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POPULAR ORTHODOXY, OFFICIAL CHURCH AND STATE IN FINNISH BORDER KARELIA BEFORE WORLD WAR II

Teuvo Laitila

SAFEGUARDING NATIONAL HERITAGE: THE FORMATION OF POPULAR ORTHODOXY AMONG THE KARELIANS APPROX. 1000–1600

The culture generally known as Karelian emerged at the end of the first millennium AD on the western and the north-western coast of Lake Ladoga and was at its peak at the time of the crusades in 1100–1300. The Karelians had to defend their territory against the attacks of the inhabitants of Häme, later also against the Swedes and the predominantly Slavonic population of Novgorod. The numerous stongholds found in the region, which were used as residences, shelters and refuges, attest to the instability of the period of cultural prosperity (Huovila 1995: 10, 12, 14, 19–20).

The relatively highly civilised culture of the period of prosperity suggests that the social structure of the Karelian community used to be complex. Such societies often included experts of religion, giving us reason to believe that the Karelians had their own, relatively developed religious system, which helped to reinforce and preserve the social structure.

The spread of Christianity to this region at the end of the first millennium AD was a challenge for both the Karelian culture in a wider sense, and religion in particular. The earliest reliable information about the arrival of Christianity comes from the grave findings, including among other things Byzantine coins and crosses dating back to the end of the first and the beginning of the second millennium. These objects must have reached Karelia through direct trade contacts or via Novgorod, which converted to Christianity between the 10th and the 11th century.

The first written account of the spread Christianity originates from central Karelia and dates back to the beginning of the 13th century. According to *St. Lawrence's text*, the extended version of the oldest Russian chronicle, the so-called *Nestorian Chronicle*, Novgorod attacked the inhabitants of Häme in 1227. At this crusade Yaroslav, the Prince of Novgorod, *sent his people to Christianise the majority of the Karelians, nearly all the people* (after the Finnish translation by Kirkinen 1987). Augustin (1991: 34) claims that *the mass Christianisation in 1227 was apparently followed by the building of churches and monasteries*.

At the same time Karelia was caught up in the middle of the struggle between the Roman Catholic Western Europe and the Eastern Europe who had retained the Byzantine Church. Religiously and economically Karelia belonged to the eastern (or Novgorod) region, but at the end of the 13th century its political allegiance must have been doubted. According to the Novgorod Chronicles, in 1278 Dmitri, the Prince of Vladimir (at that time the capital of Novgorod principality) and the son of Alexandr Nevsky, led the troops which *punished the Korlaks and conquered their land* (CN 1970: 107). Disputes between the Swedes and Novgorod over the Karelian land were legally settled with the Pähkinäsaari Peace Treaty in August 1323. With this treaty the territory of south-western Karelia, West-Kannas and the south-easternmost part of today's Finland was incorporated into Sweden.

On the western coast of Lake Ladoga the Orthodox religion, or at least Orthodox customs, secured its position in the 15th century. The increasing influences of Christianity in the Ladoga-Karelia at the time is among other things reflected in linguistic loans and legends concerning the building of monasteries. The time of the building of the Valamo monastery is debatable (Okhotina 1993; Kirkinen 1995), but most likely falls in the 14th century. At the same time (according to a legend – in 1393), the monastery of Konevitsa was also established. As suggested by the biographies of many local saints (for instance, Alexander of Süvari and several of his followers; see also Piironen 1991: 25–40), both monasteries popularised Christianity among Karelians.

At the beginning of the 15th century a hermitage was founded on the Solovetsk islands in the White Sea, and afterwards a monas-

tery was built there. The position Orthodoxy held in Ladoga-Karelia at the end of the 15th century is also expressed by the fact that at turn of the 16th century Novgorod and Moscow (which had annexed Novgorod in 1478) turned their attention towards north, i.e. to the southern and western coast of the White Sea.

The 15th century saw the emergence of Christian names in the documentation of Ladoga-Karelia. Around the same time the Karelian language became enriched with Slavonic loan words of Christian terminology, like *svjatoi* 'holy', *pruasniekku* 'feast', *pokoieniekku* 'the deceased', *Gospodi Suse* 'Lord Christ', and *Bogorodichshu* 'the Mother of Lord' (Augustin 1991: 40).

In addition to the church villages and tax-collecting areas or *pogosts* established in the 13th century, at least five more (Ilomantsi, Kurkijoe, Käkisalme, Salmi and Sortavala) were founded in Karelia during the 15th century. The strengthening of Orthodoxy in the 15th century is reflected also in the year 1500 tax register of the Votian taxation region, or the sc. "Votian Fifth" (*Votskaia piatina* in Russian). This is the earliest known document providing wider historical information on Orthodoxy in Ladoga-Karelia.

According to the tax register the region later known as the Käkisalme County was in the year 1500 divided into 7 *pogosts*: Ilomantsi, Kurkijoki, Käkisalme, Rautu, Sakkola, Salmi and Sortavala, which covered also Suistamo (Kirkinen 1979: 99; Surakka 1936: 22–23). There were 13 larger and about 40 smaller churches and chapels and 12 monastic churches in the region. The fact that places for performing church services existed in almost every larger village indicates that the Votian Fifth was at least formally a part of the domain of the Orthodox church; in reality, the service was held in these places only once a year.

