

WHEN THE THIEVES BECAME MASTERS IN THE LAND OF THE SHAMANS

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The epic yoiks among the Sámi from the beginning of the 19th century contain obvious political points of view about the colonization process that the Sámi had been and were subjected to from Sweden/Finland, Norway and Russia.¹ There are several examples of yoik texts of this type where the Sámi are either referred to as forest people or “noaidit” – shamans. The shamans were the ones the missionaries most strongly went after, a point that the Sámi exploited in their use of the oral mode of double communication expressing resistance to the ongoing theft of land and water. In the songs they slandered the noaidis, evidently to “pacify” the clergymen, at the same time as they allowed the noaidi to be the caretaker of Sámi values and as such represent an oppositional power in the texts. This tradition expresses an early awareness about art’s potential as a bearer of several messages at the same time – a purely entertaining and narrative aspect of the story being told as well as an underlying, more serious and insistent layer as a statement of the will to internal resistance and a challenge to resist the pressure from without.²

¹ This account is based mainly on my book *Med ord skal tyvene fordrives. Om samenes episk poetiske diktning (By Words The Thieves Will Be Expelled. On the Sámi Epic Poetic Tradition)*, 1987 (1993). The main texts I use are first and foremost taken from Jacob Fellman’s book *Anteckninger under min vistelse i Lappmarken (Notes From My Sojourn In Lappmarken)*, 1906.

² This way of using art has many parallels among indigenous peoples and other suppressed groups in general, and a great deal of theoretical attention has been devoted to it for example in post-colonial literary research. Since this article does not have theoretical reflections as its primary aim, I will not delve into that side of the matter now, just mention this possible intake to the investigation of literature from minority cultures as very relevant and exciting. Here I could mention countless books from recent decades, but will limit myself to mentioning a few names dealing with literature primarily from the fourth world, researchers like Arnold Krupat on the *critical* perspectives of an indigenist, nationalist and cosmopolitan approach to, in his case of study, Native American literature, Mudrooroo and Adam Shoemaker on Aborigine literature from Australia and Kirsten Thisted from Denmark on Greenlandic Inuit literature.

In the antiphonal song “Suola ja noaidi” (“The Thief and the Shaman”) the shaman admits that the thief has become master in the land of the noaidis, but still concludes the song with a sort of admonishing beseeching to drive the thief away:

Ane, ane iežat eret
Gos don boadát, dohko manat
Lean, lean mun du badjelii
Manan, manan, válddán, bijan
Suhppen ja deavččastan du eret

Be gone, far away from here
Where you come from, there you shall go
I still have power over you
I'm going, I'm taking, putting aside
I'm throwing you far away from here ³

This is a dimension of the shaman's song that the thief either chooses to overlook because of his dominant position or he actually isn't able to clarify for himself what the shaman is really saying. This old antiphonal song is so modern in its content that one could almost believe it to be a word duel between today's Sámi politicians and representatives of the dominant society who are unable to agree on a common frame of reference for understanding each others points of view. Also in the way of looking at who really is holding the decisive power, the yoik is modern in the sense that the shaman is subject to the thief's administrative and political mastery. But when it is a matter of words, and the faith in the power of words, then it is the shaman who is most clearly in charge of the argumentative point of view. This too is a truth that the minority well recognizes – the one who has the power doesn't need to argue; he can let power reign.

The changes in society that resulted from the colonization led to drastic changes in the Sámi way of life and culture. The old shamanism had to yield to Christianity, and there was no longer a need for the shaman as a mythopoetic person with the knowledge about presenting the traditional religious songs. Furthermore, the missionaries worked diligently to put an end to the Sámi practice of their own religion. All this led over time to some of the multitude of old

³ Fellman 1906: 254-59. My translation

epic yoik poetry sinking into oblivion. Still so much of the tradition has survived in the Sámi collective cultural heritage that it still represents an important sounding board for modern Sámi writing.

