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**Depicting a Sámi society between tradition  
and modernization: The strategies of  
coping in Jovvna-Ánde Vest's trilogy  
*Árbbolaččat***

In this presentation I will look at the coping strategies of the protagonist in the *Árbbolaččat* trilogy ("The Heirs"), written by the Sámi novelist Jovvna-Ánde Vest. The author is from Roavvesavo, a small Sámi village on the Finnish side of Sápmi in Northern Finland, close to the Norwegian border. Vest has been living in Paris for the last 25 years. He has written six novels, translated several novels into North Sámi and written articles concerning Sámi issues. The *Árbbolaččat* trilogy consists of three novels published in 1996, 2002 and 2005<sup>1</sup>. The last novel *Árbbolaččat goalmát oassi* ("Árbbolaččat" Third part") was nominated for the 2006 Nordic Council's Literature Prize and was then translated into Swedish with the title *Arvingarna III*.

The narrative is situated in Máhte báiki, a remote Sámi village on the Finnish side of the Deatnu river in Northern Finland. The Sámi on the Finnish side of Deatnu river lived in isolation until after the Second World War. According to the Sámi scholar Veli-Pekka Lehtola, some people designated Finland's northernmost district as a separate republic (Kuokkanen 2007: xi). Also according to Lehtola:

The ideas of social Darwinism reached Finland later than elsewhere in the Nordic countries, not until the 1920s and 1930s. The reason was Finland's independence in 1917, when it needed to seek its own identity as a state. Research that aimed at building and promoting the Finnish national identity

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<sup>1</sup> I refer to the novels as Á1, Á2 and Á3. The English quotations from the novels are my own.

began to draw distinct borders versus Russians and Swedes, an in addition versus "primitive" peoples like the Sámi, who were culturally related. (Lehtola 2004:46).

Máhtebáiki is one of the few places that was not burnt by the Germans at the end of the Second World War. The conserved buildings, the characters and their traditional way of life create a symbolic frame of the narrative. The characters in Máhtebáiki are mostly descendents from Máhtte, the protagonist Heaika's grandfather, from whom the place got its name some generations ago. Most of the characters are small farmers. The narrative is built on the stories of several of the characters from the end of the 1950s until the 1980s. This was a time with great changes and modernization within the Finnish majority society. Roads were built, agriculture was mechanized, young people started to move to the cities for jobs or to study. By means of the interconnected stories of the characters, the narrative opens up a variety of ways of interpreting the changes in the majority society and their gradual impact on the local community. Each of the characters finds their own way of coping with and adjusting themselves to the changes. Some of them succeed quite well, others do not.

In his book *Ethnocriticism*, the North-American literature professor Arnold Krupat suggests some analytical tools that I find useful for my reading and understanding of the characters' social relations and sense of self. Krupat argues that the retoric tropes metonymy and synecdoche metaphorically may be taken as naming relations of realistic type between the person/individual and society (Krupat 1992:211-212). Thus the terms metonymic and synecdochic understanding of the self can be applied to relations we experience in life. Krupat refers to Native-American Indian autobiographies when speaking of an metonymic or synecdochic sense of self, and I find that this can be usefully applied to fiction. The part-to-part sense of self is named metonymic and the part-to-whole sense of self is named synecdochic (Krupat: 1992:211-214). In these terms, Krupat claims that:

[...] modern Western autobiography has been essentially metonymic in orientation, Native American autobiography has been and continues to be persistently synecdochic, and that the preference for synecdochic models of the self has relations to the oral techniques of information transmission typical of Native American cultures (Krupat 1992:216).

The narrative of *Árbbolaččat* has a wide range of characters, but my focus is on the protagonist Heaika. The narration is mainly done through the voice of Heaika. He gives the reader both an overview of the development of the plot and personal reflections of his observations through his diary, told in first-person. In the beginning of the narrative, the reader learns that Heaika has been living for a couple of years in his mother's old house in Máhtebáiki. It is five years since she died. At this time, he is actually the first one who has moved away from Máhtebáiki and then returned to his place of birth. I will look at how Heaika adjusts himself to the community that he returns to after several years living in a city further south in Finland, and how he manages to establish himself in Máhtebáiki. I ask: how does he choose to orientate himself in this new situation in his life, and is he tending towards a part-to-part or a part-to-whole orientation regarding his relationship to the others in the local community and in his sense of self?

