

Ritual Song

Ritual songs marked key moments in life, such as weddings. Songs associated with weddings expressed tensions and anxieties, encoded traditional wisdom about successful marriage, and even ridiculed the bride or groom as lacking in wealth, beauty, or wit. Such songs reflect the static and hierarchical nature of the culture in which they were performed.

The wedding song duel tradition extends in distribution from Viena Karelia in the north to the Setu villages of southeastern Estonia, i.e., throughout the entire area in which it was possible to collect Kalevalaic songs in the nineteenth century. How could such mocking behavior be tolerated in the wedding tradition? Could the attendants of the bride and groom in a modern wedding suddenly begin to insult each other? Was the entire performance regarded as simply theatrics for the sake of custom? Reports of Ingrian weddings ending in outright brawls between supporters of the bride and groom would indicate that the latter explanation is unlikely. The old folk custom did not possess the sensitivity to people's feelings of modern Finnish culture: people regarded it as important to get things out in the open, good or bad. Improvised songs regarding the wedding couple attracted great attention. For once in their lives, the couple were the center of attention. Such behavior occurs in modern customs as well, however. Customs connected with the ending of school may include satirical songs composed about teachers, containing both praise and outright criticism.

Other ritual songs, such as those performed in connection with a successful bear hunt reflect ancient religious traditions shared by other Finno-Ugric peoples. Nineteenth-century songs of greeting a bear as an honored wedding guest show parallels in Saami as well as Khanty and Mansi bear hunting traditions. Because of the bear's tremendous mystical as well as physical power, special care had to be taken to insure that the killed animal's spirit would not be offended. Such remnant songs speak of an age when the fates

of men and nature were seen as clearly tied. Returning the bear's bones to the forest was a further way of assuring the continuation of hunting luck.

A further important ritual genre was performed at funerals. The *itkuvirsi* ("crying song," lament) was seen as an important device for helping conduct the soul of the deceased to the hereafter. Although resembling Kalevalaic songs in some respects, laments also possess distinctive features of their own, such as an elaborate metaphorical language, a high degree of improvisation, and long poetic lines, saturated with powerful emotions. According to tradition, the lament was the only human communication audible to the deceased. As with wedding songs, bereaved families who did not have accomplished lament singers of their own could call on semiprofessional singers, some of whom enjoyed wide renown for their performance skills. Primarily preserved in Orthodox communities, laments have occasionally been collected from Ingrian Lutherans as well.

By the time fieldworkers began collecting Kalevalaic folksong in the nineteenth century, its distribution had become largely confined to a few relic areas. Viena Karelia preserved the epic tradition most extensively, while the Karelian Isthmus showed the greatest flowering and maintenance of the lyric song. Heroic epic was also collected to some extent in Lutheran Finland as well, particularly in the more remote areas of northern Ostrabothnia and Kainuu. In Savo, a vibrant incantation tradition preserved the cores of many epic songs.



When the bride arrived at the groom's house, her future home, she was expected to show submission and obedience. To show her intent, she "kumarsi jalkaa" (bent to her mother-in-law's feet) during her first week of residence. While prostrating herself, the young daughter-in-law inquired about the chores the mother-in-law would like to give her. This photo by I. K. Inha dates from 1894 and depicts a genuine Karelian interior.

The Bridegroom Arrives

Luulin tuulen tuulevaksi,
meren rannan raikavaksi,
halkopinon vierreheksi.
Minä kaakon katsomahan,
vaan ei tuuli tullutkana

Mikä väki väijyvi täältä?
Tämä väki väyvn väkeä.
Ei oo vävy eellimäisnä
eikä aivan jälkimäinen,
vävy keskellä väkeä
murmur mustalla orolla,
kirkkir kirja korjasella.

Jo tuli vävy pihalle.
Lasetkaate vävyn heponen
rautasista rahkehista,
vaskisista valjahista!
Ei pääse vävyn heponen.
Kaks' on kullaista käkeä
rahkehella laulamassa.

Jo nyt pääsi vävyn heponen
rautahista rahkehista.
Pietarhoises nyt vävyn heponen,
kuminalla kultasella,
jott' ei karva katkiasi,
liha liika liikahtasi!

