The Power of Natural Materials and Environments in Contemporary *Duodji*

By Gunvor Guttorm

When I was 19 years old I decided to work with *duodji*, a creative craft activity to which I felt strongly connected. I grew up by the river of Kárášjohka in Finnmark, Norway, about 25 kilometres from the centre of the homonymous village. Early on, I learned how to look for materials in the natural environment around me. I also experienced that, in order to work as a *duojár* — as a performing craftsperson or artist, a maker of *duodji* — it was important to find solutions that would support a good life both materially and as a human being, both in a social sense and with regard to nature. My decision to allow *duodji* to become part of my life was only temporary at the time, but my passion for *duodji* grew alongside my interest in wood as material. I am also a scholar of *duodji*.

My intention in the following is to investigate *duodji* from a contemporary perspective. I will use the term *duodji* as a concept when referring to the products of a *duojár*, and the term *duddjon* when referring to the creative process. I have tried to understand *duodji* by discussing the position and meaning it has had and still has today. I will also refer to some examples of *duodji*. I approach these topics from a *duojár's* perspective, and I will also use a theoretical framework in order to emphasise this perspective from within the practice of *duodji*. I consider myself an insider when it comes to the process of dealing with materials. However, my intention is to begin a discussion of contemporary *duodji* as a vehicle for personal expression. In order to do so, several approaches must be applied. On the one hand, *duodji* should be regarded both as an activity and as a frame of mind that is integral to Sámi society. On the other hand, it is a personal expression more or less on par with other artistic disciplines.

My discussion of a few examples by contemporary Sámi *doujárat* (the plural form of *duojár*) will focus on their use of natural materials in their work. The duojárat Folke Fjällström and Max Lundström both have backgrounds in making traditional *duodji* based on South Sámi traditions. These traditions are also vital in order to understand their contemporary works. They still use birch wood as material in their work. Birch wood has always been an important material in the *duodji* tradition, including the burls that can be found growing on tree trunks.

How craftsmen approach the material in their work is, perhaps, not always the same, but I will elaborate on this discussion with diverse perspectives. I will describe the processes of *duddjon* and my own background as *garraduojár* (a craftsperson/artist working in wood and antlers), which has been instrumental in my understanding of the proximity of the maker to his/her materials. In my opinion, both Fjällström's and Lundström's works of *duodji* can be regarded as transformations of traditional relationships with the environment, of their own self-awareness, of their memories and of their knowledge as duojárat. My interpretations of their works and how they were created are also, however, my stories. My approach is thus a phenomenological one. Further, I will also ask what it might be that drives practitioners of *duodji* today, what stories their works convey, and how this can be understood as an equilibrium between collective and individual narratives.

Duodji has been practised in many Sámi societies. Historically, *duodji* has been framed within academic disciplines such as anthropology, ethnology or art history. Although obvious to many, it is worth stressing that *duodji* is based in, and part of, everyday Sámi life. Practitioners have, over time, been affected by various discussions of *duodji*, and today we are talking about *duodji* with completely different connotations as compared to earlier time periods. The Sámi reality of living in different nation-states has left footprints on people's lives and, consequently, on the cultural practices of artistic expression. On the Norwegian, Swedish, Finnish and Russian sides of Sápmi, *duodji* has gradually been institutionalised, but, at the same time, it continues to be practiced on an individual basis. Many Sámi consider themselves duojárat.[1] In the following I want to concentrate on how people's experience with the handling of materials, their skills, etc., form their understanding of what *duoddjon* is all about. Because *duodji* is practised on so many social, cultural, and political levels, people's understandings of what it means vary widely. Not everything done within *duodji* is necessarily a continuity of tradition, but *duodji* is always a contemporary expression based on knowledge, whether it be knowledge of *duodji* or of Sámi life. This, in turn, is to be considered a transformation of *duodji*. Today, because *duodji* has become an academic subject, another, ongoing transformation is taking place in which many Sámi scholars with backgrounds both in Sámi life and as duojárat (like myself) are trying to make Sámi voices more visible in texts and discourses. Further, many *duodji* practitioners use *duodji* and the *duodji* traditions as a springboard for their own creative work. From this, they express a feeling, an experience, or they may convey a message or an idea.

