



# Living Lament

*Explorations in Shifting Ideologies*

Edited by  
Viliina Silvonen and Eila Stepanova

**Studia Fennica**  
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# Navigating Laments and Ideologies

## An Introduction

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**W***hat is lament?* This question is deceptive because the answer may appear self-evident, yet ‘lament’ and its counterpart, ‘lamentation’, are used in a variety of ways with overlapping but sometimes quite different meanings. These range from a visible enactment of sadness to a piece of writing about loss, and from a sad or longing tune to a protesting complaint. In folkloristics and related fields, lament is approached as a socially communicated, practice-based genre of verbal art or ritual wailing. However, this is only a single and quite particular form amid the variety of categories that can be called lament, from the Bible’s Book of Lamentations and literary works to the myriad uses of the word currently surrounding Donald Trump in his second presidency, where they can be poignant, jocular, or derisive. The different frames of meaning can also be deeply entangled with powerful connotations and associations that may confer value or undermine significance. The potential for the words ‘lament’ and ‘lamenting’ to have negative connotations is evident from *The Cambridge English Dictionary* (2025), which describes lamenting with words like ‘sadness’ and ‘complaint’ and gives related words such as ‘gloominess’, ‘bitter’, and ‘wretchedness’, while the characterisation of ‘lamentable’ as linked to a grievous complaint can carry connotations that what is lamented is very bad and deserving of severe criticism (s.vv. ‘lament’, ‘lamentable’). Conversely, identification with the folklore genre can, in contemporary Western societies, confer the value of tradition and connections to the past. The respective verbal art becomes receivable as literature, many people considering it beautiful poetry, even if it might be heart-wrenching. The diversity of values, interpretations, and associations reflects the embeddedness of people’s views, understandings, and associations in ideologies. Indeed, the respective values, interpretations, and associations are nested in networks of ideologies linked to people’s positions and experiences, whether they valorise lament as a powerful instrument for personal expression or stigmatise it as a troubling or embarrassing display of emotions. This nexus of lament and ideology forms the centre of the present volume.

This book is centred around cultural research on lament and what happens to lament, including how it may be mobilised in modernised societies, from the nineteenth century through to the boom of social media. The volume is not developed to advocate for a particular definition of lament or concept of ideology. The authors of the individual chapters approach these from diverse perspectives arising from differences in the frameworks they use in combination with the cases they discuss. The objective is

to explore the potential interconnections between lament traditions and ideologies, which enables advancements in methodologies and the knowledge of domains that emerge at this intersection, while the present introduction is intended to orient the reader to these explorations.

The majority of contributions to this collection approach lament as a type of verbal art that expresses strong emotions, especially of grief. Many connect with genres of what were commonly called ‘folk’ traditions throughout much of the twentieth century, but the predominant orientation of this book is to address traditions, practices, and uses of lament in modernised societies. Tensions have surrounded whether all of these should be viewed as ‘lament’, what qualifies as ‘the same’ tradition, or whether different practices should all be considered lament in the same way. Opening these tensions and their backgrounds provides a relevant entry point into the intersections and entanglements of lament and ideology that are explored through the diverse contributions of this book.

### *Laments Lost or Alive and Well*

Historically, the most central and often iconic situation of lament performance is at the boundary between life and death. It is therefore ironic that the history of lament research has tended to build an image of lament traditions as things belonging to the past, as dead or dying within ‘a larger tale about modernity as loss’ (Wilce 2009, 3). An underlying thematic concern of this volume is the life and death of laments in different cultures and societal contexts. What James M. Wilce calls the ‘exaggerated death of lament’ (ibid.) is confronted here as rooted in ideologies of modernity. Stepping back from the idea of lament as non-modern and necessarily excluded from modernised societies, the chapters of this book illustrate that lament is alive and well, with relevance in current Western societies. They also further deconstruct the ways lament has been engaged from positions of modernity.

The waning or even disappearance of certain traditions, including lament, has been an ongoing topic in the field of cultural studies dating back to when interest in traditional cultures first arose in Europe in the late eighteenth century. Describing such disappearances as ‘death’ or ‘extinction’ reflects an evaluative encoding through the use of biological metaphors (Hafstein 2001). The whole discourse developed through National-Romantic ideologies of folklore as opposed to modernity, which would corrupt and destroy the traditions (Bauman and Briggs 2003; Anttonen 2005). The imagination of authenticity as found only in illiterate ‘peasants and primitives’ (ibid.; see also Bendix 1997) was integrated in a system of polarised contrasts (cf. Gal and Irvine 2019) such as literate/illiterate (oral), institutionally educated/uneducated, scientific/superstitious, and so on. These included an opposition of dynamic/static, which denied traditional culture the possibility to change and develop without losing value. The static traditions identified with the past were implicitly contrasted with modernity, in which progress was considered inherently valuable. Within this ideological environment, it was logical that the most ‘authentic’ traditions were found in the places most remote from modernisation, such as regions discussed in several cases in this book. The texts of such folklore genres could be commodified by modernity, but the progress of peasant culture into modernity’s industrial workforce was the slayer of ‘authentic’ traditions.

Within this type of ideological milieu, the position of lament could be rather precarious. This women's genre of outpouring emotion was characterised by loud displays in which melody could easily seem secondary to the vocal performances of grief. Historically, local traditions were usually documented and described by educated men who tended to marginalise women's practices and for whom grief was an emotion that should not be publicly displayed (Wilce 2009). Lament was sometimes seen as savage and primitive, even shameful, which placed it at odds with the National-Romantic movement's drive to elevate traditional culture as heritage within nation-building projects (Frog, this volume). These factors sometimes limited the documentation of laments or shaped the image of the tradition that was produced.

