

Conference on Finnic runo-song tradition

Janika Oras, Mari Sarv

The series of biannual conferences devoted to Finnic runo-song tradition in Tartu, Estonia had its ninth event “Seven skins of runo-song: various views on Finnic song tradition” on November 30 and December 1, 2016 at the Estonian Literary Museum. The aim of the conference series that started in 2000 is to offer a regular forum to all the researchers studying Finnic oral song tradition in broadest sense, and is open to the researchers of other older singing traditions.

From many aspects runo-song has remained an enigma for the researchers. Runo-songs have been noted down already in the rapidly modernizing and more and more literate society, and the focus has been mostly on the recording of texts. Therefore our knowledge on the meaning and use of runo-song as a phenomenon of oral tradition is quite fragmentary. Folklorists have made efforts to analyse the body of knowledge and the pieces of tradition again and again and from different angles, to reach the better understanding of the functioning of runo-song in the traditional society, but also on the reasons and ideas underneath the collection process as well as on the function of archival collections in the contemporary society.

The participants were encouraged to discuss various aspects of runo-song, and to propose new hypotheses on the evolvement, functioning and changes in the tradition. Conference was organized by the Estonian Folklore Archives, organizers *Mari Sarv* and *Liina Saarlo*, and it was supported by institutional research grant IUT 22-4 by the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research, and by the European Union through the European Regional Development Fund (Centre of Excellence in Estonian Studies).

Lotte Tarkka (University of Helsinki, Finland) addressed the methodological and conceptual potential of imagination in the study of verbal art and performance, with special emphasis on the runo-song tradition. In the history of research, the creativity of individual subjects and imagination were long seen diametrically opposed and even detrimental to collective tradition. The role of imagination in creation of songs and myths has been severely overlooked in runo-song research tradition. Vernacular imagination is related to language, culture, and genre. The paper discussed imaginary processes as a “pervasive structuring activity by means of which we achieve coherent, patterned, unified representations” (Johnson 1987). Tarkka highlighted how in mythic poems,

symbolism of the otherworld, and utopian discourse, the creation of unseen worlds dialogically structures the everyday and historical realities; mythic images are emotionally, cognitively and morally compelling representations that mediate the imaginal to tradition and conventions of expression.

In his paper “Some thoughts on the history of the common Finnic tetrameter and poetic system: A Late Proto-Finnic phenomenon?” Frog (University of Helsinki, Finland) offered a new theory on the emergence of the metric and poetic system of runo-song. The author proposes that the runo-song meter emerged in Late Proto-Finnic period, A.D. 200–500, as a result of changes in the prosodic system of Finnic languages that led to clear distinction between stressed and unstressed syllables, and intensive Scandinavian contacts. Frog proposes that the contacts led to the hybridization of two poetic systems into a syllabic meter with tetrametric organization, contrastive stress, and unmetrical alliteration.

The paper “Kalevala-melodies in the global perspective” presented by *Ilpo Saastamoinen* (independent researcher, Finland) searched for parallels to typical Karelian two-line runo-song melodies (of the length of two musical phrases, usually in 5/6 time) and outlined their position in the process of historical evolution and transformation of musical structures. Saastamoinen pointed out several universal features of these melodies which are characteristic of the archaic musical cultures and at the same time reflect the universals of human cognition and (oral) expression: the descending contour of the phrases and the higher pitch of the initial phrase as compared to the final phrase; developing a simple one-phrase structure into a more complex two-phrase structure, greater variability of solo genres as compared to communal singing. He illustrated the topic with examples of melody contours very similar to Kalevala melodies in the vocal and instrumental music of the world, for example, in the Mansi bear wake ritual songs, the music of Afghanistan and Iran, the shamanic songs of the Guna people in Panama and Colombia, etc.

