



Myth and Mentality

Studies in Folklore and Popular Thought

Edited by
Anna-Leena Siikala

Studia Fennica
Folkloristica

Studia Fennica
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Foreword

The genres of folklore which arise in the process of oral communication are discourse practices endowed with cultural meanings. Folkloristic research has not only examined their metadiscursive meanings but has also traced out what they tell us about the themes and motifs, and poetic style and substance, of traditional narratives and songs. If we wish to determine not only what oral tradition says but also what it tells us about, then the field of topics covered by folkloristic research broadens considerably. We may ask ourselves what oral tradition tells us about the thoughts and feelings of its performers. What sorts of beliefs, values and attitudes, emotions and memorised experiences come across in traditional songs and narratives? Folklorists have long been intrigued by the world view and beliefs reflected in oral tradition. The broadening of this perspective to cover cultural awareness, personal experiences and emotions is, however, a relatively new development. The study of folk thinking draws upon the insights afforded by the study of mentalities and cognitive studies of culture.

The concept of mentality has recently been rediscovered and continues to thrive despite the criticism levelled at it from time to time. There are two reasons for the ambivalent attitude, the more important being the notions implied by the term *mentality*. Although mentality is a serviceable heuristic tool, its conceptual confines are often so wide and vaguely defined that scholars in search of precise cognitive tools have tended to avoid it. Another source of criticism was the political use of the concept for nationalistic purposes in the Germany of the 1930s. The study of mentality may even be said to have split into two opposing research traditions: one inspiring national images for use in the public domain and the other highlighting ways of thinking and experiencing either hidden from or rejected by the public eye. Representing the latter is the research tradition founded by the Annales school in France that gave the concept of mentality a new sense and established its use in the European disciplines interested in folk thinking.

The history of mentalities, represented by such scholars as Jacques Le Goff, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Fernand Braudel and Lucien Febvre, turned its gaze on the everyday life and thought of centuries past. The Annalists strove to probe the collective mind set, experiences and thought processes of a particular era; in other words, an area overlooked by conventional historical research concentrating on politics and the ruling class. In addressing mentalities, historians in fact hit upon a subject that had long been examined by researchers in folk tradition: the world of the ordinary man, or what Le Goff called a mental universe at once both stereotypical and chaotic.

The concept of mentality has also been used in referring to the collective psychological disposition of a people, in speaking of the national character. German culture research in the 1930s tried to describe the German character, its mentality, by comparing it with that of neighbouring peoples. Among other cultural sources, it used as its material folklore such as proverbs, as

expressions of national values. This research school with its political objectives gave the concept of mentality a negative stigma, and debates regarding national characters died out during the maelstrom of the Second World War. Recalling that humanistic disciplines such as folkloristics which investigate collective values and beliefs always serve particular ideologies, it is possible to undertake a critical analysis of the application of the mentality concept in its various social contexts. From the perspective of the research history of folkloristics, debates regarding national character illuminate the political ties of the discipline in Europe during the 1930s.

As a heuristic concept, mentality seems to still occupy a key role in the debate on nationality and national identity today. This was conspicuous during the process of integration taking place in Europe in the early 1990s, in which examination of national state projects and of the relationship between the national and the European was one of the leading trends in the humanities and social sciences. Thus both the Swedish and Finnish national characters have been held up for inspection from many new angles, many of them drawing on the concept of mentality.

The concept of mentality established by the French Annalists refers to the thought and experience of the ordinary man and woman, to everyday, collective cultural representations. In referring to collective mental contents it is comparable to the concept of world view favoured by folklorists, even though the latter is, in emphasising the cognitive aspect, more limited in scope. Carol Ginzburg, in speaking of mentality, has drawn attention to the hazy, subconscious dimension of world view: the archaisms, emotional and irrational elements embedded in it. The concept is most commonly used to refer to attitudes to life, values and emotions, and to collective modes of thought and experience which guide everyday activities. Since all of these find expression in folklore, the concept of mentality has proved a useful tool in folkloristic research.

