

# GENDER, CULTURE AND FOLKLORE

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## CULTURAL TRADITIONS AND WOMEN

One of the most important discoveries of the feminist movement and women's studies which emerged with it in the 1970s has been that the role of gender, as well as its influence on the status and life of the individual in various societies – indeed, on societies as a whole – is much greater than was previously understood. Most researchers would furthermore argue that gendered statuses are everywhere unequal, so that men and maleness are dominant while women and femaleness are subordinate. This was recognized already early on, but it was considered to be a natural and inevitable state of affairs, which followed from men's and women's different essential natures, or directly from the laws of nature ordained by God. The basis for this essentialist thinking has been the biological and physiological differences between men and women, which are apparent above all in men's and women's different reproductive roles. The natural division of labour between insemination and childbearing has been thought to indicate that the nature and activities of men and women are different in other ways as well and belong to different areas of society and culture.

The biological and physiological differences between men and women, however, do not automatically give rise to inequality nor to the fact that one is subordinated to the other. Disparity and hierarchical relations are states which are socially and culturally produced and maintained. The unequal gender system is a concrete socio-economic relationship in which the means of subordination are coercive ones, but it is simultaneously a symbolic system, which also socializes and coaxes its both powerful and less powerful members into their roles. The roles of men and women in this system do not come about by accident, rather they are learned and internalized both in practice and through concepts and images. Practices, the division of labour and its associated tasks, as well as images, the concepts and ideals linked to female and male, are all a part of the traditional culture of any society. When we realize that throughout known history, hegemony in the production of both practices and symbolic images has rested with the institutions controlled by men, then it comes as no surprise that women, who began to share this control with men only a century or two ago (and in many cases much later), have become aware of how selective and male-centered the shaping of culture has been. Women and other dissident groups have found it

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difficult and often impossible to obtain official continuity for their ideas: they have either been rejected, ignored, or in the best cases, assimilated into the mainstream tradition, after appropriate 'modifications' have been made. This process has been common to all cultural areas and has been visible not only within socio-political and economic spheres but also, for example, in the areas of religion, art and the sciences.

The deconstructing and reassembling of social practices, the wielding of economic and political power, the production and reproduction of images, ideas, and institutions (educational, artistic, religious, scientific) along with the knowledge they convey, in order that they would base their decision-making and activities on the knowledge and experience of women alongside that of men, is the optimistic goal of the feminist movement and women's studies. In their achievement of this aim, or in even being aware of it and expressing it openly, the women of the world find themselves in widely differing circumstances.

At the same time that the position of women in industrialized countries is improving, and they are increasingly able to participate in the creation of the conditions and agendas which make this possible, the majority of women in developing countries carry the increasingly heavy burden of a disadvantageous economic development. There is thus no speedy nor simple solution to the aforementioned problem of gender inequality. The threat of ecological and nuclear destruction which hangs over the world gives cause to ask whether humanity will come to its end before we ever achieve an egalitarian society. Fighting for equality between the genders and for those things left to the care of women – children, local neighborhoods, interpersonal relations – is also a way of warding off the threat of world destruction. One of the aims of the feminist movement is precisely to call into question, change or remove those institutions and activities which produce the threat of world destruction: armies, armament industries, economic systems based on exploitation, cultural traditions founded on dominance and subordination.

The transformation of socio-economic and cultural conditions is nonetheless impossible without information concerning why things are what they are. We will not be able to dismantle the structures and practices which oppress women before we know how they work, and what sorts of methods and strategies they utilize. The task of feminist studies is to obtain that knowledge. But the task is also to clarify what women's own options are: what they have been historically, and what they are at the present moment. Women have, in any case, lived their lives, thought their thoughts and even expressed them publically in earlier times as well. The fact that women's ideas and articulations have not been part of the mainstream of cultural tradition does not mean that they never existed. It only means that they have remained invisible – in life, as in scholarship and research.

The part women have played in human history and culture has not been restricted merely to childbearing and childcare, or to responsibility for the

household and serving men. This fact emerges more clearly when we examine communities and time periods in which the creation and transmission of culture has been based on oral tradition. The birth of written culture has everywhere meant the exclusion of the common people, including women, from the elite who created and maintained the dominant culture. But this does not mean that the folk, including women, were left without culture. Oral traditions have existed everywhere, also in Finland, alongside institutionalized and literate culture, and in a dialectic interaction with it. Both men and women have been its producers and performers. The goal of a folkloristic feminism is thus to try to clarify what part women have played in oral tradition, as well as what sorts of traditions they have used and how. On the other hand, oral tradition also reflects the gender concepts of its time, so that it can be examined as part of the symbolic system which justifies and reproduces the prevailing roles and relations between the genders.

## FOLKLORE AS AN INSTRUMENT OF CONSENSUS AND CONTESTATION

Folklore, like written expression, can be used to either maintain or challenge the status quo prevailing within a community. In other words, it can be used to express and reinforce acceptance of the dominant norms, concepts and power structures, at which time we can speak of folklore as a tool for consensus. On the other hand, folklore can be used to attempt to dispute the authority of predominant concepts and power holders, or in any case to present an alternative, a different sort of picture of the world, at which time we can speak of folklore as a culture of contestation, as Luigi Lombardi-Satriani (1974) has done.<sup>1</sup>