In her paper “Playing with rhythm and language logic: the metrics of Seto runo-songs” *Janika Oras* (Estonian Folklore Archives, Estonian Literary Museum) analysed the metrics of older Seto runo-songs on the basis of recordings of three genres of Seto songs: harvesting songs with *lelo* refrain (*lelotamine*), weddings songs with *kaske-kanke* refrain (*kaaskõlõmine*), and game songs with *heiko-leiko* refrain (Horse Game). These genres represent the older style of singing, in which the musical rhythm consists of notes of the same length, each corresponding to one text syllable and the musical structure directly interacts with the verse structure. Although the metre of Seto runo-songs is in various ways different from the Kalevala metre, there are two important similarities. First, the Seto songs contain a considerable number

of broken verse-like structures (broken verses with the stressed syllable in the weak position are characteristic of the Kalevala metre): two- and three-syllabic accent groups form combinations 2+3+3, 2+3+2 and 2+2+3. The latter two combinations seem to have been derived from broken verse structures of 3+3+2 and 3+2+3 by shortening the initial group. These features are typical of songs with refrain, in which the verse line preceding the refrain consists of either 8 or 7 notes/verse positions (to which random or structural verse-initial extra syllables/notes are sometimes added). Second, the syllable quantity is also taken into consideration in the positioning of words in Seto songs. While words of a short and long quantity degree are positioned similarly, the positioning of words with the initial syllable of overlong quantity degree is different. These syllables of overlong degree could also be placed on two positions, like in the songs of the Võru County, South-East Estonia (Sarv 2011).

In her presentation “Fussy boundaries of runo-song” *Kati Kallio* (Finnish Literature Society) focused on the borderline areas of runo-song tradition, on the forms of runo-song that have not been valued, recorded or analysed in Finnish (and Karelian) scholarly tradition. In vernacular use there are evidences of the hybridization of the runo-song tradition and different poetic forms known and spread within the area, for example lament, *stiihu/bylina*, Scandinavian accentual rhymed poetry / *knittel-verse* / Eddic-style meters. As there evolved an evaluative opinion in scholarly tradition that runo-song in its purest Kalevala-metric form is also most worthy as the reflection of national culture, the hybrid forms have attracted less scholarly interest and have been treated as corrupted forms of runo-songs and thus also remained largely unrecorded. Kallio demonstrated that before the evolvement of the clear concept of Kalevala meter as a norm of Finnish and Karelian runo-song tradition, the scholarly and literary writings on and in vernacular poetic form hybridly combined different poetic traditions with the runo-song tradition as well.

In his paper “There comes Toomas-boy from Dome Hill. What is the relation between traditional folksong and new compositions called runo-song?” *Aado Lintrop* (Estonian Folklore Archives, Estonian Literary Museum) raised the question of the basic features of the runo-song. Although contemporary compositions aim to follow or imitate the poetic form of the runo-song, these usually differ notably from traditional runo-songs. First, the common knowledge of runo-song often confines itself with the most typical archaic grammatical forms, use of alliteration, trochaic meter, and repetition of lines in live performance. More detailed particulars of the runo-song style are usually ignored in imitations: these would require thorough knowledge (and practice) of runo-song that the contemporary creators usually lack. As a most notable difference between the traditional runo-song and contemporary creations

Lintrop pointed out a lack of formulaic language in the latter, whereas in tradition the songs are basically composed using formulaic elements of various lengths.

The paper “Seto themes in Estonian classical music” presented by *Liisi Laanemets* (Estonian National Symphony Orchestra) introduced the use and influences of Seto folk music in the works of Estonian composers. According to the database of Estonian composers (<http://emic.ee/eesti-heliloojad>), the word ‘Seto’ (alternatively, ‘Setu’) is featured in the titles of 24 composers. The most famous of these, the works of Veljo Tormis and Eduard Tubin, continue to be performed, whereas the works of some other composers, such as Riho Päts, have been forgotten, even though the influence of Seto themes in these are rather considerable. Next to direct citations of folk melodies, musical elements characteristic of the Seto tradition may be used—the Seto one-three-semitone musical scale (e.g., Pärtlas 2010), multipart singing, alternation of lead singer and choir, rapid downward modulations (*kergütämine*), specific rhythms, and timbre. The latter is the most problematic aspect because the result of an incompetent imitation of the traditional timbre could really be called “ugly voice”, which sounds rather different from the traditional one. The influences of Seto music on the individual musical language of different composers are more difficult to determine unless the melodies are directly quoted or the abovementioned traditional musical elements are used in their works.

