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My lasso.
Source: Photo by the author.

The reindeer herdsman's lasso

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I have latterly found myself thinking more and more about ropes. They have come, in my mind, to epitomise everything that an object, as we usually understand it, is not. An object, we suppose, has a certain fixity about it. It may be moveable, in its totality, but at any moment you can point to it and say where it is. We also expect it to be sufficiently solid to keep within the contours of a determinate form. We can say where it ends, and where other objects begin. It is complete in itself. But the rope has none of these properties. It is neither fixed nor solid; neither bounded nor complete. It is flexible rather than rigid, allowing for differential movement all along its length. Its conformation is continually shifting, subject to its own momentum and the vagaries of applied force. It holds together not because of the solidity of its material, but through the countervailing torque of each of its strands with that of the strands with one another. And its end marks a moment not of completion but of potential undoing, from which it will fray if not spliced, knotted or sealed. In principle, it could carry on forever. It is no wonder, then, that ropes have been largely overlooked in inventories of material culture centred on collections of objects. They simply don't fit.

Yet a world that consisted only of objects could harbour no life. It would be either still-born or fossilised. In a world of life, things are not fixed but suspended in movement, not solid but in flux, not outwardly bounded but ever discharging into the *milieu* of their existence, never complete but always in formation or dissolution. We could call it a world without objects. And it is in such a world that the rope comes into its own. Though the organic fibres from which it is made do not lend themselves to preservation, it is likely that rope is among the most ancient of human manufactures, and its uses have continued among peoples of every continent. These uses are many and various, yet have in common that they afford ways for life to take hold, or to get a grip, in a world not of interlocking parts but of forces and flows, where everything strains to take its own course. Think of the mariner, tossed on the waves, hauling on the rigging to catch the wind in his sails. He needs to "know the ropes"

to stay afloat. Think of the surveyors or "rope-stretchers" of Ancient Egypt, whose task was to re-establish field boundaries after every annual flood of the Nile. And think of the herdsman, roping his animals in the corral, as he seeks to bend their fugitive inclinations to his will.

My rope is of the latter kind. It was formerly used by a wannabe reindeer herdsman, namely myself, in a futile attempt to participate in activities within the roundup enclosure, during anthropological fieldwork among Skolt Sámi people in north-eastern Finland over the autumn and winter of 1971-1972, and subsequently – in 1979-1980 – with Finnish reindeer men of Salla, a district of southern Lapland lying hard up against the Russian border. The three-ply rope is wound from hemp and treated with tar to improve its suppleness and water-resistance, giving it a distinctive smell. It is some 20 metres in length, and half a centimetre thick. Along with a knife, for cutting earmarks, and binoculars for spotting marks from afar, the rope is an essential item of equipment which every herdsman carries at all times, slung in a coil across the shoulder when not in use. But I carried mine more for show, since I never became a competent user. Casting a rope in the roundup, to catch a chosen animal while it is running at full tilt in the throng, is a skill that takes years to acquire. This is not just a matter of mastering a particular movement, involving a throw of the arm, a flick of the wrist, a tug on the rope and digging in with the feet to take the strain. It also involves fine judgement: of pitch, velocity and direction; and of just the right time to throw to ensure that the trajectory of the rope with its evolving loop answers to the running of the animal.

The reindeer herdsman's lasso is by no means confined to the Sámi. Though the materials vary, from plant fibres to animal sinew, it is found among herding peoples across the Eurasian far north, from Lapland to Kamchatka. Moreover, it is older even than reindeer herding, since even in the days when wild reindeer were still being hunted, it was used as a snare. Rather than being cast in the act, the rope would be looped in advance across the animal's expected path, draped between a tree and an adjacent sapling, or possibly on the snow-covered ground. The hunter, hiding in the undergrowth, had only to pull on the rope in the instant the animal stepped into the loop. In the 1930's, elderly men from Finnish Lapland, who remembered hunting wild deer around the end of the 19th century, before they went extinct in the region, could tell the ethnologist Samuli Paulaharju of having used precisely this technique. I have moreover witnessed it myself, during my fieldwork in Salla, in an attempt by one of my herding companions to recover a deer of his own that he had found running wild in the forest. We had hung the loop, and as my companion held the loose end of the rope, another coaxed the deer towards it. But the attempt failed. An old gelding overtook the animal we wanted on the path, and its large antlers fouled the snare.

