

Notes on the Finnish Tradition

Anssi Alhonen

anssi.alhonen@taivaannaula.org

www.taivaannaula.org

Foreword

For every nation land is a sacred thing; for it is living on a land that gives birth to a characteristic and unique way of perceiving the world. The ancient Finns lived in a world in which the survival and continuation of life was dependent on the conditions of nature. Maintaining balance between man and nature was crucial as it was the basis on which people's livelihoods, lifestyle, religious beliefs and even language and morals were developed¹.

The aim of this article is to provide an overview of the native Finnish religion. For the sake of brevity it is not possible to include all of the possible customs and beliefs. Traditions have varied substantially through time, from Stone Age practices, to the religious practices of later agrarian communities. There have also been additional geographical differences, for example, Western Finland was historically affected by influences from countries to the West and the South, while Eastern Finland although retaining many archaic traditions was influenced by the Russians and the Eastern Orthodox Church.

It is not my wish to sketch a timeline for the evolution of religious beliefs in Finland, nor is it my wish to present the geographical differences in great detail. This paper shall instead focus on the religious beliefs and customs of the Finnish folk religion as documented during the 18th and 19th centuries. Strictly speaking, this is not a paper on reconstructed paganism. Literary sources of pre-Christian Finnish paganism are scarce or nearly nonexistent. Therefore, in my opinion, it is probably impossible to reconstruct any kind of meaningful version of Finnish paganism by using sources outside of those originating from the syncretistic folk religion. In other words, when trying to understand traditional Finnish spirituality our main sources are the traditional songs, spells and stories which were collected by Finnish scholars in the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries.

When studying the beliefs of my Finnish ancestors I am often surprised to see how many of the old traditions continued to be practiced even after conversion to Christianity. Christian saints were equated with the old spirits and most holidays from Christian folk tradition carried their share of customs and beliefs from pre-Christian times. The oldest medieval churches in Finland were actually built on top of old sacrificial sites². The perplexing result of this being that the common folk continued to worship the original spirit of the place, but inside the new church. Court records from the 17th century indicate that people were convicted of blasphemy because they had made 'illegal' sacrifices inside these churches.

The ancient tradition of making communal sacrifices at these sacred sites seems to have transformed into the custom of giving donations to church officials. The donations of items such as elk antlers and bear hides were used in church decorations in a similar manner as they were probably used at sacred sites during pagan times. The old practices persisted in the guise of novel social and theological ideas, for example, in some villages it was customary to honor the bear killed during the bear feast (a tradition

¹ Hyry, Katja and Pentikäinen, Antti and Pentikäinen, *Juha. Lumen ja valon kansa: Suomalainen kansanusko*. Porvoo: WSOY, 1995.

² Oja, Arvo. "Karhuntaljat entisajan kirkoissa." In *Valoa kansalle*, edited by Pekka Laaksonen, Ulla Piela and Maija-Liisa Heikinmäki, 58-63. Forssa: Forssan kirjapaino Oy, 1989.

that perhaps dates back to the Stone Age) by playing the church bells. Another example of this, much to the dismay of church officials, was the participation of village priests at their local feasts in honor of the thunder god Ukko during the 17th century³.

In rural areas, Christian and Pagan influences were liberally mixed, giving birth to a syncretic religion that was still very much alive in the latter part of the 19th Century, at least in the remote parts of Karelia. It is for this reason that even though literary sources for Finnish paganism are very scarce, one could argue that the ethnic religion of the Finns never truly died out but continued to live and take on new forms; even during the thousand years of official Christianity.

This presentation of indigenous Finnish religious beliefs and practices will focus on four key factors:

1. Belief in spirits that reside in nature (including those of animals).
2. The concept of ancestor spirits living in the afterlife, instead of heaven or hell.
3. The survival of Balto-Finnic myths and spells as a living oral tradition.
4. A way of life closely connected to nature based almost entirely on self-sufficient agriculture or hunting and fishing.

I have concluded that the aforementioned factors, which can be viewed independently of Christian theology and liturgy, can be considered the defining features of traditional Finnish folk religion. It is my contention that the Finnish folk faith offers a unique and holistic worldview which can be understood for the most part without reference to Christian theological concepts. My main sources of information for this are the Finnish Folklore Archive and, of course, the works of leading Finnish scholars in this field.

I. World view

The ancient Finnish conception of the world was a layered one. The world was thought to include a flat disc-like earth that was covered over by a huge sky-dome⁴. The dome was called the 'lid of the sky' (Taivaankansi) and the night sky was known as the 'bright lid'⁵ (Kirjokansi). At the center of the sky-dome where the sky-god resided the giant world-pole or 'axis mundi', supported the dome. This pole was connected to the Pole Star, 'Taivaannaula' (also known as the 'nail-star' or 'sky-nail') and this connection allowed the world pole to rotate around its axis. In certain cases, the central object that was believed to support the sky and all creation was considered to be a world tree (the 'Great Oak') or the world mountain. Today, respected scholars identify this 'axis mundi' with a mysterious object from Finnish mythology, the Sampo. It is for this reason that the main theme in Finnish mythology; the fight between the cosmic gods and the forces of Pohjola for the Sampo can be interpreted as a symbol for the eternally rotating world and the struggle between life and death, order and chaos⁶.

³ Oja, Arvo. "Karhunaljat entisajan kirkoissa."

⁴ Talve, Ilmar. *Suomen kansankulttuuri*. SKS, 1990.

⁵ Hyry and Pentikäinen & Pentikäinen, *Lumen ja valon kansa*

⁶ Kempainen, Iivar. *Suomalainen mytologia*. 1960.

The roots of ancient Finnish cosmological concepts can be found in Proto-Uralic mythology; a mythology for which the scholar V.V Napolkikh has proposed a fascinating reconstruction⁷. According to Napolkikh the Proto-Uralic world view consisted of three different worlds or layers of reality, the upper, middle, and lower worlds.

The upper world is located in the skies and also to the south. The great birch tree (or in Finnish tradition, the giant oak) grows there. At the roots of the tree, a spring flows and marks the source of the world river. Near the tree and spring there is a warm lake, or 'sea of life', where water birds and human souls are renewed. In the Finnish folk religion this upper world became a warm and light world located in the south called Lintukoto (or 'home of the birds') and the sea of life became a body of warm water surrounding the Lintukoto. This upper world is ruled by an old woman, the ruler of all life, protector of childbirth, motherhood and water birds. She is the sender of souls and the mother of the gods. In Finnish mythology a mysterious virgin by the name of Iro is said to have given birth to the three divine brothers at the beginning of times. In Finnish folk religion, the divine mother is the Virgin Mary (or 'Maaria' in Finnish) and she is remembered in songs and spells as a spiritual mother, healer, helper and protector of motherhood.

Uralic belief states that migrating water birds are messengers of the gods that are traveling from the upper world. According to this belief these birds travel between worlds via the Milky Way, or Linnunrata (the 'Birds' Way') in Finnish and in other Balto-Finnic languages. Birds such as black throated divers, geese and maybe swans were thought to carry human souls to the otherworld⁸. The Milky Way was then seen as the heavenly version of the world river; flowing down from the upper world to the middle and lower worlds.

Beyond the middle world and to the north lies the lower world. There the world river flows into a freezing cold ocean called 'Sarajas' and it is in the middle of this ocean that we find the dark and cold 'Pohjola' ('the Northern Place'). Sarajas was perhaps considered to be one and the same as the northern Arctic Ocean; an ocean into which many northern rivers flow and the Northern Lights were said to glow near the gates of Pohjola. For all intents and purposes, Pohjola is located both in the north and under the flat earth. According to certain folk songs, from Pohjola the world river runs into a wide bottomless abyss and eventually into the land of the dead.

In the Finnish folk religion this land of the dead, called either Manala or Tuonela, is also located in the center of a cold ocean; giving the appearance that Pohjola and the underworld are one and the same thing. When the Finnish healer, or tietäjä, fell into a trance, his soul faring to the underworld to gain information from the souls of deceased legendary sage, the tietäjä was said to fall through a slit (lovi). The word 'lovi' is probably a synonym for Louhi, the matron of Pohjola. If this is the case, both 'lovi' and 'Louhi' would signify a hole in the ground which can be used as a pathway to the land of the dead, or as it may also be known, Pohjola⁹.