Yoik poetry's subtle use of the language's possibilities of containing several meanings simultaneously made it possible to carry on a two-level communication where one message was transmitted to Sámi listeners and an entirely different one to outsiders. This was necessary because tax collectors, missionaries and merchants used the Sámi most important meetings early on in the colonization process for the exercise of the majority's justice over their new subjects in the north. A few of the officials had picked up some basic knowledge of Sámi, so that any direct political communication from the Sámi leaders about opposing colonization would have been understood, and the Sámi could be severely punished for disobedience. Hence one was dependent on using the language's possibilities of transmitting concealed messages and coded information through symbols and figurative meanings. This tradition also provides important knowledge for understanding later modes of literary expression in the Sámi verbal resistance to one-sided influence from the outside, and besides the yoik qua yoik has become an important symbol for the distinctive qualities and independence of the Sámi. (Gaski 1997: 12-15, and 1997b:25-26)

Among the longer epic yoiks that were committed to writing in the 19th century there are purely historical reports about how the Sámi came to Sámiland. According to the old texts this is supposed to have happened by groups after long migrations. The poems divide the period the Sámi have inhabited their land into three phases; when the first Sámi came here, when the new wave of Sámi came with herds to the land, and when the Sámi were put under the control of kings.

The account of Sámiland's first inhabitants ends by ascertaining that eventually the times changed and one arrived at a new period where the form of religion was shamanism. The poem thus seems to extend over a period of time of several thousand years. Concurrent with the transition to shamanism one was leaving behind the more primitive way of living, and new groups of people who are related to the first immigrants, come to the land. Over time reports about Sámiland spread far away, and kings sent observers to the forestland's people to bring them under the crown's hegemony. Finally

the Sámi too acquired knowledge about grace, the song says, and Christianity forced shamanism to its knees. (Fellman 1906: 239-241, and 243-247). Politically the period of Sámi independence was at an end, and culturally this became the opening for the third phase of Sámiland's history – the epoch we still find ourselves in.

From the mythic poetic tradition it is also evident that the Sámi were proud of their own history. Some of the songs actually take the Sámi people's origins all the way back to the Sun. This is the case mainly in the poems the Sámi clergyman Anders Fjellner committed to writing in the middle of the 19th century.⁴ The Sun's daughter in particular kept a close eye on the Sámi the whole time; she brought reindeer to them and was always ready to defend the Sámi. Even on her deathbed the future of the Sámi people was closest to her heart, and she was very concerned as to how it would go for the Sámi after she herself is gone:

The sun slowly sinks, the wolf comes
Slinks around in the dark of night

...

The sun is setting, the herd shrinks,
The pest rages, insects torment,
Children grope about in the dark,
Morning will come, will it not? ⁵

The Sun's son for his part set out on a long sea journey to find himself a wife, and after one year's sailing reached the land of the Giants. There he fell in love with the daughter of the giant, and together they flee from her angry brothers to his side of the land. They marry each other there after the giant's daughter has undergone a "Sámification" process, and later she has strong, sinewy sons that become the Sámi's progenitors. These sons were capable hunters and invented skis too, so in order that they not be forgotten after their death they were raised to the sky and to this very day make up the constellation Orion's Belt (Gállábártnit or cuoiggaheaddjit in Sámi, i.e. the old man's sons or the skiers).

⁴ For a more thorough introduction see Lundmark 1979 and von Düben 1873 (1977), especially 322-37, as well as Gaski 2003: 76-103.

⁵ Gaski 2003: 102-03

“The Death of the Sun’s Daughter” represents in its soft-spoken expression an entirely different tradition and attitude toward the Sámi than we find in “The Son of the Sun’s Courting in the Land of the Giants.” Where the Son of the Sun poem is clearly a heroic epic that is supposed to transmit pride and faith in the future, “The Death of the Sun’s Daughter” stands for a much more down to earth perspective on the Sámi people’s place and possibilities in the harsh Arctic reality. The poem in its pleading formulation is almost a counterpart to the bombastic rhetoric in the Son of the Sun poem, and thus represents an important admonition to the Sámi people’s collective conscience about life’s sunny and shady sides. The optimism and faith in the future in the heroic epic gets its counterbalance in uncertainty and a need to pray for a continued existence as a people on this earth (Gaski 2003: 81-83).

