

On Nomadism¹

Knut Ove Arntzen

Introduction

Nomadism can be understood in different contexts: in an anthropological sense, as a new concept in philosophy, and as a real and metaphorical concept for new artistic praxis. The real sense refers to art among nomadic people, while the metaphorical usage pertains to the use of nomadism in new artistic and theatrical creations.

The term *Nomads* is derived from the Greek *nemo* (to pasture) and refers to the lifestyles of groups of people and social types characterized by the lack of a permanent residence or settlement. Nomadic groups are normally hunters and gatherers, but there are also some who are classified as pastoral, meaning that they live on crops, which they cultivate at different locations. Nomads are found all over the world, but there is a certain concentration of them in the East Africa and the Middle East.

Nomadism as a way of life is associated with hunters and gatherers, as well as with those who live on tamed animals, which they follow to locations where food for the animals is to be found at different seasons. Examples of the hunting nomads are the Inuit people of the Arctic in Greenland, Canada and Siberia, Australian Aborigines, and Bushmen in South Africa. The Sami people have a nomadic culture with a long history, during which they made a transition from hunters to tenders of tamed reindeer.

In the northernmost county in Norway, Finnmark, the Sami would follow the reindeer from their winter quarters in the interior part of the county in this vast Lapland Area, and go with them to islands along the coast of the Arctic Sea, such as the North Cape on the island of Magerøy. Their distinctive language and culture have survived in their authentic form to some extent, especially among the Sami population in northern Scandinavia and in some parts of Russia. According to “Macmillan Dictionary of Anthropology”, they are referred to as *transhumant*, which means those who move around seasonally according to the pasturing needs of their animals (Seymour-Smith 1986: 209).

Today the Sami people have become settled to a large extent; only a few thousand out of a population of approximately 70,000 still live as *transhumant* nomads. The Sami people in Norway have their own parliament, and many of them still live with a measure of their traditional values intact. After many years of linguistic oppression, the Sami language has been accepted as an official language in Norway. They have their own broadcasting station and academy, and many of the young urbanized Sami people have become cultural

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workers. Some of them have also worked in the Norwegian State Television Company to produce entertainment series, like the one about a Sami president travelling around the world on official state visits and speaking about the Sami people as if they were a major ruling people of the world. The cultural profile of the Sami people has become a model for similar initiatives among aboriginal people elsewhere in the world.

The philosophical use of the term *nomads* is connected to metaphorical ways of thinking, as demonstrated in the *Traité de nomadologie: La machine de guerre*, by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who apply the notion of mobility connected to nomads as a metaphor for war. This connection is linked to the fact that historical nomadic warlike people such as the Mongolians could move fast on horses and strike by surprise. Upon founding a state, war machines can be kept in a state of permanent mobility. Paradoxically enough, founders of states used those nomads, who had learned how to handle metallurgical techniques. Historians seem to think that nomads and their war machines became instruments for founders of states, like the Mongolians for the Chinese and the Tartars for the Russians. (Deleuze, Guattari 1986: 73.)

This philosophical explanation might also be extrapolated to art theory. Artists can be looked upon as mobile people, moving through different geographical areas to learn and to produce. Philosophical nomadism can also be related to the notion of aboriginal art, as in the concept of songlines or ritual landscapes. In his 1988 book "The Songlines", English writer Bruce Chatwin, who is well known for his book describing the phenomenon of Australian aborigines, who create invisible traces on landscapes, which can only be seen or understood by those who know the codes. This knowledge could save people from getting lost in the desert. This is an example of nomadic practices of navigation in landscapes, which correspond to the way artists use their skills and knowledge to navigate into different geographical areas.