In some folk songs the world mountain is said to rise up from Pohjola and reach all the way up to the sky-dome and the Pole Star. This world mountain is called 'Stone Hill' or 'Pain Hill' and in healing spells, pain that is exorcised from the patient, returns to this mountain. The mountain rising up from the land of the dead and up to the skies signifies a place in which all pain and suffering is gone and the

⁷ Napolkikh, V.V. "Proto-Uralic World Picture: A Reconstruction". In *Ethnologica Uralica* 3 (Northern religions and shamanism), edited by M. Hoppal and J. Pentikäinen, 3-20. Budapest: Akademiai Kiado, 1992.

⁸ Kuperjanov, Andres. "Names in Estonian Folk Astronom – From 'Bird's way' to 'Milky way'". In *Electronic Journal of Folklore* 22, 49-61. Folk Belief and Media Group of Estonian Literary Museum, 2002.

⁹ Kemppinen, Iivar. *Suomalainen mytologia*.

world is as one. The world mountain motif is well-known from the cosmologies of several nations¹⁰.

In the underworld everything is backwards when compared to the human world. Left is right, up is down and so forth. There the world river turns around and becomes 'Tuonen joki', the river of the land of the dead. In this form the river flows from north to south and upwards again towards the upper world. In the heavens it returns to the spring at the roots of the birch tree. From there it flows down through the skies once more as a world river. This is the eternal cycle of life¹¹.

II. The Cosmic Gods

The ancient Finns had two different creation myths recounting how the world or the earth was formed. One is the 'Earth -Diver' myth which is widely spread in Eurasia, Northern America, and which was also preserved by the Orthodox Karelians. The myth tells about a bird that dived into the primeval sea and brought up earth from the seabed. The other myth tells that the world was formed when a water bird laid its egg on the knee of Väinämöinen, who was at the time floating in the primeval sea. Väinämöinen moved his leg and the egg broke forming the world. This myth is thought to have been adopted by the Baltio-Finnic people as a southern cultural loan during the Iron Age¹².

The myths recount that at the beginning of time the virgin Iro gave birth to three divine sons, Väinämöinen, Ilmarinen; and Joukahainen. Väinämöinen was the oldest and Joukahainen the youngest. It is to these brothers that the appellation, the 'Cosmic Gods' is given, since they were born before the world was formed and contributed to making the world what it is today. The divine brothers seem to be connected with the primeval elements. The oldest, Väinämöinen is associated with water. In Finnish spells and folk songs, water is called the "oldest of the brothers". Iron is thought to be the second oldest of the brothers, especially when connected with the air from the bellows of the smith's forge. Which is clearly the element of the smith-god Ilmarinen? Therefore the youngest brother mentioned then is by virtue of logic, fire, or Joukahainen (although there is no direct evidence of this connection in the folklore). Together water, iron, wind and fire made it possible for humans to create better weapons and tools. These objects gave birth to the whole of civilization. It is for this reason that the cosmic gods are not only considered to be gods of natural elements but also protectors of culture.

As previously mentioned, Väinämöinen is heavily associated with water. He creates the world through his movements while floating in the primeval sea; he builds a legendary boat and swims several times to the underworld in the form of a fish or otter. When Väinämöinen wishes to leave the human world he sails in his boat through fiery rapids. Additionally, Väinämöinen's famous kantele is made from the jawbone of a pike and the ancient Finns called certain patterns on the surface of water the "Path of Väinämöinen". When the spiritual power of water was conjured, Väinämöinen was called. Hence the Finnish scholar Kaarle Krohn concludes that originally Väinämöinen was the god of water¹³. Väinämöinen is also the world's first healer who travels to the underworld to receive the right words for healing and enchants the whole world with his singing. Consequently Väinämöinen is the god of water, sages, healers and poets.

The sky god Ilmarinen first brought fire to the world by causing the first lightning to strike over the primeval sea. Väinämöinen and Ilmarinen appear together in many myths. Väinämöinen is also involved in bringing the fire to the world but he is not the bringer of fire since his element is water. As a sky god,

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Napolskikh, V.V. "Proto-Uralic World Picture: A Reconstruction".

¹² Talve, Ilmar. *Suomen kansankulttuuri*.

¹³ Krohn, Kaarle. *Suomalaisten runojen uskonto*. Porvoo-Juva: WS Bookwell Oy, 1915 / 2008.

Ilmarinen (or Ilmari, Ilmaroinen, Ilmamo, Ilmamoinen) rules over the elements of air: clouds, thunder, lightning, wind; storm and calm; and rain and snow. Ilmarinen is also a creator god who forges the sky-dome and the world-pillar. When he is done, he places the stars on the sky-dome. As a god of fire, wind and rain, he was the god of slash-and-burn farmers. As a god of wind and storm he helped sailors and fishermen. Because of his intricate wisdom regarding fire and wind he was the guardian of smiths. Ilmarinen might have also been a fatherly god who people turned to when they were in trouble¹⁴.

It is possible that the strong folk devotion to the Virgin Mary, which continued long after Finland officially converted from Catholicism to Lutheranism in the 16th century, was based on the memory of older female deities. 'Maaria' is a popular figure in Finnish spells and her help is sought for a multitude of reasons. For instance, bear hunters used to petition Maaria, as they believed she had a role in the birth of bears. Maaria was also believed to protect cattle and save people in times of crisis. In addition, she was said to heal the sick, help weavers and bring lifesaving warmth to people¹⁵. In the folklore, squirrels and bees are associated with Maaria and just as in a number of other European mythologies, the bee symbolizes sexuality. However in Maaria's case, the bee signifies a lack of sexuality, virginity. The bee is also believed to bring Maaria healing ointments from the sky and it is here that we find an interesting connection between the mother of Lemminkäinen and Maaria. After the death of Lemminkäinen, his mother collects the pieces of her son and brings the body back to life with magic and ointment brought by a bee from sky. This theme of death and rebirth gives Lemminkäinen Christ-like features; and so it would follow that Maaria and mother of Lemminkäinen are the same being.

Lemminkäinen is the young hero of the folk poems. He is proud and brave, but short-sighted and prone to bragging, Lemminkäinen is a warrior and a skillful rune singer. He is the combination of a tietäjä and a proud viking hero. In modern times, people have focused on Lemminkäinen's role as a wanton lover-boy, creating almost like a Kalevala version of Don Juan. Most respected scholars, however, have emphasized the archaic shamanistic nature of Lemminkäinen¹⁶. Juha Pentikäinen sees eternal wandering as the main attribute of Lemminkäinen. He is not invited to the feast at Päivölä (meaning the place of the sun) but Lemminkäinen chooses to travel there anyway. During his journey he overcomes several dangers which resemble shamanistic imagery, such as a flaming birch tree. When he arrives at the feast Lemminkäinen is disrespected. As a result he kills the master of the house in a fight and flees to avoid retaliation. Eventually Lemminkäinen is hunted down and killed; his body cut into pieces and thrown into the Tuonela river. Then as previously related, Lemminkäinen mother collects the pieces of her son and brings him back to life.

Lemminkäinen is a hero; who like Odysseus is forced to travel for eternity, homeless and always compelled to leave because of one reason or another. In light of this it is worth mentioning that traveling between mythical places is also the role the tietäjä's soul. Another shamanistic element to Lemminkäinen is his dramatic death; being cut into pieces and given a new life. This sequence of events resembles the initiation rite of a new shaman, where the shaman-to-be must die and be reborn as a shaman¹⁷. Pentikäinen argues that the feast of Päivölä takes place in the realm of the sun, not in Pohjola as Lönnrot's Kalevala and certain other later sources claim. The sun symbolizes the center of the world. Lemminkäinen tries to reach that place and the celestial gods, but he fails and disappears into the sun; he is destined to die and to be resurrected¹⁸.