In his paper “‘Scarf heads, keep singing!’ The voices of women with covered heads” *Andreas Kalkun* (Estonian Folklore Archives, Estonian Literary Museum) observed how Seto women have approached in their traditional songs the absolute obligation of married women to cover their heads from the moment they get married until they die, and also how the bodily experiences of wearing headdress are expressed in poetic texts. These questions assume new meanings in the context of the current discussion of Muslim women covering their heads. The headdress of a married woman (a linen kerchief), also other bridal headwear used during the wedding ritual, are most strongly featured in wedding songs and bridal laments, but also in epic songs, in which the decorated headdress served as a special sacrificial object or a valuable trade item. Unlike narrative tradition, in which women covering their head are seen as a sign of the continuance of the divine and earthly order, in poetic tradition, which has a more intimate women-centred repertoire, women’s headwear possess an ambivalent, mostly negative meaning. While the linen kerchief was valued as a testament of the young woman’s handicraft skills, wearing it was still associated with the life of married women filled with responsibilities and restrictions as opposed to maidenhood with more freedom. The songs also mention the physical discomfort of having a long piece of linen cloth wrapped

around the head, especially during hard physical labour on a hot day: *Saa-ai pää päävä nätä, hius tuulõ hel'otõlla* (“The head can’t see the sun, or hair wave in the wind”).

In her paper “Laments as a reflection of social processes through womens’ eyes” *Natalia Ermakov* analysed the use and transformation of the lament tradition in Erzya tradition. Ermakov pointed out that although the lament tradition has been dramatically fading away during the last 60 years, it is still a living tradition adapting itself to the changes in society. From the three main lament genres – wedding laments, war and recruit laments, and funeral laments – only the latter is still in the active use, the first two genres having been mainly transferred to the stage performance. Ermakov also pointed out the role of the women with different statuses in the local communities in keeping alive the tradition, and thus an important part of the traditional knowledge of Erzyas with a very short and limited literary history.

In her paper “‘Evil home’: Analysis of a folk song from Vaivara” *Ruth Mirov* (independent researcher, Estonia) analysed a local individual development of the popular song type, ‘Evil home’, recorded from Vaivara parish in northeastern Estonia, a kind of personal or individual song used by its (re)creator singer Mari Konsa (1832–1923) to describe his life by means of poetic devices. The lyrical songs about the evil home usually either compare a young wife’s troubled life in her husband’s home with the happy times in the childhood home, or the protagonist visits her former home farm now occupied by her brother and is treated there poorly. Mirov titled Mari Konsa’s song “Son wouldn’t invite mother inside”, because this dramatic tale on the border of the lyric and the epic tells how a widowed mother is estranged from her son’s family. The song is composed applying the traditional method, combining 13 to 14 different motifs of lyrical songs of sorrow, which rarely occur in the ‘Evil home’ song type. According to the recollections of community members on the life of Mari Konsa, one may assume that she expresses the personal tragedy of the stage in her life as an aged widow in that song.

Kanni Labi (Estonian Literary Museum) presented a paper entitled “Old songs collected by young people in Narva, Vaivara and elsewhere” in which she provided an overview of the collection history of songs collected in the town of Narva and the Vaivara parish in the northeastern corner of Estonia and pointed out the uniqueness of the resulting body of material. Together with Ruth Mirov, Kanni Labi is compiling the publication of runo-songs of this area as a volume of the academic runo-song publication series *Vana Kannel* (“The Old Psalter”). For the first time in the history of the series, the publication covers the runo-songs of a large town and its neighbouring rural region. A peculiarity of this area is that in addition to the mixed population developed

in the town, also Votians, Vepsians, and Ingrians have lived in the area, geographically located on the border of Ingermanland (Ingria). *Kreenholmi Manufaktuur*, established in 1875, the largest textile factory in Europe at the time, attracted people from the Viru County and elsewhere in Estonia. Among the local volunteer folklore collectors there were predominantly rural intellectuals from outside the parish and the workers of the Kreenholm factory, and the share of local peasants among the folklore collectors was very small compared to many other regions in Estonia. The “mixed nature” of the song material is the inevitable result of the diverse origins of the songs (which are not entirely revealed in the information added by the collectors) and the influences of the tradition of the neighbouring areas.