However, the large number of churches and chapels did not mean that the population had adopted the Orthodox beliefs or practices, at least in the manner the church taught them. Also, I believe it misleading to speak of the adopting of external customs (cf. for example Itkonen 1928), since the introduction of customs inevitably involves certain interpretation. Thus we should agree that the 15th century saw the adaptation of the Orthodox doctrines to the Karelian life style, or the formation of the Karelian popular Orthodoxy (see

Timonen 1990: 11). The transformation or revival of the Karelian tradition took place in the form of interpreting the new in the framework of the old.

The Christian God, Virgin Mary and the Saints were introduced and brought closer to the people by associating them with the ‘gods’ of the pre-Christian world. Prophet Elijah, or *Iliia* as the Karelians knew him, became known as a thunder spirit, because thunder played a significant role in his life story (see 1 Ki.18: 36–38). It was not the question of the ‘heathen gods’ or ‘spirits’ being hidden under the new Christian names (cf. Harva 1932; Itkonen 1928), but rather that the pre-Christian world was depicted through Christian language usage. At the same time it was perceived as Christian, in the manner the Karelians understood Christianity. According to Harva (1932: 472), for example, the Karelians believed that *St. Miikkula* (St. Nicholas) *helped to catch birds in the snare* and therefore said a prayer to *Miikkula* before going to hunt birds. Unlike in the official church teachings the pre-Christian beliefs (here: “a hunting spirit”) and the Christian tradition (the saint engaged in the same activities) were not considered opposites, but as different ways of understanding the relationship between a man and (in this case) nature (cf. Eliade 1980: 7–8). The religious historian Mircea Eliade has called this philosophy “the cosmic Christianity” (ibid. 25).¹

The elite among the Novgorod clergy had contradictory feelings towards Christianity ‘in Karelian style’. In theory they condemned popular Orthodoxy as “half-heathen”, but in reality it was often tolerated. There were two reasons for this. Firstly, the religious life of the border area was poorly organised; the number of the clergy was small and its activities oriented mostly to ecclesiastical circles. Secondly, the area was politically unstable and the clergy wished to avoid oppressing the population in fear of revolts against the authorities.

Every now and then the church would take necessary steps towards abolishing paganism. In 1526 Makari, the newly elect archbishop of Novgorod, initiated wide-scale missionary work in the northern region of the Novgorod province, particularly among the peoples on the coast of the White Sea and the Kola Peninsula (Makari 1989: 55). In 1534 he sent a monk priest Iliia to the Votian Fifth, the Northern Aunus, the west coast of the White Sea and as far as Petsamon,

in order to bring those *astray from the real Christian belief* back to the bosom of the church (references: Kirkinen 1987: 126). Ilia carried a pastoral letter where the archbishop criticised the people for holding on to their ancestral beliefs, or *following the superstition*, worshipping groves (presumably the sacrificial groves and/or family burial grounds), stones, rivers, springs, mountains, lakes, the Sun, the Moon and the stars, and sacrificing oxen, sheep and other animals to them, with no regard to their conversion to Christianity (Kirkinen 1987: 126, 128; Mikkola 1932: 243–244).

Makari also criticised people for eating ‘impure’ food, burying their dead to ‘heathen’ cemeteries, seeking cure for diseases from spells and calling their sages, who performed sacrificial and funeral ceremonies and gave name to children, ‘priests’ (Kirkinen 1987: 128; Mansikka 1967: 226–229). The church considered participation in the rituals performed by sages the most serious of sins, as they served the Satan and not God.

The pre-Christian religion affected Christianity also elsewhere. Certain parts in the decisions made by the so-called Synod of the Century (*Stoglavny sobor* in Russian) in Moscow in the 16th century suggest that superstition and paganism was followed in the central part of Russia. The synod anathematized all those who danced at the cemeteries the night before the Trinity Sunday (on the so-called Spiritual Saturday, the day for commemorating the dead celebrated after Pentecost) or those who frisk or frolic about on the Midsummer Night, Christmas Eve or the Twelfth Night. Vlassov (1990–1991: 26) argues that village people began to adopt Christianity, performing Christian rituals and following the Christian calendar only in the 16th and the 17th century.

In 1548, Archbishop Feodosi II (governed in 1542–1551), the successor of Makari, sent another mission to the Votian Fifth. His missionary was a Novgorod priest Nikifor. According to Augustin (1991: 49) the mission work of Ilia and Nikifor proved efficient: by the late 16th century *the Church had abolished paganism*. This claim is supported by the fact that during the transition from the medieval to the modern era the Russian Orthodox Church regionally canonised more than 40 Karelian² saints (among others Alexander of Sūvari and Anton of Sijjok), 15 of whom have been included in the Russian

Church register of saints (Ambrosius 1981: 320–323; Vlassov 1990–1991: 29–30).

Several Karelian saints were originally considered sacred only from the viewpoint of the popular Orthodoxy, rather than the official church. Also, many of them were honoured before being canonised by the church (Kirkinen 1987: 141–142). Another popular feature of this veneration was that many of these saints were born in peasant families, or at least they were depicted as peasants (Vlassov 1990–91: 29–30). Moreover, it cannot be a coincidence that the cult of saints became stronger simultaneously with the church's harsh criticism against the "heathen" rituals. The worship of the saints reflects the attempt of the locals to publicly display the Karelian popular Orthodoxy to the official church. This attempt could also be seen as a defensive response against Moscow's endeavours to gain control over the peripheral regions of the country, and also against the attempt of Novgorod to brace economic ties with the periphery and compensate forced taxation by trade regulations (Vlassov 1990–91: 27). At the same time the cult of saints was considered equal with "heathen" rituals by the Karelians: it was followed in order to guarantee good harvest or the welfare of cattle and family members (Vlassov 1990–92: 26).