¹⁴ Salo, Unto. "Ukko, the Finnish God of Thunder – Separating Pagan Roots From Christian Accretions". In *Mankind Quarterly*, December 1 / 2005.

¹⁵ Krohn, Kaarle. *Suomalaisten runojen uskonto*.

¹⁶ Pentikäinen, Juha. "Lemminkäinen – Shaman or God?". In *Ethnologica Uralica 1* (Northern religions and shamanism), edited by M. Hoppal and J. Pentikäinen, 287-309. Budapest: Ethnographic Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 1989.

¹⁷ Pentikäinen, Juha. "Lemminkäinen – Shaman or God?".

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

III. Haltija: 'The Invisible Nature'

For the ancient Finns, everything in nature had its own invisible soul which was somehow connected to the natural phenomenon perceived by the senses. Trees, water, stones, fire, animals and plants were all controlled by guardian spirits, or 'Haltijat' in Finnish. This was also true of some places or beings in the human domain; such as home, fireplace, cattle, and barn. They were each considered to have their own guardian spirits. Even non-concrete things like death and sleep had their own spiritual forces¹⁹. Also, each human being was accompanied by a guardian spirit that helped the person to reach his goals and protected him against physical dangers and hostile spiritual forces²⁰. The word 'haltija' is of Germanic origin and is interpreted to mean 'mother' or 'father'. In Eastern Finland nature spirits had names like 'Mother', 'Father', 'Old Man' and 'Old Woman'²¹.

These guardian spirits protected their own domains and drove away intruders and any beings with evil intentions. If a person treated the spirits with respect he could gain their protection, but bad or thoughtless behavior would result in revenge. Respected house 'haltija' protected the house and warned the family of any approaching dangers. However if insulted, the spirit could burn down the house or cause other damage. Spirits were generally considered to be invisible but sometimes they appeared to people, albeit mostly in dreams²². This belief in guardian spirits made people aware of the spiritual order of things. It was well understood that humans could not for instance, rule the forest, but instead they had to treat it as an equal partner. The ancient Finns lived in constant interaction with both the visible and invisible forces of nature. In order to secure luck and success in life one had to maintain a balance with the spirits.

Ukko-Ilmarinen: The Ruler Of Wind, Rain, And Thunder

The scholar Unto Salo argues that Ilmarinen was a hammer-using sky god and the god of thunder who evolved into a ruler of winds, the forger of the sky-dome and a smith-hero. This means that Ukko, the Finnish god of thunder, storm, rain, and snow, is no separate god but in fact the same sky god as Ilmarinen²³. The name 'Ukko' means 'Old Man'. In ancient times it was an honored title given by the community to older men who had gained wisdom, life experience, and a position of respect in the community. At the same time Ukko was a euphemism which was used in order to avoid saying the real name of the thunder god. The Sami people famously refused to recite the name of the god during thunder storms until as recently as the 19th century.

The Finnish bishop Mikael Agricola mentions the mysterious "Rauni" in his 1551 list of ancient Finnish gods. Agricola's Rauni seems to be connected to Ukko. Since Rauni is not mentioned anywhere else in the folklore, the character has understandably caused lively debate among scholars over the years. The most common interpretation has been that Rauni is an ancient Finnish goddess and Ukko's wife. This is highly problematic, not only because there are no other mentions of this word outside of Agricola's account, but Rauni is not even a Finnish word; the original meaning of the name has been traced to Germanic roots. One theory that has gained ground is that Rauni comes from the Germanic

¹⁹ Talve, Ilmar. *Suomen kansankulttuuri*.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ahtinen, Johanna. "Luonnohaltijoiden sukupuoli itäsuomalaisessa ja karjalaisessa uskomusperinteessä". University of Helsinki, 2008.

²² Hyry and Pentikäinen & Pentikäinen, *Lumen ja valon kansa*

²³ Salo, Unto. "Ukko, the Finnish God of Thunder – Separating Pagan Roots From Christian Accretions".

word 'raudna' meaning the rowan tree. This would make 'rauni' an epithet of Ukko instead of an independent god. So "Rauni Ukko" mentioned by Agricola probably means 'Rowan Tree Ukko'²⁴.

As to whether this theory is credible, the answer is probably yes. Rowan was a sacred tree for the ancient Finns. Each house had its own rowan tree on the yard; small loops and sticks made out of rowan twigs were used to protect houses, cattle, hunter's traps, and other items²⁵. Many mythologies associate rowan with thunderstorms, the sky god, and divine powers. In Lithuania for example, it was believed that the god of thunder does not strike a rowan tree when he is destroying evil spirits lurking on earth. There is no direct evidence linking thunder and rowan trees in Finnish tradition but in Finland it was also believed that the sky god uses lightning strikes to destroy evil spirits hiding on earth.

Lightning and rain during thunderstorms was perceived as a sacred marriage, or 'hieros gamos', and which resulted in a new harvest. The union of gods fertilized the earth. In Finnish folklore there are several extant sayings and beliefs which associate thunder with sexuality. For instance, in Western Finland it was said that forest fires were caused by a nude maiden rising up from a spring and seducing the lightning to strike. Unto Salo argues that this maiden was the spirit of water²⁶. Moreover, that the sacred marriage that brought fertility to the fields was the union of these two divine beings.

Heavenly Bodies: The Sun And The Moon

The brightly shining sun and the mysterious moon play their parts in mythologies the whole world over. In Finnish mythology the sun seems to be associated with the cycle of year and shamanistic imagery, while the moon is associated with luck, fate and natural cycles. It is perhaps a little surprising then, how much of a role the moon plays in folk religion in comparison to that of the sun.

The Sun God Päivätär

Uno Harva and other Finnish scholars have assumed that the ancient Finns, like numerous other nations, practiced sun worship²⁷. When we take into account the importance of the sun as a bearer of light and life and the further symbolism connected to these things, it would not be unreasonable to say that this is probably true. However, unfortunately information on ancient Finnish sun-worship is very scarce. Päivätär or Päivä, the sun god, is more of a mythological figure than a god to be approached in prayer. Only a few prayers to the sun have been collected, all originating in Eastern Karelia, and therefore possibly the result of Slavic influence²⁸.

In folk songs it is recounted that at the beginning of the world the celestial lights (Taivaanvalot) could not shine freely and that the world suffered periods of darkness and cold. The darkness was caused by a great oak that had grown so huge that it covered the sky with its branches. A mythic hero rose from the sea and cut down the oak, bringing light back to the world, causing flowers to bloom and the leaves of trees to turn green. Some scholars have interpreted the myth of the great oak as being a reflection of the cycle of the year; the tree is born on midsummer and grows until midwinter, when everything is shrouded in darkness. The tree is then cut and spring can return²⁹.

²⁴ Salo, Unto. "Ukko, the Finnish God of Thunder – Separating Pagan Roots From Christian Accretions".

²⁵ Harva, Uno. *Suomalaisten muinaisuus*. Porvoo: WSOY, 1948.

²⁶ Salo, Unto. "Ukko, the Finnish God of Thunder – Separating Pagan Roots From Christian Accretions".

²⁷ Harva, Uno. *Suomalaisten muinaisuus*.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Lintrop, Aado. "The Great Oak, the Weaving Maidens and the Red Boat, not to Mention a Lost Brush". In

Moon And Fate

Ancient Finns believed that the outcome of one's actions was directly related to the phase of the moon³⁰. By choosing the right time for some particular work one could have the best possible results. This knowledge of the effects of the moon on man's work was highly uniform and still commonplace in Finland but a few generations ago³¹. The moon, like any other natural phenomenon was thought to be a living, soulful, being. The moon had a birth and a death, a beginning and an end. Phases of the moon were interpreted from the sky and from using rune staves. The complete cycle of the moon was called the 'Heavenly Moon'. One heavenly moon was the time between two new moons: approximately 29 days.