My own interest in artistic expressions, some of which involve different human relations while others do not, influences the position from which I approach my research. Furthermore, my background as an educator in *duodji*, a

member of Sámi society, a practitioner of *duodji*, and a researcher of *duodji* are all important to me and my approach to *duodji* knowledge. The processes of being situated within the world of *duodji* and of being proactive are intertwined because we set the conditions for the reality that we are discussing, and thus create the story we see from our own experiences. In addition to taking into consideration the researcher's background and social conditions, there are also relationships with the environment and the material as well as with other people. This means that all parts must be seen in context and in relation to each other. We relate to everything that exists around us — aesthetics, imaginations, people, trees, etc. I understand this as relational ontology.

Duodji — part of life and part of art

Both non-Sámi and Sámi have often considered Sámi craft as a common tradition of the Sámi, which has given it certain distinguishing characteristics. It has become increasingly important that a work of *duodji* manifests the traditions of Sámi culture. It should have features which demonstrate that it is part of *duodji*, recognisable both to the practised and to the unpractised eye. Often, there are also norms with regard to the making and usage of such works of craft.[2] Such craftworks are often an expression of our understanding of what 'made by Sámi' means, but this is just one method by which we can consider *duodji*.

The practice of regarding *duodji* as nothing more than craftsmanship is strongly rooted in the distinction between *art* and *not art*. I claim, for my part, that the concept of *duodji* should be understood as putting Indigenous knowledge and experience to work. The curator Bruce Bernstein and Gerald McMaster, the Plains Cree and Blackfoot curator, artist, and author, write that art historians and anthropologists have two different approaches to the practices that belong to a particular indigenous group, and that these approaches may be equally valid. The remaining question is whether both approaches still ignore the inherent idea of a particular work within a particular culture.[3] This is the critical question to be discussed in the context of contemporary *duodji*. It is necessary to start from within, to see which ideas are foundational to *duodji*, and to see how a transformation can occur within current *duodji* and its practitioners.

Let us look into a traditional product of *duodji*, the *náhppi* (milking bowl). To elucidate how beautiful a *náhppi* is, the Sámi philosopher Nils Oskal emphasises that you need to look at the use of the *náhppi* during milking and in light of the later autonomous application of the *náhppi* (and *duodji* in general).[4] I agree with Oskal in that you have to approach the two periods, that is, when the *náhppi* was made for a specific use (as a milking bowl for reindeer), and when it is a contemporary product made primarily for an audience. Since the institutionalisation of *duodji*, the view of *náhppi* has evolved. Today there are two different approaches

to an understanding of the *náhppi*, namely the idea of the reindeer industry, culture, and life that the *duojár* brings to the *náhppi* and experts in crafts aesthetics who see the *náhppi* as a modern product of an individual *duojár*. However, I am not sure that this is an autonomization of the *náhppi*. My reasoning in this case is that the *náhppi* has an inherent aesthetic quality located in culture in accordance with the ways in which Bernstein and McMaster express it.[5] In that sense, you could argue that those who make *náhppies* today take as their point of departure, without any doubt, their own subjective intentions for their work. Meanwhile, some parts of the production process of the *náhppi* remain the same as during the time when the milk bowls were made for the purpose of milking reindeer. Our relationship to the *náhppi* have changed, but that does not necessarily imply an autonomization of the *náhppi*. It simply creates another kind of relationship. The Sámi word *náhppi* itself indicates this. Most Sámi speaking people will, at least, have an association of the 'old' (from the milking period), while looking at a contemporary *náhppi*, even if its shape does not support that association.[6] I will return to this when I elaborate on what can be done with a *báhkki* (birch burl).