“The alders, flax and songs of Laiuse”, the paper presented by *Kristi Salve* (independent researcher, Estonia), characterised the *regilaul* tradition of the Laiuse parish in the northern Tartu County, which is adjacent to the Viru County. The paper found its inspiration from the compilation of the volume in the *Vana Kannel* (“The Old Psalter”) series of runo-songs of the Laiuse parish. According to the distribution of Estonian folklore phenomena (Oskar Loorits: Estonian folklore districts; Arvo Krikmann: the stereotypicality/uniqueness of proverb repertoire; Herbert Tampere: melody-based *regilaul* areas), the folklore of the Laiuse parish represents the (North-)Estonian average and the same applies to runo-songs in the area. This “average”, however, reveals some interesting details. Of the latter, the paper discussed the geographical distribution and outstanding performers of the songs. The eastern part of the parish, the Laius-Tähkvere (Sadala) commune, stands out with its considerably larger share of the material and the largest number of local volunteer collectors. This bias to the east could be explained with peculiarities of the area’s settlement and cultural history. The nineteenth-century written texts introduce several intriguing singers, such as Mart Kreos, a potter and a male singer with rich repertoire, or the married Roma couple Induses, who have performed highly traditional Estonian runo-songs.

In his paper “Executions and burials in wetlands: connecting information found in runo-songs to the events in past” *Pikne Kama* (University of Tartu, Department of Archaeology) discussed the possible connection between the events described in runo-songs, local legends, and archaeological finds. In several runo-song types burial or execution in swamp or bog is described, at the same time the archival records of local legends know the places where there are either found reminiscences of a dead body or, according to the legend, a person was buried or drowned. In some rare cases archaeologists have also found dead bodies in wetlands; due to the conditions there, the bodies have been preserved extremely well. There is a significant conflict between the songs

and the finds: whereas in songs usually boys have been buried in swamps, most of the finds of bog bodies have been women. As a conclusion Kama pointed out that the phenomena or traditions that were in use in distant past, may be preserved in folkloric texts as well as in archaeological finds, either of which gives us different information about the phenomenon in question. The task of a researcher is to correlate the information gathered from different sources.

Jukka Saarinen (Finnish Literature Society) presented a paper “Sledge of the songs and journey to the otherworld”, in which he reconsidered the interpretation of the ‘Journey to the otherworld’ runo-song type, where the singer, usually Väinämöinen goes to the otherworld to bring either tools or runo-song words necessary for building a sledge or a boat. Usually the meaning of the song has been interpreted by researchers as a shamanistic journey to obtain information from the otherworld. The motif of a broken sledge has been interpreted on the basis of only two texts as missing words during the singing performance. Saarinen analysed the texts about the broken sledge by other singers, and concluded that the widely accepted scholarly interpretation of this motif is based on an interpretation of a single singer only and cannot be considered as a general metaphorical meaning of this motif. Saarinen raised the question of how and why certain interpretations get an overwhelmingly prominent position in the history of research.

Next to the papers the conference included a film by Selma Vilhunen on the last Finnish Karelian folksinger Jussi Huovinen and his student. *Eda-Kai Simmermann* introduced her series of web publications for singers called “Small Harp”. Map application for the runo-song database compiled by IT students as their programming task was introduced by *Raina Liiva* and *Joosep Hook*. *Ingrid Riiütel* presented her fresh publication of songs and stories from Muhu island collected by herself during several decades and belonging to the series “What has remained in my footsteps”. *Mari Sarv* made some concluding remarks on the conference and introduced further plans which include the tenth conference in the series of the runo-song conferences on November 26–30, 2018. This conference will be devoted to the oral song traditions in most general terms, and is open to the researchers of different singing traditions from all around the world.

References

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