

EELIS LAINE: GREEN GRASS, RED TAPE

ON STRUCTURE AND STYLE

I could imagine that the author's aim is to write a work of non-fiction, and as material for such work, these four parts of the manuscript would need to be made more specific and reorganised under a theme. At the moment, the sections covering the different countries are unbalanced and only connected by loose chronology. Of course, the ethics and circumstances of voluntary work are presented in the first three parts (the sections on Vietnam could be placed with experiences from other areas to act as a baseline), but the text as a whole and in each paragraph needs a framework of some kind. I also think that this text would benefit from injections of texts from another author (or authors) with a background in voluntary work. Such thematic additions regarding life and culture in Thailand, Japan and Australia would complement the text, as one individual's experiences of such vast countries and cultures remain limited even after longer periods of residence.

However, I do like the way each paragraph goes straight to the point and location and there is no wavering. This is rather rare in travel literature. But (in terms of Finnish readers) the expectation value of these exotic locations could be further exploited by widening the framework enough to include perspectives other than the author's personal experience. Many of the events described seem to be so near in the past that describing the foreigner and the place of work by using a distancing narrative (or even fiction) would result in self-criticism and perhaps more interpretations of facing a foreign culture.

ON CONTENT

A travelogue like this, with the author a step further inside the foreign culture than a Finnish tourist, is at its best in scenes describing the concrete everyday life. The more the author realises the unique value of his perspective as an observer of a kind, the better he is able to spot differences between both the locals and other foreigners there. Thus, I would like to view this manuscript as everyday sociology, an analysis on how "the everyday life, after all, determined what life actually was", as the author comments regarding the distance between himself and the generation of party people. Similarly, I think that by concentrating these comments on the unique human type of the International Volunteer in the 2000s would create a reference point to bring together all the text material and a perspective that would interest a wider audience.

As it is at the moment, in my opinion, the manuscript is a long way off a finished book, both in terms of form and content. There is a notable amount of moralistic comments about Asian cultures in the text. Reflections on the voluntary worker's perhaps slightly marginal role would allow for more varied criticism on the distances of the Western and Asian way of life; I would particularly like to see other travelogues from these countries. This would soften the somewhat harsh definitions of certain cultures, as the reader would not have to rely solely on the experiences of the author.

Chapter 41 is a good example of this in many ways, with its title "Japanilaisen salaisuus" (the secret of a Japanese). The title alone is dangerously pointy in my opinion, similar to the way used in many travelogues, when people are simply reduced to representations of their country and culture.

Similarly, the apex of the chapter, the revelation of the sexual identity of a colleague and the final comments on this not changing the attitude toward the person, seem to me like structural moralism, partly highlighted by the title of the chapter. **On the other hand, structurally, this chapter is the best individual part of the manuscript, with the description of the work done (carrying rocks from the seashore to build a wall) provides structure to the entire chapter, with parallels to the process of construction and a dividing wall incidentally bringing together very different people.** Sections like this could quite easily be improved and condensed to also include relevant observations of the surrounding culture.

In summary: In terms of content and structure, I find that these column-like extracts concentrate too much on the author's inner landscape and experiences and show only glimpses of these extremely interesting environments. **The position of volunteer workers seems to be unique in the sense that they are half way inside the destination and local culture. This conflict is constantly addressed in the manuscript, and the emotion of the resulting anxiety does come across to the reader.**

In my opinion, it is a valid decision, in most of the extracts, to process a thematic conflict through a character introduced in the text. But I think that these encounters should be connected and compared with each other, to deepen and distance them through more formal narrative solutions (in order to turn them into short stories or philosophical travel essays in the style of "The Voices of Marrakesh" by Canetti).

Thank you for allowing me to read about the travels of such a special
globetrotter.

Tampere, 24 August 2014

Markku Soikkeli, student of literature, critic, science fiction writer