Many look upon *duodji* as a component of being human, because the actions of the crafts are also part of the ordinary lives people live. They are part of their enactments. Many indigenous writers and performers argue that cultural expressions are part of everyday life. The Tewa Indian author and associate professor of education Gregory Cajete notes that if one takes into account what Native American storytelling is all about, it becomes apparent that the nature of the concept of art must be understood as tied to the process behind the creation of the work. Art (here I use the term as Cajete uses it in English) was seen as an expression of life and was practised, to one degree or another, by everyone within the society. He considers this art as a ceremony, as part of the entireness, as involving creativity and orientation, which, in turn, is part of life and is, simultaneously, spiritual. When Cajete writes about this ceremony, he describes North American Indian cultures wherein much of the art has been linked to rituals. To understand the rituals, we must understand and view them as an on-going learning process.[7]

> The ceremony of art touches the deepest realms of the psyche and the sacred dimension of the artistic creative process. This is the level that not only transforms something into art, but also transforms the artist at the very core of being. This way of doing and relating to art makes the process and context of art making infinitely more important than the product.[8]

Cajete believes that this transformative feature is inherent in North American Indigenous Peoples' art of varying natures. Ceremonial objects not only had meaning within the ceremony itself, but throughout the whole creative process from the material selection to the final product. As Cajete puts it, the objects are permeated by the choices that influenced the spiritual energy surrounding their creation.[9] The ceremonial act was linked to the ritual act. As I read this, Cajete means that the contemplative part of the process behind a traditional item made to be used in a ceremony is present, even if the item already has a specific function. Yet, I do not believe that everyone would agree with Cajete's notion that the ceremonial aspect is a part of the Indigenous creative process.

On the other hand, Gloria J. Emerson, a Navajo visual artist from New Mexico, asks if it is possible, today, to talk about ceremonies in such contexts. She participated in a project for female indigenous artists called 'Art, Gender and Community'. In this project, they deliberately avoided using the term *ceremony*, instead they substituted the term *community* in order to prevent the ceremony from being trivialised and misinterpreted. For many indigenous peoples, ceremonial events are of great significance, and, consequently, they are often not discussed publicly. For many, the performance of art is distinct from participation in a ceremony. Taking part in a ceremony is to obey and respect rules that are formalised. A ceremony is solemn, not casual.[10] Creating can also be healing. She clarifies this by stating:

> The routines established for creating art are often prayerful and meditative. In reflecting about this topic, I offer this perspective: when one engages in ceremony for healing, one engages in non-linear perspectives. When one engages in art making, one sews and weaves between non-linear and linear domains.[11]

The everyday, as she calls it, is what happens at the kitchen table studio (workshop) when people sit and create while life happens around them, and, therefore, the community is involved in the creative process. The ceremonial aspect is not automatically transferred into the creative process itself, because, as she says, in a ceremony there are hidden dimensions that were formalised by their ancestors. The sacred is not trivialised, which means that all the rules are being respected.[12] There is, for example, a difference between sewing a *gákti* (Sámi costume) to be used in a traditional Sámi wedding, where the *gákti* is related to the rest of the ceremony, and sewing a *gákti* that will be included in a performance in which the creator is expressing his/her identity. The Sámi cultural anthropologist Elina Helander-Renvall writes that there is no separation between the physical and the spiritual worlds according to the holistic thinking of the Sámi. She claims that the reindeer herding culture is animistic in the sense that there

are no clear borders between spirit and matter.[13] This spiritual aspect is not necessarily tied to a particular religion, nor to a question of faith, but rather to a question of how a human being relates her/himself to life and, often, to nature, and how that human is both rational and emotional (having morals, ethics, and beliefs).[14]

Báhkki (burl) and relations in a transformation process

Let us look at the example of the use of tree burls as material. It is important to note where in the terrain it grows, and in which direction. For the person who finds the burl, its connections to the environment and the knowledge of how to treat the material are part of a holistic understanding. The *duojár* Jon Ole Andersen has said, for instance, that people have to be aware of what functions the tree has during different parts of the year and when it is suitable to cut off the burl. He recommends harvesting burls in the autumn or in the winter, since the trees are less active during this time.[15]