Seeing folklore as a tool for consensus represents a functionalist interpretation of folklore's significance. Here the assumption is that the community is homogeneous and egalitarian. Folklore both reflects and upholds the integrity of the community and its culture from one generation to the next by transmitting a sense of continuity in terms of values, norms, and social structure. The users of folklore are seen to be like-minded, no one questions the values inherited by the community. Even conflicts, which are seen to arise from the individual psyche, can, according to this perspective, be aired out with the aid of folklore, by allowing occasionally deviant behavior at the level of speech and expression – behavior which nonetheless follows traditional patterns. William Bascom's view of the functions of folklore is perhaps an orthodox example of functionalist thinking. According to Bascom, folklore can be used to, among other things, release pent-up emotions (as in various rituals of rebellion or even in the narration of fairy tales), to teach correct behavior to the younger generation, to reproduce and reinforce

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1 Lombardi-Satriani 1974.

the status quo of the community by repeating the myths of the community from time to time, and to keep anomalous behavior within bounds by distributing criticism and praise as the situation requires.<sup>2</sup>

According to the functionalist point of view, then, folklore is thus used to socialize members of the community and keep them in their place. American folklorist Mary Ellen B. Lewis takes up the topic of this task of folklore in the following, referring primarily to proverbs and jokes:

But the feminist attack has been largely centered on beliefs and sayings that tend to support and maintain the stereotypes, because these are major, although subtle, ways of inculcating values and enculturating members of society. They have validated and justified woman's role by referring to the past, thus seeking to maintain her role and cultural stability in the present and into the future.<sup>3</sup>

The functionalist view of folklore is not, however, the whole truth nor is it always even a possible explanation. Nor have traditional societies necessarily ever been as internally cohesive and harmonious as has often been assumed. Even in those societies which cannot properly be called class societies, the community is divided into groups according to gender, age, authority or kinship. The relations between these groups often form a hierarchical system containing both dominant and subordinate members. Even if this sort of community were to still exist entirely on the basis of oral tradition, one could still assume that the folklore usage of the dominant groups (elders, men) would differ from the folklore usage of the subaltern groups (youth, women) in that the latter would use it to try to challenge the authorized use of power or the power holders conceptions of themselves. This is even more clearly the case in a class society, in which the power holders strivings toward hegemony are based, as mentioned earlier, on the control of both socio-economic practices and the production of ideas. In this case, folklore as an instrument of contestation is a weapon used by the oppressed against those in power, in order to question, make ridiculous, or invalidate dominant ideas and worldviews.

Folklore of contestation can thus be assumed to arise wherever a relationship of dominance prevails: between the class of those who control the political, economic, cultural or religious means of production and those who are controlled, between dominating men and subordinated women, or between a dominant and subaltern race or ethnic group. True, the relations of dominance between both genders and races are most often based on political and economic conditions, rationalized by culture and religion. The aforementioned Lombardi-Satriani also writes:

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<sup>2</sup> See Bascom 1965.

<sup>3</sup> Lewis 1974: 85. I have written more about this issue in my book *Miessydäminen nainen*, see Nenola 1986: 99-102.

One of the most obvious examples is the relationship between the sexes where women assume the obligatory role of inferior creatures with respect to males who are the creators and depositors of values; women, therefore, constitute along with the proletariat the category of the historically oppressed.<sup>4</sup>

But rather than this relationship of dominance being reflected in folklore such that women would contest the values instituted by men, this happens rarely, according to Lombardi-Satriani. "In reality this occurs only rarely; in fact we find that the most frequently expressed values in folklore are the male values, or truly, in this specific regard, the values of the dominators."<sup>5</sup>

Naturally, examples do exist of women's folklore of contestation, and I return to this later on, but it is also clear that the majority of women's folklore reflects male values, or the so-called "general" view of the world as defined and evaluated by men. Why does women's folklore not reflect more directly the relations of dominance and subordination in which women live?

One might suppose that the possibility of using folklore of contestation is directly proportional to the distance between dominant and subordinate manifested in everyday life. The daily proximity and bonds of emotion to the 'power-holders' may have made it difficult for women to develop a worldview or folklore which called male power into question, while such folklore was enabled by the distance, for instance, between farm masters and servants – as can be seen from the popularity of humorous antagonist anecdotes concerning relations between farm masters and hired hands. At issue here is a relation of dominance and awareness of its justifications, both of which are necessary before any folklore of contestation can arise. Even in terms of awareness of dominance, it may make a difference whether the subordinated folklore user identifies the experience of being dominated as a result of men's use of power, or whether it is believed to be ordained by God, and just happens to serve male interests. And even if one's consciousness concerning male use of power has been raised, it may still be more difficult to rise up against it than against a distant God in heaven, since the man is within striking distance in everyday life.

In order for folklore of contestation to arise, there must also be a group: the possibility to see oneself as part of a larger entity united by the common experience of oppression – or anything else. For women this has been possible only when women have not been isolated within their families but have had to form a female community in the context of work or celebration. On the other hand, a decisive factor in this case is whether the internal relations within these female communities have been characterized by bonds of solidarity or whether they have reflected the patriarchal or class hierarchies that surround them. The studies carried out by Bette S. Denich and others, for example, concerning pastoral

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<sup>4</sup> Lombardi-Satriani 1975:103.