While the concept of mentality has proven helpful in referring to the broad domain of world view and folk thought, values and emotions, on the other hand it has been found wanting in the examination of specific thematic topics, since it is abstract and only vaguely definable. Finnish folkloristics has in fact developed a more cogent methodology for the study of mentalities by exploiting the theory borrowed from cognitive research regarding the storage and processing of observations and data. Mentalities can thus be conceived of as cognitive, emotional and action-determining models for viewing the world. Cognitive anthropology uses the expressions 'cultural model' and 'mental model' to refer to these semantic structures (see Anna-Leena Siikala, *Suomalainen šamanismi: Mielikuvien historiaa*, Finnish Literature Society, 1992). This study works from the premise that the cultural models which shape mentality create and order visible expressions of culture such as the folkloristic genres and motifs. They also become embedded in folkloristic representations and are handed down with them from one generation to the next.

The encoding of folk thinking, human experience, emotions and beliefs in oral tradition was of special interest to Finnish folklorists in the 1990s. One reason for this heightened interest was the growing awareness of the

value and usefulness of the Finnish tradition archives. The Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society, containing material collected from the early 19th century onwards, contain over four million texts. Since these items are the work of not only scholars but also of amateur collectors, tradition performers and their audiences, they provide new avenues for the researcher seeking to answer questions surrounding popular mentalities. This research trend has itself combined and incorporated a number of different perspectives. Since many important works have appeared in Finnish only, I will mention only a few of them here. Professor Seppo Knuutila (University of Joensuu), who has discussed many of the conceptual problems of mentality and world view in a number of publications, examines humour as a testing-ground for the 'reality' of concepts belonging to the folk world view in his *Kansanhuumorin mieli: Kaskut maailmankuvan aineksina* (Finnish Literature Society, 1992).

One dominant feature of contemporary Finnish folkloristics is the meeting between research into popular thought and a gendered perspective. Professor Satu Apo (University of Helsinki) has pioneered this field of research with her book *Naisen väki* (Hanki ja jää, 1995), which works from the premise that the archival texts born of folk discourse afford a perspective on the way people in the past understood the world of women, corporeality and family relations. At its broadest, the spectrum of women's studies in Finnish folkloristics can be seen in *Gender and Folklore: Perspectives on Finnish and Karelian Culture*, edited by Satu Apo, Aili Nenola and Laura Stark-Arola (Studia Fennica Folkloristica 4, 1998). This volume examines not only contemporary phenomena connected with the gender system, womanhood and girlhood but also the determination of gender in the traditional Finnish-Karelian world view. In his book *Jätkän synty* (Finnish Literature Society, 1997), Dr. Jyrki Pöysä (Joensuu Folklore Archive) discusses the differences represented in folklore from the male perspective. Finnish lumberjack lore also provides insights into folk humour and the communal conditions which give rise to it.

The study of popular thought, experience and emotion is a field of research with many branches. It is here approached by examining various aspects of cultural awareness, beginning with myths, world views and beliefs and proceeding to expressions of values and emotions. The section headed *Myth, Belief and World View* contains five articles addressing their topics from a broad temporal and geographical perspective. The opening article by Anna-Leena Siikala (Academy Professor, University of Helsinki), *What Myths Tell about Past Finno-Ugric Modes of Thinking*, examines the concept of mentality and what mentality history has to offer folkloristics. The focus of the article is, however, on the collective mythical models and images of speakers of Finno-Ugric languages and the re-contextualisation of mythic tradition in the identity processes of today's increasingly globalised world. The contribution *Očy Bala. A Mythological Epic Heroine* by Professor Lauri Harvilahti (University of Helsinki) points out the organic link between myth and epic. Mythical motifs and images can be described as the lasting semantic constructs that have survived thanks to the skill of its performers and the ability of epic poetry to interest audiences. The study of mythic semantic constructs

and the examination of the formal features of poetic performance thus complement each other.

Cosmological and cosmographic knowledge is one of the fundamental elements of mythic traditions. In his article *Cosmographical Maps (on Stars)* Professor Vilmos Voigt (University of Budapest) examines European maps of the 16th and 17th centuries that reflect the changing contemporary concept of the world. In his research Voigt applies principles from semiotics, as does Dr. Mihály Hoppál (European Folklore Centre), a scholar focusing on the Hungarian belief system, in his article *Linguistic and Mental Models for Hungarian Folk Beliefs*. Dr. Hoppál does not confine himself to merely describing the mental models for folk beliefs, but also views beliefs as models which guide action. In an article entitled *The Dynamistic Body in Traditional Finnish-Karelian Thought*, Docent Laura Stark-Arola (University of Helsinki) examines concepts of the body/self and the forces seen to threaten it. The Western habit of categorising the body and mind as two separate components of the human entity is not, in her opinion, necessarily appropriate in the study of other cultures. In underlining the dynamic nature of the human body in Finnish folk thought, she notes that conceptions of body and illness are closely interconnected, two sides of the same coin.

