

## **The wisdom of a drum- dancer, an old farmer and a bishop**

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### **Introduction**

I visited the college of Ruskin Mill in England the spring of 2018. It is a small college dedicated to the training of mentally disadvantaged handicapped as well as being a training college for those working with the use of alternative agriculture and traditional crafts in therapy. The college is maintaining traditional crafts of importance to maintain old buildings, techniques and knowledge that is an important part of our traditional cultural heritage. Part of this text is in-press in November 2018 in the Ruskin-Mill Research Journal and the material for the article is prior been published in a number of articles and book chapters.

In 2019, there are plans for the use of the material in a project of choreography in a project with the Norwegian Academy of Dance – school of Ballet. Communicating about the challenges of rapid social – and ecological change is one of the most important challenges of humanity. I do think that we need to use new ways of communicating as well as traditional academic writing. Thus, choreography of dance might be one way supplementing the traditional ways.

Twelve years before my visit to Ruskin I travelled in Canada and Greenland to visit Inuit communities. Coming to Ruskin brought back memories and notes from my encounters up north. Their world was one of ice, permafrost and in the wintertime extreme cold. Very much a different world Ruskin Mill. Myself being an academician and a farmer of sheep I have to relate both to the intangible culture of the rural countryside and the theories of the academic. My reflection include notes from two conversations, one with an old farmer from a small mountain community in Norway, and a conversation with a drum-dancer.

### **The drum-dancer**

The Inuit artist and drum-dancer Matthew Nuqingaq lives in Baffin Island. The place of conversation his kitchen where we shared a meal of muktoq, which is whale skin and blubber. The whale skin and blubber being a special traditional treat for guests from far away.

Matthew Nuqingaq is an artist performing drum dancing and a producer of handicrafts in silver and nature materials like claws from polar bears. He told us about his life as an Inuit artist and his attachment to the land, the changes from traditional values and lifestyle to the modern development of Iqaluit the main settlement and capitol of Nunavut the independent Inuit territory in Canada. Matthew told about the optimism that came with independence and the trauma of commercialized market values and exploitation of the local population. The artwork taken away at cheap prices by traders and sold at high prices in towns further south.

“I am getting more and more political – I have gotten more outspoken – I am getting really angry – I got really angry to the point of hostility” Those were his words, while he emphasized that he himself had the challenge of being part of two worlds- unlike some of his friends who “only belonged to one side”. Matthew himself is married to a Canadian southern woman with whom he has a child. Even if he himself was successful as an artist he emphasized that many Inuit artists have a very tough time and that even if he was dedicated to his art “the real food is what you hunt”.

While traditional artwork have been exploited by outsiders, drum dancing was for quite some time forbidden as heathen and dangerous creating a connection to traditional culture that the colonial authorities tried to destroy and change. For Matthew drum dancing is both about the connection with the past and the future; “When I am drumming I get such an amazing feeling – the sound – it was used for storytelling, conveying messages - the drumming makes me remember my mothers heart beat, being in her womb and the connection to her through her heartbeats sitting in a pouch on her back. It is connection and like moving into another world.” About those listening to his performance; “ Everybody frozen in time – before a lot of movement, and everybody froze – the humming – it connects with the past, nature and it is the future-. That is what makes me do the drumming”

Matthew emphasized the universal closeness to the mother womb and her heartbeats and the closeness of being in the circular igloo. He chuckles and add that most of all politicians need drum dancing – they need most of all to connect to the past, the present, the future and being part of nature. Laughing he add that of course everybody has a political role and we all need to participate in order to make the future and to connect – “so we all need drum dancing”.