Juottoote vävyn heponen
heiluvista hettehistä,
läikkyivistä lähtehistä,
jott' ei lähe läikähtäisi,
vesi hieno heilahtasi:
panko'os vävyn hevonen,
tallihin takimmaisehen,
tammisehen patsahasen;
panko'os vävyn hevolle
kappa kauroja etehen;
vaan ei syö vävyn hevonen,
pannaan otria etehen.

Jo tulevi vävy tupahan,
vaan ei sovi vävy sisälle
ilman orren ottamatta,
kamanan korottamatta,
sivuseinän siirtämättä,
periseinän penkamatta,
sortamatta soppiseinän.

Jo nyt sopii vävy tupahan.
Tuoko'os tuli terveksinen

I thought a wind was coming,
the sea shore roaring,
a pile of firewood toppling.
I wade out to look,
but no wind blew at all.

What people are staring from here?
These people are my son-in-law's people.
The son-in-law is not first,
nor is he right at the end,
the son-in-law is in-between them
driving a black steed
and a mottled sleigh.

Already the son-in-law has entered the barnyard.
Take the son-in-law's horse
from the iron traces
from the silver harness!
The son-in-law's horse won't budge,
two golden cuckoos are
singing in the traces.

Now, at last, the son-in-law's horse budged
from the iron traces.
In a paddock now, the son-in-law's horse
on a golden blanket
so that its hair doesn't break
his flesh doesn't stir too much!

Draw water for the son-in-law's horse
at the waving spring
at the splashing source
so that it won't leave splashing,
the fine water wave away.
Put the son-in-law's horse
in the farthest stall,
by the oaken pillars.
Place before the son-in-law's horse
a bag of oats.
If the son-in-law's horse won't eat that,
place barley before him.

Already now the son-in-law is coming inside the house
but the son-in-law doesn't fit
without our taking out the ceiling-beam,
without our raising the lintel,
without our moving the side wall,
without our pushing back the inner wall,
without our removing the outer wall.

Already now the son-in-law fits inside the house.
Bring a pitch taper flame

What Are You Boasting About?

Kutti, kutti, Suomen sulho,
sanoit aina ottavasi
Suomesta soveimman
kirkon parvesta paraimman.
Nyt vasta puutuit punktuse
kompastuit kono-nenneä,
sait sie sulta suovariksen,
aho-aijailta harakan.

Ha, ha, Finnish bridegroom
you always said you would take
the loveliest in Finland
the best of the church crowd.
See what you've gotten now –
You stumbled on an ugly nosed one
You got a swamp raven from the swamp
a magpie from the hedgerow.

– Räisälä

You Have Gotten A Worthy Wife

Jo sait sie naisen sangen varman,
sinisilmän ja sivijän!
Ei ole tää kylän kävijä
ei kylän penkin painelija,
ei kylän miesten mieltietty.

You have gotten a worthy wife
blue-eyed and virtuous!
This is not one to go visiting in the village
not one to warm the village benches,
not one entertained by the village men.

Sie saitkin naisen sivijän
linin paistjan lipaskan
pitkän piirakan tekijän
vehnäleivän lepsuttajan,
kuulun kankahan kutojan,
hyvän oluen panijan.

You have gotten a virtuous woman
a quick maker of bliny
a maker of long pies
a kneeder of wheat bread
a weaver of fine fabric
a brewer of good beer.

– Kivennapa

Bear Ritual Songs

When the bear was brought home:
Metsähippa halliparta,
metsän kultanen kuningas
itse kannan karhuani,
metsäukkoista kuletan.

Forest spirit, grey beard,
dear king of the forest;
I carry you myself, my bear,
I bring you, my forest cock.

– North Karelia

In the old days, the villagers used to kill bears. There was a headland by a lake and they took the bear heads there and collected them on a pine tree, singing:

Tukala on tuvassa olla
läyli toisen lämpimässä.
En miä sinuu pajuu paa
enkä raitaan rakenna;
panen puuhun pienoisehen
hongan heiluvan nenään.