FROM THE SWEDISH OPPRESSION TO THE RUSSIAN NEGLECT: THE PRESERVATION OF HERITAGE IN THE 17TH AND THE 18TH CENTURY

As a result of the Russian-Swedish wars at the end of the 16th century and the beginning of the 17th century Ladoga-Karelia (the Käkisalmi commune) was incorporated into Sweden. By that time Sweden had entered the period of the so-called Lutheran Orthodoxy, so the Swedish had assumed a prejudiced attitude towards the Orthodox community. The Orthodox were labelled as "heathens" and politically unreliable, and "Russians" as in the wars they had supported the Russian troops. Thus, for patriotic and political purposes they had to be converted to the Lutheran Church.

The conversion was carried out by employing administrative and social pressures. Since 1578 the Käkisalmi commune had been a part of the Protestant Vyborg bishopric. The final victory of Sweden

(in 1617) provided that the Orthodox population of Ladoga-Karelia were to attend Lutheran services, pay tithe also to the Lutheran ministers and build Lutheran churches on their territory. The Orthodox community was not allowed to call for new priests from Russia³ and different materialistic benefits gradually forced the people to turn to Lutheran church (Kirkinen 1979: 107–109).

The forced Lutheranism did not prove too efficient due to the strong resistance of the Orthodox community. Only after the Russian-Swedish war during 1658–1661, when a large number of the Orthodox Ladoga-Karelians fled to Russia,⁴ and the following mass resettlement of the Lutherans into Ladoga-Karelia the situation changed and the Lutheran church gained predominance over the Russian Orthodoxy. After that no further attempts were made to convert the Orthodox by force. It is also possible that they were believed to blend with the majority and adopt their religion. Even in the late 17th century the clergy of the Vyborg bishopric is reported to have been merely curious about the “superstitious” manners of the Orthodox Karelians, such as wearing a cross around the neck or worshipping icons (Kirkinen 1979: 113). On the other hand, the period of Lutheran dominance involved the risk that the followers of other religion would be accused of superstitious magic and condemned of witchcraft. Similar instances have been reported for example from Ingria (see Laasonen 1984). Witch trials were conducted in Karelia, too, but the court did not pass death sentences, while such fate may have befallen on suspect accused of witchcraft in Ingria.

Regardless of the confession, the use of magic spells appears to have been common practice in the 17th century Border Karelia. In his research into the events in Border Karelia under the Swedish occupation historian Erkki Kuujo (1963: 187–188) quotes a trial record, which writes that in 1687 the Salmi court of justice had a case against Antti Vanninen, a blacksmith who had settled there 16 years before from South Savo, accusing him of practising witchcraft. During the trial Vanninen had admitted having *read the Lord's Prayer, the confession of faith and other prayers on salt* and other witnesses explained that *in this region it was a common practice to read (a spell) to heal, say, a horse's sprained foot*. The blacksmith

also confessed of having prepared potions from grass and herbs to cure people and horses.

From the same period similar reports on popular belief have come from other parts of the Käkisalmi commune. In his above-mentioned work Kuujo (1963: 194) describes a court case against Yrjö Sikanen, a Lutheran who lived in Koitionjärvi, Suistamo commune. Sikanen had turned to a (Lutheran) medicine man to get help for his aching feet. The healer told him that *his condition resulted from the Russian [Orthodox] cross nearby* (Sikanen's house). Sikanen had burnt the cross. For that his probably Karelian Orthodox neighbour pressed charges against him, complaining that he had not been allowed to *openly use the cross according to the practice of the Russian Church*. According to the 1661 peace treaty between Russia and Sweden he had freedom of worship. The court imposed Sikanen the double fine: the first for his belief in witchcraft (seeking help from a medicine man), and the second for ruining the neighbour's property.

The Great Northern War (1700–1721), during which Sweden tried to extend its borders in Russia over the Baltic region and Karelia but was eventually defeated, brought along major changes for the inhabitants of Ladoga-Karelia. In the post-war period both Russian secular and the ecclesiastical powers strove for reinforcing their position in the region. Their strategies were worked out in close cooperation, since in 1721 czar Peter I had ended the authority of the Russian Church patriarch and founded the Holy Synod, which in reality was an administrative state council under the czar's close surveillance for carrying out his orders on everything but purely theological matters.

Few reports speak about the characteristic piety of the Karelian Orthodox in the 18th century. It is assumed that when agriculture and cattle-breeding became the main source of livelihood for the Karelians in the 18th century, the respective religious concepts became stronger at the cost of beliefs related to hunting or fishing. At that time Russia paid almost no attention to Karelian folk belief or the changes it underwent, even though the area was located virtually side by side with the new capital St. Petersburg. This lack of attention was probably due to the fact that Russian emperors, Peter the Great and Catherine II in particular, were rational rulers

who were more interested in the allegiance of their subjects rather than their religious convictions. And as popular belief was not a threat to the emperor's power, it was tolerated as a "noble savagery" (Sihvo 1973: 32–36).