Heaika grows up with his mother. He is an only child and does not know who his father is (this is revealed to him later in the story). He is well cared for by his mother Risten, his uncle Hemmo, who is Risten's brother, and Biret-Káre. Biret-Káre was married to Heaika's uncle but became a widow with two small children when she was still very young. She is the matriarch and "village mother" of Máhtebáiki and everybody calls her Áhkku (grandmother or elderly woman). Heaika is a lively and happy child. When it is time to be sent to school, Heaika, like many other children living in remote places, has to leave home and go to a boarding school. The other children tease him for not having a father. They call him Ristenaš-Heaika, or Luovus-Heaika. Hemmo and Áhkku find that it is best to let Heaika go to school in another

place, but the teasing continues. As a result of this, Heaika becomes a silent child and he has few friends. When the Second World War breaks out, Heaika and many other young men of his generation have to join the military. The outbreak of the war becomes a change in Heaika's situation as 'other' and fatherless: "The war breaks out, erases the differences, and the young man is accepted in the united force without prejudice" (Á1:53). He does what he is told and he is considered a normally competent soldier. After the war he is promoted to rank of corporal (Á1:33)

When the war is over, Heaika feels inadequate for the farmers life in Máhtebáiki, and decides, against his mother's will, to move to a city further south in Finland. He studies for a while and gets a job in a book store. He also meets a Finnish woman, Birgitta, and they fall in love. The story of their love and life together is little by little revealed to the reader by Heaika's personal notes in his diary. Heaika and Birgitta live together until Birgitta bears a still-born child. Birgitta's grief over her dead child turns her away from Heaika and she leaves him. After this Heaika feels very lonely. He likes his work at the bookstore and has a reliable income. As was the case when he was in the military, he feels that he is accepted. In his diary Heaika notes: "25.11.69, late at night [...] The boss of the book store, the economist Uosukainen, valued my work, and after all this time, I dare to say that in the book store, I was considered a normally competent employee" (Á2:49). Heaika finally moves back to Máhtebáiki in 1956. He has inherited a small amount of money from his mother, and this allows him to concentrate on a project writing a book about the history of Máhtebáiki and the people there. This money allows him the opportunity to live without having to find a job.

Nobody else in Máhtebáiki has writing as a job, and not everybody understands Heaika's way of living. Lisa Aslaksen has written in her masters thesis in Sámi literature on how traditional physical labor is accepted and understood, and that Heaika's way of living is not understood by all in the local community (Aslaksen 2007:36-39). Still, the money he inherited from his mother makes it possible for him to do exactly what he wants: to gather material and write. In this sense Heaika has quite a bit of luck; in the late

fifties people in this area did not have much money and they mostly got their livelihood from their small farms and whatever they harvested from nature. Heaika's neighbor and cousin Ánde wonders how anyone can live by writing. Ánde himself is a famous carpenter and has plenty of work. He lives with his wife Birget, their four children and Áhku, who is his mother. He offers to help Heaika to get a real job. Ánde says that they surely need an extra man for a road building project, and there is always a carpenter who could use some help. Heaika's answer is: "Thank you for the advice. I'm not afraid of real work, it's not a question of laziness. You don't understand, and you are not the only one, what about yourself [...] Do you like your work?" (Á1:10). Ánde looks at him as if he doesn't understand what on earth Heaika is talking about. Ánde's wife Birget explains to her husband: "Heaika wants to know if carpentry is a pleasant kind of work." To this Ánde answers: "I have been asked about many different things, but never this. Carpentry is the only thing I know well, not even in the worst cold have I hated my work." (Á1:10). In this situation the narrative provides the reader with an example of the differences in the characters' way of thinking. The narrative also depicts an encounter between the traditional local community and influences from the majority society, brought there by Heaika's book project.