Research into mentalities has traditionally been concerned with beliefs and magic in particular. The reason for this lies in the nature of the source material at the disposal of historians. The witch trials of the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries yielded a wealth of detailed information on the images associated with witchcraft. The section *Witches and Devils* is devoted to this field of research – a field shared by mentality historians and folklorists. In her article *World View, Witch Legend, Witch Confession*, Dr. Éva Pócs (Hungarian Academy of Sciences) uses some of the same sources as historians in drawing on texts yielded by the witchcraft prosecutions. Going through the narratives of witnesses, prosecutors and the accused as they appear in the court records, she shows how the nature of the narratives changed as the trials progressed, which to her mind reflects the shifting conflicts behind the accusations.

The witch trials provide modern-day researchers with valuable insights into images connected to the Devil. In *The Devil's Identity: On the Problem of His Pre-Christian Prototype in Estonian Mythology*, Professor Ülo Valk (University of Tartu) indicates that Christian concepts of the Devil were founded on both ethnic features of European origin and features derived from the high religions of the East. Dr. Pasi Klemettinen (Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society) also addresses concepts of the essence of evil in his *The Many Faces of Evil*, based on his doctoral dissertation *Mellastavat Pirut* (Finnish Literature Society, 1997) which deals with poltergeist phenomena. The article by Professor Ulrika Wolf-Knuts (Åbo Akademi, Turku), *Two Discourses about the Devil*, is likewise based on her doctoral research *Människan och djävulen* (Åbo, 1991). Wolf-Knuts stresses that the images of the Devil created by the teachings of the Church on the one hand, and the folk mentality on the other, belong to two discourses that were emphasised in different ways but nonetheless constitute a single entity, despite echoing different voices.

The section *Values and Collective Emotions* turns away from folk belief to values, attitudes and emotions. The shift is not as radical as it may seem from the perspective of today's secularised world. Here in Europe folk morality engaged in a dialogue with the teachings of the Christian Church; imaginary beings, the Devil included, were appealed to as a way of sanctioning misdeeds. In Finnish folk culture, alcohol possessed powerful cultural connotations. The recent in-depth study by Professor Satu Apo, *Viinan voima* (Finnish Literature Society, 2001), examines folk attitudes toward alcohol and alcohol-related behaviours provides a picture of unusual breadth stretching from prehistory to the present day of the Finnish beliefs, concepts and experiences surrounding alcohol. In her contribution to this volume, *Alcohol and Cultural Emotions*, she debates the meanings and collective emotions attached to alcohol in Finnish folk culture and the concepts upon which the Finnish national alcohol policy is founded. She also presents a methodological model for research on cultural models and emotional attitudes based on multiple folklore genres.

Images of the enemy contained in historical narratives provided Licentiate Henni Ilomäki (Finnish Literature Society) with the point of departure for her article *Narratives of Ethnicity: Karelian War Legends*, which discusses the folk concept of ethnicity. The enemy, the Other, is described as lacking a sense of right and wrong and being capable of atrocities. *Cynocephalus* images link stereotypes of the enemy with mythical images of the Devil. The interesting thing is that folk visions of the enemy such as those revealed in folktales were revived in narratives regarding the wars of the 20th century, as demonstrated by Docent Ulla-Maija Peltonen in her doctoral dissertation *Punakapinan muistot* (Finnish Literature Society, 1996) which examines the oral tradition surrounding the abortive attempt at revolution in Finland 1917–1918. Sayings and proverbs reflecting cultural values are popular tools for debating national character. Docent Pekka Hakamies (Karelian Research Institute, University of Joensuu), in *Proverbs and Mentality*, analyses the relationship between proverbs, values and attitudes and looks into the use of the mentality concept in paremiological research. In a comparison of proverbs characterising the Russians and the Finns, he points out perceived differences in the ways the two nations think which also recur in other forms of cultural discourse as well.