For Matthew being a hunter, an artist and drum dancer is all about the same connection to nature and Inuit culture. “It all connects to 4000 years of Inuit culture and makes people realize how close they are to the far distant – the hunt – the heartbeat, the sound of the drum it is all the same.” “The land is a strong part of Inuit life. You feel really small and the strength of nature. The nature can kill you in a moment – the respect of the land is huge. We know that we belong to the land and that the land does not belong to us. We do not own the land; the land has so much beauty and strength and tells us that we have to give it a lot of respect. Mathew Nuqingaq emphasize the fascination of the mystery of the land being “the mystery in everybody’s life”

The mystery of the land is also very much part of the mystery of the life of the people at Ruskin Mill. It is as; Matthew phrased it, the mystery of everybody’s life. In a way, the achievement of the Ruskin Mill students is about struggling with that mystery as well as the practical challenges of life.

### **The old farmer from the mountain community in Norway**

Earlier the same year I talked with the farmer Ivar Fosse who was 84 years old in march 2005. The topic of the conversation was place names in his local community and the process of mapmaking. Outsiders were making those maps and naming landscape structures. Fosse related to the practical use of the land. Words were in his opinion tools with inbuilt knowledge and part of the history of how to use and relate to the land.

At the time of the interview, Ivar Fosse was still active, going for long hikes and fishing in summer and skiing in winter. Interviewing him during Easter I had to choose a day he was not out skiing. Together with another farmer, Iver Veslum, who died in 1996 he has been collecting traditional place names, carefully making notes and recording information on maps and in notebooks. Ivar Fosse started the work in the early 1960s; while Veslum joined later, concentrating on the geographical area he had lived and worked in.

They themselves have been part of a generation using the mountains from early childhood. The place names gave information about distances and characteristic landscape formations

necessary for moving around and relating to nature. Knowing the names was like having a map of the landscape. A map contained a wealth of information on everything from the colour of the bottom of a stream, the type of stream, to contours of characteristic mountain formations, fishing, grazing, migration routes for wild animals and the routes of movement of domesticated animals from the farms and spring grazing to summer grazing. The summer farms are up in the mountains and the winter farms lower in the terrain and farther down the valley, surrounded by fields of cultivated land. Movement was on foot and partly by boat along a lake further into the valley. His most important teacher had been his own father. The names reached far back into the past one generation after generation.

One of the reasons for recording the names was that place names no longer were important for the younger generations. The cycle of life has changed in importance as farming has changed and more people have started to work outside of the farms. Since children no longer to the same extent work in the landscape with their parents the place names easily become lost. Recording them while the knowledge still exists is important for their preservation. Another concern has been outsiders and map makers not having sufficient knowledge of the landscape and the traditions, and changing names according to their own interpretation.

The examples given by Fosse of the latter are numerous, many of them due to insufficient knowledge of local dialect variations and others due to people wishing to change names according to their preference. His frustration was clearly there, describing how difficult it was to make mapmakers listen to his knowledge, preferring the knowledge of people in tourism and closer to their bureaucracy to that of people with knowledge and traditions connected to the land.

One example that could be of both kinds is a mountain called “Vend hø”, which on modern maps is called “Ven hø”. The first has the meaning of the height that turns, (“vend”) in the meaning of being across the valley and not in the same direction as the rest of the mountains or hills following the rest of the mountain range. Thus, a walker in the mountains would always know where he was when he came to that mountain. The latter has the meaning of the beautiful “ven” height, that name being more appealing as more attractive and possibly even more appealing to tourists and outsiders. Yet other examples related to particular use of the landscape, like “sleo” being a traditional kind of fishing trap. The name is close in pronunciation to “sli”, which might mean, “cut” a word usually used about cutting grass to harvest hay. Thus, the name of a place for catching fish with a fish trap is by mapmakers changed to a name of a place for harvesting hay.

The day after the interview Ivar Fosse was off up in the mountains with a friend of his, continuing his work, being an old man more used to fighting bad weather and using the terrain than to fighting ignorant map makers.

### **The Bishop of Greenland**

Later I had a conversation with the Bishop of Greenland Sofie Petersen. The talk was rather informal, however as her position was as the chief representative of the Church of Greenland it had political and theological dimensions.