There are certain interesting aspects regarding Cajete and Emerson's analysis of the working process. Many of those who work with *duodji* are especially concerned with materials brought from nature. I have observed many times that duojárat who use natural materials talk about materials as partners in their creative process. Often, the stories are about the reindeer (if the material comes from one's own herd), the nature of the reindeer, etc. Even if the material is harvested by coincidence (without actively searching for materials), people often have stories about nature, such as what time of the year it was, how they saw the material, why it was important to harvest it, and what they plan to make with it.[16] These connections are relational, with several terms applied to them. The Opaskwayak Cree and Indigenous scholar Shawn Wilson divides relations into several levels: relations with people, relations with the environment/land, relations with the cosmos, and relations with ideas.[17] Wilson also sees a connection between worldviews and ontology. This means that how we see the world influences our understanding of what exists and vice versa.[18]

A *duojár* goes to the forest to look for burls as duojárat have done for generations before her. She can either walk, ski, or use a vehicle for transportation. She moves into the landscape, with the landscape. She knows where she should look for the material, just as her ancestors have known. She looks around to see if there is water nearby, what kind of vegetation there is and how dense the forest is. She is already in the process of creating, and her creative partner is the forest surrounding her. She knows she has to cooperate with the burl, pay attention to its shape and size and then, later on, 'merge it' with her own cultural frameworks and her personal creativity. On the surface, she is repeating what a *duojár* did a hundred years ago, but her intention and approach will be completely different today.

Fig. 1: A birch burl.
Photo: Gunvor Guttorm.

In Figure 1, we see a birch burl, which has, by virtue of its natural state, given the *duojár* a form. In this case, I would think that the shape is perfect for a *náhppi*. The transition between the burl and the trunk provide the *duojár* with an opportunity to make a handle. The burl's shape and size give the *duojár* a message as to what can be done and what cannot be done. These factors were also important historically, when the *náhppi* was used as a milk bowl. Thus, part of the knowledge of how to craft a *náhppi* is the same, even though the intention of the actual design of the náhppi will be different.

The concept of transformation here simply refers to a process of reshaping or remodelling. The main idea of such a transformation is to retain the values of

Fig. 2: Náhppi made by Essaias Poggats. Photo: Gunvor Guttorm.

tradition in a transformational process. The Indonesian designer Adhi Nugraha uses the term transformation in the sense of traditional knowledge and forms of expression being considered so valuable that they are worth transforming in order that they become an active part of modern life.[19]

My example regarding the collection of material can be considered a continuity of tradition as well as of the relationships that follow. Nugraha believes that the value of traditional cultural expressions will be sustained as long as people find it interesting to maintain parts of the tradition and develop it in their contemporary expressions.[20] This does not mean that the *duojár* always takes the shape of the burl as the basis. Max Lundström has used the burl as material in his work *Dabtemeh* (*Feelings*) from 2003. Lundström comes from the Southern Sámi area on the Swedish side of Sápmi. *Dabtemeh* can be considered an object for use (a barrel), but instead of keeping it rounded as the material is often used, that is, in its natural state, it is angular, as the peaks stretch into the surrounding space. The meeting that occurs between the concrete material (i.e., the burl), the artist's perception and the *duodji* experience he carries with him is expressed in the work. While he expresses an understanding of the burl, it is his inner feeling and how he views the external world that are expressed here. The shape goes beyond that of a bowl, a feeling explained in the title of the work.

Another work called *Voejkeke* (*Väsen* in Swedish, 'Being') by Folke Fjällström, illustrates the transformation of both the lived life and personal experiences. This reflects stories of the theme that we are never alone.

Fig. 3: Max Lundström Dabtemeh (Feelings), from 2003. Photo: Max Lundström.