The official church was confronted with at least three problems that surpassed the issue of popular belief. Firstly, the dissolution of what was known as the Old Belief (*Staroverets*) Church founded at the end of the 17th century (see further Laitila 1995). Secondly, the aforementioned subjugation of church to the state, and thirdly, the overall religious ignorance, which the ecclesiastical authorities had acknowledged as a problem since the second half of the 18th century. Even though the popular religion in some way did merge into the official religion, in the 18th century the church had only limited resources for initiating a wide-scale instruction work outside major settlements, and there was not enough teachers, either (see Freeze 1990). By the end of the 18th century the Karelian folk religion probably had crystallised into the system of approaches and rituals as it was known in the 19th century.

UNDER THE CONTROL AND CRITICISM OF CHURCH RELIGION IN TIMES OF AUTONOMY (1809–1917)

The Karelian popular religion centred around the idea that every occupation, such as cattle-breeding, agriculture or different kinds of hunting, and every human has a fairy "master" or "mistress", whom the Orthodox church calls a sacred guardian or intercessor (see Genetz 1870: 92; Haavio 1959; Pelkonen 1965a: 305). The most important guardian of agriculture in Viena and Aunus, but also in Border Karelia was Saint Ilia. According to Uno Harva it was a common practice in Uhtua that if at the beginning of assarting there happened to be no wind, then the assarters started to whistle and shout: "Hey, St. Ilia, let's assart the land!" In Viena and Aunus, and occasionally also in Suistamo and Suojärvi, some straws always remained uncut during the harvest. The straws were called St. Ilia's beard and they were left on the field for better crops next year (Holmberg 1923: 120).

People also believed that Ilia had the power to change the weather. According to the folk calendar the summer was ended with a festiv-

ity in honour of Ilia (on July 20). It was celebrated also for inducing Ilia to bring fine weather for the beginning harvest (Mansikka 1941: 166–167). One of the main principles of popular piety was therefore interdependency: if people left an offering to the saints (masters, mistresses), the latter guaranteed successful harvest (haul, cattle).

One of the festivities celebrated in Border Karelia, which the Russian Orthodox Church considered particularly “heathen”, was a sacrificial feast. The best known accounts of this feast come from the island of Mantsi in the northeastern corner of Lake Ladoga. On this island and also in Suistamo a feast was held on the Sunday following the Ilia Day almost annually until the beginning of the 20th century. The feast culminated in the ceremony of cooking and eating sacrificial meat. The goal of the feast was to protect the cattle from all dangers. The event brought together people from Mantsi, Salmi and even more distant regions (Haavio 1949: 155, 159–160; Harju 1997; Rajamo 1944: 272–273).

The sacrificial ox was presented or yielded, as the Karelians used to say, by each village in turn. The ox was slaughtered either on Saturday evening, or according to more numerous reports, on Sunday morning. The slaughtering was followed by a church service performed by the local priest or someone involved in the sacrificial ritual. Often it was the village elder who had the honour of killing the animal. After slaughtering the meat was prepared for the common feast. The ox skin was sold to the highest bidder and the proceeds were saved in the “sacrifice chest” kept in the village chapel. The local clergy considered the festivity heathen and persuaded the villagers to abandon it, either with promises or threats. Nevertheless, the festivities were celebrated until the 1910s (see Haavio 1949: 155–157; Harju 1997; Jääskeläinen 1912; Sauhke 1971: 164–172; Viljanto 1991: 292–295).

The inhabitants of Lunkula, an island not far from Mantsi Island, used to sacrifice rams on the so-called *Bok* Day (July 4th). The origin of the festivity is unclear, but its purpose was to ensure the growth of sheep. The sacrificial feast bears much resemblance to the festivities on the island of Mantsi. The sacrificing of rams was reportedly finished in 1909, but they were “presented” to the sacred place until the 1930s (Sauhke 1971: 144–148).

By the 19th century the festivities held on the Lunkula Island had clearly acquired characteristics typical to the Karelian popular orthodoxy. Around the year 1820 the inhabitants of Lunkula built a small chapel on the island. The island priest, who was Russian, refused to consecrate it. So the villagers themselves performed the consecration in honour of *St. Shpuashu* ‘the Saviour’, ‘the Redeemer’, the guardian of sheep. They also began conducting services without the priest. When the chapel was renovated in 1870, the priest of Salmi (a Karelian by origin) offered himself to perform the consecration, declaring the chapel sacred in the memory of the enlightenment of Christ. The villagers were furious as their opinion had not been considered: at the end of the consecration service many villagers refused to kiss the cross the priest was holding. After this incident the villagers and clergy were on unfriendly terms for a long time (Sauhke 1971: 147–148).

Sacrificial festivities of the islands of Mantsi and Lunkula share certain features and purposes. It was a collective ritual, which united the village people, making them feel it was **their very own** village. It also reminded them that the welfare of cattle and humans was a shared responsibility. The importance of the festivities to the village people becomes evident in the light of the fact that when the Russian Orthodox Church forced them to abolish the sacrifice, they obeyed the order, but returned to celebrating the custom after a bear had swum to the island and done a lot of damage (Haavio 1949: 158).

The social significance of village festivities and calendar rituals in general will become obvious when considering the importance of stability in daily life, or ensuring the fertility and growth of people and domestic animals (see Foster 1965). It is hardly a coincidence that the cattle was taken to the pasture on St. George’s Day, the day of Georgios the Winner (April 23), and stall-fed since October 1st, the Day of Protecting Virgin Mary. Both days were significant festivities for church and in the family circle (Sauhke 1971: 270; Timonen 1990: 113), and celebrated the saints’ benevolence towards their people, towards those who honour them.