In the context of Heaika's story, it is not strange that he is the one who brings in this element of a wider world into Máhte báiki. Because he grows up without a father, Heaika has to find, from an early age, alternative ways of coping in a community so dependent on agricultural activities. The lack of contact with his father has disconnected him from the father-son sphere where he naturally would have learned what a man needs to know in order to continue the traditional agricultural life in Máhte báiki. Heaika's uncle Hemmo is in many ways like a father to Heaika. He lives together with his wife Riittä and they are Heaika's nearest neighbors. Hemmo is hard-working, loyal, and speaks only when necessary. Hemmo is also the only one to whom Risten confided her secret; who Heaika's father is. At that time it was a great sin to have a child without being married. In this case the people do not

even know who the father is. "The shameful pregnancy makes Risten isolate herself from other people and from real life. As far as Risten knows, nobody around here has ever before had a bastard." Hemmo says this to Risten when she tells him who the father is: "So that's how it is. The boy will be well looked after. That wealthy man should have enough money to help with the upbringing of the child, but the best might be to forget all this. I wouldn't have thought this about him, the son of the parish clerk and schoolmaster." (Á1:52). Hemmo does not have children of his own, and he has plenty of time to take care of his sister and nephew. Hemmo and his brother Máhtte build a house for Risten so that she will have a home for herself and the baby. He provides Risten and Heaika with firewood and fresh fish, but Heaika never has to help Hemmo doing this work. For this reason, Heaika never learns traditional man's work in Máhtebáiki. In a conversation with the Sámi scholar Ánde Somby I asked how that could be, that a man like Hemmo would not teach his nephew these skills that are so vital for a man in a community like Máhtebáiki. Ánde suggested that the relation between a father and his son will contain a certain amount of confrontation from time to time. A possible interpretation is that Hemmo wants to protect the poor boy who does not have the support of his own father, and it is easier not to engage himself in a relation where he would risk getting into confrontations with his nephew. Hemmo is the one who supports Heaika when he decides to leave Máhtebáiki after the war. His mother cries and gets very upset, but Hemmo then says that Heaika is a grown-up and free to go. He relies on the young man's ability to take care of himself and consoles his sister by saying: "Heike is not the kind of person who perishes, Heike will return when the time comes" (Á1:34). Hemmo lives his life in his own way and is not very concerned about what other people might think. Even though he has always lived and been in Máhtebáiki, he is not narrow-minded, at least not when it comes to the ones that he cares for. His unconditional support of Risten is a good example of that. One day when Heaika visits Hemmo, the

old man is sitting and čiktit<sup>1</sup>. Heika comments that Hemmo is diligent. Hemmo then says: ”– Somebody čiktit and somebody does some other work, everybody does what they know the best” (Á1:12). An other example is when a lestadian religious meeting takes place at Ánde’s and Birgget’s house. People have come from far away to listen to the preachers, and the whole village turns up on the first day - everyone except Hemmo. He is working outdoors in his potato field where everybody can see him, and he could not care less whether the preacher gets offended or not. When Riittä dies and Hemmo really feels the weight of his age, Heaika is the one on whom he relies. The two of them maintain this good relation until the day that Hemmo passes away.

When Heaika returns to Máhte báiki, he does not have much motivation when it comes to something as important as gathering enough firewood. In the cold area where Máhte báiki is, firewood is an absolute necessity. At the end of the 1950s the people in Máhte báiki still did not have electricity. Heaika is not very good with the axe and he is reluctant to ask for help. He keeps saying as an excuse that the writing takes so much of his time. This goes so far that he rips off some of the boards from the outer wall of his mother’s old barn one day. He takes them from the backside of the barn, hoping that nobody will discover it - but in vain. Ánde’s son Heandarát discovers that Heaika has started to burn his mother’s barn and tells his father. Ánde, who normally does not pay Heaika many visits, now feels that it is urgent to have a serious talk with him. Heaika understands why Ánde suddenly comes to visit him, and says to Ánde that he did not have time to go out in the woods. Ánde asks him why he did not tell him or Máhte-Máhte, one of Heaika’s other cousins? They would both be glad to help him. Ánde at the same time looks around the house and asks Heaika why he does not clean the house once in a while. He says: ”It’s not any of my business, of course, but it’s so sad to see my aunt Risten’s house like this” (Á1:30). When Heaika later on the same day pays a visit to his uncle Hemmo and tells him about Ánde’s visit, Hemmo asks him why he did not borrow his axe. The next

