

The kalevalaic tradition as finnish mythology

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Myths forge a link to immutable principal events in the past and in doing so establish a social entity united by notions of a common origin. Thus they have an uncanny power of self-definition and are therefore suitable for political uses. Myths have played an important role in social movements attempting to create group unity on national, ethnic or regional grounds. Myths address both socio-cultural and existential questions. Therefore, research into mythical traditions has been vital in analysing both the shaping of our common conception of history and the construction of cultural identity of distinct population groups. The study of mythical aspects of history extend into of classical mythology (see Detienne 1981), while issues addressing cultural identity led, among other things, to the compilation of the Kalevala and ensuing research on its material (Honko 1990). The study of Finnish mythology has used Kalevalaic folk poetry as one of its main, though by no means only, source materials. Since the 1980s the study of mythical traditions has grown in importance, mainly because of the establishment of the European Union and the subsequent need to strengthen the European identity. In the United States the new wave of myth research has been inspired by the ethnonationalism of the postcolonial era. Many a small nation has taken the Finnish Kalevala as its model in establishing its own national symbol.

Finnish interest in Kalevalaic poetry and mythology did not fade with the establishment of an independent Finnish state: the Kalevala jubilee celebrations (1985 and 1999) were widely appreciated. Today, the Kalevalaic tradition is attracting more and more interest. The changing structures in Europe and the economic recession shook the basic pillars of the Finnish worldview. It seems that a nation needs identity symbols not only in its infancy but also in transition and in times of crisis. The meaning and symbolic value of the Kalevala or its equivalents cannot be understood in a narrow national context. To understand the character of the Kalevalaic tradition as a national mythology, we have to examine it more closely to see what aspects of it make it so suitable for self-identification.

The Kalevala and the world's epics: myth as history

Kalevalaic poetry existed - like the epic poetry of non-literate cultures in general - only as oral tradition. The early collectors could already make observations on its nature in the light of parallel traditions in other peoples. Mikael Agricola in 1551, for example, obviously had some idea about the nature of epic poems when he named Väinämöinen and Ilmarinen, the central figures in Kalevalaic poetry, gods of the peoples of Häme. Elias Lönnrot, accordingly, placed Kalevalaic poems on a level with the great epic poetry of Europe - the Iliad and Odyssey of Greece, the Edda of ancient Scandinavia, the Nibelungenlied of Germany and the Beowulf of the Anglo-Saxons - when creating the Kalevala epic. The European literary epics differ both from one another and from the epics of Asia and Africa not only in content but in the way and the period they were noted down. The relationship between the finished epic and the collection of oral poems telling of the deeds of the same hero is also something of a problem. Nevertheless, there are common features in these traditions. Their special value, sacredness or cultural significance places them above all other stories.

In *The Kalevala and the World's Epics* (1990) by Lauri Honko the Kalevala keeps company with distinguished epics of other peoples. The theme running through the work is the Kalevala as a representative of its genre, alongside other epics and epic poetry of the world. In the introduction Lauri Honko answers the question "What is an epic?" by calling the epic as Brenda Beck did in 1982 (p. 196) a superstory, a folk genre carrying an image of first-rate narration. Folk epics are, according to him, long poems often running to thousands of lines sung or recited by 'professional' tradition bearers. Myth and history are woven into them to form true, trusted events, so that they become mirrors of the world, the nation and its early heroes.

Remembering the past is crucial for our sense of identity (Lowenthal 1990, 197-200), be it an individual or a group identity. A sense of a shared 'history' seems to be necessary to the formation of an ethnic group. Kirsten Hastrup sees that in a case where the shared history is absent, traditions may be invented for the purpose of distinction (Hastrup 1987, 258; see Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). A concept of the past of one's own group and of the fundamental essence of the universe is one of the most basic forms of human knowledge. Before the art of writing was invented, oral narratives and poems were the primary tools for preserving this knowledge. The controversy over the explanation of the mythical knowledge codi-

fied in oral tradition - evident as a preference for either the mythical or the historical interpretation - ultimately illustrates the difference between the concepts of history held by Western researchers and the members of the culture studied. In traditional cultures myth and reality are not placed in different compartments as they are in Western thinking. The fact that comparative religion has underlined the religious dimension of mythology has often prevented us from seeing its historical function, its position as the 'sacred' history of one's own group.