Bishop Sofie Petersen is in charge of the Church of Greenland. An independent church that is still a part of the State Church of Denmark. There are many publications that document that

traditions, myths and traditional religious belief has been maintained and to some extent co-existed with Christianity in outlying districts of Greenland.

The Church of Greenland has been part of the Danish administration of Greenland, which means that the Church has been part of a colonial project. At the same time, the Church has found its foundation in the Christian Gospel, which has given the Church a kind of independence from other parts of the Danish administration in Greenland.

The Christian faith have a foundation in being universal, in the thought that it exist one true Gospel valid for all humans and in that those believing have a mission in spreading the Gospel. Those critical to that part of the Christian universal message will take the stand that such a practice will result in suppression of meaning and a colonialism that suppress other ways of practicing belief and other faiths.

What is beyond discussion is that the Church at times have condemned, kept a distance from and worked against many practices that has had to do with traditional belief and spiritual practice. Since traditional spirituality and beliefs were closely connected to traditional activities in the Greenlandic society, such as hunting, fishing and other ways of harvesting what, from a Christian point of view, has been created by God, the practice of the Church must obviously have had a great and sometimes negative effect on many traditions.

Until Greenland gained home rule in 1978 the Church of Greenland was part of the Church of Denmark. The preachers were mostly Danish and many of them just stayed a few years in Greenland before returning to Denmark. Today many of the preachers emphasize their roots back to traditional belief at the same time as they communicate the Christian Gospel.

The bishop emphasizes the importance of ecumenical work across the differences that exist between the various Christian Churches in the world:

*“ The Church has the whole world as the place of work. One is taught to know one self better when associating with and being taught the ways of others. There is a common interest in among all indigenous populations in the world. Young Greenlanders need to understand that they are part of a greater community and that it exist a greater world than Greenland.*

The language question seems to be of crucial importance to all indigenous population. Greenland covers an enormous geographical area and there are differences between the languages or dialects spoken. I am asking myself if the standardizing of the Greenlandic language into one language will result in the loss of adaptation to the local culture and thus to local traditions and identity. Does the Bishop have any reflections about the role of the Church in language policy?

*Language is an important part of the Inuit culture and identity. It is a great problem that many Inuit, particularly in Canada and USA, have lost their own language. During the Danish rule it was a policy of giving priority to the Danish language.*

*When I attended school Danish was the first language. We were taught Greenlandic from third grade. Today it is different and Greenlandic is the undisputed language for Greenland. The Church has played an important role in order to protect the Greenlandic language. In the Church the Greenlandic language have always been used. It has been part of the Gospel that the Church should use the language of the people. It has never been an easy process. It has*

*been very difficult with a theology and a religion using or their descriptions and metaphors from a totally different culture.*

*Locally, for example in east Greenland, it means that a preacher will have to speak and use images that will reflect the local context. The most important is to be understood and to use a language adapted to those who listen to the message.*

What about the situation in Greenland and those who brought Christianity to the Greenlanders?

*It was, in my opinion, a good thing that the Gospel came to Greenland. At the time of the early missionaries, it was considerable economic activity by whalers and traders. Still, it has to be admitted that they worked against and suppressed activities they thought of as heathen in ways that sometimes destroyed valuable local traditions. One example is drum dancing that served as a way to solve conflicts, as a therapeutic practice and was an important part of local culture. Suppressing such practice and music was unnecessary.*

*However, there are clear differences between the old way of believing and the Christian belief. The old Inuits believed that everything had a soul. As Christians we do not believe that, we know that we as humans have been given a soul and that is what is separating us from the rest of our surroundings.*

It is possible to claim that the contact between humans and what in western terminology is called nature is the most universal that exist, while religious understanding with a foundation in a specific culture always will be influenced by that context. What is the opinion of the Bishop, was not the spiritual belief and practice in Greenland universal even at the time before Christianity?

