

ON THE BELIEFS OF KESTENGA KARELIANS According to the Materials of the Folk Prose

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The folklore of any ethnos is always connected with the spiritual culture and beliefs of its own and neighbouring peoples. The study of concrete material leads to the conclusion that several different local folklore traditions can be revealed even within the same ethnos. Then the characteristic features of language, subject, rites, beliefs are observed in each of them.

The Kestenga region (formerly Kestenga-Olanga), the northernmost region of the republic, owns one of such local traditions in Karelia.

It was historically determined that the neighbouring Kestenga and Uhtua (now Louhi and Kalevala) regions were rather isolated and their population seldom communicated with each other. Both the isolation from the southern neighbours – Uhtua Karelians – and considerable contacts with the Saami, Russians and Finns influenced on the local Kestenga folklore tradition.

For several years the author's scientific interests were directed at the collection and study of the poetry of the Karelian population living in the Kestenga region. The results of the field works for the recording of songs are published in some papers¹ and in the song collections.²

The aim of this article is to tell about the beliefs of the Kestenga Karelians, which are reflected in the folklore prose – memorates, legends, etc. – according to the field records. It is known that the structure of the folk narratives is rather 'indistinct'; it is difficult to do strict genre differentiation. For the tradition-bearers, it is the events that they tell about and that they believe in, that are important, and not the genre names. 'Ideal' genres are revealed by the investigators. Finnish folklorist L. Honko explains the necessity of such 'ideal' genres by the fact that with their help 'the investigators learn to see the real genre and to tell each other about them'.³

We turn to those texts of folk narratives in which the people's beliefs are reflected.

As is well known, the Saami lived on the territory of modern Karelia before Karelians and Russians. The evidence of their living was preserved for a long time in the remains of the material culture and household objects. At the end of the 19th century Finnish archaeologist J. W. Juvelius marked the traces of the Saami settlements throughout Northern Karelia – quadrangular *chum* (tent of skins), stoves, graves, hunting pits for deer, Lappish *seids*. He has found a *catiska*⁴ – one of the objects of Saami household.

Some information on the Saami life has preserved up to now. It could be collected rather easily even in the 1980's.

Jyrinšuaarella on lappalaiset eletty... Siinä on kiukuan šija, lappalaisien pirtin šija, ne vanhemmat niitä šanotah... Tuhkalašša, Korpijärvessä, Lapinniemesšä on toozhe lappalaiset eletty. (Phon. 2604/10, Sofporog village, 1980. – ‘The Saami once lived in the Yurinostrov. There are traces of a stove here and the old men say that this is a place of a Lapp's house... Saami lived also in Tuhkala, Korpijärvi, Lapinniemi.’)

The local geographical names are also closely connected with the Saami toponymy. The names with the first part *lappi* (‘Saami’, ‘Lappish’) – such as Lapinsaari (‘Saami Island’), Lapinniemi (‘Saami Cape’), Lapinlampi (‘Lappish forest lake’), etc. – are preserved here.

Karelians assigned strong witchcraft power to the Saami. According to the legends, the ancestors of the famous runo singers' family Shemeika learnt witchcraft in Lapland (*tulilappalainen*). They visited it several times and as a result the representatives of their family became strong charmers (*tietäjä*) and lucky hunters. Their magic power was so strong that twenty deer ‘ran into their enclosure’.⁵

Kestenga Karelians considered aboriginal Saami great ‘witches’, as they could ‘swim even on a stone’ (*on kivella souvettu*).

There is a legend on reviving the dead for some time in the Saami villages of Kestenga-Olanga. As we know, the first text of such kind was recorded by Juvelius in the 1880's. This legend is met three times in our records: in the account of F. Nikonova (Phon. 2604/10, Sofporog village, 1980) and twice in the A. Saloniemis record (Phon. 2549/15, 1979 and Phon. 2608/4, 1980, Tungozero village).

A Saami charmer dies (falls into a trance) in the absence of witnesses-assistants. The returned kinsmen try to revive him (take him out of trance) and they succeed for some time. The ‘dead’ gets up three times and says:

*Ei ole miehestä männehestä
eikä urohošta uponnehešta. –*

(‘A dead one is no person,
(He who is) dipped (into ground) is no man.’)