According to Iivo Härkönen (1920: 135; cf. Haavio 1935: 138–139) all the bells for cattle were gathered together at the eve of St. George’s Day and dropped in a *special kettle filled with water, which*

was left on the place of honour the icons at the crossing of benches. This procedure was followed by a lengthy prayer, and then one of the boys in the house carried the bells anticlockwise around the house/farm and tolled them *loud enough to be heard in other farms.* The ritual was performed three times, after which the bells were placed back into the kettle. The same ritual was performed in the morning before the bells were tied around the cattle's necks.⁵ As cattle was primarily a women's and children's responsibility, they had a central role in these and other similar rituals (see Saarikivi 1974: 24–25). On the other hand, the secondary position of women in the hierarchy of the Orthodox Church, or in other words, the exclusion of women from the church duties might explain the popularity of popular orthodoxy among women.

Under the increasing control of the Orthodox Church and the state (Finland) over the Border Karelia, gained by education, discipline and administration, at the end of the 19th century the popular orthodoxy began to crumble. First it became evident in rituals performed at different times of life, customs related to birth, marriage and death. In the late 19th century and even more in the early 20th century these customs shared the characteristics and rituals of the official church.⁶ If a child from the Suojärvi village, for example, was taken to the sauna to preserve its health and welfare, the procedure had to follow certain rituals. During the bathing the child was asked God's blessing, peace and health from *Spoassa* 'the Redeemer', Virgin Mary and St. Ilia, the giver of water. Finally the child was repeatedly blessed by making a cross-sign against illness and accidents (Pelkonen 1965b: 356–358; see also Genetz 1870: 92–93).

The church influence was most manifest in customs related to death. All the rites connected with the cycle of life affected the life of the family and village community, but the change brought about by someone's death was irredeemable. For this reason, but probably also for ensuring the well-being of those who stayed behind, all quarrels with the dying person had to be settled. It was customary that relatives and friends visited those in deathbed to *proskenjalla*, ask for forgiveness, settle disputes. In Suojärvi the visitor said: *Prosti roadi Hrista*. 'Forgive, in the name of Christ.' And the dying person answered *Jumala prostikkah* 'God will forgive you'. Forgiveness was

asked from the deceased also before the funeral ceremony. On the way to the graveyard the mourners asked forgiveness in the name of the deceased from passers-by (Pelkonen 1965c: 367, 369–370; Rajamo 1944: 268).

The deceased was commemorated for 40 days from the day of death *'kuusnetäliiset'* in Border Karelia. In some places villagers celebrated a collective commemoration day (Russian *radunets*), or the Resurrection Day. According to the church calendar it was celebrated on the second Tuesday following the Easter. On that day people visited the graves of their relatives, taking food to the graves, speaking to the dead, lamenting, followed by the commemoration dinner for the whole family. A similar festivity, the *'muistinsuovatta'*, or the commemoration day, was celebrated on the third Saturday of October (Harva 1932: 478–479; Mansikka 1923; Pelkonen 1965c: 372–373).

Death-related folk heritage and that of the official church were very similar, as the commemoration of the dead played an important role in the church tradition as well. Directly after a person's death it was customary to offer a prayer for the dead person's soul (*panihhiida*). It was common practice to invite the priest to say a prayer at the death wake on the third night after the departure. People sung hymns, and the priest delivered a speech in honour of the deceased. The departed relative was buried the next day.⁷

Kuusnetäliiset was also a church festivity, as it involved liturgical service *lounaallinen* in honour of the deceased. After the service the mourners went to the graveyard to say a litany. Also, during the resurrection festivities and the commemoration Sunday ministers were asked to perform litanies in the graveyard (Rajamo 1944: 268–269).

Prayers were said for deceased relatives also in church. For this purpose their names were inscribed in a special commemoration book. Rajamo notes that a commemoration book from Suistamo contained

even the names of people who had died some hundred years ago. This was how long the connection between the living and the dead could be retained through prayers (Rajamo 1944: 220).

A similar perspective of eternity was characteristic to pilgrimages, where the popular and church religions meet again. During the autonomy people from Border Karelia and South Aunus made pilgrimages mainly to the Valamo monastery. Pilgrims came there in large numbers, often a whole village came together. On Trinity Sunday and Pentecost in general, the inhabitants of Salmi went on a pilgrimage to the monastery of Alexander of Suväri, which located on the southern shore of the Suväri River. The main cathedral of the monastery was dedicated to the Holy Trinity, therefore a big festivity was held in the monastery. The festivity was also a good opportunity to trade, say, horses (Sauhke 1971: 512).

People went on a pilgrimage for several reasons. Many had given the God or a saint a promise that if they recovered from an illness or from trouble they would travel to Valamo. Such promises were called *jääksiminen* or *jääksiminen*. For some the pilgrimage was repentance, the redemption of a past sin. Others went on the journey out of curiosity, to see the famous place and its glory, or the miraculous icon. There were cases when pilgrims from distant regions went to Valamo every year (see Härkönen 1928: 228–229).