The four articles in the section *Expression of Love and Sexuality* are based on Finnish folklore archive materials. The opening article, *Changing Attitudes to Love in Finnish Folk Songs*, by Licentiate Anneli Asplund (Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society) describes the attitudes to love and sexuality portrayed in various vocal genres. Since the spread of ballads and roundelays in the Finnish-Karelian region can be dated approximately, the article also follows the changes that have taken place in the concepts of love and sexual relations. Joint authors Professor Seppo Knuutila and Licentiate Senni Timonen (Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society) take an in-depth look at one lyrical song (*If the one I know came now*) in Kalevalaic metre. The portrayal of passionate love in this song is unique to Balto-Finnish lyric poetry in this metre; the poem has been translated into 467 languages, and into German by none other than Goethe.

This rare poem aroused the interest of scholars nearly two centuries ago. Knuuttila and Timonen present some of its earliest interpretations and stress the corporeal nature of the emotion expressed in the poem.

Incest is usually defined in Kalevala-metre poetry as a relationship between sister and brother or mother and son, unlike in, for example, Indo-European oral tradition, where the father-daughter relationship tends to be emphasised. Licentiate Tarja Kupiainen (University of Joensuu), in *The Forbidden Love of Sister and Brother: The Incest Theme in Archangel Karelian Kalevala Meter Epic*, examines cultural concepts surrounding incest and the picture of it given by Karelian poetry from the viewpoint of the victimized girl.

Riddles, a well-known medium of erotic fantasy, are silent on the subject of love. In *Sexual Riddles: The Test of the Listener*, Professor Annikki Kaivola-Bregenhøj (University of Turku), traces out the sexual imagery of riddles collected over a span of more than a hundred years. Although attitudes towards sexuality have fundamentally changed during this period, sexual riddles still occupy a place of their own in modern culture. Folk eroticism has elicited relatively little interest among folklorists, though the way was opened for further studies in Finland by Satu Apo's work *Naisen väki* (1995) mentioned above. The same theme is taken up in the anthology *Amor, Genus & Familia* (Finnish Literature Society, 1998) edited by Jyrki Pöysä and Anna-Leena Siikala, which addresses folk eroticism and representations of love as described in folklore.

This collection of articles is published in the frame of the "Myth, History and Society" -project financed by the Finnish Academy.

The process of editing and translating the articles of this book into English has been a lengthy one, subject to numerous delays. I am grateful to the authors for their patience. The articles were translated by Leila Virtanen, MA and Docent Laura Stark-Arola. Satu Lehtinen, MA, Saara Paatero, BA and Dr. Anastasios Daskolopoulos assisted with the editing. Technical assistant Pirkko Hämäläinen has been responsible for solving a number of problems involved in the editing and processing of the final text. I wish to express my warmest thanks to all who contributed to the book in some way or another for their valuable assistance.

Espoo, 25th November 2001

Anna-Leena Siikala

Myth, Belief and Word View

What Myths Tell about Past Finno-Ugric Modes of Thinking

Myths establish a link to immutable principal events in the past and in doing so establish a social whole united by notions of common origin. They have the uncanny power of self-definition and are therefore suitable for political uses. Myths have played and still play an important role in social movements attempting to create group unity on national or ethnic grounds. Myths address both cultural and existential questions. Therefore, research into mythical traditions has been vital in analysing both the shaping of our common European history as well as the construction of national identities. The former explains the extent of classical mythology studies (see Detienne 1981), while the latter led, among other things, to the compilation of the *Kalevala* and ensuing research on its underlying source materials (Honko 1990). The study of myths has played a special role in establishing a common background for the Finno-Ugric peoples even if interest in this project had waned by the middle of this century. Since the 1980s, the study of mythical traditions has again grown in importance due mainly to the establishment of the European Union and the subsequent need to strengthen European identity. In the United States the new wave of myth research has been inspired by the ethnonationalism of the postcolonial era. Similar tendencies can be observed in the field of the Uralic mythologies: new interests both in historical and field based studies of myth are evident in different countries.