Fjellner’s texts or transmissions stand out among the other notes we have from the 19th century, even though Fjellner’s contribution as the Sámi Homer was disputed among some scholars at the turn of the century.⁶ K. B. Wiklund wrote a relatively condemning essay about Fjellner’s poem where he almost accused him of forgery by pointing out the differences between Fjellner’s texts and the other epic poetic tradition among the Sámi committed to writing.⁷ In this connection I am not going to delve into this discussion, just mention Fjellner’s contribution to Sámi literary history as unique and valuable assessed from a contemporary viewpoint. Even if Fjellner’s writings in part are closer to mythological writing, they also absolutely have undertones of the same thematics as this presentation mainly deals with – namely early Sámi oral literary use of art as a medium for expressing resistance to loss of land and water.

The yoik text that was dedicated to the noaidi Gargias is proof that the colonization of Sámiland also led to internal Sámi disputes and conflicts.⁸ On the surface level it is a story about a contest between two infamous shamans in two adjoining areas of Sámiland. In the initial situation all of the wild game has disappeared from Gargias’ district, and through the trance he has been in at the very beginning of the yoik, he knows that the reason for the famine threatening his people is

⁶ Loaned from the title of Bo Lundmark’s dissertation from 1979.

⁷ See more about this in Wiklund 1906: 47-56.

⁸ Fellman 1906: 203-12.

due to sorcery from the neighboring siida's or neighboring area's noaidi Doragas. Doragas, you see, had led all the wild game in the forests and all the fish in the rivers and lakes over to the neighboring district. With the help of his *sieidi* – sacrificial stone or god – Gargias however manages to yoik the game and fish back again. Doragas doesn't put up with this debasement; he kills Gargias and throws him out into the river. But Gargias is still not dead; he transforms himself into a little object that a pike swallows.

Gargias is in the pike stomach an entire year until Doragas understands that Gargias is still alive and hiding in a pike. So Doragas puts out a net to catch the pike, but Gargias escapes. For three years he is left alone by Doragas until one beautiful day on the way home to the turf hut after a hunting trip he is again killed. This time Doragas puts him in a chest and lets him lie there for another three years, but during the funeral Gargias revives again and slips out of the chest. He calls his son, presumably to demonstrate before the crowd of people at the cemetery what a powerful shaman he really is as well as to disavow Doragas even more. However, his son has also learned the shamanistic arts during his father's absence and comes flying in the shape of a wood grouse. This emphasis on the son's knowledge at a point in time when the father is really supposed to excel insults Gargias and makes him so angry that the whole thing ends in a fateful clash between father and son with the result that the son flies off and leaves his father behind humbled and sorrowful. The unfortunate consequence for Gargias' people from this internal struggle was of course that their noaidi lost power and respect and that the riches of the forests and lakes once again went to another group.

It is reasonable to place the poems that have their point of departure in the resource scarcity of the traditional hunting and fishing quarry at that time when the taxation of the Sámi inland was at its most severe. The Sámi paid taxes at times to three countries, often quite large quantities of furs and dried fish to the Norwegian, Swedish and Russian more or less self-appointed tax collectors. The severe tax pressure in turn led to extensive hunting and taking of wild game which resulted in a substantial reduction of the wild reindeer herds, especially after more modern hunting weapons were introduced.

Since at that time it was normal to believe that higher powers influenced the migrations of the wild game and similar phenomena, it

is logical to imagine as a first reaction when for example the passage of the wild reindeer fails to occur one year that one or another power has influenced the reindeer to stay away from this area. As a consequence of the shaman's central position in regard to hunting and fishing, for one thing by influencing the gods' good will so as to provide a good return, the people naturally turned to him to get an answer. For that purpose the shaman could prophesy with the help of his noaidi drum, and he could travel with his free soul over wide areas in a short time to locate the game. When he discovers that there is still plenty of game in the neighboring siida one can easily understand the conclusion that their noaidi must have used his arts and led all the game there. The only known way to get the game back was to demonstrate greater ability in shamanistic cunning and insight than the competing noaidi could – for both animals and people must submit to the shamanistic forces.