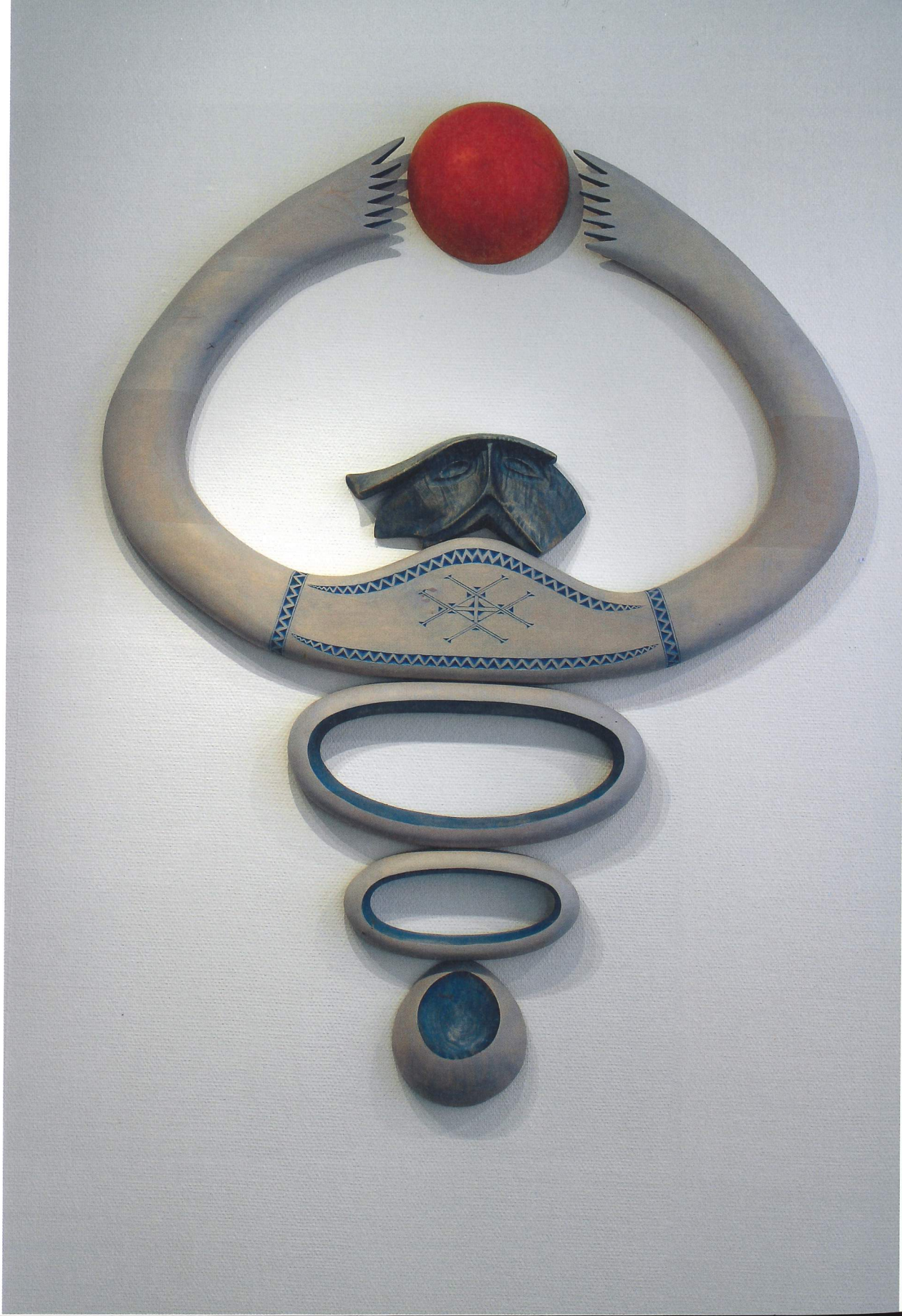

Fig. 4: Voejkeke (Väsen in Swedish, 'Being') by Folke Fjällström. Photo: Gunvor Guttorm.