The same rope, in short, can function as both a lasso and a snare. A lasso becomes a snare when set; a snare becomes a lasso when cast. Either way, the key to successful operation, apart from the guile and dexterity of the operator, lies in the tensile strength and flexibility of the rope itself. Both depend on the frictional forces, of fibre on fibre, that ultimately hold the rope together. When the rope is bent or stretched, fibres slide over one another. If it is long unused, however, the fibres tend to lock in place, with the result that a coil of rope can harden almost to the point of rigidity. To restore it to working order, you have to give it a good stretch. This is best done by looping it around a stout tree trunk, and then, holding both ends, tugging as hard as you can. It is common, just before the roundup begins, to see everyone tugging away on any suitable trunks they can find. Once revived, the rope will perform well, even in very low temperatures. Yet the friction of fibres that gives the rope its strength, when stretched taut, also provides it with a memory when coiled. A rope that has been coiled in one way will not take kindly to being coiled in another. That's why, during the roundup itself, herdsmen prefer not to coil their ropes in the pauses between throws, but to let them trail behind them, along the ground. So long as the end is loose, there's no risk of lines getting tangled or of people tripping over them.

There is more to the reindeer herder's lasso, however, than a length of rope. It also includes one critical component which I have not so far mentioned. This is the toggle. Mine has been hand-carved from a piece of antler, approximately six by three centimetres, and one centimetre in thickness. Broad and round towards one end, narrow and rectangular towards the other, it is pierced by two holes – one large, in the round end, so as to form a ring; the other small, in the rectangular end. To prepare the lasso, the rope is threaded through the small hole, and then knotted at the tip to prevent the toggle from sliding off. The other tip is then passed through the ring, to make a loop. In readiness to cast the lasso, the herdsman holds the free end of the rope in his left hand, and forms a loose coil in his right by pulling enough rope through the toggle to cover the required distance. The toggle, then, hangs by the rope midway between the left hand and the right. In the moment of release, the coil is sent soaring into the air, whereupon it springs open into the ephemeral form of a noose which closes as it flies towards its target. Catching an antler or a back hoof of the selected animal, the noose immediately tightens, with a grip that is only intensified by the force of the animal's flight. In the ensuing struggle, the rope – now taut – becomes the conduit for a battle of wills between the animal and the human, in which the powers of the one can be more than a match for those of the other.

Clearly, the toggle plays an essential part in all this. It completes the loop without which nothing could be caught. Lacking a toggle for his lasso, the herdsman would be as bereft as the musician without an instrument. The

comparison is apt, for like the musical instrument, the toggle has all the attributes we would expect of an object: shaped from raw materials into a fixed and final form, it is solid and durable, outlasting every throw of the lasso, just as the instrument outlasts every performance. Exquisitely crafted, again like the instrument, the toggle preserves the work of its maker for posterity. Many have become collectors' items, and examples are frequently exhibited in museum displays of Sámi tangible heritage. Just as the instrument, when not in play, draws attention to itself as an object in its own right, so in the museum of heritage, our eyes are immediately drawn to the toggle, while the rope, if exhibited at all, retreats into the background. It is, after all, just another length of rope, of no particular interest. Place the instrument in the hands of the musician, however, and we are immediately captivated by the melody. So too with the herdsman. It is in the flight of the rope, as in the flow of the melody, that the real artistry resides. As music exists only in the performance, so the rope comes to life only in the act, alternately dangling in the pause, snaking through the air, and tugging on its quarry.

Over four decades now have passed since my reindeer herding days, and for me they are now but a distant memory. Yet I still have my lasso, and from time to time I take a look at it to remind myself of the lessons it has taught me. I have periodically brought it out in my classes, too, to help me teach these same lessons to my students. Of these lessons, one stands out above all others, namely, that the world we inhabit – the world of life – is not made up of material objects. It is rather a world without objects, wherein things are ever coming into being and nothing lasts. And in this world, the greater the tension of contrary movements, the more tightly are we and our nonhuman companions bound together.