ðjálf’s Journey: An Example of How to Incorporate Younger Sources in the Comparative Study of Indigenous Religions of Northern Europe

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In this article, I would like to address an idea of how to use later material as pointers to older sources, in a comparative perspective. This will be illustrated through a review of the case of ðjálf, known as the companion of Þórr in Old Norse, one who has been compared with material from other cultures in Northeast Europe. The Sámi material of the 18th century and the Finnish material of the 19th and 20th centuries is problematic in its relationship to the Old Norse sources of the 13th century in many respects, including geographically and chronologically. Earlier research had its image clear: Sámi religion was dominated by the beliefs of their Scandinavian neighbors, as was the religion of the Finns. (Cf. Olrik 1905a; 1905b; 1906.) Later research has, however, shown that the exchange must have been a lot more complicated than that.¹

Borrowings, Loans, Exchange – What Do We Mean?

Religious acculturation and change, as suggested by Åke Hultkrantz (1973; cf. Sørensen 2004), is by no means a one-off deal. In most cases, this is a process that extends over a long period of time with several encounters in different settings, introducing, planting and incorporating ideas and motifs among a range of different people. It is not like going into a library and borrowing a book. It is not a single occasion, and probably not with a clear agenda or an open choice. This makes it difficult to state who, in the darkness of early Iron Age Scandinavia, made an impact on whom. Did the reindeer sacrifice to the thunder god on the mountain side in Lapland by a magically-skilled Sámi impress the tax-collector of a Norwegian lord, or was it the cultic festivities in Uppsala that the Finnish merchant told his friends in Satakunta about, that caused the religious change? Whatever happened has left us traces in the written sources, ink on paper or skin. Traces of something that in many respects were anything but that – ink on paper – but rather contacts with the divine, the smell of blood on the idols and tales of powers capable of changing your life. The traces are like gossip about those meetings and the things in life that meant something to everyday life and the people on both sides of the language barriers. I will here try to show how a retrospective comparative method may help us point out possible new perspectives on the sources of Old Norse religion.

Religions as a Context for Each Other

A comparative method may help us to lay bare motifs hidden or hinted at in material from different periods and cultures. Most likely the most popular characters of popular belief, so-called ‘traditiondominanter’ [‘tradition dominants’], that attract popular motifs and draw them to themselves, are the...
main target of the method. They are rich in material and usually from different types of sources and times. In this case, with Sámi, Finnish and Old Norse religions, we have the thunder god, in each cultural setting an extremely popular and central character, evidence of which denotes protection against chaos and fertility as the most central topics connected with this figure. The Sámi language is however not one, but several, divided into South Sámi, Lule Sámi, North Sámi and Skolt Sámi, and sometimes even more sub-groups like Ume Sámi and Inari Sámi are also taken into account. Considering the Scandinavian peninsula and the Baltic Sea region as one cultural melting pot, the thunder god’s semantic sphere becomes central and a surface where motifs and evens myths are easily transmittable, probably simply due to the fact that they made sense in the everyday world of the worshippers. A mythic motif is taken into a new environment if it seems useful to the worshippers, not if it is approved of by higher authority. Before the domination of the Church, the different ethnic groups interacted in different settings; through trade, war, alliances, etc. Not being exclusive, intercultural settings provided a flow of ideas and impressions. However, with this said, a melting pot and a high degree of sharing does not mean an uncritical borrowing from one another and the copying of an entire mythological system note by note. Each character and religious setting selects its own pieces, forming them and adapting them into the particular system. The cultural sphere of the Scandinavian peninsula is in itself a reason to consider these sources as each other’s context, even though from different times and despite cultural variations.

Who Wrote the Sources?
The three indigenous religions of Northern Europe have three individually very different text corpuses as their main written sources. In sweeping (and somewhat oversimplified) strokes, the Sámi sources were mainly written down by the missionaries of the Swedish and Danish-Norwegian Church, but during a time when the Sámi religion was in full swing. The Finnish material was collected by academics doing fieldwork, but at a time when it had developed into a folk religion with Christian influences. The Old Norse material was written down by Christians a few hundred years after the official conversion to Christianity. All these collectors and scribes have one thing in common: they were all outsiders looking in.

A Human among the Divine?
The helper of the thunder god is an elusive character in several different indigenous religions in Northern Europe, such as the Old Norse, the Sámi, and the Finnish. (The helper is also present in the Lithuanian material, but, although interesting, will not be considered in this study). The different sources are spread out not only geographically, but also across several hundred years, from the 10th to the 20th centuries. Nonetheless, they show several common denominators.