It is difficult to be at home,
hard to be by another's warmth.
I don't place you in the willow,
nor do I put you in goatwillow;
I place you in a rather little tree,
at the rocking end of a pine tree.

– Nurmes

Lament Songs

Lament songs or keening was a traditional, improvisational genre performed most often in conjunction with weddings and funerals, but also in other contexts of leave-taking. The tradition has always been dominated by women, who perform lines to a simple melody, broken by frequent sobs. The ecstatic, emotional performance of the lament can sound jarring and disagreeable to a person unfamiliar with the tradition. To one conversant in its artistry and ritual importance, however, the lament becomes a richly memorable and valued genre. Lament traditions are widespread throughout the world, with the oldest recorded laments deriving from ancient Greece. In the Baltic Sea region, the lament tradition is found primarily among Greek Orthodox communities, occasionally among Lutheran Ingrians as well.

Lament songs differ from both normal communication and other forms of Kalevalaic song. Karelian laments make use of alliteration as well as repetition, although line length and metre are subject to much greater variation. Alliterative links may extend over many lines. Diminutive and frequentative endings lengthen individual words and increase the emotional charge of the poetry. Lines are filled with nonlexical syllables as well as elaborate traditional metaphors for persons or concepts typically found in the songs (e.g., parents, death, the cemetery). The plentitude of metaphors, word-endings, and nonlexical syllables ensures that the actual communication within the song proceeds only very slowly.

The meanings of laments are multiple, ranging from the general meaning understood by the entire community to the personal meanings of singers or listeners. The generally recognized function of the lament within Finnish and Karelian tradition was clear, however: to help conduct the deceased or the bride to their next life, their new existence. The lament was regarded as the only human communication audible to the dead in the otherworld and it was essential to ensure that the deceased rested with ease and contentment in the next life. In the Viena Karelian wedding, lamenting continued until the bride's hair had been covered by the scarf tied in the manner of a married woman, a final marker of her changed status and new life. Laments may have also been seen as a means of protecting the happy bride from the dangers of anger or envy. The feelings reflected or evoked in the laments, however, were often very powerful and it was believed that a bride who did not cry hard enough at her wedding would have tears to pay for it in her married life to come. The lament was closely tied to ancient notions of magic, particularly in effect in these crucial rites of passage.

Wedding Laments

Wedding laments were sung in addition to traditional wedding songs (see above), the chief difference lying in the degree of improvisation and the form of the poetic lines. While wedding songs were fixed in form and often sung in chorus, the wedding lament used traditional metaphors and topics as the core for an extemporaneous outpouring of weeping and song. Below are included several descriptions of lament performances typical within the overall wedding.



In Western Finland in old times the wedding room or hall was decorated with "ryijy", rugs, mirrors and glazed paper pictures. The wedding couple stood or sat on the rug while bridegrooms held a large silk cloth, teltaa (tent), above their heads. The ceiling was decorated with a fringe cloth morsiantaivas ("bridal sky"). Members of Kokkola Local History Society demonstrate the late nineteenth-century custom in the year 1940.

In the evening, after the marriage, the kin started to congregate at the bride's house along with the villagers. The bride lamented to each of them in turn. First she cried to her father, asking what was going through his mind when he sold his daughter off. Had he been under the influence of tobacco or liquor it would have been more fitting for him to sell his daughter's speckled church-going dress or best village festival shirt.

To her mother the bride cried that she had given her father permission to make the sale, nor had she forbidden or turned away the deal although the daughter had always been dutiful to them both.

As the evening started, the sauna was heated. When the kin had assembled and the bride had cried to her godfather, godmother, aunts, brothers, sisters, uncles and relatives, she climbs onto the oven, reciting:

La mie nyt nouseksentelen ihalaisen isolinnaisen
lämmittelijäisen lämmähäiseen
ja ilmalle korottamaiseen kiukaan korvaiselle
hellittelemään näitä jääkkähäisiä helmaisiani,
sulattelemaan jääkkähäisiä jääpurahaisia
Mie en jouteloitelt koko kasvinkerrassaan
lämmittelöimään lämmittelijäisen lämmähäisees
enkä sulattamaan näitä jääkkähäisiä helmaisiani;
mie kaikki karistelin aamukastehoiset
ja kaikki tunnuksentelin lumitupruiset
ja kaikki viereksentelin vesisatehoiset.