So far attempts to determine the nature of old Finnish epic poetry have drawn on the categorising concepts 'mythical', 'historical' or 'heroic'. The mythical and the historical interpretations have been fighting for supremacy in determining the fundamental nature of Kalevalaic poetry from the 18th century onwards. Similar problems have been shared by research into Homeric epic (cf. Detienne 1981, 22-24) and ancient Scandinavian poetry. In Finland this dispute had deep roots. The quest for history, for insights into the past through epic poetry, is an extremely powerful force stimulating epic research in a young state devoid of literary sources. And we can see from the trend in the historical interpretations of the Finnish epic that this force not only stimulates but also guides research in accordance with whatever national interests are dominant at the time (cf. Siikala 1992, 133-136). In contrast to this there emerged a school following the trends in mythology research of the European continent. It is surely no exaggeration to claim that the more cosmopolitan a researcher's orientation is and the wider his familiarity with comparative materials representing different cultures, the sharper his view becomes of the mythical and fictive nature of the Finnish epic.

Both myth and history are symbolic forms of connecting the past and present. Christine Seydon (1990) points out that epics with a mythical bias are a characteristic feature of communities which lack a centralised power structure and in which the devices for communal identity are founded on a system of kinship. Epics with a historical bias are in turn to be found among communities in which a framework for identity is provided by state-like systems and hierarchical social relations. We could ask what is so special in the Kalevalaic tradition, in its mythic history that it was accepted as the mythology of the new state? We could answer that illiterate Finnish culture needed its own history, but is that enough?

Myths as mental models building worldview

By codifying the structures of the worldview, myths bear mental models of the past; they are one form of the structures of *longue durée* of culture. In ad-

addressing the prerequisites for human and social existence, the mythologies of the world revolve around the same key questions, even though the solutions may vary and diverge according to the culture in question. Thus the mythologies of different cultures are not similar. Ways of seeing the world and analysing it, making even empirical judgements, and thus ascribing meanings to perceptions vary from one culture to another. Notions about 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 worldview 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 to sustain worldview and to solve contradictions are more deeply rooted and conservative. Hence, mythology is one of the most persistent mental representations. In fact, we can even view mythology as a long-term prison – if we use the metaphor of the Fernand Braudel- , which tenaciously 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 constantly transformed according to the social context (Vernant 1992, 279). The life of mythical traditions 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 great theories of myth from 19th century scholars to the 20th century have influenced the way Finnish scholars have identified mythical themes in Kalevalaic poetry. Therefore the study of Finnish mythology requires a thorough re-examination of the concept of myth, a task which has attracted growing attention due to the rise of classical mythology as an important object of study. My previous research has demonstrated that the myths of Kalevalaic poetry did not - as was assumed by earlier research - occupy a marginal position as thematic fragments, the background of which could be traced in an earlier stratum of tradition. Kalevalaic epic poetry ought to be approached as a mythic discourse in which meanings are generated at all levels of tradition. Myths are woven into the Kalevalaic epics as 1) narrative entities, i.e. epic songs, and 2) complexes of myths consisting of these songs. Besides the mythical motifs, the researcher should look at 3) the fundamental questions and dualisms constitutive of the narratives and 4)

the symbols, metaphors and mythical imagery which form the core of Kalevalaic mythical poetry, epics and the corpus of incantations.

The key metaphors in Finnish mythology emerge from the symbolism of the other world (Siikala 1992, 48-40, cf. Eliade 1971, Ricoeur 1976). Individual singers and song communities interpreted the poems in different ways. The meanings ascribed to the mythical images and poetic metaphors have varied in different cultural contexts. Images and motifs derived from different epochs constitute a loosely structured network of images, concepts and narratives open to constant reinterpretation. The nature of the mythical discourse, however, defines the possibilities of recontextualisation (see Hanks 1996, 274-277), but despite constant variation, the tradition has a historical continuity.

Common roots of the Finno-Ugric worldview

The multidisciplinary symposium entitled *Suomen väestön juuret* (The origin of the Finnish people) held at Lammi on 8-10 November 1997 challenged established notions within studies of Finnish mythical traditions. The interdisciplinary consensus connecting Finno-Ugric speakers with East-European Comb-Pit Ceramic archaeological cultures (see Häkkinen 1996, 73) and above all the location of the early Indo-European language speakers in the neighbouring areas on the Russian steppes provide new substance for reconstructing the background of the Finno-Ugric mythical tradition.