The festivities, commemoration days and pilgrimages are the forms where the popular elements of religious life are most conspicuous. By the end of the 19th century the increasingly nationalistic Lutheran Finland, much like the Finnish-minded Orthodox, considered the Karelian popular orthodoxy too Slavonic, or superstitious, which is practically the same (Genetz 1870). Therefore the popular religion was not regarded authentic, or the true manifestation of Karelian (religious) identity, which, as the Finnish stressed, had to lie in folk songs in Kalevala metre, the national epic *Kalevala* and its performance.

The latter was certainly not alien to the Orthodox Karelians, but their religious life did not centre on it. Under the influence of the Karelian-minded and other Finnish national romantics (about them see Sihvo 1973) the performers of folk songs in the Kalevala metre, like dirge singers and zither players, became to play an important role in various village festivities since the end of the 19th century. Among other events, the ancient folk song performers were welcome guests at weddings and funerals. With some reservations we might even claim that the runo song singers pushed aside the

Karelian popular orthodox tradition. The popular orthodoxy, which had fostered the ancient runo song poem tradition (see Nenonen & Rajamo 1955: 299) had to blend in the “authentic” Karelian folklore. I will return to that later.

At the end of the autonomy period runo songs and popular orthodoxy for some time coexisted side by side, each in its own ‘niche’. At home people followed the popular orthodoxy, and in the world outside the house and the village, also in times of troubles they turned to the ancient runo songs (Nenonen & Rajamo 1955: 299–300). On major holidays, at the Christmas time, for example, different traditions blended into one. In Salmi, for instance, people used to go and give thanks to, or *slavicise* other villagers. This happened on the Christmas Day when the *slavicisers* went from house to house in small groups or alone, and asked the householder permission to *slavicise*. If permission was granted they stepped to the iconic corner, made a cross-sign and sang the Orthodox Christmas hymn “The Christ was Born, Thank the Lord” in Church Slavonic.⁸ After singing the hymn they wished happy holidays and long life in local pidgin Church Slavonic (Sauhke 1971: 351).

This custom, like the ritual of *Smuutting* described below, was in fact a well-known rite associated with the movement of the Sun, the winter equinox and the change of the year (see Eliade 1993).

Popular orthodoxy was not merely the following of certain customs. The Orthodox worldview was reflected in oral tradition, legends in particular. Legends played a central role in teaching the ethics, and indirectly also the social control or guidance. The main principles followed in the Border Karelian legends could be categorised under the following notions: right conduct, trust and miracles.

Right conduct involves considering and helping other people. The legends often describe how the unselfish act of kindness to an unknown beggar is rewarded and how those who refuse to help punished. Many legend characters suffer the fate of Job, the righteous sufferer. A bear, for example, ate the cow of a poor and pious widow, no matter how hard the woman prayed. On the other hand, the right conduct and trust in God and saints even through hard times was finally rewarded and a miracle took place. The storm weakened, the harvest was abundant, the sick were healed (Järvinen

1994; see also Razumova 1996). Irma-Riitta Järvinen, a folklorist who has specialised in studying Karelian legends, concludes that the legends emphasise the same morals than in the biographies of the Byzantine and Slavonic saints, that is, a call to show kindness and helpfulness to one's fellow humans (Järvinen 1994: 12). Thus we might say that the popular and churchly ethics, where the same motifs, the problem of good and evil, right and wrong was explained by two different but interrelated and adjacent worldviews (cf. Pelonen 1965a: 303–305).

Nevertheless, the popular and churchly worldviews were in constant opposition. This opposition was already seen in the criticism of the Karelian clergy (particularly since the beginning of the 20th century) concerning people's "*superstitious worldview*". The critical articles were published in the journal "*Aamun Koitto*" (AK 2/1907: 17) and other similar journals reviewed by the clergy. The priests also sentenced *epitemia*, the clerical punishments for following superstition. The minister of Suistamo, Johannes Sitikov (priest 1888–1897) proscribed a housewife Maria Patriikka 100 kowtows (prayers) for *having followed superstition and cast 'ruani'* (an illness) *words and spells on a farmer's daughter* (Rajamo 1944: 276).

In conclusion we might say that by the end of the autonomy the Karelian popular orthodoxy had fallen under pressure. The Orthodox clergy made efforts towards securing its official position both among the population, but also in relation to Lutheranism. Thus also the efforts to root out beliefs and customs which did not conform to the teachings of the church. In this battle the church found allies among the patriotic Finns, who wished to root out the popular orthodoxy, although not with the aim to popularise the "true" orthodoxy but to discover the "true" Karelian identity. For the clergy the popular piety stood in the way of Finnish Orthodoxy, for the patriots in the way of the Karelian-Finnish identity. I will conclude my article with a short overview of the Karelian popular orthodoxy during the first decades of Finland's independence⁹ and folklorists' criticism about the same period.



Icon from the Merikjärve research station [North Karelia]: praying group. Petros Sasaki 1992. [Post card].

TRADITION TRIUMPHS OVER RELIGION: POPULAR RELIGIOUS LIFE DURING 1917–1939

The continuous efforts of the Orthodox clergy to lead the popular Karelian orthodoxy back to the bosom of the official church meant that the duties of women became the centre of attention. The performers of the folk rituals were made responsible for organising religious instruction at home and for the children under the church's approval (see for example AK 21–22/1928: 247; Saarikivi 1974). Instead of its Russian origin the church brought parallels with the Karelian tradition *from the beginning of times*. The clergy also emphasised their linguistic and racial affinity with the Finnish, not so much among the Karelians but in Finland in general, and spoke about Russia as their *mortal* enemies (see Mikkola 1932). The “Whites” of Finland were destined to separate the Karelians from the “Red” Russians at any cost (see Frilander 1995).