Oh I raise myself, my great father fortress,
onto the warming place of my giver of warmth
and rising up upon the stove
to warm there my icy hems,
to melt the icy edges.
I have not in all my childhood been able to
warm myself in the warming place
of my giver of warmth
nor melt there my icy hems.
I shook off all the morning dew
and felt all the swirling snow
and rolled in all the wet rain.

The Daughter's Melancholy Increases

In the betrothal ceremony, the bride's melancholy increases. She cries ever more plaintively – to her, death as a little child in the cradle would have been preferable to parting as an adult, but the warm nicknames for the mother pour out ever more beautifully:

Suloinen sukijaiseni
kallis kantajaiseni
helle helmoin-tuojaiseni!

Beloved woman who carried me
treasured one who bore me
shining one who brings my hems!

Olisit tukehuttanut, tuutijaiseni
olisit oikaissut olkiloin päälle ottajaiseni
kattanut kankaan alle, kasvattelijaiseni
käsilläsi olisi liikuttanut liivat, leikuttelijaiseni,
sormillasi poiminut someret, suorittelijaiseni!

You should have suffocated me, you who
crooned to me, you should have struck me
on straw, you who carried me,
dunked me in the marsh, you who reared me,
with your hand you should have moved sand,
you who soothed me, with your finger
plucked gravel, you who readied me.

Olisit pannut liivoihin lämpimiin, lämmittelijäiseni
someriin suojiin soritellut, sorittajaiseni!

You should have put me into warmer sand,
you who gave me warmth, pressed me into
gravelly swamps, you who soothed me.

Mie olisin makaellut, maalle tuojaiseni,
liivojen lämpymässä, lämmiteltyiseni
somerien suojaassa, sorittelijäiseni.

I would have lain, you who brought me to earth,
warm in my sand, you who gave me warmth,
in the protection of gravel, you who soothed me.

Olisit silloin siekin ollut huoletta,
huolittelijäiseni,
murehitta muijoiseni, tuojaiseni,
miun perästä pesettelijäiseni.

Then you, too, would have been untroubled,
you who cared for me,
unpained by my familiar form, you who bore me,
you who washed me after my birth.

– Ingria

Lament at the Unbraiding of the Bride's Hair

Ingrian weddings included a ritual unbraiding of the bride's hair (*kassan päästäminen*). After her wedding, a woman would wear her hair beneath a kerchief rather than tied in the braids of a daughter. The unbraiding was usually done by either a Godmother or by one of the bride's friends. The bride performed the following lament during the ceremony.

Siliään miun siar Marjaiseen,
kallis miun kansahisseen,
armas miun artteliparvueen,
mihe päässät päiväkkähän kassastaan,
mihe harotat halukkahia hiuksiaan?
Vasta miä suin sulasual suuritusakkkahain.
vasta mie harjasin haluharjal huolekkahain,
vasta solmielin kovvaa solmee kova osatoin.
Kustapa tulit niin armahak alehtunehelle,
kustapa tulit nin helteheks heikoihuolekkahalle

Smooth, my sister Marja,
dear companion,
beloved member of my crowd.
For what reason do you loosen my braids so sorrowfully
for what reason do you free my mournful hair?
Only I smoothed my dear head with great pain,
only I brushed my mournful hair with care.
only I tied tight knots tightly.
From where did you come to show pity to this lowly one,
from where did you come to shine upon the weak one,

harottammaa halukkahia hiuksiaan?
Ohan miul kaks kättä kätkeleinekkähäl,
kymmen sormutta sortunehel,
millä päässellä päiväkkähän kassastaan,
millä harotella halukkahia hiuksiaan.

– Soikkola, 1883.

to free her mournful hair?
I feel on me my two pitying hands,
ten tumbling fingers,
with which I loosen my braids so sorrowfully,
with which I free my mournful hair.