The cycle of the heavenly moon was divided into four periods, each about a week long. The time of the new moon was regarded as the birth-time for the moon. The first days following the birth were called the 'early moon'. They were part of the upper moon (Yläkuu) phase which extended over the first two periods. Each upper moon ended with the full moon, which started a lower moon (Alakuu) phase, which extended over the remaining two periods. The last days before the birth of the new moon were called the 'end moon' or the 'old moon'. The impact of the upper and lower moons can be summarized as follows, the upper moon grows, and the lower moon destroys. The days of the upper moon were fresh, full, and of vitalizing strength. Every aspect of life in which growth was desirable was carried out during the upper moon e.g. planting crops, getting married, counting money. Conversely, during the lower moon was the time for dealing with that which people wanted to destroy, stop growing or dry out³².

Kuutar, the god of the moon, seems to be connected with human fate. In Balto-Finnic legends a heavenly maiden, the moon's daughter, sits on the upper branches of the world tree and weaves people's fates together. Each fate is represented by a silver thread of life. The fates are weaved together in the skies to create the complete picture of the life of the world. When the maiden accidentally snaps a thread she begins to cry and her tears fall down as three rivers which form three hills with three birches growing on top of each of them. At the top of each birch a cuckoo sings as a sign of fate to the person whose life thread has been snapped³³.

Water Spirits

Water, like all the other natural elements, was thought to have its own spiritual force called 'väki'. Väki was controlled, or symbolized, by the guardian water spirit which was believed to have been the first person to drown in that place³⁴. Fishermen naturally had a reciprocal relationship with this spirit³⁵. The fisherman gave offerings to the water spirit and in return was given good fishing luck. After each catch, the guardian water spirit was thanked through the offering of money, silver, or more commonly, the first fish from the catch³⁶.

Electronic Journal of Folklore 11. Folk Belief and Media Group of Estonian Literary Museum.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Pöyhönen, Anne. *Yläkuu ja alakuu. Ajoituksen taito suomalaisessa kansanperinteessä*. Yläkuu kustannus, 2008.

³² Pöyhönen, Anne. *Yläkuu ja alakuu*.

³³ Lintrop, Aado. "The Great Oak, the Weaving Maidens and the Red Boat, not to Mention a Lost Brush".

³⁴ Krohn, Kaarle. *Suomalaisten runojen uskonto*.

³⁵ SKS. *Suomen kansan muinaisia taikoja II. Kalastus-taikoja*. Porvoo-Juva: WS Bookwell Oy, 1892 / 2008.

³⁶ Ibid.

In the spring, when the lakes and rivers were freed from the ice, the first catch was a major event and the guardian water spirit was given offerings. Sometimes the spirit appeared in the fishermen's evening fire and future fishing luck was divined by the outward appearance of that spirit. One might anger the spirit by breaking certain taboos associated with fishing. One of these taboos is very characteristic of Finnish tradition; the need to keep different *väki* apart. For instance, one could not go fishing on a hunting trip because this brought the forest *väki* and the water *väki* into close contact, which “ruined” the lake³⁷.

Fire Spirits

Kaarle Krohn argued that the Finnish tradition shows no certain signs of fire-worship³⁸. As far as I know, Finnish people did not sacrifice to the fire directly, however if we take fire-worship to mean that the fire is considered to be a sacred, living, being and has a central role in religious rituals, the Finns were certainly fire-worshippers. There are three reasons for this. Firstly, the fire has a divine origin in Finnish mythology. Secondly, the burning and kindling of sacred fires has been a major component in many yearly feasts³⁹. Lastly, the fire was also believed to have the power of purification and to ward off evil spirits⁴⁰.

The story of how fire came into the world states that fire first came to existence in the heavens when Ilmarinen struck the first lightning over the primeval sea. As previously mentioned, fire played a major role in the various feasts during the spring and early summer. Great bonfires were set in remote places and people gathered around them to sing, dance, and to welcome the spring. The sacred bonfires, which were kindled according to strict ritualistic rules, and by using ancient methods no longer used in everyday life, were thought to secure good harvest and cattle luck.

The main reason for setting the fires was to protect people and animals against evil spiritual forces. Sacred fire was regarded as a primeval power, of which all the hostile spirits were afraid. Especially powerful was a fire mixed with tar (called “the sweat of Väinämöinen”) and juniper⁴¹. Matti Varonen claims that during the pre-Christian times, sacred fires had a dual role: to attract friendly spirits, such as nature spirits and the spirits of the ancestors, and to ward off evil spirits. When the old beliefs started to fade away, the idea of attracting good spirits was forgotten, and only the idea of driving away evil forces remained⁴².

Land Spirits

The land was divided into two domains: that of human land (e.g. fields, arable land and the yard) and that of natural land (e.g. forests, swamps, lakes, rivers). All these areas had their own *väki* and their guardian spirits. Fields and yards were guarded by male and female spirits called different names such as the 'King Of The Land', 'Black Man' and 'Black Woman' etc. These land spirits secured the luck in the fields and in the yard. Every time beer was brewed or something was baked, the spirits had their offerings before anyone else could eat the food or drink the beer. The land spirits also blessed the cattle

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Krohn, Kaarle. *Suomalaisten runojen uskonto*.

³⁹ Varonen, Matti. *Vainajainpalvelus muinaisilla suomalaisilla*. Porvoo-Juva: WS Bookwell Oy, 1898 / 2009.

⁴⁰ Talve, Ilmar. *Suomen kansankulttuuri*.

⁴¹ Vilkuna, Kustaa. *Vuotuinen ajantieto*. Keuruu: Otavan kirjapaino Oy, 1950 / 2010.

⁴² Varonen, Matti. *Vainajainpalvelus muinaisilla suomalaisilla*.

with good luck. These spirits could be angered if the offerings were neglected or the people of the house did not live up to the moral standards valued by the spirits⁴³.

When a person moved to a new house the first thing he had to do when stepping inside the house was to bow to each corner, greet the land spirits, and offer them bread and salt. Whenever a new person, such as a bride, or a temporary farmhand moved into a house, the person had to give sacrifices to the land spirits and greet them with certain words⁴⁴. The land spirits were also often greeted outside the yard when the earth was needed for use. One example of these were the offerings made to the land spirits before burying a deceased person was buried, in order to make sure they approved the final resting place. In similar vein, hunters used to ask permission from the land spirits before they laid down for the night on their hunting trips⁴⁵.

Forest Spirits

The ancient Finn lived his life surrounded by forests. The forest was a source of food and tools, a place to hide when the enemy attacked, and a sacred place for praying and sacrificing. Even today many Finns feel that their souls 'rest' when they have a chance to visit their beloved forests. The forest was of course thought to be full of väki, and ruled by the spirits of the forest.

The main symbol for the forest's väki was the anthill, or as it was known, the 'Castle of the Forest'; the nest served as a symbolic pathway between the humans and the spirits. It was believed that the spirit of the forest would visit the man who sacrificed silver, liquor, or blood from his finger into the nest and hunters could tell from the outward appearance of the spirit how he felt about the man's plans. If the spirit appeared in plain clothes and looked rude, the bounty was not going to be good. If the spirit showed up in beautiful clothes and looked benign, it was a good sign⁴⁶. In order to thank the forest spirit for the bounty given, part of it was sacrificed into the anthill. Giving sacrifices to the forest spirits was not only an expression of good will between the hunter and the forest, but also an attempt to avoid the wrath of the spirits⁴⁷. Angered spirits could cause the hunter to get lost in the wilderness; the insulted spirits could also steal things from the hunter⁴⁸.

The forest spirit was personified as Tapio, who was imagined as the wealthy patriarch of his forest mansion. The forest animals were called Tapio's cattle, the bear was Tapio's oxen, the fox was Tapio's dog, and the rabbit was the lamb of Tapio etc. Certain peculiar spruce trees (*Picea abies* f. *tabulaeformis*) were thought to be sacred for Tapio and offerings were left there. Tapio also had wife called Mielikki⁴⁹. It should be mentioned that often the hunters imagined the forest as a woman with two sides – either as the loving and benign Mielikki, or the cold and cruel Ajattara. Some hunting prayers had clearly sexual overtones as the hunters tried to seduce the forest with the right words to provide bounty for them⁵⁰.