<sup>5</sup> Lombardi-Satriani 1975:104.

and peasant communities in the Balkans, tell how for example, women who work together in large extended households nonetheless end up competing with each other for resources controlled and distributed by the kin group elders. Women may also function as if they were the lightning rod for quarrels among men or brothers of the family, in which case the quarrel is blamed on the woman, since actual clashes between men could break up the family, and women can be disciplined through threats and beatings.<sup>6</sup>

The situation has been the same elsewhere as well, wherever the patriarchal large extended households have comprised the basic economic units. The result is that, for instance, many women's songs depict relations between the women of the household (mother-in-law, daughters-in-law or sisters-in-law) in highly negative terms which undoubtedly reflect reality.<sup>7</sup> In other words, the oppressors are presented as other women rather than men. The system of oppression in patriarchal families, as in the class system, forces the oppressed to fight each other and makes it difficult for solidarity to exist. On the other hand, negative experiences and sufferings have in some cases truly formed the basis for female solidarity and are the uniting factor in certain situations such as wedding ceremonies in which married women perform together in groups. In these situations, however, at issue is not contestation but rather the context-appropriate performance of the dominant tradition and the attempt to transfer to the bride knowledge concerning the female experiences of marriage and living under the authority of a mother-in-law.<sup>8</sup> Women's groups are discussed in more detail below.

## WOMEN'S STATUS AND THE MYTH OF MATRIARCHY

It is quite easy to find examples of women's eternally subordinated and inferior status from the folklore which rationalizes this status, as well as from that which contests it. An interesting body of material, and one which is contradictory in terms of interpretive possibilities, is the legend of ancient female power, the myth of the matriarchy.

Myths which tell of ancient societies governed by women can be found from different parts of the world. For Finns, the nearest example is Pohjola, or Land of the North, dealt with in Kalevala metre poetry. Pohjola is a land controlled by "the gap-toothed crone of the North", in opposition to which stands Lönnrot's cleverly-constructed Land of Kalevala, governed by virile males.<sup>9</sup> Although the

<sup>6</sup> See Denich 1974:255-256; also Rihtman-Augustin 1982.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Boskovic-Stulli 1982:89-91; compare also the 'daughter-in-law songs' of the Ingrians and Karelians.

<sup>8</sup> See Nenola-Kallio 1982:180-181.

<sup>9</sup> For the most recent discussion of Lönnrot's version of the Mistress of Pohjola, see Sawin 1988.

battle for the Sampo – a mysterious source of riches – waged between Pohjola and Kalevala ended in a draw when the Sampo was dashed to pieces which scattered to the four winds and sunk to the bottom of the sea, the loss of the Sampo nonetheless destroyed the prosperity of the female-governed Pohjola and with it apparently also the power of the “crone”. At least this is how the story goes in Elias Lönnrot’s Kalevala.

The mythology of Antiquity which tells of Amazons was one of the sources used by J.J. Bachofen in developing his perspective on the cultural evolution of humanity. According to this view, development progressed from hetaeristic or promiscuous Amazonism and matriarchy to a higher stage, that of patriarchy.<sup>10</sup> Hetaerism represented a period in which the way of life was still purely ‘natural’, and in terms of sexuality, ‘bestial’; Amazonism, a period in which women waged war and wielded power was followed by a matriarchal stage, which was in Bachofen’s opinion “a step toward civilization”.<sup>11</sup> The rise of the matriarchy was bound up with marriage and thus the birth of a more ‘pure’ sex life. In the matriarchy, however, there still prevailed “mother right”, founded, of course, on ‘natural law’, in other words, on the concretely physical relationship between mother and child. ‘Mother right’ included not only the reckoning of kinship and descent according to the mother, but also the inheritance of property by the daughter and the fact that women were not only the heads of families but also the heads of government (gynocracy).<sup>12</sup> The emergence of a true civilization and lawful society was nonetheless associated with the emphasis on paternity as spiritual and intellectual parenthood, above and beyond the “law of nature” or physical parenthood. Because it was spiritual and intellectual, paternity was seen to be part of the “heavenly light” in contrast to maternity, which was eternally earthbound.<sup>13</sup> In a patriarchy, stated Bachofen, intellect and spirit always win out over material substance.

Bachofen’s theory of culture and the development of humanity is a product of its time and clearly reveals the 19th century masculine hubris which has its roots in Antiquity. What is significant in this context is that Bachofen, unlike others, considered the myths of Amazons to be historical in their origins,<sup>14</sup> and thus proof of the existence of ancient female-governed nations and matriarchies.

Myths can also be interpreted in other ways as well. The dominant interpretive approach in anthropology after Malinowski has been a functionalist one: myths justify and reinforce the organization of society and its cultural institutions. Joan Bamberger, who has studied the myths of South American native peoples, has also relied on a Malinowskian interpretation. These South American myths tell

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<sup>10</sup> Bachofen 1967:69, notes.

<sup>11</sup> Bachofen 1967:143.

<sup>12</sup> Bachofen 1967:156.

<sup>13</sup> Bachofen 1967:109-110.

<sup>14</sup> Bachofen 1967:150-151, 154

how in ancient times, women possessed the political power until it was wrested from them by men. In these myths, which are told in both the Tierra del Fuego region and along the shores of the Amazon River, the central idea is that secret ritual objects, masks, flutes, songs, and ritual sites were originally invented and controlled by women. Through trickery and violence, men divested women of these objects and along with them, women's power in matters both sacred and profane. Ever since this time, women have been subordinated and have had neither the right to participate in the rituals nor touch or see these ritual objects.<sup>15</sup> The myths are told and used in order to justify the prevailing male power and the fact that women are not allowed to participate in rituals or other significant events. But it is not mere myth which keeps women at bay, neither among the Native South Americans nor among other groups. Myths are reinforced with concrete sanctions, so that, for example, a woman who somehow breaks the rules set by men is punished by being raped or murdered.<sup>16</sup> An excellent example of the existence, use and analysis of such myths appears in Yolanda and Robert F. Murphy's work *Women of the Forest* based on material collected in the 1950s from the indigenous Mundurucu tribe.<sup>17</sup>

There is no doubt that for the narrators, these myths represent true stories. But contrary to what Bachofen had in mind, their truth value is sociological rather than historical in nature. They cannot be used as evident of ancient female power, for they are true only in terms of their consequences: political power resides with men, just as is declared in the myths' conclusion.