In Fjällström's case you can hardly say that the collecting, the processing of materials, and the use of ornamentation represent a continuity of parts of the *duodji* tradition, but he has interpreted these activities within considerations based on his own personal expressions. Here, the organic work of understanding is significant. The shape and contents of the work constitute a strong symbiosis, and, thus, the aesthetics of craft is prominent in the work. Nevertheless, I would like to emphasise that the craft process begins in the forest. Therefore, the work not only refers solely to the exhibited object, but to multiple processes, of which one essential process is going into nature to look for the needed material.

What I mean is that it is possible to look at *Voejkeke* from the perspective of a transformation by considering the selection of materials, the ornamentation, and the inference of meaning. One can see a relationship between the physical, the material, and the spiritual. The content that is conveyed in this piece can be connected to particular worldviews, as explained by the Indigenous scholar and citizen of the Fish River Cree Nation in Manitoba, Michael Anthony Hart:

> Worldviews are cognitive, perceptual, and effective maps that people continuously use to make sense of social landscapes and to find their ways to whatever goals they seek. They are developed throughout a person's lifetime through socializations and social interactions.[21]

Fjällström has a background as a *duojár*, and that is what he has applied in this work. The material he used is straight birch wood and burl. Straight wood can be shaped as one wishes. Burl is shaped by nature in such a way that it represents less work for the *duojár*. Typically, when a *duojár* collects burl, it is done in areas where burls often grow. If she is looking for a burl to be used to make some specific functional form, she will seek burls whose outer shapes are undamaged. But it is the material itself that communicates whether it is useful for her or not. Furthermore, the *duojár* can refrain from taking the burl if she wants it to grow bigger. Burls which may seem damaged can provide the inspiration for works that do not necessarily fulfil a practical function.

Fjällström also used ornaments in *Voejkeke*. The ornaments applied here are of both wood and of antler. The ornamentation consists of a central section that can be interpreted as a sun symbol and four cardinal points; it could also be interpreted as *leahtah* (a merge pattern), as *duojár* and art historian Maja Dunfjeld call it.[22] The pattern consists of transverse lines with touches of triangular shapes. Around this middle section there is a different, carved zigzag pattern. Both of these pattern combinations are used in everyday objects, like knives, cups, skis, containers, etc. Folke Fjällström also makes a lot of knives; he decorates his knives with these patterns. Fjällström uses materials and the orna-

ments that are well known in the creation of products used day to day. I assume that he treats the materials in the same way as he would while making a bowl, for instance. He uses ornamentations that he knows well and which are also used in other products. This means that he is moving around a crafting system (the South Sámi *duodji*) of which he has long been part. He then adds to this his own interpretations and develops his own ideas, moving *Voejkeke* between traditional and contemporary contexts. When you transform a tradition, as Nugraha claims, you tie together the past, the present and the future.[23]

Closing remarks

Duodji as a concept has been the focus of research for a long time, but it is only in the last 20 years, perhaps, that it has been a subject for discourse within the framework of Sámi knowledge systems, which are closely connected to Indigenous knowledge. In this article the concept of *duodji* is discussed in an indigenous context. There is a distinction here between how we understand *duodji* when we discuss it within a traditional context, as opposed to seeing it as part of the contemporary phenomenon of artistic practices. As in all other artistic activities, our understanding of *duodji* changes through time, and this invites us to develop a dynamic interpretation of *duodji* as a creative process. In this article, I have chosen to emphasise the practice, and then elaborate on an approach that is based on *duodji* itself. I have used examples of works notable for their natural materials. I argue that if one uses natural materials, the *duodji* process starts in the forest. I say this because of my own interest in natural materials and my own relationship to them. For me, natural materials are living matter. If you gather the materials yourself, you create the possibility of a relationship to the environment as whole as well as to the materials themselves.