⁴³ Krohn, Kaarle. *Suomalaisten runojen uskonto*.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Krohn, Kaarle. *Suomalaisten runojen uskonto*.

⁴⁷ Lehtikoinen, Heikki. *Tuo hiisi hirviäsi. Metsästyksen kulttuurihistoria Suomessa*. Teos, 2007.

⁴⁸ Krohn, Kaarle. *Suomalaisten runojen uskonto*.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Lehtikoinen, Heikki. *Tuo hiisi hirviäsi. Metsästyksen kulttuurihistoria Suomessa*.

Spirits Of The House And Farm

Guardian spirits in Finnish tradition were not limited to natural places; they were also thought to be found in the buildings created by humans. While the best known of these guardian spirits is that of the home, other buildings such as the barn, mill, sauna and the cattle shed were also considered to have their own spirits. It was widely believed that the person who bought the land from the spirits in order to build there, was the first person to die there, or was the first to make fire there, became the guardian spirit of the place⁵¹. It can be argued that the spirits residing in the human environment were originally nature spirits whose power was somehow relocated to buildings. The mill spirits, for instance, were originally thought to be water spirits.

In Western Finland the guardian spirit of the house helped the family and ensured that moral values were adhered to. While the guardian spirit could not prevent accidents from happening, it could warn people about them in advance⁵². Grass snakes were thought to symbolize the guardian spirit and they were fed and left to roam freely around the yard and buildings. This snake tradition is almost definitely of pre-Christian origin⁵³. The 'Haltija Snake', as the snakes were called, was connected to the luck and fate of the house. If the snake was treated well, the house had success and luck. If it was treated badly or even killed, the house faced terrible times⁵⁴.

For the ancient Finns, sauna was a sacred place to cleanse the body and spirit. As with all the other places of importance, the sauna was also guarded by a guardian spirit ('Saunanhaltija') whose job it was to ensure all the norms and customs regarding sauna were followed properly⁵⁵. Sauna was at least as much of a sacred place as the church, and it was thought that when one cleanses one's body, mind, and behavior must also be purified. Sauna was also the place where women gave birth and healers did their work. People were expected to act respectfully and calmly in the sauna. When people were finished, water was poured on the stones for the spirit to enjoy the warmth of the sauna in peace⁵⁶.

Field Spirits

Each field and each crop was believed to have its own spirit. The arable land was sacred to the ancient Finns as the source of nutrition and life and if the field spirits were remembered and treated with respect, good harvest luck ensued. There were several customs regarding sowing and harvesting, which were aimed at showing proper respect to the spirits⁵⁷. The haltija of the field was called Pellonpekko or just Pekko (Pekka, Pikka), was probably originally the Finnish spirit of barley, and thus the spirit of beer. Barley is one of the oldest cultivated grains in Finland, and probably at some point in history, the name of the spirit of this particular crop came to refer to all of the field spirits⁵⁸.

Where there is barley, there is always beer. In Finland beer was enjoyed as a sacred drink at feasts such as the 'Ukon vakat'. Sacred beer consecrated with spells and mythical songs was brewed for the yearly

⁵¹ Talve, Ilmar. *Suomen kansankulttuuri*.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Muhonen, Timo. "Haltijakäärmeperinne Suomessa". Lecture in the "Myyttinen käärme" conference in Hämeenlinna, April 2, 2001.

⁵⁴ Muhonen, Timo. "Haltijakäärmeperinne Suomessa".

⁵⁵ Pentikäinen, Juha. "Kylpynormit ja saunatapain yliluonnolliset vartijat." In *Valoa kansalle*, edited by Pekka Laaksonen, Ulla Piela and Maija-Liisa Heikinmäki, 58-63. Forssa: Forssan kirjapaino Oy, 1989.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Krohn, Kaarle. *Suomalaisten runojen uskonto*.

⁵⁸ Harva, Uno. *Suomalaisten muinaisuus*.

festivities. In certain celebrations, getting drunk was almost mandatory, but the folk songs strongly condemn any kind of misuse of alcohol that would lead to arguing, fighting, and violence. The role of beer at feast was to bring joy, laughter, and singing. Even Väinämöinen is said to have sung after drinking beer, which makes Pekko, the spirit of beer, a Finnish god of singing⁵⁹.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

IV. Emuu and Animal Beliefs

Animals and plants also had their guardian spirits. The guardian spirit of each animal or plant was thought to be the elder, or the primal mother of the species; all the existing animals or plants were considered to be her sons and daughters. This mythic mother was called 'Emuu', from the word 'emä' or 'mother'. The name of the species 'emuu' was usually somehow related to the qualities, the behavior, or the environment of the animal in question⁶⁰. For instance, the bear's 'emuu' was called Hongotar, which is a combination of the '-tar' suffix denoting 'female' and consequently 'motherhood', and 'honka' which means 'pine tree'. After every bear feast the bear's skull was lifted and placed on the top of a pine tree so that the soul of the bear could return to heaven.

People turned to the 'emuu' when they had something to do with its living descendants. Hunters prayed that the emuu would allow them to hunt some of her "boys" and asked for her forgiveness after the kill was done. It was believed that since the 'emuu' protected and guided her own sons, if insulted she would hide them away from the hunter's guns and arrows. It was especially a grave insult to kill a sleeping animal, since the animal's soul was thought to be out of body, and the soul could lose its direction if the body was killed. This kind of traumatized animal soul could haunt the hunter and drive him to insanity. Hence the hunters always whistled before killing an animal that was sleeping⁶¹.

Bear, The Heavenly King Of The Forest

Bear worship has been a crucial part of the religious practices of the northern peoples since ancient times and the Finns were no exception to this. The bear, the biggest predator and undisputed king of the Finnish forests, was a sacred animal for them. Like many other Finno-Ugric peoples, the Finns imagined the Big Dipper as a golden basket in which the very first bear was lowered to the earth, thus signifying that the bear had his origin in the heavens⁶².

In modern Finnish the bear is called 'karhu', but his original name was 'Ohto'. Karhu is a euphemism indicating the roughness of the bear's hide ('karhea' means rough in Finnish). Yet 'karhu' is by no means the only euphemism for the bear, in fact, hundreds of different names have been collected, including the venerable 'He'⁶³. This demonstrates that the real name of the bear was a taboo, and people refrained from using it not only out of respect for the divinity of the animal, but also because they did not want to lure the bear near their cattle. Similar taboos have been associated with other divine beings; one example of this is the use of the honorable title 'Ukko' rather than the sky-god's real name: Ilmarinen.

Ancient Finns believed that the bear had a strong connection with the human race, and that this was obvious even from the outward appearance of the animal. The bear was thought to be able to understand speech and even to read minds. Bear was also thought never to harm a female, possibly because of the mythic marriage between a woman and a bear who were the founding ancestors of the bear clan. This story is known amongst many Finno-Ugric tribes. In Karelia, people did not eat bear meat as late as the early 20th century as it was regarded as a form of cannibalism. It was also believed that some humans could take the form of a bear⁶⁴.

⁶⁰ Lehtikoinen, Heikki. *Tuo hiisi hirviäsi. Metsästyksen kulttuurihistoria Suomessa.*

⁶¹ Lehtikoinen, Heikki. *Tuo hiisi hirviäsi. Metsästyksen kulttuurihistoria Suomessa.*

⁶² Leinonen, Antti and Willamo Heikki. *Ison karhun alla.* Helsinki: Bildit Oy, 2001 / 2008.

⁶³ Leinonen, Antti and Willamo Heikki. *Ison karhun alla.*

⁶⁴ Krohn, Kaarle. *Suomalaisten runojen uskonto.*

The Finns were famous for their arctolatry; when hunters killed a bear, a great celebration was held during which the bear was treated as a guest of honor. The ancient marriage between the woman and the bear was also symbolically repeated⁶⁵. In eating the bear's flesh, the people took on a part of his soul and qualities, a practice not completely unlike the Holy Communion practiced by Christians. When the feast ended, the bear's soul was to be returned to the heavens, and so the bear's skull was raised to the top of a great pine tree called 'The Bear Skull Pine' (Karhunkallohonka) to the accompaniment of farewell songs. The scholar Arvo Oja speculated that, in ancient times, the bear hide was placed in the sacred grove after the feast⁶⁶. The bear cult was very strong in Finland and continued until modern times. There is evidence that in rural areas of Central Finland bear skulls were being put on top of old skull pines until as late as in the 1930s⁶⁷.