The motif of the revival of the dead is international, it has ancient mythological base and was known even in the ancient Greece and Rome.

Fire is the necessary component of the revival process. It is also present in our records: ‘When the other brother returned he dug him (the dead Saami – N. L.) out, made a big fire and put him into it...’ (Phon. 2549/15). The fire is conducive to the process of revival and cleaning.

Modern science considers such ancient beliefs not groundless: 'Social experience says that such practice could not survive through ages and millenniums without any positive result'.⁶ Maybe our legend preserved in the people's memory can be ascribed to the relicts of such 'positive result'?

These beliefs come from the ancient methods of revival, ways of re-animation preceding the medical practice. The data on the return to life are not singular: They are present in various ages and cultures, forming a kind of current flowing from the past to the present.⁷

The local toponymy is also related with the ancient beliefs. The old inhabitants of Tuhkala village tell that Ristinieniemi (*risti* – cross, *niemi* – cape) has got its name because 'in that area, in Pistojarvi, smallpox occurred... They put a cross at that place to stop the disease, not to let it enter this village'. –

*On tuolla päin Pistojärvellä ruvet oltu... Hyö on pantu se risti
ših, jotta eikö vaštua šitä rupie, jotta ei täh kyläh tultais* (Phon. 2649/
1 Tuhkala village, 1981).

The cross in this case served as a protection.

The legends about hidden treasures are based on the ancient beliefs connected with sacrifices. They date back to the period when the dead were buried with their treasures and arms.⁸ These magical hidden treasures are usually concealed in the bog, spring, under a stone, in a lake, etc. They show themselves very seldom – at night in one's sleep, or their location is prompted by the fire. The opinion that the hidden treasures burn was widely spread. In Sofyanga village the fire of burning hidden treasure can be seen only from one window of one house. The glass of this window was changed, but the fire was seen through the new one, too.⁹

The hidden treasures are mainly concealed in the water (lakes, rivers), in mountains and on islands. It was not easy to get them as it was connected with serious obstacles. One can obtain a hidden treasure only with the help of a sacrifice or meeting certain practically unrealisable conditions – to hit the knife in the fire from a long distance, to see the flame of the hidden treasure through a hole in a burnt tree, etc.¹⁰ Absolute silence is necessary to obtain hidden treasures; most of them are 'lost' as this condition is not realised; a cry, a fright, any sound prevents one from getting it. According to the popular beliefs, every hidden treasure had its own ghost who protected it:

*Luolehetar luonnon tyttö,
Manun eukon palkkalainen,
Joka ott vuoren vartijana,
Raha purnun paimenena,
Anna mulle avaimia,
Lainnoa läpäksimiä,*

*Jolla aartehet avoan;
En mä kultua kultijasi,
Enkä hävitä hopejoitasi.*

(*'Luolehetar* (cave protectress) – a girl of nature
in underground mistress's service,
you who guard the mountains,
pasture the money coffer,
give me the keys,
lend me the master-keys,
with which I shall open the treasure,
I shall not spend your gold,
I shall not lose your silver.¹¹⁾

Legends, oral stories of fantastic character were accepted by the tradition bearers, both by tellers and hearers, with great confidence.

The Karelian legends can be divided into two main groups – poetic texts in the Kalevala metre and prosaic ones. They existed in parallel without any confluence. Prosaic legends about building churches and monasteries were very popular in Karelia.

The Finnish historian Heikki Kirkinen thinks that the role of the monasteries in the Karelian culture was rather significant. They were something like cultural centres, besides their role as a propagators of Christianity.¹² There were nearly 70 monasteries altogether on the Karelian territory.