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<sup>1</sup> Čiktit means repairing holes in the fishing net.

day Máhte-Máhtte brings Heaika some firewood so that he can continue his writing. Máhte-Máhtte owns the horse in the village and helps the others in the village with heavy physical work. He is one in the local society who seems to notice and appreciate Heaika's talent. He says to Heaika: "Everybody can cut some trees, but not many can hold a pen" (Á1:31). If I look at Ánde's visit to Heaika from a metonymic sense of social relations, the incident from Heaika's perspective can be interpreted as an impolite interference in someone else's private life. He is reluctant to ask for help because he wants to manage on his own. He has his pride and will manage by himself even though he is inadequate for the task. In this situation I interpret Heaika as having a metonymic sense of self as an individual who wants to manage by his own. Given the context it is also possible to interpret the visit from a synecdochic orientation, where Ánde looks at Heaika as a part of the whole local society and pays Heaika a visit as an act of concern. This is the same act of concern that he shows when he offers Heaika help to find what in his opinion is a real job. Even though Heaika feels inadequate of doing the traditional man's work, he still feels a desire to be capable of doing such work. After a while he buys himself an axe and starts to collect own firewood. He actually learns that cutting firewood is healing for body and spirit:

In the twilight he goes out on the *rándat*<sup>1</sup>, from the *soahttu*<sup>2</sup> he picks out a suitable birch and starts to saw. He saws and saws, the physical work has strengthened the flabby muscles, the hands don't tire as soon as they used to in the beginning. When he stops to take a breath, he hears Hemmo sawing. Two lonely men passing a day on the *rándat* in the time of *skábma*<sup>3</sup>. The younger is beginning to find joy in the sawing, the older one has learned to cope with loneliness a long time ago. (Á1:122).

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<sup>1</sup> The place where you chop the wood.

<sup>2</sup> A pile of wood.

<sup>3</sup> Skábma is the time between November and January, when the sun does not rise above the horizon north of the Polar Circle.



Heaika also has an interest in fishing for salmon, even though he never becomes very good at it. He blames his father for never having to learn it: "And what would he do with Hemmo's frayed fishing nets, he who didn't learn from his father how to čiktít, how to moardít<sup>1</sup> – or anything" (Á2:186). I interpret Heaika's desire to be capable of doing this kind of traditional practical work as a longing for a father who he never knew. In Máhte báiki this skill is still an important part of the man's role. After moving back, his inadequacy constantly reminds him of his loss, and the desire for fishing for salmon in the river can be seen as a way to take back something that is his birthright. I also interpret Heaika's desire as a way of wanting to integrate into the local community after living many years outside it. Fishing is a skill that people understand and value, and for a man to have that skill means belonging to the community. The fishing is also a metaphor for Heaika's solitude as an outsider who is standing alone in the midst of the movements of the local society. He is trying, with only partial success, to capture something elusive, hidden and yet valuable under the surface of the society where he returned to. Heaika's fishing can also be seen as a double metaphor; it is his way of trying to "fish" for important information for his writing by wading through the currents of local society.

The inheritance from his mother provides Heaika with the material support necessary for his project. Another aspect of living in a small village like Máhte báiki is that he needs to find a way to fit in with the rest of the local community in order to actually write. For his book project he needs to get information from the people who know the history of Máhte báiki. In order to obtain that information, he needs to gain the trust of those who possess this knowledge. To do this, Heaika does a lot of walking between the houses to visit his neighbors and informants. This walking can be interpreted at several levels: on a personal level it is important for Heaika both for his writing and for socializing - as an escape from his lonely single life. Another level the walking also has a function

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<sup>1</sup> Moardít is part of the process of preparing the fishing nets before you can start fishing.