Nomadic Art in the Past

Ritual landscapes can also be found among Arctic people, for example, in the Sami areas in northern Scandinavia, where burial sites and other landmarks made of stone heaps are scattered across tundra landscapes, where they can be used as points of orientation. When archeologists of Tromsø Museum first took interest in these sites, they found it difficult to describe them adequately because of problems in localizing them. They needed help from specialists in the Sami society and religion to find the sites. In the Inuit Arctic landscape of Canada, these landmarks are known under the name of *inukshuk*, "stonemen", also referred to as "dreamstones", as described in the children's book "Dreamstones" (1999) by Maxine Trottier and Stella East. Additional examples of past nomadic art include stone paintings found in South Africa, Scandinavia and other parts of the world. In Johannesburg in the Africana Museum there is a stone-painting

collection, which clearly documents the ritual function as well as the sites of the stone paintings, dating from the Stone Age up to the European discovery. Ships of European origin are reproduced on some of these stone paintings.

As a past and present activity one might also mention the strikingly stylized and abstract figures on bone carvings found in the Canadian Inuit societies. The American Indian wooden totems are very much connected to American Indian historical settlements, as, for instance, in British Columbia. Their almost monumental carving techniques, wooden constructions and architecture were well documented in the huge exhibition at the Museum of Man and Civilisation (*Musé d'homme et de civilisation*) in the City of Hull in Québec, Canada, in 1995.

The *powwow* is a festive occasion that Indians of North America have been organising to celebrate friendship and social exchange, by dancing and drumming in given spaces. White authorities would worry about them, because expensive gifts were given on a large scale, and there was the fear that they would waste their fortunes this way. In our days the *powwow* has increasingly become a tourist attraction.

Mask dancing in Greenland, as performed by the Greenland actress Makka Kleist, who lives in Tromsø, is an example of how ritualistic dance and expressive performance serve as an integrated part of the culture. The performers wore masks that were used for shamanistic purposes, but also had the function of scaring children.

Shamanistic activities, widespread throughout the arctic region, are a topic deserving special treatment. The shaman in Sami language is *noaide*, and his way of getting in touch with the animal souls is by drumming to induce a trance state, enabling the shaman to contact bear souls in particular. Soul-contact was needed with those animals that were hunted for food and other materials important for survival. Bear-rituals are especially known and described in Siberia.

Nomadic Art in the Present

In the present, nomadic art is either the continuation of traditional techniques of handcraft, such as the above-mentioned bone carvings, which are made for sale, or the continuation of the traditional rituals, to the extent that they have not been replaced by externally-imposed religious practices. This has been true of the Sami people, whose shamanistic traditions were prohibited by the Christian Lutheran church, and whose drums were almost all destroyed by Christian missionaries in the 17th and 18th centuries. The rediscovery of this historical culture has given new inspiration to present-day artwork.

The subject of nomads in literature is a broad topic unto itself, which deserves more extensive investigation. Several Canadian/American-Indians and Canadian-Inuits, along with Norwegian and other Scandinavian Sami writers, have made significant contributions to dramatic literature both in the past and present. Especially important to the current context is

Canadian dramatist Thomson Highway, whose plays have been performed at cultural centres for indigenous art, for example, in Toronto. The Sami musical singform *joik* is widely known and has some excellent performers such as the Finish-Norwegian Nils Aslak Valkeapää, who is also a poet. Marit Boine, whose musical technique is also based on the *joik* tradition, is a world-renowned Norwegian musician. Her work can be characterized as a melodic singing of verses, which explain moods and situations.

Sami Visual Art and Theatre

In a Sami context there are some visual artists of significance, like Iver Jåks, who is a thorough nomad in the sense of working with stray wooden material found washed up along the seashores. He has made driftwood sculptures in a combination of wood carvings and installation art. His exhibition in the Tromsø Art Society in 1999 demonstrated the excellence of this kind of art work, which combined different identities of both a formal artistic background and the specific arctic context. Such driftwood can float all the way from Siberia to the shores of Finmark.

Nomadic performance art has also been produced by historically predominantly nomadic people such as the Sami. The first example that I have encountered of combinations of ritual and performance with elements of nomadism is Sami theatre group Dalvadis Teatter from Karesundo in northern Sweden. At a guest performance in Stockholm in 1987, they were very clearly mixing performance art techniques with ritual approaches in the intersection between different traditions.