Comparative studies have demonstrated that the mythical motifs found in the Kalevalaic epics which depict the emergence, structure and creation of different cultural phenomena are part of a widespread international tradition. Parallels can be found both in Uralic and Indo-European, as well as in more distant Asian and even Native American cultures. The significance of these parallels for the understanding of pre-Christian cultures and their worldview is a difficult research problem. Nevertheless, mythology consisting of narrative motifs, mythical imagery, symbols and significant concepts can be regarded as a type of language or system of coding which has its own characteristics. This notion opens up the possibility to analyse, through comparative research of mythical traditions and their motifs, imagery and concepts, a stratum of traditions extending in different directions which corresponds to the subgroupings of languages based on the results of comparative linguistics.

While many fundamental questions remain for discussion, including where the Uralic languages were spoken and over how large an area, a common vocabu-

lary reveals quite clearly the kind of culture possessed by speakers of early Uralic and Finno-Ugric languages. As Kaisa Häkkinen has pointed out, pan-Uralic vocabulary fragments indicate “a language used by a society living in the relative North which practised hunting and fishing at a Stone Age level of development” (Häkkinen 1990: 176). In seeking the roots of Finnish shamanism on the basis of comparative research (Siikala 1992), I came to the conclusion that the oldest layer of religious imagery represents not an Arctic but a Subarctic culture, existing in the milieu of the northern ‘taiga’ type. It was a culture, furthermore, in which waterways occupied a crucial role. This is well suited to the framework of the vocabulary presented by Häkkinen, even though it must be kept in mind that the meaning of a word may shift in the course of cultural or ecological change. Insofar as we interpret Uralic and Finno-Ugric vocabulary on the basis of information concerning northern hunting and fishing cultures, whose environment and subsistence modes make them useful points of comparison, we can attempt to describe these ancient cultures in more detail.

It is characteristic of the hunting and fishing cultures of northern Eurasia that they exhibit a vast range of detail within surprisingly similar basic structures. The variety of detail can be traced back to traditional orality and the absence of a codified educational system, while the structural resemblance springs from similarities in subsistence modes and ecological conditions, but can also be seen to derive from highly archaic models of thought. Early Uralic hunting and fishing cultures can be assumed to have contained similar cosmological structures and mental models regarding the other world, the nature of humans and their relationship to their environment, as well as animal ceremonialism and shamanistic practices.

The structure of Uralic mythology and the transformation of tradition

I have characterised the Finno-Ugric hunting and fishing cultures as fitting the framework of the Comb-Ceramic and Pit-Ceramic cultures of Eastern Europe and the Urals. The earlier Uralic-language culture was, in its general outlines, a similar sort of Northern hunting and fishing culture. Thus the structural hallmarks of the mythology characteristic of such Uralic and Finno-Ugric cultures are linked to the demands of a nature-oriented way of life and observation of both nature and the paths and positions of the stars in the night sky. For many cosmological myths and images documented among Uralic peoples, analogous forms

have been discovered from such a broad area that these traditions have been considered age-old, stretching back in time as far as the Stone Age. Thus they can also be considered in all likelihood to have been part of the culture of those peoples speaking the early Proto-Uralic language.

In addition, Uralic mythology as a whole appears to form a worldview built on intertwined complexes of beliefs and images and reflecting the mentality of hunters and fishers. (See Hoppál 1979, Napolskikh 1992, Siikala 2002). Its cosmographic features include a worldview centred on the Polar Star, the syncretic fusion of horizontal and vertical models of the world, an emphasis on the north-south axis as well as the importance of waterways in linking this world and the next. The north-south axis is also emphasised in depictions of the forces associated with life and death. The centrality of (water) birds reflected in astral mythology is connected to the cult of the sun as well as a female life-giver, whose attribute is the birch, a variant of the world tree. Categories of the supranormal have undergone continuous alteration under the influence of neighbouring religions, so that it is difficult to identify divine beings leading directly back to the Uralic period. Beliefs held in common, however, include the concept of the sky-god, female deities having power over life and death, and above all the nature spirits and animal spirits essential to a hunting and fishing culture. Uralic peoples have also shared the fauna-centred astral mythology peculiar to Eurasian hunting and fishing cultures as well as the complex view of the soul which underlies both animal ceremonialism and the shamanic institution.