Myths are sacred history: not only the aforementioned Native South American myths but also Genesis, the Biblical story of the Fall and expulsion from the Garden of Eden. They lend authority to the present reality by offering an 'historical' explanation for what has taken place at some point in the actual past. At the same time they justify this reality by giving it a sacred origin. The creators and preservers of most sacral traditions are men – just as they are among the Mundurucu and Tukana peoples of South America.<sup>18</sup> For this reason, the same warning applies to them as to other cultural traditions with which we are more familiar: the picture they offer of the present state of affairs and their continuity is selective, seen and rationalized from a subjective male perspective. This is pointed out by both Bamberger and folklorist Martha Weigle when they urge feminists and other critical scholars to proceed with caution. Joan Bamberger writes:

The myths constantly reiterate that women did not know how to handle power when they had it. The loss is thereby justified so long as women choose to accept the myth. The Rule of Women, instead of heralding a promising future, harks back to a past darkened by

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<sup>15</sup> Bamberger 1974:274.

<sup>16</sup> Bamberger 1974:175

<sup>17</sup> See Murphy & Murphy 1985:113-116.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Nenola 1988.



repeated failures. If, in fact, women are ever going to rule, they must rid themselves of the myth that states they have been proved unworthy of leadership roles.<sup>19</sup>

For her part, Martha Weigle refers to goddess figures and warns against taking them as examples, because those goddesses which have come down to us through the ages from different sources have, according to her, “been defined and celebrated by males, they appear more often monstrous and dangerous than as primary creators and gift-bearing culture heroines”.<sup>20</sup>

Myths of matriarchs and female power can thus be clearly classified as folklore of consensus: they have been and still are used to explain and reinforce the justification for male power. The myth told by the Masai group in Africa as to why women do not own cattle also belongs to this group: once, women left the cattle they owned unattended, at which point the cattle changed into a herd of wild animals, and thus women have only themselves to blame for the fact that cattle, the only real property of the Masai, is in the hands of men.<sup>21</sup> The fact that women tell this myth is an example of how women’s folklore also reflects male values; it is also an example of how, through folklore, women are indoctrinated to accept their own station in life and consider it to be natural.

## A TRADITION OF CONTESTATION ?

In Ilmar Talve’s book *Vatjalaista kansankulttuuria (Votic Folk Culture)*, there is a description of the Votic women’s custom of cleaning, once or twice per year, the site where they wash their laundry:

The washing place was open in the winter as well, and it was cleaned twice per year, in the spring and autumn. There was no fixed cleaning day, rather it was agreed upon separately. The cleaning was carried out by women. The ditch was emptied of water using a pail, then cleaned with a broom and the dirt and grime lifted out. After the cleaning the women held a celebration for which they obtained hard liquor. The accordion player was the only male participant at the festivities, and he was also offered alcohol. The women drunk themselves into intoxication.<sup>22</sup>

Paul Ariste tells of the same custom:

When the date of the cleaning day (*likopäivä*) was decided upon, then each woman had to once again contribute some foodstuffs for the communal meal. Money was collected to buy spirits. When the washing place was clean, the women gathered in somebody’s

<sup>19</sup> Bamberger 1974:280.

<sup>20</sup> See Jordan & de Caro 1986:505-506.

<sup>21</sup> See Nenola 1986:109-110

<sup>22</sup> Talve 1981:44.

house, where together they celebrated the *likopäivä*. The only man invited to the party was the harmonica player. At first the women sang and danced by themselves. Gradually they were joined by other men.<sup>23</sup>

The same sort of women's custom among the Votes was the *klaccina*, which could be celebrated on St. George's Day, for example when the cows were let out to pasture:

On St. George's Day or some other day, the women gathered malt and food for a *klaccina*. If the *klaccina* was on St. George's Day, then some of the village cowherds were invited. No other men were allowed. If a man came to a women's party, the women tore off his pants.<sup>24</sup>

Information concerning similar types of women's celebrations have also been recorded from other Finnic and Finno-Ugric peoples such as the Ingrians, Setu and Mordvinians. The Setu had a women's celebration known as the *paaba-praasnik*, in which married women participated prior to the Lenten fasting period. The women collected money, procured alcohol and food, and dressed in comic attire. The only man allowed at the festivities was the musician – just as in the Votic celebration of *likopäivä*. Women sang and danced, and the songs and dances were full of coarse obscenities and indecent behavior. Songs which ridiculed men were performed. If men drove past the house where the festivities were being held, the women might tip over the loads they were carrying or do something “even worse”. Intoxicated women might start fights with the other women of the village.<sup>25</sup>

Uno Harva depicts a similar custom celebrated by married women and known as *bratsina* among the Mordvinians. One celebration was known as “the wives’ ale party” (*akkojen kalja-juhla*) and was also organized by married women. The women's behavior is depicted in the following:

When everyone had prayed, eaten and drunk, the candles (which were basic props in the celebration) were taken to neighbors in great pomp and ceremony. At the head of the group walked three women with staffs or poles known as *alasiat*, the tops of which had been carved in the shape of horses' heads. The candles were carried by whichever woman to whose home they were to be taken. Two other women carried bread, meat, wheat pasties, spirits, and ale. Following them, three women ‘rode’ the poles, which were 2 - 2.5 arshins [approx. 4<sup>1/2</sup> - 6 ft.] in length. The whole procession sang obscenely erotic songs. After having left the *statols* (candles) in the care of the woman whose turn it was to store them, the drunken women went riding the poles up and down the street. Men were said to take care not to encounter them for the reason that if the women got their hands on a man, he would end up the victim of obscene taunting and ridicule. He would be

<sup>23</sup> Ariste 1966:203.