This could have been the situation when the yoiks about “the duels” between the noaidis were created: namely before it dawned on people that the reasons for the lack of hunting and fishing luck was something other than evil shamans. It is clear that the siidas were in an inner revolt and struggle with each other, something one can easily deduce had to be the result of a complete change of form of life and economic structure. We know from history that the old Sámi siida society gradually broke up from the 17th century onward, and it is entirely natural that such a drastic change of the cultural basis also had to result in art's interpretation and presentation of the process. Read against this backdrop, one can imagine the yoik about Gargias as a relatively late version of the songs about the shaman duels, where on the basis of new insights about the processes of change in the society and the reasons for these, one incorporates this knowledge in a broadening of the tradition that tries to give an artistic expression for what is happening.

The next stage in the gradual discovery of the causal relationships for the poor times is to blame the sieidis or the stone gods that one sacrificed or prayed to – but which did not prove to be of any help when the resources dwindled. On the contrary, the Sámi experienced that the strange people, the intruders, of whom there were steadily more in their land, could even take money, gold and silver *from* the sieidis without the latter reacting against the theft in any

way. According to the tradition one was supposed to rip incompetent gods to shreds, and get a new one. In the song “Noiddiid juoigan” reference is made to such cases, and the audience is exhorted to find themselves an amenable god.⁹ But at the same time this implies that one must move from ones own area “guhkás mannot” (let’s go far away), or in any case move to another one of the seasonal dwelling places: “mis leat ollu orrunsajit “ (we have many haunts). The ecological adaptation however was so strictly regulated that a change from the fixed yearly cycle could have disastrous consequences. Yet there was no other way out when one was driven away by strangers.

This is expressed for example in the long song “Meahcceolbmot” (The Forest People) where it speaks of the creatures from a foreign land: “Gildet min maddá” (Banish us, they do too) and “Eat mii goittot sidjiide beasa maiden dahkat” (We can do nothing against them).¹⁰ These strangers penetrate into the Sámi’s economic activity, and they look for the shamans and take their objects from them. They even want to get hold of the hidden underground treasures. In this song too the Sámi’s only way of reacting is to withdraw, find a “ráfi báiki,” a peaceful place, where they won’t be badgered. The conclusion of the song is a strong challenge to the others to remain in their own land; you are unworthy as neighbors for us: “Dohkketmeahtumat lehpēt midjiide siidaguoibmin.” In “Noiddiid juoigan” too it is emphasized that face to face with those who do not turn to Sámi ways, i.e. the new immigrants, that “We are this land’s occupants; you belong to the uneven and stony land, ... we bear a grudge against you.”

The clearest artistic expression of the resistance to the colonization from the outside nevertheless is the previously mentioned antiphonal song “Suola ja noaidi” (The Thief and the Shaman). The text opens with suola, the thief, saying that he has gathered and utilized the earth’s plants, such as grass and berries, but never taken the residents’ property. All the same one day a person came over to him and called him a thief. Next it is the noaidi’s, or the shaman’s, turn. He says to the thief that you don’t know the local customs; don’t you know that I exist? Further he asks the thief to be observant, try to see things in another way. But the thief answers arrogantly and asks the

⁹ Fellman 1906: 217-25.

¹⁰ Fellman 1906: 231-39.

shaman whether he thinks he is God – have you created the grass and the trees, aren't you also the earth's ashes? He says that he is aware of the shaman's activity and asks him to mind his own business.

The Christian allusions in the thief's response to the shaman show that the yoik was subject of a relatively late Christian adaptation, something that also implies that it must be of newer date than for example "Meahcceolbmot." In "Suola ja noaidi" moreover the Christian inspired references are ascribed to the thief who of course represents the encroaching Christian culture. In any case, it is emphasized more and more strongly toward the end of the poem how powerless the shaman is; he has been made a fool of in captivity; his fingers can no longer bend; and he admits that the thief has become master of the berries, the stones and the grass.