⁶⁵ Krohn, Kaarle. *Suomalaisten runojen uskonto*.

⁶⁶ Oja, Arvo. "Karhunaljat entisajan kirkoissa."

⁶⁷ Pentikäinen, Juha. "Viitasaaren teksti". In *Kansanomainen ajattelu*, edited by Laura Stark and Eija Stark. Helsinki: SKS, 2007.

V. Sacred Places

For the ancient Finns, nature was full of sacred places: stones, hills, trees, lakes and springs. Offerings to ancestral spirits were made at sacrificial sites near the house, such as cup stones, sacred trees located in the yard (Pitämyspuu, Karsikko) or at the local graveyard. Offerings to nature spirits were made in natural places, for example, people sacrificed to the anthill or to certain trees for the forest spirits, or to the watery places for the water spirits. When offering to the guardian spirits of buildings, offerings were placed inside these buildings or at nearby trees or stones⁶⁸.

Ancient sacred places can be identified relatively easily from old place names. Over one hundred Finnish place names, mostly lakes, include the word 'pyhä' (sacred). In other words, these places were at one point, considered to be taboo places with very strong väki⁶⁹. Another possible sign of the ancient sanctity of a place is the word 'hiisi', meaning 'sacred place' or 'sacred grove'.

Groves, Sacrificial Stones and Springs

In ancient Finland and Estonia, sacred sites were called 'hiisi'. In folk religion though, Hiisi is also an evil spirit, a demon of sorts, and the prevailing theory has it that Hiisi originally meant 'sacred place' but later became the name of a demon due to Christian influence. In Finland hiisi as a place is associated with ancient graveyards and sacred groves⁷⁰. Hiisi was a place for prayer, sacrifice, and healing. The sacred place was separated from the profane human world. No tree was cut there nor was cattle grazed or the earth dug. In general the human impact on the place was kept to the bare minimum. Disturbing a sacred site destroyed the luck of the violator, and the luck of his descendants. People would only gather at these sacred sites for religious reasons during certain holidays. Food, coins, and jewel offerings were left there; as a further sign of respect, ribbons were tied to the trees⁷¹.

The sacred places of the Finno-Ugric peoples are usually located on top of hills. High and naturally beautiful locations were valued, as were places with close proximity to natural water⁷². In Finland there are no great mountains, but there is some evidence that the highest hill near the village (often known as 'Ukonvuori' or 'Ukko's mountain') was the location for sacrificial feasts in honor of Ukko; this involved leaving food offerings overnight⁷³.

Sacrificial stones have been either, unshaped, natural stones, or so-called 'cup stones', which have one or more small, man-made 'cups' on the surface (the actual technique used to make these cups is debated among scholars). Cup stones are known from all over Finland, except in Northern Ostrobothnia, and are most commonly located in areas that had major Iron Age settlements, as well as some parts of Savonia and Central Finland⁷⁴.

The Finns also regarded springs as sacred, and money, or silver, among other things, was sacrificed into

⁶⁸ Talve, Ilmar. *Suomen kansankulttuuri*.

⁶⁹ Talve, Ilmar. *Suomen kansankulttuuri*.

⁷⁰ Hyvärinen, Anne. "Hiisi-Places on the Landscape of Eastern Finland in the Light of Archive Materials" (paper presented at the international seminar "Holy Groves Around The Baltic Sea", Tartu, Estonia, May 4-6, 2007.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Krohn, Julius. *Suomen suvun pakanallinen jumalanpalvelus*. Porvoo-Juva: WS Bookwell Oy 1894 / 2008.

⁷³ Krohn, Kaarle. *Suomalaisten runojen uskonto*.

⁷⁴ Talve, Ilmar. *Suomen kansankulttuuri*.

the springs. Midsummer night was considered to be an especially good time to make offerings to the guardian spirit of a spring. Water was 'bought' from springs and used in healing and folk magic⁷⁵.

Karsikko: The Tree of the Dead

The creation of the 'Karsikko', or literally 'one who has been pruned', was a tradition that was predominantly found in Savonia. This pruned tree could be dedicated to a deceased person, but was often shared by the ancestors of a certain house or family. Details about the dead were carved on the tree, most often the initials and the dates of birth and death of the deceased. The word 'Karsikko' could mean either a group of karsikko trees, one single tree, or even piece of wood collected from a karsikko tree which had fallen down. Karsikko trees were often located along the road between the house and the graveyard; this was believed to prevent the return of the souls of the dead from the graveyard⁷⁶.

The scholar Hornborg suggested that in pre-Christian times each family had their own karsikko⁷⁷. When a new house was built one of the first things done was to choose a place for the karsikko. Usually this meant that a section of the forest near the house was left standing, and this plot became the karsikko as the years went by and trees prepared for each person to die in the household⁷⁸. This kind of karsikko forest was a sacred grove of sorts where the offerings were made to the ancestors. The ancestral spirits were given the first share of the crops, the milk, the game, and the fish. It was especially important to remember the ancestors during family celebrations; As with other spirits it was thought crucial that the offerings were made before anyone else had tasted the foods, or drank the beverages. Money was also given as an offering to the karsikko. Whenever people made a successful trade, they gave a little offering of the money before it was spent on anything else⁷⁹.

Hornborg also mentions the so called memorial karsikko. This kind of karsikko was made in the same way as the usual karsikko, but instead of the life of a person, it marked the memory of certain significant events or disasters. The tree was trimmed at the scene of the event, and the year of the event was carved on it; this memorial could also be a rock⁸⁰. It's worth mentioning that several karsikko trees were created at the places where people were murdered during the bloody Finnish civil war in 1918⁸¹.

Sacred Trees of The Forest And The Yard

Every self-respecting hunter and fisherman had his own sacrifice tree; at the foot of which he would bury his offerings to the spirits. This tree was also regarded as sacred, and cutting it down brought bad luck. There were also beliefs about the other trees in the forest; the oldest tree in the forest was venerated and called the elder of the forest⁸². Juniper was known to have an especially strong and beautiful guardian spirit, and it was this that gave juniper smoke the power to fend off evil spirits. The rowan tree was also sacred, as previously mentioned, and it was used extensively in folk magic⁸³. Alder was associated with the forest spirits and also used in folk magic⁸⁴.

⁷⁵ Krohn, Kaarle. *Suomalaisten runojen uskonto*.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Hornborg, "Karsikoista". In *Virittäjä-lehti* 1886.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Hornborg, "Karsikoista".

⁸¹ Vilkkuna, Janne. *Suomalaiset vainajien karsikot ja ristipuut*. Suomen muinaismuistoyhdistys, 1992.

⁸² Krohn, Kaarle. *Suomalaisten runojen uskonto*.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Virrankoski, Pentti. "Rantsilan noita ja hänen ihmisnukkensa." In *Valoa kansalle*, edited by Pekka Laaksonen, Ulla

In every yard a special tree was grown called 'Pitämyspuu', or 'The Tree That Is Cared For'. This tree was associated with the land spirits, and has counterparts in Scandinavian countries. When a house was first built, a small tree sprout was also planted in the yard to be tended to by the new owners, since it was believed that the tree spirit wouldn't serve anyone younger than itself⁸⁵. The Pitämyspuu was promised that it would be left to grow in peace and that not a single twig would be harmed. In addition, the inhabitants of the house pledged that they would offer to the tree the same foods they were having at each feast; libations were also poured for the tree. The tree spirit was said to protect the house, cattle, and crops. However, if the master of house was not pleased with the protection the tree was offering, he could cut it down⁸⁶.