<sup>24</sup> Ariste 1966:202; the term *klaccina* or *glatsina* was also used for the *likopäivä* festival, see Talve *ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Virtanen 1981:34.

stripped naked, hoisted up onto the shoulders of the women and paraded up and down the street, while the women made highly graphic claims concerning the victim's physical capacities. After having pronounced a man to be poorly developed, the women hinted that his wife was seeing other men, and of robustly-built men, on the other hand, they said that other men's wives were doubtless stealing visits to his house.<sup>26</sup>

Harva mentions that married Russian women also had the same sorts of celebrations; there is also information concerning married women's drinking parties from Germany.<sup>27</sup> Concerning the function of these activities, Harva states that their erotic elements suggest that they were "originally intended to stimulate sexual activity and promote fertility."<sup>28</sup>

"Wives' festivals" were associated not only with the ridicule of men, but also with that of unmarried women, old maids. On the other hand, in some places these festivals have focused particular attention on those young women who had married during the previous year, who were in a sense adopted into the group as new members. In Western Ingria the following is related of such initiation rites:

Only married women and widows participated in the festivities; neither unmarried women nor men did so. For their part, newly-married young women attending these parties for the first time received particular attention. They were hoisted up and cheered, and then taken into the "women's group" or "women's own", that is, the wives' group. Each woman who had been brought to the village as a bride during the previous year and who now 'became a woman' and was allowed into the others' company, was supposed to contribute 20 kopecks to the common fund. In Soikkola village it was still the custom to baptize these young women the next day by submerging them, fully dressed, in water up to their ears.<sup>29</sup>

Women's celebrations were also held after the Russian Revolution in Ingria, now on March 8 in honor of International Women's Day. But the description of the day's proceedings strongly resembles those given above:

On Women's Day all of the women gathered together. Then they began to drink various types of hard liquor, they ate, brought food from home; then started dancing and singing, each one singing now this, now that song.<sup>30</sup>

These women's celebrations exhibit features which clearly justify both their interpretation from a functionalist perspective and the suggestion that they have the same sort of purpose, namely to maintain and restore social equilibrium, as do other rituals and celebrations in which the prevailing social hierarchy is turned upside-down. These latter have been, for example, New Year's rituals, carnivals,

<sup>26</sup> Harva 1942:247-248.

<sup>27</sup> Harva 1942:249-250.

<sup>28</sup> Harva 1942:249.

<sup>29</sup> Harva 1942:250. Harva's sources were the recorded field observations of Elsa Enäjärvi-Haavio, Lauri Laiho and J. Lukkarinen in Western Ingria.

<sup>30</sup> Nirvi 1971:334.

and certain rituals in which a slave is chosen to be king for a day, those in power are mocked and derided, and dominant values are ridiculed and laughed at. Leea Virtanen refers to this in her interpretation of women's festivals:

This traditional celebration suddenly makes possible a completely different sort of behavior, when a normally hard-working mother appears in the typical 'male' role, intoxicated, reeling off obscenities and spoiling for a fight. This sort of carnival behavior, however, is seen in its own way to strengthen prevailing norms and customs.<sup>31</sup>

The functionalist interpretation usually takes the preservation of the dominant social structure as its point of departure. The maintenance of the status quo, however, is naturally in the interests of those at the top of the hierarchy, of those in power. If, then, behavior which clearly calls this hierarchy into question is interpreted as a 'ritual of rebellion' whose only function is to defuse social tensions and vent social pressures, thus reinforcing even more strongly the prevailing situation, then perhaps there is something we are not seeing. What if we consider this behavior from the point of view of the subordinated, in this case women? Is the issue in their case merely the fact that they want to express, through deviant behavior, that they know where the boundary lies? The same claim has also been made in interpretations of children's traditions.<sup>32</sup>

It is true that when the women's festivals are over, everything returns to normal and daily life continues. Relations between the sexes, in sexual behavior as in other areas, are restored: sexual harassment and drunkenness once again become the prerogative of men. The position of women remains unchanged: married women toil, and are beaten if they do not obey. But during the women's festival they have expressed and demonstrated that they belong to a women's group, and through their songs and speech they have let their own views of the dominant order be heard. The tradition of women's festivals is not a feminist tradition, its goal is not emancipation or revolution. But in a male-centered culture based on patriarchy, it surely offers an image of a feminine counterculture. At least one can infer that women know who they are, know that they have their own position in society and that they are needed. By caricaturizing men's behavior and by emphasizing the solidarity of the women's group they convey the existence of their group and its views. For example, the aim of the sexual harassment directed at men is surely not just "stimulation of sexual activity and the promotion of fertility", rather, women show men what they think of their sexual behavior. And what are we to make of the fact that the women's group in a sense momentarily dominates the public space in which their movements are otherwise regulated: the village road, even roads between villages, as is told of the Setu?<sup>33</sup> "Men are said to take care not to encounter them" – men, not women had momentary reason to be wary

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<sup>31</sup> Virtanen 1981:34.

<sup>32</sup> Bregenhoj 1988:185-186.