Elements of a worldview reaching back to early hunting and fishing cultures were best preserved among those groups for whom these modes of subsistence were of continued economic importance. The most significant rupture in this mode of thinking occurred during the transition to agriculture. The transition was nonetheless so gradual, and left ample room for the continuation of hunting as a supplementary form of subsistence, that the foregoing themes and images of mythology survived for millennia. Even if many features of livelihood and habits in the Finnish-Karelian culture area were fairly modern, seers, hunters and fishermen maintained age-old traditions found among other Finno-Ugric and Uralic cultures. The basic elements of Uralic mythologies were preserved, for example, in the Finnish-Karelian epic and incantation poetry: these included cosmological beliefs, animal ceremonialism, especially bear rituals and myth, astral mythology (involving the elk and bear), bird mythology and the female mistress of sun and south, features of shamanism, etc.

Cultural contact and dominant religions transform mythic traditions by eradicating the old and introducing new elements. But the way in which change occurs in models of mythology and folk belief - both the Uralic and others - still remains a problem. The issue at stake is basically the relationship between the birth, establishment and transformation of factors characterising worldview and other structures of culture. Despite the stubborn conservatism of collective awareness, worldviews seem to vary according to the social and economic structures of the communities. This is evident if we look at the differences in the mythic traditions of different Finno-Ugric and Uralic groups. There are, in fact, many more dissimilarities than similarities and they reflect the history and economic and social conditions of different groups.

We could examine the transformation of myth tradition as a dialectic process in which cultural change and new cultural contacts offer new concepts and images to replace the old ones. The mental models inherited from the past, on the other hand, provide cognitive frameworks into which these new elements are placed. The adoption of new elements thus occurs on the terms dictated by existing cultural knowledge. This can be seen particularly in concepts regarding divinities and the land of the dead. Another prominent feature of folk belief and mythology is the multiplicity of parallel images and ideas. New images combine easily with those generated on the basis of tradition.

The more vital and deeply rooted the values, attitudes and beliefs, the broader the transformation required in the culture as a whole to renew them is. Elements of religion and mythical worldview may have persisted despite opposition through various cultural eras. But their meanings may not necessarily have remained the same: the motifs may have been re-interpreted and re-fashioned within the confines of new cultural frames.

Similar images and motifs, different mentalities

The many central themes, motifs and images found in epic poetry in Kalevalaic metre are part of a far-flung and obviously old international body of myths in which the heritage of Uralic hunting cultures can be traced even today. On the other hand epic poems and incantations tell about contacts with Indo-European, Baltic and Scandinavian cultures, as Julius Krohn (1885) and Kaarle Krohn already noted. The ethnographic material in the epic poems displays features characteristic of the times of the Crusades and the Vikings in Northern Europe. This led Kaarle Krohn to think that Kalevalaic poems told about histori-

cal events and were originally produced in Western Finland during the Viking era and then wandered to the eastern and northern parts of the Finnish-Karelian area (Krohn 1914 and 1918).

As a mythical and mythico-historical tradition, the Karelian epic in many respects resembles the ancient Icelandic poetry noted down in the 13th century. The characters of the hero-gods and the mythical places display numerous communal features, some of which have so far tended to be overlooked. What is, however, more significant is that the mentalities and worldviews, the concepts of and values assigned to nature, society and mankind differ clearly from one another. (Siikala 1992, 272-276).

Explanations differ even for the very essence of the world. Ancient Icelandic poetry claims that the world was born from the body of the giant Ymir according to the myth of the killing of the primeval monster, in contrast to the more nature-oriented Finnish-Karelian image of its being born from the pieces of an egg. The Icelandic god-heroes belong to either the Aesir or the Vanir, two races of gods who fought both between themselves and with outside forces. The battle finally leads to the destruction of the world. The heroes are the patriarchal heads of families whose abodes, mansions and helpers are described in detail. A dangerous assignment is either undertaken as a concerted effort or is delegated to deputies and envoys. Of all the gods, Thorr alone, equipped with a mighty belt and hammer, travels alone among the giants. The Finnish-Karelian heroes tend to be bachelors rather than family men. The stories about them prefer to describe a journey fraught with dangers, its destination and means of transport rather than the hero's abode. Journey themes describing the borders of the earth and the regions in the other world are popular ones in international myths. One notable feature is, however, that the Finnish-Karelian hero is not aggressive simply for the sake of it. He leaves home in order to woo, to seek knowledge or to return stolen property.