The Old Norse character Þjálfi is the only character said to be a human being of any significance in Old Norse mythology when it comes to interacting with the gods and being taken up to the realm of the gods. His sister Röskva is known only by her name. However, not even this is beyond dispute, since Þjálfi and Röskva are said to be giants in Hymiskviða and one suggested etymology for Þjálfi’s name would even point to an elfish origin.

To most of you, the character of Þórr’s helper is familiar. The Old Norse thunder-god uses a number of characters as a sidekick on his travels to Jötunheimar [‘Giantlands’], usually Loki or Þjálfi, but there is also the example of Týr in Hymiskviða, not to mention the giant Hymir when he goes fishing for the Midgarðsormr [‘World-Serpent’]. In the Old Norse myths, Þórr is the only character who frequently uses a travel companion.

The character of Þjálfi is unique in the Old Norse material. He is a male, age unknown, not considered a child, but not an independent adult either. He is a human/giant, taken as a servant into the realm of the gods. Unlike Loki, Þjálfi is never seen without Þórr and does not star in any of his own myths. Previous attempts to explain Þjálfi have focused mainly on the etymology of his name, and his relationship with, or his swapping places with, Loki as the companion of Þórr.
Regarding the name Ƿjálfi, suggestions have been made from slightly different directions. One proposal is ‘the serving elf’, others include ‘fighter of shackles’ and ‘one who ties, binds’ (see de Vries 1962: s.v. ‘þjálfi’ and works there cited). In Ólafur Guðrúnarson’s Póadrápa, he is called sifuni (Faulkes 1998: Skpm verse 83) together with Þórr, suggesting “a close relationship either by blood or by marriage” (de Vries 1962; Heggstad, Hóðnebo & Simensen 1993), which would symbolize a close relationship to the god. Additional information on Ƿjálfi would be that he is also present in Swedish 19th century folkloristic material, still as the servant of Þórr. Worth noting here is also that Þórr in the same context is often referred to as ‘old man’ or ‘old man Thor’, in the same way that the thunder god is referred to in Sámi, Estonian and Finnish material. (Schón 2005.)

In Sámi religion, the helper of the thunder god is called Thoor-olmai [‘Þórr man’]. This character is more of a guardian to the violent thunder god, who is kept imprisoned due to his bad temper. In North Sámi traditions, the helper is the one releasing the god when thunder is due. But, North Sámi sources suggest that this also could be done by the noajdie, the Sámi shaman. Occasionally in South Sámi tradition, Thoor-olmai also guards the noajdie when he is in a trance, on soul journeys. In the place of Thoor-olmai, we also find Thorens sóner [‘Sons of Þórr’], Termes raskaste drángar [‘Termes’ fastest farmhands’] (Fellman 1820–1831 Il: 102.), Thorens drángar Luleå 1687 (cultic site in Bergman 1891: 224f.), Tordengudens drenge [‘farmhand/farmhands of the thunder god’] and Thordens striidsman [‘the thunder god’s soldier/fighter’] (Skanke 1728–1731: 255). Three of these names suggest that we are dealing with a group, not a single character. He is the son of the thunder god, and is thus of divine heritage. The Sámi thunder god is called Horagalles in the southern parts of the Sámi language area, the name being a loan of the Scandinavian Þórr kall [‘old man Þórr’]. The ‘Germanicizing’ of the Sámi material also points at another problem: the authors of these sources interpreted the information on the Sámi thunder god in terms of Þórr, leaving to us no clue as to how much their interpretation has impacted the sources. The thunder god carries different names in different Sámi languages, where the Horanames (Horagalles, Horanorias, Horesgud) are South Sámi, in Lule Sámi he is Thora Galle, in Pite Sámi he is Hora-Gallis and Pajan-Olmai [‘Thunder-Man’]. In northern and eastern regions, the thunder god is called