One of the consequences of the pressure exerted on the popular piety was the shattering of a tradition into customs, the original meaning of which could easily fall into oblivion. A good example here is the custom of *smuutting* between Christmas and Twelfth Day. This custom was followed all over the Orthodox Border Karelia (see Jänis 1997; Nenonen & Rajamo 1955: 79). Matti Jänis describes how in Tulema, the largest village in Salmi commune

a group of young girls and boys settled to go ‘smuutting’ from house to house on a certain evening. [...] The youngsters put on disguises so that nobody would recognise them. [...] We walked the way in high spirits and making a lot of noise: one of us played a harmonica or something and others played the” drums”, banging at empty tin jars with a wooden stick.

The ‘Smuutts’ knocked loudly at the door and asked: “Can we come and ‘Smuutt’? The request was rarely denied. Inside the house those who could play an instrument, did so, and others danced and tried to sing feigning their voices. The audience tried to identify the ‘Smuutts’. (Jänis 1997)

According to Jänis the custom of *smuutting* was a frolicsome gathering of the young. Other accounts (an oral account by Pirkko Jauhianen, an artist from Salmi) also suggest that it involved the consuming of large amounts of alcohol. The custom was continued

for some time after the World War II. Reportedly it could not be connected to church traditions, it rather appears to have been a modification of the same international masquerading than the aforementioned churchly version *slavicising*. Likewise, the purpose of *smuutting* was to secure a productive following year.¹⁰

Side by side with the tradition existed the “Kalevala tradition”, a body of customs which found much support in the 1920s and 1930s, propagated most conspicuously by the mainly Lutheran national romantic intelligentsia and promoters of tourism. Even orthodox Karelians supported the performance of this tradition. In the 1920s and 1930s, for example, it was customary that the *lamenters and runo singers wished good luck* (*lykkyö da osua*) at the wedding in Suistamo (Nenonen & Rajamo 1955: 79).

The death wake was held on three nights in the home of the deceased. People sang sacred songs, read out passages from the Bible, narrated ‘suakkunoita’, the lamenters sang dirges in honour of the departed. On the night preceding the funeral the wake was held all through the night, people could eat and drink. On the way to the graveyard the lamenters sang the dirge of departure. [–] The memory of the departed was sacred and the visiting of the grave, ‘luonualliset’, or daytime services and other commemoration services were held at specific times. [–] Working on Sundays and holidays was a serious sin. The icon (‘obrasa’) was hanged to the ‘great chupu’, the iconic corner; anyone who entered the house, or started to eat or finished his meal had to make a cross-sign. (Nenonen & Rajamo 1955: 79–80)

The above account illustrates how the popular orthodoxy and the ‘Kalevala tradition’ began to blend and form the true ‘Karelian’ tradition.¹¹ There are other examples of this, too. According to Eliel Warttainen (1953: 131–133) a graveyard in Korpiselka Tolvasjärvi was considered sacred, like elsewhere in the Orthodox Karelia. When some villagers had felled some ancient trees there in order to clear the graveyard from a fallen birch, two of the tree-choppers had caught a serious disease and one of them died. According to Warttainen people believed that it *was a punishment for offending the sacred place, God and spirits*. Warttainen’s informer Hannes Wornanen told that there had been once a wooden cross near the graveyard.



Icon depicting the founders of the Valamo chapel.

Whenever a villager had a small trouble, a wound or had fallen ill, he went to the cross, left a small gift and said a prayer. The villagers believe that the priest had removed the cross, as the place was also known as an offering site for ‘pagan’ spirits. (Vartiainen 1953: 132).

With the growing popularity of the Kalevala tradition emerged a new group of folk specialists – folk healers. They had been known for a long time, but while other performers of folkloric rituals like sages and the practitioners of fishing, hunting and cattle-breeding rites had lost their standing, folk healers remained and people sought help from them as the last resort, if not otherwise (cf. Genetz 1870: 92–96).

Even during the 1920s and 1930s healers were very common in Border Karelia. Mauno Pehkoranta, for example, describes his childhood in the Koitto village in Suistamo:

Törtö-buabo, Matjoi Simanainen and Mäki-buabo were healer women. They had the power to arouse love and other such things. Kuljukka Jehimä could save the cows who were lost in the woods, or call a bear to carrion, etc. (Nenonen & Rajamo 1955: 78)

Even folk medicine sometimes turned to the popular orthodoxy, where the line between spirits and the saints of the official church was often very thin. An account from Loimola, Suistamo from the beginning of the 20th century describes a woman who had suffered from toothache a couple of weeks and prayed for relief from St. Gabriel painted on the icon in the corner. Having prayed for two weeks with no relief, she got angry: she went to the icon corner, tore the icon off the wall, took it out and threw it into the snow-drift, saying: *Go away, Gavril, you have never helped me!* The story's narrator Warttinen (1953: 137–138) adds:

It is not hard to guess that, after the pain was alleviated the woman took Gabriel and hanged it back to the iconic corner, praying for forgiveness on her knees and through tears.

