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Folklore as cultural heritage

For some years now I have been chairing the board of the Cultural Heritage Fund at the University of Helsinki. The task of the Fund is to raise money to conserve and save old and fragile materials – books, newspapers and manuscripts – at the National Library of Finland (formerly the Helsinki University Library). While working at this board I have come to think of the concept of cultural heritage (kulttuuriperintö in Finnish) from different perspectives and also how it relates to the concept of cultural tradition (perinne), which is more familiar to us folklorists. The concepts have, of course, been discussed for a long time by scholars of culture in many contexts and especially lately when in many countries different heritage projects have been started to boost tourism or other purposes. In these discussions scholars often have tried to define the concepts apart from each other and found it difficult. I think that the question is made more difficult in Finnish context because both heritage (perintö) and tradition (perinne) in Finnish derive from the same verb periiä (Engl. inherit) [Elore 1/2009]. My paper is not, however, about definitions but just a simple and short presentation of some thoughts about how folklore and even study of folklore relate to cultural heritage. And in this context my example is Kalevala.

The concept cultural heritage refers mostly to material things inherited from the previous generations: different sorts of art products, architectural monuments, textual materials (as I mentioned before) (according to dictionaries heritage can also refer to traditions as such, e.g. inherited tradition of freedom etc.). When regarded as nationally or otherwise important, most of cultural heritage is kept in museums or other public collections and archives, but families or other individual keepers can also own their share of cultural heritage. There is also the concept of World (Cultural) Heritage which includes monuments and built environments

considered globally important to the history of Humanity and accepted in the list of UNICEF.

Cultural heritage is thus important or regarded as such globally, nationally or locally. «Regarded as such» refers to the fact that to be considered as cultural heritage of some group of people or nation or of the world the things must have some meaning, mostly collectively accepted meaning to the group or the nation and in most cases this meaning connects to concepts of identity and continuation (national, ethnic, local, family). The first aspect in the process of signification, getting or giving a meaning, is, of course, that things, materials used to belong to our or your or their parents or ancestors – they were inherited from them. But as it is with the material inheritance we get from our parents, it is also with cultural heritage at large: at the time of making an estate inventory list after the death of a parent or of the previous generation, there may be different opinions and attitudes towards what has been inherited. The things inherited may be regarded as valuable (economically, emotionally, having to do with the continuity of family or group) or outmodish, useless crap or unsuitable in our modern circumstances. Thus the inheritance, the heritage, may be given up, destroyed, sold or divided between the heirs – or it may be kept and regarded as having a meaning and value to us or the next generations.

Cultural heritage may be destroyed by so-called natural reasons: materials get worn out, decay or they are forgotten. But there are also other reasons: wars or other extreme situations. Sometimes the destruction will be intentional and purposeful as monuments or other materials are destroyed in order to get rid of something that is in contradiction with f. ex. new rulers or ideologies or religions. Examples can be found both from the past and from present: the destruction of the ancient Library of Alexandria, destroying of the Buddha statues by the Taliban in Afganistan, to mention just a couple of them. Sometimes and actually very often the old is destroyed so that the new can be built, like in Finland in the 1960s very many old buildings were destroyed in towns and new ones built instead. Not all old buildings were part of cultural heritage – but also buildings with value as monuments of the short architectural and thus cultural history of Finland were destroyed.

And as old things can be used to different, new purposes, so cultural heritage, or at least parts of it, may be interpreted anew, given new meanings – and as long as cultural heritage will allow new uses and interpretations it can at least have some meaning to the inheritors. The processes and chains of interpretations and significations are also part of the

cultural heritage as the history of the cultural heritage. Without the knowledge of the history of our cultural heritage we may not understand it although we may consider it esthetically or otherwise interesting.

Oral traditions and the development of literacy

Now, if we accept the definition of cultural heritage as concrete things and materials inherited from the previous generations, it seems to leave outside traditions, at least those we call folklore or oral traditions. They are also inherited from the previous generation but the process is different: they are learned while growing up in a group or community, and when the previous generations die there is no need of making an inventory list of what you have inherited – tradition has already become your property. The life of oral traditions, folk poetry, or traditions in general is depending on willingness or ability to use or to remember by the inheritors but also on the continuation of the way of life from generation to generation. When that changes, through social or economic or technological development, old traditions may lose their functions and meaning.

One of the most important factors in changing human cultures has been the development of literacy – and that, as we know – has been a long historical process beginning in ancient times. During this process, there have been many different instances when myths, knowledge and history of a certain community that used to pass from generation to generation orally, especially in oral poetry, have been written down, textualized, and become the starting point and important part of that community's textual or literary cultural heritage. Such a process took place in ancient Greece and produced Iliad and Odyssey – which furthermore later on were adopted as a central ground and model for developing European literary culture in different phases, from Roman times to Renaissance and continuing through the development of national cultures in 18th and 19th centuries till our days. There are other, even earlier examples of a similar process: Mahabharata in India, Gilgames in Mesopotamia. Other examples include the Bible (Old and New Testament), Edda in Iceland, the Germanic Niebelungenlied, etc. In all of these and other cases the textualization of oral traditions or the use of certain oral traditions in creation of literary texts has meant the beginning of profane or religious literary traditions and the institutionalization of histories or religions, which has proceeded hand in hand with the development of societal and economic systems and structures – including the rise of nations and empires.