Table 1. Servants of the thunder god in Sámi, Old Norse and Finnish traditions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the thunder god</th>
<th>Sámi</th>
<th>Old Norse</th>
<th>Finnish</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name of the servant</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature of the servant</td>
<td>Divine</td>
<td>Human/giant/elf</td>
<td>Human</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship between the god and the servant</td>
<td>The god’s servant in the myths. Thorens sóner, Thorens drángar, Tordengudens drenge, Thoor-olmai, Thordens striidsman, Termes [...] drángar</td>
<td>The god’s servant in the myths; called Þórr’s sifuni [‘relative by marriage’]</td>
<td>Ritual specialist; called Ukon poika [‘The old man’s / the thunder god’s son/lad’]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of the servant</td>
<td>Sets the locked up god lose (function shared with the shaman); guards the shaman while he is in trance</td>
<td>Assists the thunder god on his adventures</td>
<td>The religious specialist and the link between gods and men; protects against diseases, protects harvests, etc., relying on the power of the god</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tiemmes, Dierpmis and Termes. (Rydving 2009: 95ff.)

The Finnish thunder god Ukko ['Old Man'] does not have a helper in the same sense as the thunder god of Old Norse and Sámi traditions. However, on the other hand, the tietäja ['knower, one who knows'], the ritual specialist in pre-modern Finland, was called Ukon poika ['son of Ukko, lad of Ukko'], suggesting a close relationship with the god. This specialist was in some sense like a reflection of the deity, and the god supplied the tietäja with weapons and defensive magic (Siikala 2002: 203–208). In that, the tietäja and Ukko share the same function. The tietäja could also be referred to as ‘demi-god’, or even be called ‘god’ (see Table 1).²

By simply combining these three associates of the thunder god, we would produce a non-existent, ideal picture of a helper of the Nordic thunder god with features from the 13th to the 20th century. Such a jumbling could be summarized as follows:

He is related to the thunder god, either by marriage or as a son.
He releases the thunder god, and he guards the shaman in trance. He assists the thunder god. He is a religious specialist in close contact with the thunder god and a mediator between man and the divine. He has a connection to shamanic activity.
He is divine or a human made divine or a human with special abilities.

If we, for a moment, halt this mad speculative train and instead think, we will find several things to be critical about. First of all, the sources stem from different geographically scattered places. Secondly, they are in most cases from very different time periods. At least the heydays of Sámi and Finnish religions are separated from those of Old Norse by several hundred years. Thirdly, we can also conclude that the circumstances under which the different sources were preserved and written down also differ. What to do?

Well, first of all, we can conclude that we have material from the 1200s to the 20th century from all religions, even though the main corpora surface in different time periods for each of them. During this time, new things are added and subtracted from the material.

We can also conclude that Christianization struck each differently: with different force and with different outcomes.

By combining all the characteristics, we get something that does not exist and that should not be treated as any sort of reality either. What is it then we have in front of us in the laboratory? Is it a vehicle that will take us easily to new discoveries? No. Is it a map of the complete character of a Nordic concept of the helper of the thunder god? No.

What we have here is a heap of suggestions, road signs pointing in directions where we may look more closely for more clues to solve the riddle.

So what we need to do is to use the suggestions and look deeper into the material that the road signs point to.

It is my firm belief that only evidence found in the Old Norse material says anything about the concept of pre-Christian Scandinavian traditions. Sámi and Finnish material can never be used to simply fill in the gaps in Old Norse religion and vice versa. The material in a comparative study, whether it is cross-cultural or chronological, may tell us something about a cultural contact and influence, and may point back in time, but cannot stand alone. If it points in a direction and more indications are found, it strengthens the possibility. It may be difficult to accept the historical darkness here, but until new light is shed on the matter, this is the only acceptable conclusion.

With this set of rules and the road signs from Sami and Finnish material, it is possible to proceed with the examination of Bjálfi from the suggestions into questions:

1. Is Bjálfi ever considered to be part of a collective, a group?
2. Does anything that Bjálfi or Þórr do connect them to shamanic activity?
3. Could the name Bjálfi have been a title for a ritual specialist?
4. Is Bjálfi a mythological interpretation of a ritual specialist?

Question 1: Bjálfi is never considered to be a member of a group as sometimes the assistant in Sámi tradition seems to be, apart from the visit to Utgarðalóki in Snorri’s Edda, a very strange group indeed. Two humans/giants, a god/giant on
his way down and the thunder god. The myth seems to be a compilation of several motifs and shorter tales, and the outcome of the myth is somewhat unclear.

Question 2: I have not found anything that would connect Þórr or Þjálfi with any shamanic activity.

Question 3: No, Þjálfi is more likely to be a human personal name, which strengthens the idea of Þjálfi not being a god in his full right. Recent discoveries though, may have given us new information (Portable Antiquities Scheme: “Spindle Whorl”).