Duodji practitioners, at least according my knowledge and experience of *duodji*, often collect their materials themselves. In itself, one can say that searching for and gathering materials is part of *duodji*. This is the primary reason for considering my chosen examples as *duodji*. The collection of natural materials is a tradition in *duodji*. The reasons it is possible to talk about transformation in this context are, in my opinion, tied to the movement from being an object with an implied meaning of work in an everyday context to becoming the visualisation of a personal story. Many works are still closely connected to a specific Sámi context and a common understanding of its traditions. As contemporary artists, however, today's duojárat expand on these qualities by including their own stories in their creations. When this is altered as a result of changes within society, the practices of *duodji* also change. This is both necessary and desirable. The knowledge and experience of people who exercise the craft are transformed in new ways.

The *duodji* movement that started in the early 1900s, influenced by the Arts and Crafts movement in Europe, was the impetus of a special Sámi *duodji* aesthetics, which takes ideas from functional items (like the *náhppi*) and turns them into a craft that could also function outside the Sámi environment.[24] Ornamentation also belongs, as I see it, to this new aesthetics. That said, I must emphasise that ornamentation has been especially important in the South Sámi tradition. Lundström follows this tradition in *duodji*, where the *duojár* transmits both the treatment of the tree and how the ornamentation becomes part of the object. These are recognisable processes. And yet, Lundström has liberated himself from following the form of the báhkki and followed, instead, a separate inspiration that differs from traditional considerations of the material. This could be called a transformation of tradition.

In Fjällström's case, we cannot fairly say that the collection and processing of materials and the use of ornamentation is a continuity of the handicrafts tradition. He has interpreted this as a personal expression. He uses the knowledge that a *duojár* possesses when creating. In addition, the content of the work addresses the idea that other beings move among humans. It is this lasting relationship that is expressed in the work. Without knowing whether this is the case with Fjällström's approach or not, I believe that he has brought a burl which he did not want to be modified for everyday use. Instead, he wanted to create *duodji* based on phenomena whose existence among us he wishes to illustrate. By working in cooperation with the material, he also takes note of the surroundings and himself in the context of creating.

Duodji artisans and craftsmen do not live in a vacuum, as if there were an unambiguous connection from the past to the present without influences from the outside world. Today, artisans are interpreters of multiple realities, such as shown in the above considered works of Folke Fjällström and Max Lundström. On the one hand, they carry with them their *duodji* experiences, in which creativity begins in the woods. On the other hand, they are familiar with the world of contemporary art. The practice of *duodji* can be understood as the evolution an artist undergoes during his creative work. One must also take into consideration the social and environmental frameworks in which the work is exhibited and how its expression is interpreted. In other words, an expression has a history.

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Notes

1 I wrote previously about what this institutionalisation has brought with it, especially on the Norwegian and Swedish sides of Sápmi. See Guttorm 2010: 71–95.

2 These aspects have been analysed by Maja Dunfjeld in her doctoral thesis (Dunfjeld 2001) and by many other researchers (see also Guttorm 2001).

3 Bernstein and McMaster 2004: 10.

4 Oskal writes about the *náhppi* as a comment to my own conclusions concerning the use of *náhppi* both earlier and today. Oskal 2004: 69–81, and Guttorm 2001: 75–172.

5 Bernstein and McMaster 2004: 10.

6 Guttorm 2001.

7 Cajete 1994: 151–163.

8 Cajete 1994: 153.

9 Cajete 1994: 153.

10 Emerson 2010: 17, 18.

11 Emerson 2010: 18.

12 Emerson 2010: 18.

13 Helander-Renvall 2010: 44, 45.

14 This, as I understand, is also what scholars like Law (2007) and Blaser (2013) discuss in relational ontology.

15 Persen & Geving 1999: 34.

16 Guttorm 2001.

17 Wilson 2008: 80–97.

18 Wilson 2001 and Hart 2010: 7.

19 Nugraha 2012: 116–120.

20 Nugraha 2012: xx.

21 Hart 2010: 2.

22 Dunfjeld 2001: 168.

23 Nugraha 2012: 119.

24 See Guttorm 2010: 71–95.