*“The people in Greenland have always lived in a close connection to the land and the sea. The faith will reflect where you live. We have always known that we have lived our lives influenced by the forces of the land and the sea. The result has been a belief in fate that Greenlanders have had from earlier times.*

*Living a life under such conditions will reflect both in each individual’s own life and in matters of faith and spirituality. The humans in Greenland have lived from what they have hunted and fished at sea and from what they have hunted and harvested from the land – like the reindeers they hunted. Weather conditions have regulated the life of humans. Humans living in Greenland have always experienced the greatness of their surroundings and that it has been greater than they themselves”.*

Does this mean that spirituality and religious belief is more important for Greenlanders than those living under other circumstances?

*“All indigenous people are the victims of human activity in other parts of the world. Those humans who live against their surroundings – the land, air and sea, cause pollution and global warming by the activities and lifestyle they pursue. We know the great forces of our surroundings and we will try to live in a respectful balanced relationship to those forces. If humans try to put themselves above their surroundings and control them they will be the victims of their surroundings. Humans have to show humility to the forces of the land, sea and*

*weather. If humans do not show humility to those forces they will be the victims of them. Then humans try to behave like God, which would be making mockery of creation and what is sacred. That is exactly what is happening in large parts of the world, and that is what indigenous people and those living close to the land and sea will have to pay the greatest consequences of.*

What about the old belief from before Christianity does it have qualities that would be important for those living today?

*All the Greenlandic traditions show the importance of humility towards the land and sea, and that we need to live in a sustainable respectful relationship to our surroundings. Everything that surrounds humans has soul. The human surroundings – the land, air and sea – will show their power. The legend of the mother of the sea with her long hair who catches the animals we live from is an example of a story that illustrates the soul. The shaman, or the spirit seeker's in Greenlandic terminology, who has to comb the hair of the mother of the sea tells about a connection humans need in order for the animals we live from not disappearing.*

*The old traditions and the respect they represent for the land, sea and air is important for those living in today's world. Everyone who puts on the role of God behaves in a blasphemous way. We can never give any of them any guarantees; however what we can give them is hope, community and rituals, which emphasize both the faith and the community."*

What about the relationship between the human beings in Greenland?

*"The Church is the community. You can see the attachment, which exist between humans when you attend church in Greenland. The rituals will lead the humans through celebration and grief. We attend weddings, baptizing and funerals as a community.*

*"The faith is the strength of the humans. Humans live from their faith and a human will know her or his own faith. Faith and doubt would be companions, however it is possible to come with new questions and look at questions of faith from new angles when you add new knowledge.*

*I believe it is something mutual in all religion. Christianity has its own way of addressing questions of faith and spirituality and other religions have other ways of addressing the same issues. I do believe that no human being can be completely without faith. Humans are believers, they have to believe and believing is to be a human.*

*The faith means that it is possible to find a meaning even if the meaningless happen. I find it difficult to accept many things that will happen in life, such as a loss of a child. I do not find any meaning in the fact that such things happen. However, I find strength in the Christian faith that makes it possible to live with the meaningless."*

Would you say that all people living in such close proximity to nature conditions represent part of the same community of spirituality due to their situation?

*"The divide between humans is between those who do believe that they can manage the land, sea and weather and behaves like God towards their surroundings and those who realize that*

*they cannot do so. We have to live our life according to the conditions of our surroundings. It is an important part of God's creation and it is blasphemous not to do so. "*

## **Summary**

The Bishop I certainly right a community between all humans across all differences is certainly the challenge of all of us. Coming to Ruskin gave me insight into an active practice relating very much to that challenge. Walking through the meadows and valley around Ruskin Mill meant relating to a landscape with a historical past partly visible and partly not visible. The old farmer from Norway gave me insights into the wisdom of words and place-names. That knowledge is partly lost and partly remembered. We all have the challenge of maintaining it. We all need to be curious and ask. We all need to acknowledge being part of mystery being far greater than ourself.

Being so lucky that I had the opportunity to work with crafts I had to relate to my own inabilities and to be in a process of learning. Partly with words and partly by practice and doing together.