If the place for a shrine was incorrectly chosen, then all built within a day sank underground. But as soon as the building site was transferred to the correct place (which was determined by a floating log, raft, chip, cock cry, mysterious voice) 'large stones from far away rolled themselves to the construction place'.¹³ The churches were often built by grants, epic heroes. In Southern Karelia some legends were recorded about the life of Alexander Svirsky – the founder of the Svirsky monastery, and about the construction of the Solovetsky and Valaam monasteries. Some reminiscences about the small Topozersky monastery, about the various old-believer branches, about the *tuhkaviero* (*tuhkaset*), islanders (*suarelaiset*), worshippers of God (*jumalanmolijat*), are preserved in the Kestenga region. There are also some data about the *podruzhniekka* which was put on the floor during the prayer, and about the rosary (*listohhat*) – a lace with knots to count the bows.¹⁴

Some inhabitants of Kestenga-Olanga went to worship in the Solovetsky monastery even at the beginning of this century.

According to the legends of many countries there are two antagonistic forces participating in the creation of the world, two sources – good and evil, God and his antipode who has various appearances in different nations, the

devil being most frequent of them (*paholainen, piru, bieša*). This ‘dualism’ explains the positive and negative sides of the world structure. There is a legend about God and devil dividing the earth in the villages of Kestenga-Olanga region:

The devil asked God's permission to make a hole in the earth – and from here came mosquitoes, flies, various blood-sucking insects to trouble the man.

There are less legends in the Kestenga region than memorates and folktales.

The memorates tell about meetings with various guests, ‘hosts’ of the surrounding nature – forest, water, etc.

The stories about sorcerers, witchcraft, spooks, corpses, werewolves, etc. can also be ascribed to this genre.

The meetings with the undesirable supernatural creatures are induced by the transgression of usual prohibitions, for example, working on holidays, steaming in saunas late in the evening, making much noise, swearing before going in the forest, doing injustice to somebody, etc. The memorates are known only in the oral form. Having no certain and constant structure, they are, as a rule, complete, have traditional motifs, often international. The action of the memorates is ‘fastened’ to a certain place – to this or a neighbouring village, to the nearest lake, bog, forest, etc.

The event described in a memorate could have taken place recently, the hero of it could be the teller himself, his relatives, neighbours, i.e. the people whom he knew well.

The following testimonies are characteristic of them:

Daazhe mie olen nählyn pikku poikana. Koštovuorašša olima... Hiän tuli rantah, a myö olimma puolikilometrie kylästä... (Phon. 2711/19, Zacheek village, 1982 – ‘Even I saw it, when I was a boy. We were in Kostovaara... She (the ‘water mistress’ – N. L.) came on the coast, and we were half a kilometre from the village...’)

Muinen kun on tuola Nil'makupašša, a Louhešša on vielä še naini elošša, hyö šuahah nuottah vetehisen äpäreh... Še on ihan pravda (tosi). – Ul'l'a on vielä Louhešša. (Phon. 2649/4, Tuhkala, 1981. – ‘In Nil’maguba, this woman lives in Louhi even now, they caught a young water-sprite with their sweep-net... That is the real truth. Ullya is still living in Louhi.’)

Mie en ole nählyn, muamorukka pruažniekkana oli mänty yhteh lampih heinällä... Hyö kun kacotah, ka kakši mieštä šeisou rannalla muššissa vuatteissa, napit kiilletäh. (Phon. 2610/38, Kokkosalmi, 1980. – ‘I have not seen, but my late mother went to the forest lake for the

grass on a holiday... She saw two men standing on the shore in black clothes, with shining buttons.’)

Mie olen šemmosie rahvahie kuullun, jotta on nähty. (Phon. 2608/18 Tungozero village, 1980. – ‘I have heard it from the people who saw it themselves.’)

In the studied regions the memorates about water-sprites and forest goblins are the most popular. ‘The water mistress’ is a female creature with long black hair. She combs them, sitting on a stone near the water. Once you ‘notice’ her from the shore or boat, she disappears into the water (*solahti veteh*).

The subject of these stories is always connected with a concrete place and with exact indication – where and under what circumstances else unusual meetings took place:

Tuolla on meilä kivi, tuolla lahella... Sitä vetehisen kiveksi I kucutah. Mie voin männä siula näyttämäh, kun moottorin panen pyörimäh, missä on še kivi. Nyt on äijä vettä – ei nävy, a konša on kuiva kesä, niin näkyy. (Phon. 2650/5, Tuhkala, 1981. – ‘There is a stone here in the gulf... This stone is called the water mistress’s stone. I can show you when I start the motor, where this stone is. Now there is high water and it is not seen, but when the summer is dry, it is seen...’)