Textualization thus is the means of turning an oral tradition into a part of cultural heritage [Honko 2000]. This is what happened also to old Karelian and Finnish oral poetry when Elias Lönnrot (and others) wrote down songs and he created the epic Kalevala on their basis. But textualization is only the first phase of this development. To become important cultural heritage a text (or any item) must be recognized as such. To understand the meaning of Kalevala yesterday or today, we must know both the history of its making and the recognition and signification processes it has gone through. And not only know but to understand and this means that it is necessary to know also the ideological and intellectual contexts of these processes.

For a long time, the literary traditions and culture were the privilege of elites or ruling classes everywhere: of aristocracy and priests. In Western Europe, the development of common literacy began in connection and after the Reformation, when the idea was developed that all people should be able to read and understand the important Christian teachings. The problem was that most of the religious texts were written in Latin, the language of Church and scholarship. So it became necessary to translate Bible and other religious texts into vernacular languages. Some languages had so far been spoken only – but in many there existed already traditions of vernacular literature in the Middle Ages, although the level of literacy was low among population. The development everywhere in the end led to the birth of many more literate vernacular cultures in Europe. But it took some time, in Finland almost 300 years, from about 1540 to the beginning of 19th century [Suomennoskirjallisuuden historia I, esp. Kaisa Häkkinen 2007]. During this process, at the end of 18th century, scholars and enthusiasts in Europe also found, wrote down and published oral folk poetry and other examples of vernacular culture, which became popular within the trend of cultural Romanticism. Folk poetry was valued as being freer and more originally human both in style and feeling than the dominant literary tradition based on classical tradition – and it was thought to express more closely the character and spirit of each folk or nation.

The names to remember in this connection are, of course, James McPherson (*The Songs of Ossian*) and Thomas Percy (*Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*) in England, Johann Gottfried Herder in Germany, Henrik Gabriel Porthan and his pupils in Finland etc. The context of this process in Europe was the beginning of general scholarly, political and societal development towards freedom of thought, democracy, human rights and nation states. It was the time of trying to think otherwise of humanity,

human societies, individuals, cultures and religions – J. G. Herder's writings are a good introduction to these ideas [Karkama 2007].

Herders book *Stimmen der Völker in Lieder* and other (earlier) folk poetry collections, and his writings concerning the quality and meaning of folk poetry for different ethnicities and nations had a great influence in many countries. Herder's ideas of folk poetry being also a source of history, customs or other features of the culture of each folk or country were received with enthusiasm in many countries, so also by Finnish scholars. All this is recognized part of the history of folklore research, and we need not go into this deeper.

The birth of Kalevala and some consequences

In this context, however, it is important to remember that this enthusiasm in vernacular folk poetry is an important strand in the history of the birth of Kalevala and in the history of Kalevala becoming an important part of the Finnish and Karelian cultural heritage and also of the textual cultural heritage of Europe and the World. The enthusiasm and interest in Finnish language led already H. G. Porthan and his contemporaries to collect oral poetry and other examples of Finnish and related people. Porthan's pupils and followers continued the collection and at the time of Lönnrot beginning his studies in 1820s there existed already quite a lot of material as we know. But at least as important as the availability of examples of folk poetry written down was the understanding that this poetry was a proof that illiterate Finnish or Finnic people had their own culture. This realization opened up the possibility that this language and these people could become literate, they could develop their own culture, become «civilized». And this is what took place during the 19th century in Finland. The publication of Elias Lönnrot's Kalevala was one of the starting shots in this process, although not the only one.

The process of development of modern, literary civilization (or culture) and the possibility of literary education for everybody, which includes processes like that of the creation of Kalevala, paradoxically changes, destroys and leaves behind the oral traditions, not at once and not altogether, but gradually. This observation has been the well known motivation for collecting folklore for both the 18th century folk poetry enthusiasts and for the serious students and scholars of folklore following them. The collection, writing down and archiving old oral traditions to save them from getting into oblivion has been the job of folklorists till today. The

idea of saving different oral traditions from final death and oblivion has in recent years been criticized, even made ridiculous from some points of view – but we would know rather less of our ancestors and of their culture and ideas, if we did not have the folklore materials collected, archived, studied and published in the 19th century or later on. All these materials are now part of our cultural heritage nationally or locally recognized and of importance for research and understanding of human beings and cultures. They also have made it possible to develop the scholarship of folkloristics, which I regard as belonging to our cultural heritage.