The name of the production in Swedish was *8 minuter från solen* ("8 Minutes from the Sun"), and there was a striking contrast between attachment to a theatre of bodily energies, reminiscent of the Greenland theatre group Tukak, and a play with not-acting and of performance art character. The basic structure of the action was dramaturgically fragmentary, dealing with the relationship of two Sami girls, *vigjheamit* in the Sami language, and the shaman, *noaide*, who at the same time was acting as the wild animal, the coyote. He also represented the threatening urban, industrial culture of the majority, subverting the Sami native culture. This production was directed by Ida-Lotta Backman, with the American Iroquois Indian, Norman Charles, in the dual role of the shaman/coyote. Iroquois Indian traditions of shamanism were combined with Northern Scandinavian Sami shamanism, thus joining different, "migrating" Northern Hemisphere traditions. Dalvadis, which was probably the first Sami theatre group, was shut down some years ago for lack of cultural support from the Swedish authorities.

In Norway a more elaborate official strategy for maintaining Sami culture was developed than in Sweden, enabling a Sami theatre group to exist, supported as a regional, professional company, in the Sami village of Kautokeino in the County of Finmark. The group was started in the early seventies, some years after the Norwegian professional

company, had been founded in the arctic region's capital Tromsø. Thus the Hålogaland Theatre, named after the old historical name of the region, became the major Norwegian language theatre of the region.

This happened in connection with the discovery of a strong regional cultural identity, something that also took place within the Sami population. But while the Norwegian language theatre of Norway could draw upon the fact that Norwegian professional theatre had already existed for more than 150 years in the south, the new Sami theatre had to rely on different sources. One of the people advising the new Sami theatre as a dramaturge was the Danish playwright and philosopher Ulla Ryum. Per Brask from the Drama Department at the City University of Winnipeg, Canada, has published an interview with her on the topic of aboriginal theatre.

Ryum points out that aboriginal, so-called fourth world people, had begun to use theatre and urban media to express their self-respect. Sometimes, as in the film by Nils Gaup, "The Pathfinder" (1987), they used a standardised dramaturgical form, based on the Aristotelian tradition. But Sami theatre preferred other dramaturgical forms, because of their more unconventional ways of structuring working processes, and also because their own myths are often of a non-realistic character. As Per Brask describes in "Interculturalism and Performance" (1991: 160–161), Ulla Ryum uses the term *cultural archeology* to designate the complexity of ethnic cultural traditions.

Beaivvás Sami Teater was established as an independent group in 1981, and it has been operating since 1990 with a permanent state subvention. In the winter of 1991 this theatre participated with other partners, like the Hålogaland Teater, in producing an arctic version of Bertolt Brecht's "The Good Woman of Sezuán", under the direction of Dutch dramaturge Jos Gronier, using ice sculptures as scenery and performing outside in very cold winter temperature, with the actors moving around on snow scooters. Another Beaivvás production was "Narukami", based on a Japanese legend, already dramatised 600 years ago. The performance was in genuine Sami manner, based upon Sami ritual traditions emphasising magic and poetry. (Arntzen 1994: 73.) Significant to their intercultural approach is the fact that their director-in-chief for several years, Haukur J. Gunnarsson, is from Iceland. It seems clear that such turning points in arctic theatre are of both regional/national and of international/intercultural character. Such theatre is not isolated but borrows inspiration and materials freely from different parts of the world.

Nomads as a Metaphorical Concept for Art

The concept of nomadism has had a major impact on new creation in the arts. New ways of understanding context and biography in the arts have largely led to a replacement of aesthetics by context, as expressed by more or less imperfect acts of documentation or different kinds of live art events with emphasis on biography and personal exploration. In

some respects, this trend can be connected to artistic migration from the east-bloc countries, which preceded the fall of the Iron Curtain. Already in the 1970s a large number of artists from communist bloc countries started moving to the centres of mainstream culture in Western Europe to gain education and artistic practice. Some of the best-known examples are Marina Abramovicz and Ulay, who portrayed the wandering from each side of the Great Chinese Wall, a project that was completed in 1988.