The discourse on the 'death' of traditions was reimagined at the end of the twentieth century in terms of a transition from one life to the next. The turn to performance involved a transformation in the conception of folklore from idealised static texts to dynamic practices in which variation both in relation to specific situations and over time was fundamental (Abraham 1968; Bauman 1975; Ben-Amos and Goldstein 1975). Reimagining traditions as in ongoing transformation went hand-in-hand with challenging the earlier view that folklore was exclusive to non-modern milieux (Dundes 1977), later followed by deconstructions of the concept of authenticity (e.g. Bendix 1997), and the deconstruction of the concept of folklore itself in relation to modernity (Bauman and Briggs 2003). Lauri Honko ([1991] 2013) proposed that the life in pre-modern culture was only the 'first life' of folklore, which was followed by a 'second life' dislocated from that environment as it is 'resurrected' from archives. The metaphorical transition from one life to the next is particularly resonant with the use of lament for a person's transition to a life in the otherworld (Honko [1978] 2013), and Anna-Liisa Tenhunen (2006) extended this model to a 'third life' in her study of the reinvention of the Karelian lament tradition in Finland. Thinking of traditions as having different 'lives' provides a fruitful lens for thinking about sameness and difference through their transformations without devaluing younger generations as merely derivative of older ones any more than children are merely derivative of their parents. The central hazard of this type of thinking is the risk of inferring that a new life of a tradition involves the death of the old one. In reality, traditions may have multiple, simultaneous lives. Thus, in parallel with the emergence of the third life of Karelian lament in Finland, its second life continued in the archives (Stepanova 2014; Silvonon 2022), as did its first life in Russian Karelia, where, for example, a news crew accidentally recorded a performance of a lament in 2021 (Stepanova 2023).

Despite the numerous attempts to break free from the dichotomy between lament traditions inside and outside of modernity, modernity's ideologies of non-modern traditions and 'authenticity' persist in both the minds of researchers and in popular thought (see also Bendix 1997, 219). In this volume, Madis Arukask, Larissa Mulder, Viliina Silvonon, and Aušra Žičkienė open comparisons between the non-modernised lament practices collected in archives and their adaptations and transformations in current Western societies. The loss of lament has been an ongoing topic of discussion in research and to some degree in the public sphere, and the question of authenticity is also discussed among present-day lamenters. Some have focused on the distinctions between their own laments and those of a non-modernised tradition, while others have sought to establish a link between these. The fact that the so-called third life of Karelian lament in Finland sparked public debate, including questions of cultural

appropriation (Silvonen and Kallio 2023), demonstrates that these themes are current and important. Although lament traditions are still often imagined as dead and belonging to the past, this is mainly attributable to the dominant ideologies that have rendered invisible their various manifestations in the present.

### *Navigating Ideologies*

The development and use of the categories above are deeply entangled with ideologies, but ideology is no less slippery as a concept than lament. Nevertheless, variations in the concept of ideology remain tightly tethered to ‘ideas’, whether synonymous with ‘beliefs’ or imagined in terms of values and concerns. Ideologies are known through discourse, whether they are consciously reflected on, or people are completely naturalised to them as an organic part of their worldview, whereby the culture of everyday life is seen as no less natural than gravity. Ideologies provide a lens of good and bad, right and wrong, and they determine the relative value of, for example, a lament versus an epic or a lullaby, or even whether a lament can be recognised for consideration at all (see Gal and Irvine 2019). Whatever the case, ideologies are always centred as ‘ideologies-of’ something as opposed to something else, whether this is a cultural era like the Enlightenment or modernity, a phenomenon of nature like death, a phenomenon of culture as broad as colonisation (Briggs, this volume), as specific as a Seto burial lament (Arukask, this volume), or a phenomenon like emotion that is at the intersection of nature and culture.

An important dimension of ideologies is that the understandings and interpretations that they entail are also ‘ideologies-of’ in the sense that they are embedded in the aims and values of some group and bound up with the respective social position, relationships to other groups (perhaps including in the past or inhabitants of unseen worlds), to the environment, and so on (van Dijk 2012; Rehman 2013; Rehman and Ampuja 2023). Ideologies provide both unconscious and conscious models of thinking that affect people’s behaviour in everyday life. They shape people’s approaches to laments as well as how they practise, conceptualise, and talk about lamenting. They underlie the differences between how laments were understood by folklore collectors and their informants, and also by other cultural insiders and outsiders. This social dimension of ideologies is prominent in the chapters of the present volume, where the dominant ideologies (Kroskrity 2001, 203) emblematic of a culture, nation, or the Global North are at odds with ideologies of societies or groups that are seen as outside of or subordinate to it. The connection between ideology, people’s positionality, and their relative evaluations makes it a flexible tool for examining the various lament traditions and the uses of lamenting in society.

### *The Roots of Tension around Defining Laments*

Discussions around the question *What is a lament?* have caused tension between researchers and lamenters, and also among lamenters themselves (see Fenigsen and Wilce 2012; Silvonen and Kallio 2023). Some of the issues pertain to the question of what practices can be designated as laments, on what terms, and by whom lament

Come with us and step into this garden of intersecting paths that leads you to explore the ground where ideologies and lament traditions meet.

What is lament? The question is deceptive because the answer may appear self-evident, yet lament and its counterpart lamentation are used in a variety of ways with overlapping and sometimes quite different meanings.

The history of lament research has tended to build an image of lament traditions as things belonging to the past. We show that lament is alive and well, with relevance in current Western societies.

We offer you a multidisciplinary and multicultural view on laments, drawing from folklore studies, ethnomusicology, history, anthropology, and religious studies, covering regions from Northern Europe to indigenous cultures in Venezuela.



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