According to the popular concept the appearance of the water sprite often indicates some troubles, usually death (*kuolema näyttäytyy* – ‘the death appears’):

Siitä kun nähnet järvessä vetehistä, nii sinä vuotena ken nih järveh kuolou. (Phon. 2648/20, Tuhkala village, 1981. - ‘If you see the water-sprite on the lake, somebody drowns in this lake this year.’)

...Šanou, tänä vuotena tuaš ottau rahvahie Tuooajärvi. Nin kolme henkie šykšyllä i mäni. (Phon. 2608/18, Tungozero village, 1980. – ‘Says – this year Lake Topozero will take people again. So three men drowned in the autumn.’)

...Puaporukka šanou: ‘Mitä työ lapšet itettä? Teijän luo ei tule, tämä še on miun šurmaksi.’ Heän kešällä i kuoli. Ne pahoiksi näyttäyvytäh... (Phon. 2220/20, Kestenga village, 1975. – ‘My late grandmother says: ‘Why do you cry, children? It will not come for you, but it is my death.’ She died in summer. They appear for misfortune.’)

The forest master (*meccän isäntä*) – in black clothes with large shining buttons – makes strange, incomprehensible sounds (*losmottau*). A hunter can enlist the support of the forest-’master’, using the following invocation in autumn before the hunting season:

*Salon herra, maan isäntä,
kaunis kankahan eläjä,
tule sanani kuulemahan,
orpoa opettamahan,
turvatonta turvimahan,
tule jalan käytävälle,
kahen silmän nähtävälle.*

(SKVR I:4, 21).¹⁵

(‘The taiga master, the ground host,
the nice inhabitant of the forest,
come here and listen to my word,
teach the orphan,
protect the defenceless one,
come where there are the footprints,
where two eyes will see you.’)

Simultaneously with the invocation, it was necessary to scrape the silver from three silver coins and to bow to the forest three times.

The folk-tales ‘give’ certain practical advice, for example, not to quarrel, especially before some important event. Pedagogical-moral functions are characteristic of them. A baby of the ‘water-mistress’ fell into the fishers’ net and entreated them to let him go. If he was not released, a punishment came soon:

*No, oli ne kiušattu... Siitä kun nuoriso läksi täyši veneh, mihi
lienöy kyläh kisoih, markkinoih, kun še keski šelällä kuajalti koko
venehen, nin...* (Phon. 2649/4, Tuhkala village, 1981. – ‘But they
tormented him much. And then a boatful of young people went to
another village for a fair and the boat sank in the middle of the lake,
that’s right...’)

The motif of spending the night in a forest hut forms a cycle of the memorates. It was necessary to ask permission for entering the hut – otherwise the ‘master’ was displeased, he began to make noises, to knock, to open the door (*meccäpirtissä ei ollun rauhua* – ‘there was no peace in the hut). It was necessary to put an axe near the threshold for protection.’)

There are some variants of the memorates about local people wandering throughout the forest which they knew rather well. This time they were lost. There is, as a rule, the following way out: it is necessary to stand on a stone and to turn over one’s clothes. The memorates about a domestic animal ‘hidden’ (*meccä peittä*) by the forest are close to this cycle. There are also a lot of stories about charmers, sorcerers, witches (*tietäjä, jeretniekka*), about their positive and negative actions, force, ability to cure, to find the lost domestic animals in the forest, etc. A real powerful charmer would know beforehand (often see in his sleep), who would come for his help, and prepare his actions.

There are also numerous stories about fortune-telling at Christmas, listening near an ice-hole, forked roads, on the threshold of a hut, etc. All of them correlate to varying extent with ancient Karelian beliefs.

Sources:

Phon – Phonoteque of the Petroskoi Institute of Language, Literature and History. The first number marks the number of the cassette, the second is the number of the piece of recording.

Literature

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¹⁵See Note 11.