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On Nils-Aslak Valkeapää's drama *Ridn'oaivi ja nieguid oaidni* ("The Frost-Haired One and the Dream-Seer")

Inspired by Japanese culture through his personal contacts and several stays in the country, Nils-Aslak Valkeapää (1943–2001) wrote his only poetic drama in the North Sámi language based on the structure of a traditional Japanese Waki-Noh play. Written in the mid-1990s, *Ridn'oaivi ja nieguid oaidni* ("The Frost-Haired One and the Dream-Seer"¹) reimagined the role of the Japanese *shite* (a spiritual figure, or the messenger of God) as Ridn'oaivi, the Frost-Haired One, a kind of timeless mythical figure who acts as a mediator of the wisdom with that humans can achieve a greater harmony with nature. The role of the *waki*, the human counterpart of the *shite*, is figured as a young Sámi *boazovácci* (reindeer herder) who wanders the tundra alone with his herd on an autumn night.

Despite its juxtaposition of elements from Japanese and Sámi cultures, Valkeapää's play does not create dramatic tension through cultural conflict, but rather through the reindeer herder's own inner turmoil. In order to ascend into the realm of higher knowledge, the herder enters a liminal phase, in which his subjective state of mind awakens to the supernatural realm. Once he allows the supernatural wisdom to inspire him with answers, the young herder reaches maturity. The Frost-Haired One, a visitor from the spiritual realm, teaches him that maturity demands two main things from a person: first of all, to love himself and others, and secondly, to never forget the deep interconnection of humans and nature. The third voice in the play is a chorus, known as the *jiuati* in Noh theatre, which often acts as a commentator. Consisting of one male and two female actors, the chorus (*koarra* in Sámi) acts as a driving force behind the dramatic events of the play. Although the chorus also hails from the spiritual world of Ridn'oaivi, it remains invisible to both characters.

Liminality in the play

Based on Arnold van Gennep's work *Rites de Passage* (1909), where van Gennep distinguishes between preliminal (separation), liminal (transition) and postliminal (incorporation) stages of rites, the anthropologist Victor Turner further elaborated the concept of liminality (from the Latin *limen*, meaning "threshold") in several of his works. As a state of being "betwixt and between" (Turner 1967, 4), "between two positions" (Turner 1974, 237), Turner describes the major characteristic of liminality

as "the analysis of culture into factors and their free recombination in any and every possible pattern" (Turner 1974, 255). While blurring the borders between very different (often contradicting) symbolic orders, a liminal experience will result in the removal of forms and limits previously taken for granted, and thus give way to new orders. In his play, *Ridn'oaivi ja nieguid oaidni*, Nils-Aslak Valkeapää constructs liminality by intertwining Sámi human reality with manifestations of the spiritual world. The play consists of short opening and closing acts with a third, more elaborate act in between. The stream-of-consciousness lines of the *boazovácci* (the reindeer herder) and the otherworldly messages of Ridn'oaivi (the Frost-Haired One) are often introduced and followed by yoiking.

In the first act (preliminal stage) the reindeer herder arrives at his resting place and contemplates the essence of nomadic life: "I need not, I wonder where to go, / the herd of reindeer decides my path".² Already his opening lines – "how strange, / when I make halt, it is as if I am on the move, / and as if at home, when I am roaming"³ – indicate the questioning of ordinary reality, along with the inherent contradictions of mobility and stasis. While the herder dozes off near his fire, Ridn'oaivi returns to the human world to survey its changes. In his monologue, the oxymoronic wordplay of the opening lines is enhanced to include the liminal phase of the natural and transcendental: "this is the time, / the time which is not time, / the dream that is life, the life that is dream... / which is life... / a dream in life".⁴ Following his encounter with Ridn'oaivi, the herder realizes the uniqueness of this dreamlike experience, and laments the missed opportunity. Using past conditional constructions, such as "galgen jearrat" ("I should have asked"), he invites Ridn'oaivi back again.