Question 4: There are similarities between the Thoor olmai’s and the noajdie’s release of the thunder god and Þjálfi’s actions in the myth of the battle against Hrungnir. In the story, Þjálfi tricks the giant into standing on his shield, both in Snorri’s prose version and in Eilífí’s skaldic poem Þórsdrápa. Since I consider this to be a myth of ritual fire-striking, where the giant Hrungnir is made of stone with a three-pointed heart and armed with a whetstone clashes together with Þórr and his hammer of steel (as I have argued elsewhere; see Bertell 2003: 227ff.), it seems no coincidence that Þjálfi is the companion in this myth and not Loki. Þjálfi makes the meeting of the whetstone and the hammer in mid-air possible, thus creating the fire/lightning at their collision. The whole idea of the character of Þjálfi seems to be connected to the relationship between humans and the mightiest of the gods as a mythical interpretation of a ritual. The myth of Hrungnir and his heart also connects to the story of Þórsteinn Bejarmagns and his fire striking weapon; a three-sided stone and a nail from the dwarves that returns to the throwers hand. (Bertell 2003:232f.)

The idea of humans related to gods is universal and old (Steinsland 2007: 435–436). Already the Egyptians considered themselves related to the sun god, and many other cultures have as well. The idea of Þjálfi being related (sifuni) to Þórr is therefore by no means radical even if he is human, and could therefore be a mythical interpretation of a ritual specialist’s relationship with the thunder god. Since he is considered to be human by Snorri and a giant in Hymiskviða, and if the etymology does indeed point towards an elvish origin, this may show that the category of being to which Þjálfi belonged was of less importance. The significant point may have been that he was not a god. However, this also raises new questions. To what extent could a worshipper him- or herself turn to a god, and when did he or she need someone to transmit his request for him/her? Here we find different kinds of contact between man and god: a seafarer could still call upon Þórr for better weather, but the Conversion of Iceland was taken care of by a native ritual specialist.

Conclusions?
In the light of the religious surroundings, the etymological explanations of the name Þjálfi could point in the right direction: someone who assists and makes the thunder god successful by letting him lose (as Thoor Olmai does in Sámi myth) and by plying his way. This is what Þjálfi does in the Hrungnir episode, in which he could be interpreted as the fire striker, making the steel and the whetstone meet.

This motif sphere and the flow between the indigenous religions shows that the motifs associated with the thunder god probably had regional variation, and as a ‘tradition dominant’ attracted different motifs in different settings, between cultures and even within each culture. As seen in the poem Þórsdrápa in comparison with Snorri’s prose version of the Hrungnir-episode, even within the same narrow milieu as the one Snorri operated in, there are variations that could be an expression of different traditions or genres, rather than Snorri editing the text. Since the variations across the materials reviewed here are so extensive, we may conclude that the mythological assistant of the thunder god in Sámi and Old Norse religion was a character and a concept in which the central idea is an assistant and the nature and form (race, number) is secondary. It could also be interpreted as a central theme for the thunder god: he may not work alone. In the episodes where he does (Lokasenna; Harbardsljod) this is pointed out as something exceptional. Strangely enough, Þórr is called einriði [‘lone
rider’) by Snorri. The comparative study indicates that the vocabulary around ritual specialists in the Sámi material and the mythological character of Thoor-olmai is one of those variations. This opens for the idea of Þjalfi carrying the same traits, and possibly showing those in the myth of Hrungrnir. Combined with the rare and rather dim Ukon poika information from Finnish myth, and an equally dim mention in scaldic poetry of Þjalfi’s possible close kinship with the thunder god, Þjalfi as a mythological interpretation of a ritual agent could be suggested.

Notes

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The (De)Construction of Mythic Ethnography I: Is Every purs in Verse a purs?
Frog, University of Helsinki

Hegemonic academic discourses have developed an over-idealized image of j tunn (pl. j tna r) [conventionally translated ‘giant’] and purs (pl. pursar) [often translated ‘ogre’, distinguishing it from ‘giant’] as exclusive categories of being. The term purs is one of a number of Old Norse terms for otherworldly beings hostile to humans, all of which commonly get classed as ‘giants’, ‘ogres’ and/or ‘trolls’ in English. The image of ideal categories is a scholarly construction of Old Norse mythic ethnography that has been developed and refined since the 19th century. Particularly across the past decade, debate has