Folklorist Martti Haavio (1935: 140–143) gives an account of Ontrei, who lived on Suojärvi, *still believed in spirits* and knew various spells. When Haavio had cut himself sharpening a pencil, Ontrei had read the spell for clotting the blood, spat on the wound, read the spell and spat again thrice on the wound *claiming that this would reduce pain and clot the blood*. Haavio also describes Ontrei's treatment (spells) for pustules and pox, but his style suggests that Haavio had little regard for Ontrei's skills and knowledge. Similar views are typical to other Finnish nationalistic researchers of the Karelian folklore. We might even go as far as to say that they, rather than the Orthodox Church, gave the ultimate blow to the popular orthodoxy.

Folklorists admired and searched for the 'true' Kalevala tradition. For reasons that will not be discussed in the article, they had no interest in the Border Karelia, focusing on the cradle of the Kalevala tradition – Viena and Aunus. Still, their criticism towards the Karelian folk religion concerned also the Orthodox Border Karelia.

The main accusation towards the Karelian folk religion was that it was not willing to give up the outward appearances. The folklorists criticised all institutions that were not Lutheran, accusing them of being responsible for the popularity of the “Russian influence” among the Karelians, particularly in Viena and Aunus. In his book *The Finnish Peoples (Suomen Suku, 1928)* T. I. Itkonen names several monasteries and hermitages from Sävri to Solovetsk. According to him Karelia centred to these places. The orthodoxy of these regions was apparent, rather than real, as the “Russian faith” was something imported, something adopted by force. Apparently Itkonen did not believe that the popular orthodoxy was a true, organic part of Karelian life. He understood it as a kind of a curtain hiding the eternal, immutable Karelian folk religion underneath (see also Genetz 1870: 84–85).

In the second edition of the introduction into Karelian history and culture *The Karelian Book (Karjalan kirja, published in 1932)*, Uno Harva, the religious historian, has studied the Karelian religion since pre-Christian beliefs in greater detail. Harva argued that at the core of the Karelian ancient religion lied the sage-institution (healing, casting spells, etc.) and the worship of sacred places, like graveyards and groves, and their spirits (masters). He makes a reference to the accounts of Makari, the archbishop of Novgorod.

Harva shared Itkonen’s views on that the Karelian (in addition to Viena and Aunus, he included Border Karelia) orthodoxy was apparent, it was an ancient religion interpreted by Christian terms. St. Ilia, who was known all over Karelia, had replaced the ancient god Ukko, the cattle-spirits had been substituted with St. Jyrki (St. George), St. Ulassie aka Valassi (Blasios), St. Miikkula and others. The sacred groves as the holy sacrificial and praying places were substituted with church or chapels, the *tsassouna*.

Harva’s ideas were not as uniform as those of Itkonen. The Orthodoxy really had been imported to Karelia, but the Karelians had modified it to suit their needs. Although Itkonen (1928) argued that no Karelian would know the reason why he prayed to, say, St. Miikkula, Harva still believed that praying to saints meant something more to the Karelians, than just a custom with no social purpose.

Similarly to Itkonen Harva eventually realised that the Orthodoxy was alien to the Karelians, that it was something that concealed their own native religion, the Kalevala tradition. Thus, both folklorists try to explain the features, which distinguished the Karelians from the Finnish with external influence. Even the popular orthodoxy, which was by no means alien to the Karelians, was suppressed with ideological arguments: a Finn (and all Karelians were considered Finns) could have had nothing even remotely resembling of a Russian in his character. Later research has rectified this idea (see Timonen 1990: 117), but the ideological tension between the popular and official orthodoxy, or between the Lutheran and the “authentic” and the “non-authentic” folk religion still exists.

Translated by Kait Realo

Comments

¹ According to Eliade (1980: 25) this type of Christianity centred to the worship of life and fertility, and the wish to preserve them.

² Karelia in this context covers Ladoga-Karelia, Aunus and the western and southern coast of the White Sea.

³ Priests were not trained nor inaugurated in Sweden or Finland.

⁴ During the war they had supported the Russians.

⁵ The analogy with the official orthodox Easter and Resurrection tradition, including ringing the bells, walking around the house, is undeniable.

⁶ Until 1892 the orthodox congregations of the Finnish principality were under the domination of the St. Petersburg metropolitan. After that they formed a separate bishopric. Finland acknowledged the bishopric as an independent (autonomous) church in November 1918. In June 1923 the bishopric was granted ecclesiastic rights under the domination of the Constantinople patriarch. Already in the 1890s the clergy of the Border Karelian bishopric consisted primarily of ethnic Karelians, many of whom were Finnish patriots.

⁷ The position of priests became secured only at the beginning of the 20th century (cf. Genetz 1870: 101–102).

⁸ The term ‘slavicise’ originates in the Church Slavonic language and denoted ‘to thank’.

⁹ The World War II brought along so critical changes for the Karelian orthodoxy and the Karelian community (Karelia was incorporated into the Soviet Union and the Karelians were forced to settle in different parts of Finland), that the folk religion of the following period is an altogether different matter.

¹⁰ It is also possible that it was a certain transitional ritual, the “initiation” into the adult world and marriage (cf. Eliade 1980: 11–12).

¹¹ The new Russian folksong tradition, ‘*pajatukset*’ and dances contributed to the tradition as well (see Genetz 1870: 90–91). Their impact on the changing popular orthodoxy has not been studied, and will not be further discussed in the present article.

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