In her introduction to “Cultural Diversity in the Arts” Ria Lavrijsen wrote: “The question is whether in the nineties leeway will be granted for new and other visions of quality, voiced by people who are not part of established art circles. These groups are eager to participate in the art world, as arbiters who stand open to other qualities, to cultural differences, to other aesthetics and other parameters, to a renewal of modern and postmodern art, and to a recognition of pluralism.” (Lavrijsen 1993: 13.) To my mind in this publication, crossing boundaries and nomadism are concepts regarded as parameters to describe new artistic approaches, including what is called metaphoric detachment: “meaning some insight into life, into the imagination, into feelings by which we can group our thoughts in various ways.” (Ibid, 14.)

One genuine expression of nomadism is the post-mainstream² movement of new artistic activities. A movement of both global and local or regional character, “post-mainstream” can be used as a concept to describe what happens when mainstream movements are exhausted, resulting in a mix of styles and traditions that could not be combined in the mainstream for reasons of aesthetic purity or trend fixation. Post-mainstream can be described in terms such as cultural identity and nomadism, and it can include ritual and ethnic components as well as media or story telling. “Hybrid”, then, might be most appropriate as an aesthetic metaphor. Examples of post-mainstream theatre are young local theatres, as found in the Italian Adriatic Area, in urban centres of multiculturalism and in remote regions with ethnic populations or strong regional identity. A good example of the use of strong regional identities is arctic Scandinavia. In this area there are examples of productions of theatre and performance art, similar, in fact, to what can be found in North America or even in Australia.

Landscape art projects evoke both the nomadic notion of movement as well as ritual landscapes of holy or sacral sites. Such artscape projects are growing in numbers, as in the sculptural project of “Artscape Nordland” in northern Norway. That project, which can be

² Post-mainstream means standing in opposition to the Eurocentric mainstream, dominated by western European Centres (metaphorically the Main, like referring to the big rivers like Rhein and Main (i.e. Frankfurt am Main). Main as a river name corresponds linguistically to the word *main* as in *mainstream*. This is an ironical way of saying that post-mainstream is in opposition to the mainstream created in Western European cities like Frankfurt am Main.

visited anytime, stands between the urban and the local or the regional and the local. The artists of this project were predominantly “mainstreamers”, but the context itself is of the marginal kind with its colourful mosaic of identities.

Danish artist Elsebet Rahlff has a personal history as a “messenger tramp”, being born in Copenhagen, growing up in New Zealand and now living in Bergen. Her work on artscapes of flags could be called a post-mainstream experiment in landscape art. Elsebet Rahlff’s flags are pierced with holes, the patterns of which correspond to symbols that paraphrase the different national flags of the world. The basic colours of these flags is grey, but when they hang on flagpoles the colours become nuanced to give the impression of being black rather than grey, an effect caused by the contrasting lights. One can imagine this artscape of flags as a collection symbolising moving or migrating identities, wherever they are exhibited, as in Rio de Janeiro, Berlin, Reykjavik or Brussels.

Searching for identities instead of aesthetic fulfillment is also an aim of Western artists, such as the French visual artist Christian Boltanski, who has been working on personal biographical materials combined into sculptures or installations. A Polish artist I choose as an example of nomadism from Eastern Europe is Robert Sot, who later has changed his name to Robert Alda. Sot *alias* Alda lives and works in Bergen, Norway. His work as an artist can be described as the fulfillment of a messenger tramp. Examples of Boltanski’s work are the combination of live art and painting, as represented by his work “In Search of Ideal Worlds” (Bergen, 1995). Keywords for Sot’s *alias* Alda’s artwork are memory, recycling of materials, and personal biography. As an artist, Sot in that specific project was a tramp or nomadic tramp. On a global scale one could also mention the performance and installation artists gathering around the Embassy of the Nomadic Republic and carrying the Nomadic Passport organized by the art centre *Le Lieu* in Quebec City, Canada.