I referred earlier to the Greek heritage of the European culture and to the Homeric epics of Iliad and Odyssey. Another meaningful strand in the ideological and intellectual background of the birth of Kalevala was the newly risen interest in the so-called Homeric question at the end of 18th century. German scholar Friedrich August Wolf published in 1795 his «Prolegomena ad Homerum» or «Introduction to Homer». In it he presented his idea that Iliad was based on oral poetry sung by wandering master singers, rhapsodies – and that their songs were then written down by Homer or/and some other writes. The Homeric Question – whether these epics were created by Homer alone, were literate from the beginning, or whether Wolf was right or even whether Homer was a real person – is still under discussion today. But in this context the interesting issue is that Lönnrot and other scholars had read Wolf's book or at least knew what his theory was about and this obviously gave them the idea that perhaps also from Finnish oral poems an epic could be created. And thus Kalevala was born. A proof of the general European interest in epics and their meaning was that Kalevala was received with enthusiasm by some European scholars and discussed as an extraordinary finding (a folk epic) even before it was translated into other languages.

The interest in oral epics in those times was also connected to the interest and understanding of histories of nations following Herder's and Hegel's thinking. Thus one of the discussions around Kalevala (and implied already in Lönnrot's own writing) which begun after Old Kalevala's publication was about whether Kalevala was historical and could be interpreted as proof of the existence of Finnish nation. This, of course, meant a lot in the time when the birth of Finnish nation actually was at its beginning in the first decades of 19th century and the national identity was being built. Thus there was a great willingness to accept both the idea that Kalevala was genuine folk epic and if not actually a genuine history of the Finnish people, at least a proof of their creative cultural power and the possibility of developing Finnish language into language of literature and culture.

After over one and a half century of research into and around Kalevala, its uses in different national, cultural, ideological, artistic and even economic contexts and purposes, the interpretations, understandings and significations of Kalevala form a vast field of study for scholars of today and of future [Kalevalan kulttuurihistoria 2008]. But at the same time Kalevala lives on as literature, translated into many languages, read as poetic and prose versions, even used as a model for new epics as the Vietnamese one [Mon's and Man's Children 2008] written by Bui Viet Hoa, Kalevala and Kanteletar translator. Kalevala's stories and themes are used in different artistic projects, it influences painters, musicians and theater [Taiteilijoiden Kalevala 2009]. And to us as folklorists it represents an example of how ancient oral poetry has been changed into textualized specimen of Karelian and Finnish cultural heritage and not only that: the publication of Kalevala and the following interest in other Kalevala metre songs gave also significance to other oral traditions, folk tales and legends, laments, proverbs and riddles etc. These have been recorded in different ways until our days, have been made objects of study and published – and thus have been added to the collections of our (or others') cultural heritage.

Research into Kalevala and its background materials meant the beginning of the research field of folkloristics in Finland. Research, theories, methods and understanding of oral poetry and its life have much developed through generations of scholars since Lönnrot's or his followers' times. Without Kalevala, without the enthusiasm in oral poetry, ancient or contemporary, at the end of 18th and beginning of 19th centuries – and the significance this poetry was given in the development of European nations and their cultures in both scholarly and political-national interpretations, I don't believe folkloristics could have become such an important field of humanistic studies, at least in Finland. That importance is mostly gone, nowadays, but it belongs to our cultural and scholarly history and gives even today some back support to us as students and scholars. And so does the existence of Kalevala although the study of Lönnrot's epic was left mostly to literary scholars and others already at the end of 19th century, when folklorists moved on to study the original folk materials.

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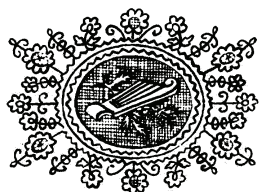
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Петрозаводск

**Мифологема перевоплощения персонажей
в карельских эпических песнях:
предпосылки, ситуации, образы**

В карельских эпических песнях, давших мощный импульс к возникновению замысла «Калевалы» и во многом послуживших материалом для его осуществления, представлена чрезвычайно архаическая картина мира. Основанная на древних верованиях, она удерживается в традиции на протяжении всего ее бытования, несмотря на последующие наслоения, переосмысления, трансформации. Это не статичное изображение. Воспетый в рунах мир неуловим в своих очертаниях, он всегда динамичен, склонен к переменам и метаморфозам. Здесь реальный крестьянский быт причудливо переплетается с фантазмагорией. В каждом из компонентов такого мира скрыта некая потайная сущность, заключена «внутренняя форма», готовая в определенный момент проявиться наружу. Специфика этой картины в значительной мере обусловлена архетипом, связанным с идеей перевоплощения персонажей. Им пронизаны разные сюжеты, а именно: изображения героев, решения коллизий, характеристики атрибутов и даже фона, на котором разворачивается действие. Древнейшие воз-