<sup>33</sup> See Virtanen 1981:34.

of walking alone on the road. It is as though the society of women functioned as an alternative reality to that of everyday life, as Froma Zeitlin writes concerning corresponding customs<sup>34</sup> within certain Greek rituals in which women ritually act out inappropriate behavior.

The celebrating of festivals in connection with a particular job or task performed collectively such as the cleaning of the laundry site among the Votes, on the other hand, tells us that women know that their work is important. It is useless to expect a celebration linked to clothes washing or cleaning from men's culture: these sorts of inevitable tasks linked to the reproduction of everyday life have never been, nor are they yet, a part of men's culture. The *likopäivä* of the Votic women tells of women's work which both maintains society and unites women.

A more precise and comprehensive analysis of women's festivals has not yet been undertaken. When it is, there is reason to examine their significance in terms of both the women's community and culture and the broader culture as a whole. What appears to be the venting of social pressures and the maintenance of equilibrium may in fact be a clue as to the existence of another worldview, that of a women's culture, to which Leea Virtanen has referred in writing about the song culture of the Setu.<sup>35</sup> To what extent this women's culture contains elements which contest the 'mainstream' worldview of men and offers alternatives to it, is also something which can only be clarified through further investigation.

Hints at the existence of another sort of worldview and other values can also be found in the folklore of other cultures. In her article "Women – Images of their Nature and Destiny in Rural Greece" (1986), Juliet du Boulay has pointed out how Greek folklore would appear to contain two contradictory images of women and their natures. On the one hand, woman – according to Christian tradition – is equated with the fallen Eve, who is unclean, given over to subordination by men, stupid, gullible, cowardly, unreliable, weak and irresponsible. Alongside this clearly ideological image is another based on practicality, which is revealed in, among other things, the sayings "the woman is the mainstay of the house", "without a woman there would be no house", "the woman comes next after God", and "a woman can become like the Mother of God".<sup>36</sup>

The same contradictory image of women can naturally be seen in the traditions of other peoples converted to Christianity, in which ideology and practice do not mesh. Ideology is in fact used to convince women that what is important is not what they do but what they are: an image of God which is more deficient than and inferior to that represented by man. One of the consequences of this contradiction is surely the battle which we women still wage in trying to achieve a positive self-image. It is still difficult for us to believe that what is important is what we do rather than how we look or how well we live up to the feminine

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<sup>34</sup> See Ardener 1987:119.

<sup>35</sup> Virtanen 1981:38.

<sup>36</sup> Du Boulay 1986:140-141.

ideals set for us, or how well we are able to please a man.

Women's culture, and the meanings and values contained within it, can be sought from folklore in many ways.<sup>37</sup> We can examine situations in which women use the same folklore genres as men and attempt to clarify whether differences can be observed in usage between the genders. Research on the subject would appear to demonstrate that women's role in the production and performance of folklore reflects the gendered division of labour prevailing in the community: if women function primarily within the domestic sphere and family, then their folklore is also associated with these areas. Women have, for example, told children fairy tales at home, while men have been more able to appear as public narrators of fairy tales in the company of adults.<sup>38</sup> Fairy tale research has shown that the types of fairy tales favored by men and women are different.<sup>39</sup> This does not necessarily mean, however, that men and women perform men's and women's fairy tales differently – although this too may be the case. Satu Apo writes:

(...) feminine plots deal with the relations between the genders in entirely the same spirit, and cultivating the same stereotypes, as do masculine plots: the fairy tales' female protagonists are portrayed using typically feminine features and their male opponents are given the usual masculine characteristics.<sup>40</sup>

But there are apparently differences between the fairy tales told by men and those told by women: if it is true that fairy tales do not only speak of things at the level of "fantasy", but rather reflect the social reality of their narrators,<sup>41</sup> it is quite clear that in a fairy-tale telling community the worlds of men and women differ so much that this difference must be visible in their fairy tales or other stories. But what accounts for the fact that the style or language of narration does not greatly differ between the genders (compare Apo's statement above concerning the custom of describing gender) and that the differences we do find were among individual narrators (regardless of gender)? In seeking our answer should we look to the idea, posited by feminist literary scholars, that the language of literature generally is the language of men? Does the language of folklore also receive its expression and content from the language of that gender which occupies the hegemonic position in the tradition in question?

At least it is clear that whenever a folklore genre is produced entirely or for the most part by women, its possibilities for revealing those things which are important to women or the women's community are greater. I am thinking here of the language of Balto-Finnic laments – which has left many male folklore

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Jordan & de Caro 1986; see also Jordan & Kalcik 1985.

<sup>38</sup> See Dégh 1962.

<sup>39</sup> For example Apo 1986:198-199; Holbeck 1987:405.

<sup>40</sup> Apo 1986:200.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Apo 1986:209, notes; Holbek 1987:405.