Alda’s work relates to Catholic religious art as kitsch, thus reminding one of the global hybrid art works as can be found in places like the Caribbean with their mixture of voodoo and Christian elements. This kind of global hybrid artwork was an expression of contemporary art that could be clearly seen at the Container Exhibition of Copenhagen Cultural Capital 1996. A Norwegian newspaper described the exhibit as follows: “There must be millions of them: the containers that are carried by ships across the oceans.” (Kyander 1996.) In this way the containers were turned into metaphors for movement and transportation of works of art, which had been exhibited at some of the biennials of the mid-1990s, including Johannesburg, Sao Paulo and Istanbul. In Sao Paulo Korean artist Duck-Huyn Cho had constructed a metal box that was supposed to give the impression of coming from the interior of the globe. In Istanbul Ayse Erkmen constructed a kind of a container lift, as a metaphor for the harbour city at the Bosphorus. The aim was to indicate that contemporary Turkey had contributed a great number of guest workers to other countries. Guest or immigrant workers also represent a nomadic element in our time.

Norwegian Inghild Karlsen's work with performance and installations led her also to stage design and scenography in national theatres in Bergen and Oslo, doing scenography for productions of plays by the Norwegian innovative dramatist Cecilie Løveid. Important to the context of nomadism, cultural identity and post-mainstream developments in the arctic region are her two works of visual performance and new theatre, *Namadis* and "The Polygonal Journey". *Namadis* was a project in co-production with the Bergen International Theatre Festival in 1988, using a former German fortification from the Second World War as space, inside and outside. There was also an installation at the Bergen Art Society, and a production performance, showing the process of felting, with Inghild Karlsen herself and her assistants, in Tromsø, Norway. She exhibited a camping car at the biennial in Sao Paulo in 1994. Concerning Karlsen's later activities, it can be mentioned that she worked as a scenographer for various theatre projects, in which her visual artwork would be reflected. Her visual style as a scenographer was inspired by aboriginal myths or ritualistic legends, formed into tableaux, which transformed the myths from stories into visual arrangements with music and sound effects like in the *Namadis* production. The means of expression were to be on an equal footing as well as interrelated. The title of *Namadis* refers to the Latin name for felt, *namadis*, which sounds almost like *nomade*. The scenic action inside the fortification was arranged so that the audience was enclosed; the spectators were unable to escape and thus became voyeurs in the ritualistic sense. Seven goddesses are represented, with different abilities related to objects. They are handed over to the male order, represented by the "box man", who attacks them physically. A new society is produced this way, the "tube-man society", with the box-man living in an arrangement of polygamy. Only one goddess survives; the rest are carried away by the tube people. Later the goddesses are restored as mourners or "weeping women".

The story seems simple, but the visual implications are even more important. A large, white Earth Ball made of felt is carried outside onto the roof of the fortification, where it is held symbolically by the vanishing goddesses and where it is left behind by the audience, which leaves by the same pathway they came, illuminated by torches. In my view, this reflects a mythical universe, performed in ritual terms, but also in the form of a visual kind of dramaturgy. Such an example illustrates how visual performance or new theatre can be used in an intercultural context. Participating in the production were a young actress from the Faroe Islands and a dancer from the Philippines.

A production of an even bigger scale was "The Polygonal Journey", which took place in March 1990 in The Auroral Observatory in Tromsø. It was also an installation as well as a visual performance, including Danish and Japanese partners. The critic Lotte Sandberg wrote the following about the installation located outside and in the entrance of the Observatory: "A narrow path has been dug in the deep snow. Along it there are

stakes with arrowheads, crosses, tents and different geometrical objects made of felt. In front of the entrance to the Observatory there is a group of figures with their heads bowed – ‘mourners’ made of light and dark felt”, as it is stated in the review also titled “The Polygonal Journey” in *Siksi*. (Arntzen, Sandberg 1990: 41.) Here we see a link to *Namadis*, where women were turned into mourners in the performance itself. Willie Flindt, a Dane known for his work with former Billedstofteater and Hotel Pro Forma, developed the visual performance together with Inghild Karlsen. The music and Noh-play sequences were presented by the Japanese music and performance group The Dumb Types from Kyoto. According to my article on the scenic production, one could make the following analysis: “The emphasis was on the visual framework, to which the textual elements can be said to have been subordinated.” (Ibid, 41.)