In Scandinavian poetry man is bound by his social status, his kin and his fate. He dreams of a paradise with never-ending ale drinking and the brandishing of weapons typical of Valhalla, leaving such technical skills as the forging of magic golden objects to outsiders such as dwarf smiths. The Finnish-Karelian hero does not submit to his fate in the same way. The heroes of Karelia are the smith and the tietäjä - seer or shaman - who overcome what would appear to be superhuman problems by means of their abilities and skills. In the epic, shaman themes serve to stress the importance of knowledge and its acquisition rather than the importance of the spirit world.

Poetries differ most fundamentally in their view of the status of women. The Germanic woman is a wife, a cause of dispute and a schemer who occupies the domain of fertility and magic. The woman in Karelia is a maiden wooed by suitors, or a ruler of the places encountered by a mobile husband on his journeys. On entering Pohjola, Päivölä, Hiisi or Tuonela, the man is received by the mistress, assisted by a band of male helpers. Louhi and her counterparts are women of authority who act independently. There are two things that indicate that these descriptions are not concerned just with the 'otherness' of the mythical world. One is that in Scandinavian mythology this status is assigned to a man, Loki. The other is that the woman in the courting poems is invariably the giver-away of her daughter. According to the custom assimilated later, and also prescribed by law, this is the father's job. Even in the poem *Elinan surma* (The Death of Elina) dating from medieval Western Finland, the suitor requests the maiden's hand from her mother or brother. All in all, family relationships seem to acquire different manifestations in poetry. The Germanic tradition stresses the relationships between father and son, man and wife regarded as meaningful by the kin system familiar to us in the West. By contrast, Finnish-Karelian poetry prefers to examine the relationships between mother and son or brother and sister, just as many cultures outside Europe do. The poems undoubtedly bear messages of social systems long since vanished.

The basic polarities of Finnish mythology

Mihály Hoppál has stressed that mythology should be understood as a system in which the basic oppositions have a constructive role. The examination of basic oppositions that are often fundamentally universal allows comparative study of mythologies. (Hoppál 1979, 219). The basic structures of the Finnish-Karelian mythology represent and recreate the main features of the worldview. The mythic discourse maintained and performed by Kalevalaic runes handles the problems of the ontology of the universe and its beings. Poems discuss the features of the life history of divine heroes and the relationships of the oppositions which create the frame for the worldview: the relationship of non-time and time, night and day, this world and the other world, male and female, young and old, the elements of the cosmos, nature and culture.

The poetry centring on Väinämöinen – the main hero of Kalevalaic poetry – reflects the basic mythical structures in an illuminating way (detailed analysis in Siikala 2000). As a cultural hero, Väinämöinen was involved in the creation of the cosmos. He is floating in the primeval sea and on his knee the primeval bird

lays the egg out of which the parts of the cosmos are born. Väinämöinen belongs both to the time before the beginning of time and to the time after the creation. It is interesting to see how some poems describe his birth. In Ostrobothnia the mother of Väinämöinen or his father is the Maiden of the North; in Karelia a virgin gives birth to him and his two brothers Ilmarinen and Joukahainen. A woman as the origin of divine heroes and thus also of the cosmos is not a typical feature of the world mythologies. It may say something about the Finnish-Karelian gender concepts.

It seems that the main aspects of the social order, such as the principle of seniority, the opposition between old and young, are depicted in the figure of Väinämöinen as well as the opposition of female and male. In the wooing poems and in the Sampo poetry he woos a young woman and meets an old one - Louhi - as his opponent. What is important here is Väinämöinen's failure in his wooing: he continues to be a bachelor and in a Rääkkylä poem he expresses the norm which he himself did not obey: the denial of marriage between young and old people.

Väinämöinen is capable of overcoming this social taboo because his origin is in the other world, beyond the border to the social realm. His place is in the non-human world and in primeval time. But, like many other divine heroes, he crosses the border between non-time and time, the other world and this world. This is pictured in, for example, the lines which stress the opposition of night and day: Väinämöinen was born in the night, when the day came he went to his smith's hut. He belongs to the night but he comes to the day, as some Polynesian mythical heroes do. He comes to the day and becomes a man. The hero who crosses the boundary of this and the other world, non-time and time, night and day, is transformed into another being and is capable of continuing his life in the altered conditions.