Myth, Mentality and Slowly-transforming Structures of Thought

The interest in myth studies depends on the central position of myths in world view and on its possibility to illuminate past modes of thought. By codifying the structures of a world view, myths carry mental models of the past; they are one structural manifestation of *longue durée* of culture. In addressing the prerequisites of human and social existence, the mythologies of the world revolve around the same key questions, even though the solutions may vary from culture to culture. Thus the mythologies of different cultures are not the same. Ways of seeing the world and analysing it, even making empirical judgements and thus ascribing meanings to perception vary across

cultures. Notions concerning the world and its phenomena are structured in different systems of knowledge and mental imagery. The most fundamental areas of cultural consciousness are related to the community's world view and basic values; mythology is constructed as a representation of precisely such basic structures of consciousness.

Discrete cultural materials and oral traditions can easily cross national boundaries. Unlike these surface elements, the structures of consciousness needed to sustain a world view and to resolve contradictions are more deeply rooted and conservative. Hence, mythology is one of the most tenacious forms of mental representation. In fact, we can even view mythology as a "long-term prison" – as Fernand Braudel characterises mentalities – which endures even the most radical historical changes and continuously carries the past into the present. Nevertheless, myths are interpreted within the framework of each culture and continually transformed according to the social context (Vernant 1992:279). The life of a mythical tradition is characterised by the inherently conservative nature of its basic structures and even themes, but at the same time these structures and themes are constantly reinterpreted in social practice (Sahlins 1985).

The line of research initiated by the Annales school in France and known as the history of mentality, aims at getting to the heart of the world of human experience and thought. Jaques Le Goff defines its scope as follows: "The history of mentalities operates on the level of the everyday and the authentic. It attacks the area not covered by history centering on the individual – it reveals the non-personal substance of the individual's thought, the substance shared by Caesar and the last of his legionaries, Saint Louis and the peasant on his land, Columbus and the sailors on his ship." (Le Goff 1978:247–248.) It is worth pointing out that mentality historians have been interested in folk thought and in particular the field of folk belief and magic. (Cf. Ginzburg 1985/1966; Ginzburg 1988/1976; Gurevich 1990; Le Roy Ladurie 1985/1975; Thomas 1971).

The mentality historian is interested in what goes on in the minds of people in a particular era. The worlds of human experience and thought are, among other things, factors pointing to the concept of mentality. A comprehensive and uniform definition of mentality is not, however, easy to find. According to Le Goff the French *mentalité* is used in English philosophy to denote the nature of the collective mind of a people or group of peoples (1978:250). The Finnish *kansanluonne*, or "national character", is akin to the English term mentality but has gone out of use since it became charged with political undersirable overtones in the 1930s. Le Goff also mentions that the German *Weltanschauung*, which refers "to a mental universe that is at the same time both stereotyped and chaotic", comes close to the concept of mentality. A similar line is adopted by Aron Gurevich in his studies of the medieval folk mentality focusing on the world view and collective psychological disposition of medieval man. (Gurevich 1990:xvi). Instead of clear-cut theories and ideas, he is interested in implicit models of consciousness and behaviour. Also close to the concept of mentality is that of world view, although it is, due to its concentration on the cognitive aspect, more narrowly defined (Knuutila 1989:187–196).

The recent fascination in Finnish folklore studies with popular thought and the values and emotions encoded in oral tradition began with the realisation that the vast collections of the Finnish folklore archives still have much to offer the modern-day researcher. These archive materials were not only collected by scholars, but also by the ordinary rural populace interested in their own traditions, by performers and their audiences. With its myriad voices, this body of source material thus provides new avenues for the researcher seeking to penetrate popular thought. What does oral tradition tell us about the way its performers think and feel? What sorts of beliefs and ideas are transmitted in traditional songs and narratives? Perspectives from the study of mentalities and cultural cognition research provide a framework for investigating these issues.

This collection of articles works from the premise that the cultural models which shape mentalities give rise to manifest expressions of culture, including folklore. These models also become embedded in the representations appearing in folklore, and are handed down from one generation to the next. The topics of the book cover age-old myths and world views, concepts of witchcraft and the Devil stretching back to the Middle Ages, and the values and collective emotions of Finnish and Hungarian agrarian communities.



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