In the second act (liminal phase) the chorus not only yoiks in between the characters' monologues, but it takes an active role in the verbal argumentation of Ridn'oaivi. In addition to the refrain of "ale bala unna vieljaš" ("do not be afraid, little brother") they cite a few lines in translation as well as in the Japanese original of the great haiku master Basho (1644–1694). Ridn'oaivi questions the importance of accumulating worldly knowledge, and emphasizes both the path of the heart ("you do not need that knowledge [...] / that you need... do not ask me what you need, / love, and dare to love... / yourself, then you can love others, too... / love")⁵ and the path of nature ("Olmmoš lea dušše oassi luonddus", "the man is but part of nature"). In this long, carefully-sculpted poetic monologue, the real intermingles with the transcendental, culminating in the subjective incorporation of both. In the midst of this communitas, Ridn'oaivi confirms his position: "you ask whether I am the Frost-Haire in the old tales, / I am, but I am you, your thoughts, your dreams / and when you leave, I move into your dreams, / if I am."⁶

The short closing act (postliminal phase) consists of two verbal parts and a yoik by the reindeer herder, leading up to the final chant of the chorus (*Áldobiellut*, reindeer

bells). The joyous, enthusiastic words of the herder sum up the major motifs of the play, and they also indicate the end of the liminal phase. Thus the drama comes full circle and the audience is taken back to the play's initial scene. This time, however, the human character's mindset is changed, and he is finally attuned to the timeless trekking route of the reindeer, to the circle of life, which recapitulates the "almmi johtolagas Beaivi ja Mánnu", "Sun and Moon on the trekking route of heaven". Owing to his encounter with Ridn'oaivi, and Ridn'oaivi's incorporation into the everyday person ("thus Frost-haired flew to the other side of life / into me, within my very self / into my dreams / and I am the Frost-haired")⁷, the herder will remain intimately connected to "nieguid máilbmái", the "world of dreams", and the "eallima don beallái", "other side of life".

Closing thoughts

Valkeapää's poetic play will undoubtedly be inspirational and instructive for future generations. The play has already proven itself to be a classic of the relatively new artistic medium of Sámi theater. While the text of his play has not yet been published in book form, the play first became accessible to Sámi and Nordic audiences in 2007 and 2009 through an excellent staging by the Beavvváš director and theatre manager Haukur J. Gunnarsson. The play was staged again in 2013, with performances honouring Valkeapää on the 70th anniversary of his birth.

Constructing liminality by intertwining Sámi human reality with manifestations of the spiritual world marks a departure from other works of Valkeapää's oeuvre, including his 1971 debut *Terveisiä Lapista* (published in English as *Greetings from Lapland*, 1984) and nine subsequent poetry volumes (a.o. *Beaivi*, *Áhčážan* 1989, *Sun, My Father* 1997). These works stress the liminal relationship of Nordic and Sámi cultures, as well as the overarching conflict between indigenous people and their colonizers. Throughout history, the relationship between the Sámi and their Nordic colonizers has been characterized by an aggressive hierarchy and the suppression of Sámi cultural expression, but Valkeapää's work has contributed enormously to the recent, rapid emancipation and revitalisation of the Sámi culture. In his only poetic play, however, liminality manifests differently, marked by the subtle intertwining of the spiritual and the real, and unburdened by any interfering cultural conflict. The harmonious blending and merging together of these two levels reveals not only the life philosophy of the author, but also an essential aspect of Sámi traditional knowledge.

References

¹ The author would like to thank Haukur J. Gunnarsson for sharing both the original play and its English translation. Though the author was fortunate to see a performance of the play in Inari in September 2013, the video recording of the play supplied by Gunnarsson was a great help.

² ”Ii han mus leat ge dárbu jurddahallat, gosa manan; / Bohccot han dan mearridit”. All the English quotes from Valkeapää’s play are available due to the efforts of Roy Tommy Eriksen and Harald Gaski.

³ ”Go bisánan, lean dego johtime / Lean dego ruovttus, go jođán / Iige noga johtolat johtimiin / Dal nai guodildin moadde beanatgullama”

⁴ ”Dát dat lea dat áigi, / Áigi mii ii leat áigi, / Niehku mii lea eallin, eallin mii lea niehku... / Mii lea eallin / Niehku eallimis...”

⁵ ”it don daid dieđuid dárbbat [...] / ahte don dárbbahat... / ale jeara mus máid don dárbbahat... / ráhkis, oskkil ráhkistit... / du iežat, dalle earáid nai... / ráhkis!”

⁶ ”ja don jearat, jus go mun dološ Ridn’oaivi, / de lean, muhto mun lean don, du jurdagat, du niegut / ja go vuolggán, boadán / du nieguide / lean don, dus, du niegut, / jus lean”

⁷ ”nu girddii Ridn’oaivi eallima don beallái / iežan sisa, munnje, / mu nieguide / ja mun lean Ridn’oaivi”

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