in the local society. Heaika's visiting is a way of getting and giving information about his work to the other members of the society, so that they might see the importance of it. It is also a good way of interchanging news. He is very humble and careful not to brag about his writing abilities. He often says as in this situation: " Heaika is writing a book, Áhkku said. – I'm just scribbling a bit. Nothing to make a fuss about" (Á1:25). He is not doing it only for himself, he is doing it for the rest of them as well. It is also his way of making a space for himself in the local society on his own terms. In a way, Heaika is both an insider and an outsider in Máhtebáiki, and writing this book makes him able to balance these two positions. On a third level concerning the local society and the majority society, the walking will eventually result in a book. Once published, the book will function as a witness to the history of Máhtebáiki. Though it is a remote village, the knowledge of the life and the people can be passed on to generations to come even when those who possess the knowledge are gone. At this level the book also functions as a mediator between the oral and the written traditions. Heaika in some way is actually the one who connects the old and the new time in the history of Máhtebáiki. Heaika manages to make his own project part of the whole community of Máhtebáiki, like a cooperation. His book can be seen as a contribution or a gift from him to the community. In this way, he will not be remembered only as Ristenaš-Heaika, or Luovus-Heaika, the boy who did not have a father. Heaika's walking and the result of the walking, the book about Máhtebáiki, is a combination between a metonymic and a synecdochic sense of self, though I find that the metonymic orientation plays a less crucial role than the synecdochic orientation in both the narrative and Heaika's project. In *Nordisk Litteratur/ Nordic Literature 2006*, the literary critic Jógvan Isaksen makes a comment on the third novel in the trilogy:

Not that life is bad in the far north of Finland, but the prerequisite for survival is a tough working day – where work itself is more important than anything else. Work from first to last – the description of it may seem somewhat harsh for a

contemporary reader from a bit further south, until one remembers that anywhere else in Scandinavia, one need go no further back than a generation or two before one finds that idleness was the worst sin, and hard work the goal of everything. (Isaksen 2006:102).

I agree with Isaksen's observation that hard work is a goal for the people of Máhtebáiki. It is said "my life is where my work is". The traditional Sámi life was and is work, but the hard work itself is not the only goal for the people. People are very dependent on each other, not only for sharing the work but also for company. Both are important for surviving. In Máhtebáiki the social life is developed and maintained through work, but it is not only the hard work that is the goal of everything. The way I interpret this, the goal is just as much about social relations and characters' interrelation. It is about finding your place in the community and being a part of it, i.e. by helping your family and neighbors if they need a hand and by being accepted and appreciated for your contributions to the community. The focus of the narrative has in my interpretation just as much to do with social relations, where the characters' lives are interconnected, as with individual struggles with everyday life. In his diary Heaika admits that he has always felt lonely:

«23.12.-84. Late at night ... I am a very lonely person, always have been. Everybody around me has passed away. Only I am left. From my childhood on I have been an orphan. The women of this place, that have fed me when I needed it, have been my mother, and my father have been the people who made my life easier with gentle words. I have a warm house and food every day, when others had more in life than me. The only thing that comes from myself are my memories, the most beautiful among them my love, the love, that left me paralyzed. I have missed out on many things in this life, my biggest wishes never came true. On the outside I seem to live a pretty good life, but in my innermost thoughts I am always alone...». (Á3:188).

In a conversation with the Jovnna-Ánde Vest in the summer of 2006 he told me that one of his goals in writing this trilogy was to depict the good things in hard times. This does not mean that the same model of living fits for every one of the characters and that everybody is living in harmony with each other. Each of the characters has something to struggle with in their own lives and in their relation to the other characters. Heaika does not ever give up even if life is harsh. He survives a childhood without a father, he moves away, falls in love, gets his heart broken and returns to his home village. There he manages to find coping strategies so that he can live his life as he pleases and have good relations to his neighbors and relatives. As an adult returning to his place of birth, he defines his own role in the society – he functions both as an insider and an outsider, but he is no longer "other". He socializes with others, but sets his own limits for how much he lets them interfere with his life. He is a lonely man, but in a way he has chosen that himself and he accepts the situation. That is one of his strong sides - to accept the situation as it is. If he wants changes in his life, he does what he can to fulfill his wishes, even though he does not always succeed. He lives as a lonely mediator between the traditional life and the new times that are about to come.

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