In the 1980s, a development took place in visual dramaturgy in the independent project theatres, which strove towards a certain equality between the visual and the textual. This trend is also reflected in Flindt and Karlsen’s performance, in which the tension between the visual and the textual is produced in a juxtaposition with the Japanese Noh-theatre tableau. It is also evident in the Danish actress Else Fenger’s rhetorical-gestured declamation of the Old Icelandic poem *Voluspà*. This was the core of the performance; the rest was supplementary. (Ibid, 42.)

Today a general shift of emphasis in perspectives is taking place, from formal and aesthetic analysis to an emphasis on cultural identity and interculturalism. This development might also have led me to another conclusion, namely, that the core of the performance is the exchange of cultural identities. This result would also involve an explanation of “hybrid” as the conscious recycling of both identities and means of expression, as well as materials or textual fragments that are being used variously in nomadic artistic praxis, be it metaphorical or not.

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Nomadismist

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Mõiste *nomaadid* kasutamine filosoofias on seotud metafoorse mõtlemisega, nagu seda demonstreerivad Gilles Deleuze ja Félix Guattari oma raamatus „Nomadoloogia: sõjamasin“ („Traité de nomadologie: la machine de guerre“, 1980). Nad käsitlevad nomaadidega seostatavat mobiilsust kui sõjmetafoori. Viimane viitab faktile, et ajaloolised nomaadidest sõdalased, näiteks mongolid, suutsid hobustel kiiresti edasi liikuda ning ootamatult rünnata. Riigi loomine sai võimalikuks vaid tänu sellele, et sõjamasinaid võis hoida pidevas liikumises. Paradoksaalne küll, aga nomaade kasutasid ära just riigi loojad, kes olid õppinud, kuidas rakendada metallurgilisi tehnikaid, nii et ajaloolaste arvates muutusid nomaadid koos oma sõjamasinatega vaid instrumentideks riigimeeste käes, nagu mongolid hiinlaste või tatarlased venelaste jaoks. Kirjeldatud käsitlust kasutatakse kui metodoloogilist baasi, et uurida, kuidas mõistet *nomaadid* võib mõista eri kontekstides: nii antropoloogilises tähenduses kui ka uue kontseptsioonina filosoofias ja kunstides. Antud artiklis rakendatakse seda mõistet uute kunstiliste praktikate uurimiseks nii otseses kui metafoorses tähenduses. Otseses tähenduses viidatakse nomaadide kunstile, metafoorselt aga nomadismile uuemas kunsti- ja teatriloomingus.

Nomaade iseloomustab peavoolujärgne (*post-mainstream* – vastand eurosentristlikule peavoolule, mida kontrollivad Lääne-Euroopa keskused) liikumine uute kunstiliste tegevuste leidmiseks. Nende tegevus kannab nii globaalset kui ka lokaalset või regionaalset värvingut ning nomadismi mõistet võib kasutada kirjeldamiseks seda, mis toimub, kui peavooluliikumised ammenduvad. Nomadism segab stiile ja traditsioone, mida peavoolu kontseptsioonis ei saaks esteetilise puhtuse või suundumuste kinnistumise tõttu kombineerida. Konkreetsemalt tuuakse näiteid Põhja-Skandinaavia etendus- ja visuaalkunstidest.

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Nihkuv vaatepunkt: teatritraditsiooni ümberkirjutamine postmodernistliku kultuuri äärealadel

Jurgita Staniškytė

Viimastel aastakümnetel on leedu teatris toimunud palju muutusi, eriti seoses teatri baaselementidega: teksti, näitleja ja vaatajaga. Esilekerkinud postmodernistlikud arengud on kõige ilmsemad ja radikaalsemad teatristruktuuri neis osades, mis on olnud problemaatilised kogu leedu teatri ajaloo vältel – teatri identiteet ja sotsiaalne funktsioon, draamateksti roll lavastuses ning näitleja ja tegelase suhe. Selles artiklis