collectors wondering and confused. At the level of their content and message, laments are not a folklore of contestation. On the contrary: I myself have tried to show how clearly the insecure status of women in the patriarchal and agrarian kin community can be read from these laments, along with the fact that a woman's status was dependent on the status of key men in her life.<sup>42</sup> Ritual laments do not attempt to deny or overturn this insecurity: through laments, women submit to it, complain about it and implore aid from both God and humans. Nonetheless it is interesting that at the level of language, the world and important interpersonal relationships receive a different kind of emphasis in laments. In one of my analyses,<sup>43</sup> I found that within the metaphorical system of naming (which denoted kinship, among other things) existing in Ingrian ritual laments, persons were divided into only two groups: mothers and children. All other categories of kinship were variations of these two, and people were, ultimately, either somebody's mother or somebody's child. Men too, are always designated somebody's child: father is grandmother's child, husband is mother-in-law's child. At the level of this naming system in ritual laments, the human community appears to be clearly matrilineal, even though the world depicted in the laments is clearly patriarchal. It would naturally be tempting to deduce from this that the language of ritual lament – which happens to be otherwise quite archaic – has preserved some memory of a past matriarchal or at least matrilineal system of kinship, from a time when descent really was reckoned through the mother. But there is another possible explanation as well, that of women's early and divergent perspective on how the human community, family and kin are formed and how persons are related to each other. During times of crisis, this alternative image of the community naturally calls to mind within the community the unbreakable foundation of the original family unit, the bond between mother and child. It is naturally significant that this fundamental relationship comes to the fore in precisely those situations in which women, through lament and ritual, strive to emphasize the continuity of life despite death and separation. The language of lament has been created by women and transmitted through women from generation to generation. Does it contain a feminine counter-interpretation, which, through the ages, contests the idea that the only possible system of power is a patriarchal and hierarchical one, and reminds the community that all persons are born from women, contrary to what the patriarchal culture would have it believe?<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> See Nenola-Kallio 1982:103-106, 212 notes.

<sup>43</sup> Nenola-Kallio 1982:33 notes.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Jay 1987.

## WOMEN AND CULTURAL TRADITIONS

An examination of women's status and possibilities based solely on the information -both empirical and theoretical- offered by and contained within the male-centered mainstream tradition leads all too easily to an emphasis on the 'wretchedness' of women's position or their status as 'victims'. This has been demonstrated in the course of clarifying the different phases of feminist research.<sup>45</sup> Women have often been seen as the involuntary victims of socializing mechanisms, and the 'otherness' of woman in a male-oriented culture has been seen as decisive in the explication of her social and psychic development. This picture is undoubtedly correct in many senses: women have been the 'other' and socialization has played an important role in women's status and psychology. Nonetheless, this is not the whole picture, as I have attempted to argue in this paper. Women are not merely objects but are also subjects. Their role as social actors has been overlooked for the reason that the mainstream of cultural tradition has recognized only a few exceptional women as its own: female leaders, saints. Elsewhere in historical writings, the role of visible women has been as the mother, spouse, lover or other background figure to some noteworthy man.

Examining history and culture from a female point of view in order to discover what women were doing while men were making history, or, what various historical and cultural periods look like when viewed in the light of contemporary women's experiences, has uncovered new source materials for historical research. Oral history and recollected knowledge, whose bearers have also been women, becomes available as a new source of information. The place of oral tradition, that is, folklore as a source for researching women's cultural history, is justified so long as it is not interpreted too straightforwardly or with the expectation that it will reflect any sort of unmediated reality. The advantage of oral tradition is that from it, we have information concerning the traditions produced and used by both men and women. Alongside the male-dominated materials of literate culture, gender folklorists are in a privileged position with regard to earlier centuries.<sup>46</sup> Women as culture-producing subjects existing prior to the era of female writers and novelists are more easily reached through folklore than through written materials.

In women's studies and gender studies the attempt is made to clarify whether women really have been compliant victims within a male culture, or whether signs of their active search for and expression of alternatives can be seen from their oral traditions. The question can also be asked whether oral tradition reveals signs of women having perceived themselves as contributing to, either individually or collectively, their own fate. In setting out after the answers to these questions,

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<sup>45</sup> See, for example, Harding 1987:3-5.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Apo 1988.



I have examined the use of folklore as a tool for consensus and contestation. But as I have also striven to show, at issue is not only the perspectives and goals of the folklore users, but also the researcher's viewpoint. In reading through earlier folkloristic research, it appears that male-centeredness and consensus have tended to be part of both the material and its interpretation. This makes the uncovering of alternative interpretations and viewpoints twice as difficult. Nonetheless, penetrating dominant traditions and hegemonic male interpretations and seeing the other side of the issue is a prerequisite for reaching the uniqueness and subjectivity of women's culture.

*Translated by Laura Stark-Arola, Ph.D.*

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## ABSTRACT

The main theme of the article concentrates around the problem how the oral tradition can be analysed from the point of view of consensus or contestation, whether it has been used to maintain or challenge the gender order of the community. It is stated that the functionalist interpretation of folklore has mostly paid attention to the forms and ways in which folklore has been used to maintain the status quo of a community. Another perspective has been presented by L. Lombardi-Satriani in the beginning of 1970's when he described folklore as "culture of contestation". Using this concept the author has tried to see whether women have used folklore to contest their subordinate status or the domination of men over them.

Some examples from the Finno-Ugrian tradition are presented of this type of folklore. A special example is the tradition of women's annual feasts where they could turn gender roles and gender behaviour upside down, take over the public space, get drunk and sing and speak obscenities and mock men if they happened to get in their way. The author's interpretation is that if only for one day, women could this way tell what they thought of the status quo and the behaviour of their men. Besides this, other features of these feasts seem to point to solidarity between women and their awareness of the importance of their work for the community. So these traditions are an example of contestation, but not yet of revolution: next day the course of life went back to "normal". Also some other examples of contesting traditions are given.

The author also makes the point that what we know of women's traditions seem to point to the conclusion that it mostly represents culture of consensus, but we need not accept this conclusion at its face value, since most of the folklore collections and studies have been made by male scholars who perhaps have not been able to reach or appreciate women's folklore of contestation or have not seen alternative ways of interpreting the sources. Anyway, she states, folklorists are in a better position to study the different sides of women's lives and thoughts than scholars of literary tradition, since women in oral cultures were also regarded as culture-producing subjects and thus folklore archives usually include both women's and men's traditions.

## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Das Hauptthema des Beitrags konzentriert sich auf das Problem, wie die mündliche Überlieferung vom Standpunkt des Konsens oder der Kontroverse analysiert werden kann, ob sie benutzt wurde, um die Geschlechtsordnung der Gemeinschaft aufrechtzuerhalten oder in Frage zu stellen. Es wird festgestellt, daß die funktionalistische Interpretation von Folklore ihre Aufmerksamkeit meist auf die Formen und Wege richtete, in denen Folklore zur Aufrechterhaltung des Status quo einer Gemeinschaft benutzt wurde. Eine andere Perspektive wurde von L. Lombardi-Satriani vorgestellt, der versucht die Autorin zu erkennen, ob Frauen Folklore benutzen, um ihren untergeordneten Status bzw. die Herrschaft von Männern über sie anzufechten.

Für diese Art von Folklore werden Beispiele aus der finno-ugrischen Überlieferung angeführt. Ein besonderes Beispiel ist die Tradition jährlicher Frauenfeste, bei denen Frauen Geschlechtsrollen und geschlechtsspezifisches Verhalten umkehren können: sie übernehmen den öffentlichen Raum, sie betrinken sich, singen äußern Obszönitäten und verspotten Männer, wenn diese ihnen zufällig über den Weg laufen. Nach Interpretation der Autorin könnten Frauen, wenn auch nur für einen Tag, auf diese Weise zum Ausdruck bringen, was sie über den Status quo und das Verhalten ihrer Männer denken. Außerdem scheinen andere Merkmale solcher Feste auf eine Solidarität der Frauen untereinander und ihr Bewußtsein von der Bedeutung ihrer Arbeit für die Gemeinschaft hinzudeuten. So sind diese Traditionen zwar ein Beispiel für Kontroverse, aber noch nicht für einen Umsturz: am nächsten Tag kehrt das Leben wieder zu seiner "Normalität" zurück. Darüber hinaus werden andere Beispiele solcher Streittraditionen angeführt.

Die Autorin stellt auch fest, daß alles, was wir über weibliche Traditionen wissen, offenbar meist auf eine Kultur des Konsens hinzudeuten scheint; doch wir brauchen diese Folgerung nicht als bare Münze zu akzeptieren, da die meisten Sammlungen und Untersuchungen auf dem Gebiet der Volksüberlieferung von männlichen Forschern stammen, die vielleicht nicht imstande waren, einen Zugang zu Streitkultur der Frauen zu erlangen oder sie nicht zu schätzen wußten oder keine anderen Wege der Interpretation der Quellen sahen. Auf alle Fälle konstatiert sie, daß Folkloristen bessere Voraussetzungen als sich auf schriftliche Traditionen stützende Wissenschaftler haben, um die verschiedenen Seiten des Lebens und Denkens von Frauen zu untersuchen, da Frauen in mündlichen Kulturen auch als kulturschaffende Subjekte angesehen wurde und Folklorearchive daher gewöhnlich sowohl weibliche als auch männliche Traditionen umfassen.

## RESUMO

Este artigo concentra-se na questão de saber como pode a tradição oral ser analisada do ponto de vista do consenso ou da contestação, e se tem sido usada para manter ou contestar as regras da identidade sexual duma comunidade. Afirma-se que a interpretação funcionalista do folclore prestou sobretudo atenção às formas e meios como o folclore foi utilizado para manter o *status quo* duma comunidade. L. Lombardi-Satriani, no princípio dos anos 70, apresentou uma perspectiva diferente, descrevendo o folclore como uma “cultura de contestação”. Utilizando este conceito, a autora tentou ver se as mulheres usaram o folclore para contestar o seu estatuto de subordinadas ou o domínio dos homens sobre elas. Apresentam-se alguns exemplos da tradição ugro-finlandesa desse folclore de contestação. Um exemplo particular são as festas anuais de mulheres em que estas podem inverter os papéis e os comportamentos de identidade sexual, apropriar-se do espaço público, embebedar-se, cantar e dizer obscenidades e troçar dos homens, se eles, por acaso, se intrometem. A interpretação da autora é que, se bem que apenas por um dia, as mulheres podiam, desta forma, exprimir o que pensavam do *status quo* e do comportamento dos seus homens. Além disso, outros aspectos destas festas parecem apontar para uma solidariedade entre mulheres e uma consciência da importância do seu trabalho para a comunidade. Estas tradições são, pois, um exemplo de contestação, mas não ainda de revolução: no dia seguinte, a vida prossegue da forma “normal”. São igualmente dados outros exemplos de tradições de contestação.

A autora observa também que o que sabemos das tradições femininas parece indicar que, na sua globalidade, elas representam uma cultura de consenso, mas que não devemos aceitar tal conclusão como um dado adquirido, uma vez que a maioria das colectâneas e dos estudos de folclore foram levados a cabo por investigadores masculinos que talvez não tenham podido descobrir o folclore feminino de contestação, ou não tenham podido apreciá-lo, ou que talvez não tenham visto meios alternativos de interpretar as fontes. De qualquer modo, os folcloristas estão em melhor posição para estudar os vários aspectos da vida e do modo de pensar das mulheres do que os investigadores da tradição literária, uma vez que as mulheres nas culturas orais eram também consideradas como sujeitos produtores de cultura e, assim, os arquivos de folclore incluem geralmente tanto as tradições masculinas como as femininas.