When it dawned on the Sámi that neither the neighboring siida's shamans nor their own gods' decrepitude was the cause of the problems that had arisen, dwindling game and steadily worse conditions for the hunting society's continued existence, one had to face the truth: Colonization was the real cause of the problems, and those who took the land from the Sámi had to be called by the correct name: thieves. This was a critical acknowledgment for the minority to arrive at, and it is actually important to consider it as one of the reasons for the Sámi to give up the old religion compared to only explaining it as a result of external missionary activity. Since the old gods no longer could help against the pressure from outside, it was completely in line with the tradition not only to reject the gods but even to destroy them.

Nevertheless this does not imply an immediate transition from shamanism to Christianity, as the previously mentioned yoik "Meahcceolbmot" tells us. There, those who took the religious objects or media from the shamans were described only as "amas olbmát" (strange men). We know that these persons were the Norwegian missionaries, but the Sámi did not yet associate them with another faith, according to the yoiks. For them the missionaries were the usual strangers, along with the colonists who "ohcet...alcceset hearvan ja ávnnasin...buktet čoahkkái, bidjet vuorkái, ohcet viisaid, ohcet noiddiid, gehccet ja váldet dainna gaskaomiid" (seek...for themselves as finery and raw material...bring together, preserve, want to know who the wise ones are, seek the noaidis, observe and take from them

their objects). This ought to be a clear indication of the close connection between the early missionary activity and the colonization of Sámiland.

This is one of the exciting sides of literary scholarship, that it can also function as a sociohistoric discipline.¹¹ It is interesting to notice which perspectives the handed-down Sámi traditional texts give as a form of firsthand commentary from the Sámi side on the processes of change that accompanied the transition from the old hunting society to a more differentiated and economically complex society. The texts touch on the loss of religious and administrative independence. These testimonials, because of their character as art, do not stand in danger of being skewed and having their points of view adjusted to the advantage of the colonists to the same degree as one can experience with historical documents in controversial matters. Thus the epic yoiks are of inestimable significance as a record of Sámi feelings and conceptions of what happened when the thieves became masters in the land of the noaidis.

That the third stage in the Sámi recognition of the causal connections behind the loss of sovereignty over their own land, led to a literary commentary on what happened in the form of an antiphonal song between a prominent Sámi representative – the shaman – and a spokesman for the colonists – the thief – where the unambiguous conclusion is that the thief wins, is just proof of an early Sámi consciousness about the new political power relationships being established. “Leage, leage isit don / Suola, leat don hearrán beassan” (Be the master now / Thief, you’ve become lord), says the shaman to the thief who for his part concludes with the words: “De don nogat dussin, noaidi bargi” (Then you’ll perish and vanish, you shaman) (Fellman 1906: 255).

Such a clear declaration of political capitulation has never since come from the Sámi side, and of course it has entirely clear ethnically conditioned grounds beside the purely artistic perception: Political

¹¹ I am not privileging this approach over other interpretations to these old texts, only demonstrating one possible reading which, in my view, also ought to be interesting for scholars in other disciplines, especially for historians. Neither am I saying, let me emphasize this, that all Sámi texts should be read in the framework of opposition – there are plenty of examples of literary works which are best enjoyed without glimpsing at all to oppression or opposition – but for the texts dealt with here, the sociohistorical approach has been a natural one to choose.

comments are meant for an interethnic public, whereas art in a traditional Sámi sense had a clear internal ethnic dimension. Therefore, it was essential to *not* be straightforward in speech in non-Sámi connections, while in art one could express oneself freely face to face with ones own people, who were the primary receivers of the intended message. As such the last lines of the verse in the noaidi's song contain a continued verbal resistance to the thief. He refuses to accept that the Sámi are going to allow themselves to be assimilated and he expresses an inner appeal to his people about never giving up. In that sense the shaman's words are alive even today.

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