Piela and Maija-Liisa Heikinmäki, 202-207. Forssa: Forssan kirjapaino Oy, 1989.

⁸⁵ Krohn, Kaarle. *Suomalaisten runojen uskonto*.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

VI. Luck and Rites

Every human being needs a certain amount of luck in order to reach his goals, and to get through the critical moments in life. For the ancient Finns, it was crucial to secure the luck of the community and the family with regards to their livelihoods and critical moments of life. Luck or 'onni' (sometimes also known as 'lykky', or 'säästi' in Karelia) was protected and maintained through the right actions and rites⁸⁷.

Personal and communal luck was protected at all costs⁸⁸. During pregnancy, childbirth, and the naming of the child, steps were taken to protect the luck of the mother and the newborn child. During wedding ceremonies the bridal couple's luck was protected. When a person became ill, his goal was to renew his luck. Additionally, different livelihoods had their own luck associated with them, and a person might possess luck in fishing, hunting, growing crops etc. Luck was mainly protected and acquired by means of spells, which were recited out loud, unlike folk poems which were always sung⁸⁹.

The relationship between luck and fate is twofold. Firstly, the word 'onni' was sometimes used to refer to a person's fate and their guardian spirit. Luck was therefore something that a person was born with and that he carried with him throughout life, it was his share of life. On the other hand it was believed that people had the ability to influence their luck at certain sacred moments of the natural cycle, and the human lifespan. People might, for instance, affect the outcome of their actions by following omens, moon phases, and taboos such as keeping the different väki apart⁹⁰.

For every situation it was of the utmost importance to secure a divine mandate from the spirits or ancestors for your actions or at least to make sure the spirits were not hostile to your plans. Interaction with the spirits followed the principle of *do ut des*, or 'I give so you may give'. The favor of the spirits was established through sacrifice and prayer, after which the spirits would agree to protect the person's actions if the spirits so wished. Different spells and rituals were also used to affect the outcome of events (e.g. using magic and spells to enhance a girl's erotic allure in order to attract suitors) or to protect oneself from harmful forces⁹¹.

Luck with the crops was secured by carefully evaluating omens before starting work and honoring the spirits of the fields in a proper manner⁹². In some places the fertility of the field was strengthened by singing the old mythic songs about the sampo, which tell how the pieces of the sampo helped to create the world's first harvest. This demonstrates the connection between ritual and myth. Ritual is the place where myth lives. In the rituals people repeated through words, actions, and symbols, the myths which recounted the reasons why the world is the way it is. Through ritual the world regained its original potent sacred power⁹³.

⁸⁷ Talve, Ilmar. *Suomen kansankulttuuri*.

⁸⁸ Hyry and Pentikäinen & Pentikäinen, *Lumen ja valon kansa*

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Eliade, Mircea. *Pyhä ja profaani*. Loka-Kirjat, 2003.

VII. Tietäjä: Healer, Seer and Sage

The Finnish tietäjä was an important and respected person in his community; a healer and a sage; he had a special connection to the spirit world. The Tietäjä was always an abnormal person who was both respected and feared; he was the spiritual leader of his community. When the normal, everyday life of his community was disturbed, he was approached to give his counsel. The wisdom and knowledge of the tietäjä were highly valued, and often times, he also had the gift of clairvoyance. People asked for the tietäjä's help with many different issues, from marrying to negotiating land sales⁹⁴.

A Tietäjä usually learned his or her skills from an older tietäjä. Often the inherent capability to be a tietäjä was inherited in the family and the older sage would teach his skills to a younger relative he had chosen to continue the craft. According to one belief, a child born with a tooth in his mouth was particularly adept to learn these skills since he carried with him the soul of a tietäjä. However, people could come to meet the tietäjä and learn his skills even though they were not kin; these skills could and might also be sold. The sages of the Sami people, the 'noaidi', were considered highly powerful and people traveled long distances to meet them⁹⁵.

The scholar Matti Varonen argues that the power of tietäjä was believed to come from the ancestors⁹⁶. As the ancestor spirit made its home itself inside the person, he was thought to possess higher wisdom. The ancestors had a dramatic way to instill their knowledge in the shaman-to-be. They might, for instance, cause the person to fall ill and during this sickness, transfer the ancestral soul into the person. This gruesome sickness brought the person closer to the spirit world, and prepared him for life as a shaman⁹⁷. The belief that spiritual power is received from the dead is very apparent in the Finnish tradition. A Tietäjä, for example, might drink from a human skull in order to gain excellent memory, or use other rituals related to the dead to gain the increased mental powers which would help him in his work. Most importantly, the tietäjä always drew his power from the underworld before doing healing⁹⁸.

A Tietäjä's instrument was the kantele, which the first healer and tietäjä Väinämöinen played at the beginning of time. The Kantele was believed to be of mythical origin, and to possess magical qualities, but it was also part of everyday life for ordinary people⁹⁹. Several scholars have discussed the possible link between the kantele and the shaman drum. For instance, one of those scholars, Anna-Leena Siikala, suggested that the kantele is an evolved Baltio-Finnic version of the shaman's drum¹⁰⁰.

⁹⁴ Tuovinen, Jane. *Tietäjistä kuppareihin: Kansanparannuksesta ja parantajista Suomessa*. Porvoo, Helsinki, Juva: WSOY, 1984.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Varonen, Matti. *Vainajainpalvelus muinaisilla suomalaisilla*.

⁹⁷ Varonen, Matti. *Vainajainpalvelus muinaisilla suomalaisilla*.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Siikala, Anna-Leena. *Suomalainen samanismi*.

VIII. Human Souls

Human beings were believed to have several souls. We can identify three different soul-beings connected with each person: the 'Henki' or 'Löyly' ('Life-Soul', 'Body-Soul'), the 'Itse' (the 'Self'), and the 'Luonto' ('guardian spirit'). The 'Henki', or 'life-soul', represented the life force of the human body, and was said to manifest itself as the signs of life: breathing, warmth, heartbeat, blood circulation, and in other vital signs¹⁰¹. When a person drew his last breath the 'Henki' was believed to leave the soul in the form of a small animal such as a butterfly, a little bird, or a fly¹⁰². For the Finns, the life-soul enters human beings while in the uterus, at the point when the first signs of life begin to become apparent. Names for the 'life-soul' in Finno-Ugric languages translate to 'breath', 'vapor', or simply 'life'. The life-soul is the thing separating living beings from the dead, those that breathe from those who do not¹⁰³.

The human psyche is formed by the 'Itse' soul, which literally means '*self*', even in modern Finnish. Itse is the personality which can exist outside the body as a knowing, wanting, and feeling being¹⁰⁴. This soul makes the newborn a person by giving him consciousness and personality. The Itse belongs to the family, and in death returns to the underworld to live among its kin; the same soul can be reborn into the family line, and also appear as a ghost¹⁰⁵.

If a person died a violent death or as a result of some other wrongdoing, or if the possessor of the soul was a wrongdoer himself, the soul would become confused, and would not be able to enter the realm of its ancestors to exist in peace. Instead, the soul was caught between worlds, where it remains a soul without a place ('Sijaton Sielu'). In former times, people who had committed suicide were not buried on hallowed church ground, and these souls were also thought to wander without a place¹⁰⁶. The soul without a place continued look for moral compensation for the pain suffered, or it might try to be born again into the world. Because of this pregnant women would avoid places where traumatic events such as murders had taken place¹⁰⁷. Sometimes the soul might even turn to the living to help them to accomplish some mission that the soul had failed to finish during his own life¹⁰⁸.

The third soul-being associated with humans was the guardian spirit, which was called the person's 'Luonto', literally meaning his 'nature' and 'temper'. A Luonto was the spiritual guide and protector of the person, it could appear as his doppelgänger; sometimes the guardian spirit even appeared in a place before the actual person arrived¹⁰⁹. The scholar Haavio claims that the Luonto could be the mythic mother of the person's clan, which would make the Luonto an 'emuu' of the human being¹¹⁰. It was believed that the child received his guardian spirit at the time of his naming, or when he got his first tooth, and it was only then that the child was fully accepted into the family.