Once born, Väinämöinen acts and feels like a human being but his doings change the state of the world. He creates a culture with his brother Ilmarinen. However, he bears signs which show his otherness. Like many divine heroes in world mythology, Väinämöinen's body is deformed. He is blind like Odin and Oedipus; his foot is wounded like the foot of Achilles, the Greek hero. Deformation of the body, which is often self-caused, can be interpreted as the elimination of the cosmic connection. The crime conducted by the hero serves the same function; Väinämöinen, for example, is accused of incest. It is interesting in this connection that the relationship in the incest episode is that of son and mother - Väinämöinen and his mother - not the one typical in Germanic poetry - father and daughter.

The poems about Väinämöinen and Ilmarinen also describe the relationship of the elements of nature as well as the relationship of nature and culture. Both act as cultural heroes and change the elements of the world by creating main cultural objects from the materials of nature. Väinämöinen and Ilmarinen create fire, the first boat, the kantele, music and the Sampo, a miraculous object giving fertility. The poem of the origin of fire is interesting in describing the relationship of water and fire. After Väinämöinen and Ilmarinen have created the fire, it is dropped into a lake and finally found in the stomach of a fish. Fire is born in heaven, which is Ilmarinen's element, but it comes to the world through Väinämöinen's element, water.

Heat and cold, south and north, life and death are depicted in the relationship of the heroes called Kaleva's sons (Väinämöinen Ilmarinen, and others) and the mistress of the North, Louhi, Loveatar, a witch or an evil shaman whose abode is situated on the edge of the world near the kingdom of death and demons. The relationship of life and death, the fertility-giving south - the sun - and the cold northern elements are expressed in the figures of female heroes. Louhi represents death and evil things, Päivätär - the goddess of the sun - and the Virgin Mary everything which is good and healing.

I could add to my examples. What is important here is the fact that oral poems which bear mythical knowledge cannot be understood as separate poems. They form an entity in which the motifs and images - even containing contrasting elements and contradictory interpretations given by singers - make some sense just as an entity: the mythical awareness of the world.

Students of the Kalevalaic tradition from Elias Lönnrot to the present day have stated that the core of Finnish culture, its worldview and basic values seem to be 'softer' than, for example, the worldview of the old Scandinavians. The stress on nature, the quest for knowledge and technical skills, the powerful mistresses and female dominance in kinship relationships, the lack of a strong heroic ethos, created a picture of a nation which - perhaps - cherished some archaic modes of thought, but which at the same time had a mind capable of learning and respecting gender and social equality.

The Kalevalaic tradition as national mythology

The recreation of Finnish mythology, the compiling of the Kalevala, in order to establish a link with the ethnically relevant past was, of course, the result of a national awakening in Finland. The work of Elias Lönnrot gained importance at

the beginning of the 20th century because it supported the identity processes of the young national state. The process or negotiation of identity can happen only in interaction with an 'other'. A consciousness of self - either of a person or of a group - needs knowledge of the existence of the other. We see ourselves through the mirror of the other (cf. Hegel). Identification and rejection are both important factors in the process of building the identity. They help to make distinctions between us and the other.

National symbols are sought from sources that have the authority and uniting power of the past. Mythology or mythic history has this capacity. The Kalevala testified that the Finns had their own sacred past. It also made a difference; it was something unique, something Finnic which separated Finns from the former masters - the Swedes as well from the recent occupiers - the Russians. That is a reason why the Kalevalaic mythology preserved in folk poems and compiled by Elias Lönnrot into an epic was re-mythologised in the nation state of Finland.

The process has not ended. Finland has recently become a member of the European Union. It seems that we need a new mythology which unites us with the other European nations. Studies of ancient Greek mythology have gained more importance and a new theory of the original home of the Finns has been presented by some Finnish linguists. Instead of the Volga area it lies somewhere in Germany. Maybe folklorists will soon be studying the similarities between Kalevalaic poetry and its European parallels.

Studies in Kalevalaic poetry and other oral epics have shown that there is no static stage in the life of oral mythic history. It is constantly re-contextualised and re-interpreted, even recreated in changing political contexts. The authority, authenticity and truth of an oral tradition is repeatedly challenged and constructed in the cultural practice. And yet there is continuity in the life of mythic history: something to be valued, something which bears the authority of the past.

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