

Nature speaks in the Kalevala



Tero Kokko

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1. FOREWORD

When I started reading the Kalevala in the early 2020s, lots of questions arose that I wanted to consider. I photographed, acquired source material and looked for connections from the Kalevala to the lives of modern Finns.

I became particularly interested in man's relationship with nature, because I think that modern humans have distanced themselves from nature, do not know what it has to offer and do not know how to adapt their activities to the limits of nature.

The Kalevala offers plenty of material for people interested in their cultural roots who are also searching for themselves in an ever-changing world.

The Kalevala also provides a starting point for examining the current way of life and even solving global problems.

My goal is not to proclaim or present correct or ready-made solutions, but to provide stimuli for reflection and conclusions. Art can show, raise questions and emotions, and offer directions. It doesn't have to give answers.

My aim is to bring the Kalevala closer to people. I want to explore its outlines and look for what lies behind the legends.

As a result of this work, an exhibition and a related set of materials have been created, which I present between these covers.



Thanks

The implementation of my Nature Speaks in the Kalevala project has only been possible with the help and support I have received. There has been a willingness to cooperate from so many parties that I can only be grateful to all those who have given their own contribution, time and expertise at the different stages of my project. I would especially like to thank Marja-Stiina Suihko and Kati Kleemola as well as Saku Slioori, who checked the English translation.

Grants have allowed me to work long-term, which has also challenged me to be worthy of the support and trust I have received.

I would like to express my sincere thanks for this wonderful cooperation and for the opportunity to make one of my dreams come true. Thank you for walking with me!

Tero Kokko



2. NATURE SPEAKS IN THE KALEVALA

We Finns in the 2020s are in a very similar situation to the people of the time reflected in the Kalevala.

"Finnishness" is still mixed with influences from the East and the West as well as from elsewhere.

Our early ancestors are thought to have come to the Suomenniemi peninsula 11,000 years ago from the regions around Spain, when the ice retreated further north. Both genes and culture have also been transported from the Ural Mountains.

Based on ancient Finno-Ugric mythology, it can be said that genders and population groups have been more equal than in the rest of the world. In the world of the Kalevala, differences and shortcomings are also accepted, although folk poetry also speaks of the harsh underprivilege.

We can examine the climate differences between the Vikings and the Middle Ages, changes in sea level, swampiness, and the fears and manifestations of inequality raised by livelihoods and demographic changes.

In the Kalevala, heroes do not have to be perfect. What was it like to "see" Väinämöinen in the Kalevala or Odin in Norway, if they can be imagined to have been blind? External or internal seeing?

Do we really see and stop to look at things or do we ignore them as a matter of course? I aim to see the Kalevala in a new light. I focus on producing visual material, as the image shows a piece of a shared reality – antiquity and the present time.

The Kalevala is a gateway to ancient Finnish-Karelian culture, myths, rituals and lifestyles, but the epic also opens up a view of nature and man's relationship with nature.

Nature is present everywhere in the Kalevala and man's relationship with nature is close. Nature was respected, even feared, as it was seen as an inseparable part of the living environment and the cycle of life.

In the Kalevala, everything happens in nature, and nature with its offerings and phenomena is a lifeline for humans. In folk poetry, man was a part of nature, equal to the squirrel, the trees, waters and rocks of the forest, and in close interaction with other things. Nature and its phenomena can also be seen in many ways in the language, metaphors and parables of the Kalevala.

The more I spend time in nature and look at the details of nature, the more my appreciation for the fascination and vitality of nature grows.

Nature provides us with nourishment, but also good care and medicines, as well as the opportunity for a wide range of exercise and well-being. Green plants produce oxygen, and at the same time, plants and soil sequester carbon.

Nature gives more than it takes. As we reach the limits of the Earth, we must think about how much we can intervene in nature and make use of it.

The folk poems on the basis of which the Kalevala has been compiled and created tell their story over a long period of time. The central part of the Kalevala can be dated to the period from the Viking Age to the end of the Middle Ages in the 800s–1300s. The poems have been passed down from one generation to the next and transformed into countless variations when repeated orally in different parts of Finland and Karelia.

Lönnrot has already stated that seven different Kalevalas could have been written from the collected poetry material. Thus, the epic at our disposal also makes it possible to find and present a wide range of ideas without violating the spirit of the Kalevala.

The flow of culture is a continuum, and we can also see the present in relation to the past. History is a bridge, but it should not define us, but be part of our future.

The Kalevala conveys the change in culture from the gatherer-hunter era to agriculture and animal husbandry, which enabled the population to grow. Väinämöinen cuts down a slash-and-burn forest, a bonfire bird sets fire to a field, and the resulting field can be sown and made to grow grain.

Ancient poems describe significant historical events. It is estimated that about 4000 years ago, a cosmic collision caused the Kaali crater in Saaremaa, which has undoubtedly been the most spectacular post-Ice Age natural disaster in Northern and Northeastern Europe..

*Rushing ever further onward,
Burned up half the land of Pohja,
And the furthest bounds of Savo,
Over both halves of Carelia."*
(48th poem) Karjalata.

The women of the Kalevala are either mothers or sisters, rarely wives. Women are also leaders, as in the Nordic countries and in the myths of Tuonela. It is interesting that the Finnic and ancient religious peoples have not veiled or silenced their women. It is no wonder, then, that Finland has become a pioneer in gender equality.

The arrival of Christianity in Finland through the Crusades caused an increase in inequality. Lands were distributed to crusaders and immigrants in order to populate Finland

The advent of Christianity is described at the end of the Kalevala. Marjatta gives birth to a son to become the king of Karelia. Väinämöinen gets angry and gives way, but predicts that he will return. He leaves his kantele to new generations, which symbolizes the beginning of a new era and Lönnrot's understanding of the carrying power of the Kalevala.

Nature Speaks in the Kalevala

The Kalevala is Finland's national epic, on the basis of which the entire Finnish culture has been built, but what would the Kalevala have to say today?

I started to read the Kalevala. There arose questions that I wanted to begin to clarify. I photographed, acquired source material and looked for connections between the Kalevala and the lives of modern Finns.

I became particularly interested in man's relationship with nature, because I think that modern man has distanced himself from nature, does not know what it has to offer and does not know how to adapt his activities to the limits of nature.

The goal of my Nature Speaks in the Kalevala project is to bring the Kalevala closer to people. I want to hear what ancient man might have to say today. That is the message I want to convey with this book and my pictures.

The book has been published in addition to Finnish also in English and Estonian.

Tero Kokko

Tero Kokko is a visually impaired photographer who has received grants for his artistic work from Finnfoto, for example.

In addition to solo exhibitions, he has participated in group exhibitions and developed a method for visually impaired people to experience images on the basis of touch. Poetry books have also been published based on Kokko's photographs.