A Luonto could appear in the form of a person or animal but sometimes it was understood as the 'non-personal luck' of the person¹¹¹. A person with a strong character was thought to have a strong guardian

¹⁰¹ Hyry and Pentikäinen & Pentikäinen, *Lumen ja valon kansa*

¹⁰² Sarmela, Matti. *Suomen perinneatlas*. SKS, 2007.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Hyry and Pentikäinen & Pentikäinen, *Lumen ja valon kansa*

¹⁰⁵ Sarmela, Matti. *Suomen perinneatlas*.

¹⁰⁶ Hyry and Pentikäinen & Pentikäinen, *Lumen ja valon kansa*

¹⁰⁷ Sarmela, Matti. *Suomen perinneatlas*.

¹⁰⁸ Varonen, Matti. *Vainajainpalvelus muinaisilla suomalaisilla*.

¹⁰⁹ Sarmela, Matti. *Suomen perinneatlas*.

¹¹⁰ Haavio, Martti. *Suomalainen mytologia*. Porvoo Helsinki: WSOY, 1967.

¹¹¹ Talve, Ilmar. *Suomen kansankulttuuri*.

spirit which provided him luck and the ability to carry out his plans successfully. The extraordinary mental powers and the charisma of remarkable people, such as the tietäjä, were explained by him having a powerful guardian spirit¹¹². When the tietäjä did his healing work, he would use spells in order to call his Luonto from the underworld, and would allow it to possess him completely. This resulted in an ecstatic state which helped the healing and gave the tietäjä exceptional powers¹¹³. It was also possible for a person to lose their guardian spirit, by means of experiencing a traumatic event. A person without a spiritual guardian was unlucky, depressed, and sick. If a person had a guardian spirit that was weak, they were believed to be able strengthen it through carrying out the appropriate rituals¹¹⁴.

¹¹² Sarmela, Matti. *Suomen perinneatlas*.

¹¹³ Siikala, Anna-Leena, *Suomalainen samanismi*.

¹¹⁴ Haavio, Martti. *Suomalainen mytologia*.

VIII. Ancestors

For the ancient Finns, there was no real barrier that separated the living from the dead. When people died, they went to the land of dead which was thought to be located at the graveyard. Even after death, the dead were in contact with the living, receiving their offerings, and hearing their prayers. The family was thought as a single whole, consisting of both living and deceased members¹¹⁵. The ancestors were the upholders of the family's moral values, traditional ways, and societal structures. The individual person and the family asked guidance from the ancestors in all major decisions. Hence the ancestors can be said to have had a greater influence on the people's lives than the higher gods¹¹⁶.

If the living fulfilled their responsibilities to their ancestors in a proper way, the spirits continued to protect and support them. If, however, the ancestors were neglected or insulted in any way, problems would ensue. The ancestors might appear as ghosts in their former homes, and in the worst case, take the soul of a living person to the underworld with them. The danger was at its highest during the first 30-40 days following a death, for this was when the soul was not yet fully located in the underworld. Visiting ancestors might appear in human or in animal form¹¹⁷. Meeting dead relatives again could also be a positive experience full of joy. The dead soul was thought to appear as a bird, or a butterfly, or as a flower, among other things. In Karelia, belief in this kind of reincarnation and the soul was widespread, and children were advised not to harm the birds, since they might be carrying the souls of their ancestors. If a butterfly flew inside the house, it was not touched, and certainly not killed¹¹⁸.

The relationship between the living and the dead seems to have been curiously twofold. On the one hand, the spirits of the dead were thought to reside in the land of the dead, where they could only be reached by the soul-traveling tietäjä. On the other hand, people also had a more personal relationship with the dead and would visit their graves, talk to them, and give them offerings. During certain yearly feasts, the spirits of the dead were thought to visit their living relatives. The difference between these two approaches can probably be explained through the status of the deceased. One's own ancestors were regarded as somewhat closer and more familiar (albeit still with the element of fear and horror that is always present when the living approach the dead), but the souls of the powerful tietäjä, and of other powerful people were regarded with fear¹¹⁹.

Finnish spells and folk songs also represent two ideas about the location of the souls of the dead. The first idea is that the dead simply live in their graves. However, the second idea is that the souls reside in an underworld called 'Tuonela' or 'Manala'. But as Kaarle Krohn has shown, these two concepts do not contradict each other¹²⁰. The god of death, 'Tuoni', did not originally mean the personification of death but the dead corpse itself. From there, it evolved into a general term for death, and finally became the name for the ruler of the land of the dead. Yet in many folk poems, the "house of Tuoni" simply refers to the grave. So it would not be unreasonable to say that the ancient Finns probably thought that would continue to live in their graves, and formed a community of the dead in the graveyard, however in later times, 'Tuonela' and 'Manala' became more abstract concepts¹²¹. This explains practices such as memorial feasts in the graveyards and the need to lay the dead person at rest in the graveyard of his own

¹¹⁵ Varonen, Matti. *Vainajainpalvelus muinaisilla suomalaisilla*.

¹¹⁶ Harva, Uno. *Suomalaisten muinaisuus*.

¹¹⁷ Talve, Ilmar. *Suomen kansankulttuuri*.

¹¹⁸ Konkka, Unelma. *Ikuinen ikävä. Karjalaiset riitti-itkut*. Helsinki: SKS, 1985.

¹¹⁹ Varonen, Matti. *Vainajainpalvelus muinaisilla suomalaisilla*.

¹²⁰ Krohn, Kaarle. *Suomalaisten runojen uskonto*.

¹²¹ Ibid.

community.

IX. Cycle of the Year

Finland has four distinctive seasons, which have had their effect on the yearly festivities. The ancient Finns divided the year into a winter half, and a summer half, with the two yearly transitions between the two halves occurring in mid-October and mid-April. In the middle of the summer half was midsummer in July, and in the middle of the winter half, midwinter in January. In an agrarian society, there was little reason to follow the Solstices and Equinoxes (which are decided in accordance with the movements of the sun), and so changes in temperature became the deciding factor; July is usually the hottest month in Finland while January is the coldest¹²².

Each year ended and the new year began at the 'Kekri' feast, which was held around the end of October, or beginning of November. Kekri was a harvest feast and a memorial celebration for the family's ancestors, who were thought to visit the living on that occasion. The next major celebration was 'Joulu' (Yule, Christmas), which probably grew in significance over time due to Christianity and many traditions originally associated with Kekri were transferred to Joulu¹²³.

The Joulu period lasted for three weeks, from the 21st of December to the 13th of January. During this time, sacrifices were made to the spirits in order to ensure luck for the future. These sacrifices were mostly given mostly to household and land spirits. It was also believed that ancestors visited their relatives at this time of the year, as well as at Kekri¹²⁴. Joulu ended around the mid-winter, called 'Talvennapa', when the winter's back was said to be broken (like the great oak was cut down in the folk songs), and the spring started to return to the world. The coming of spring was hurried during Shrovetide by certain rituals; during Easter, young children would walk from house to house to show off the first, decorated, branches of spring, and to recite spells of good luck to the hostess of the house. This tradition still lives in Finland as part of children's culture¹²⁵.

When spring arrived, people would gather in natural places to celebrate the new season of growth. During these feasts, nature spirits were worshiped, and the sacred fires burned. Cattle were put out to pasture, and magical rituals were carried out for their protection during the summer. During May and June, great communal feasts for Ukko were held. At this feast, food was offered, and people prayed to Ukko that he would give them rain and good harvest¹²⁶. As the year progressed towards autumn and winter, the celebrations became more associated with land spirits, the household spirits, and the ancestors. The great communal gatherings in the spring gave way to more family-focused celebrations that held inside the house, and in the yard. Cattle and horses were again brought inside, and people once more prepared for winter¹²⁷.

¹²² Vilkuna, Kustaa. *Vuotuinen ajantieto*.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Varonen, Matti. *Vainajainpalvelus muinaisilla suomalaisilla*.

¹²⁵ Vilkuna, Kustaa. *Vuotuinen ajantieto*.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.