VILIINA SILVONEN and KATI KALLIO

Tradition and ownership

Disputes about Karelian laments in Finland

DOI: https://doi.org/10.30664/ar.131229

A new dispute about the ownership of Karelian laments emerged in Finland in 2021. The severely endangered Karelian language is the closest relative of Finnish. Karelian laments were brought into new Finnish contexts during the late twentieth century by Finnish individuals with Karelian roots, with an aim of making the Karelian lament tradition usable also for people not of Karelian descent. Recently, Karelian activists in Finland have strongly criticized the Finnish uses of laments. This relates to wider discussions about minority rights and the status of the Karelian language in Finland. Using social and traditional media material, panel discussions and interviews, we analyse this dispute and contextualize it in relation to the historical folk culture, the Karelian minority and uses of laments in contemporary Finland. The setting is complicated by the assimilation of Karelian speakers, the diversity and the closeness of Karelian and Finnish identities, and the complex intersections of national, ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic factors. Our approach is informed by the recent scholarly discussions about the ownership and appropriation of intangible culture. At the heart of the dispute, we see varying interpretations of what the laments actually are, and how they relate to languages, ethnic identities, communities, modernization and religion.

In contemporary Finland, there is an ongoing dispute about the ownership of Karelian laments. Present-day lament practices often rely on the historical Karelian tradition. Karelian language is the nearest linguistic and cultural relative of Finnish but extremely endangered. Although Karelian is an autochthonous language in Finland, it does not have a proper legal status, and in Finnish popular discussions, Karelian identities are not recognized as distinct from Finnish. To complicate the situation, there are both Karelian- and Finnish-speaking Karelians, with the former historically being mostly related to the Eastern Church and the latter with the Western Church. In Finnic areas traditional laments have been recorded from Orthodox regions, except Ingria, where the Orthodox and Lutheran traditions interacted closely. Although laments are a global phenomenon, local traditions vary considerably.

Traditional Karelian laments are performed at rites of passage, and use highly specialized language, expressing collective and personal grief, and transmitting cultural meanings and mythical worldviews. Lament in contemporary Finland often differs from traditional practices: laments appear as performing arts on stage or as modes of therapeutic self-expression with psychological or new spiritual interpretations; they are learned in courses, and the language used is typically Finnish. In late-twentieth-century Finland, the first to bring laments into these new settings were Finnish individuals with Karelian roots, with an aim of making the tradition acceptable and usable also for people not of Karelian descent. Recently, Karelian activists in Finland have strongly criticized this approach and the Finnish uses of laments.

In this article, we contextualize this dispute in relation to the historical folk culture, the Karelian minority and understandings and uses of laments in contemporary Finland. The setting is complicated by the historical closeness of Karelians and Finns, the assimilation of Karelian speakers, the diversity of Karelian identities and complex intersections of ethnic, national and religious identities. The laments may be connected to secular, new spiritual, neo-pagan, Lutheran, Russian Orthodox, vernacular Karelian, cosmopolitan, Finnish, Karelian or Finno-Karelian contexts and identities. Our approach is informed by the recent scholarly discussions about the ownership and appropriation of intangible culture. We argue that at the heart of the dispute are varying interpretations of what the laments actually are, how they can be used, and how they relate to languages, ethnic identities, communities, modernization and religion. Owing to the closeness and complex interrelationships of Karelian and Finnish identities, the case of laments has a potential to add new strands to the discussion of ownership, religion and ethnic identities. While we focus on the discussions about laments in Finland, there is also a Karelian minority in Russia.

Our analysis focuses on public social media posts, panel discussions and newspaper and magazine articles. We also rely on earlier research and our research interviews and private discussions with Karelian and Finnish lamenters, Karelian activists and revivalists, Finnish musicians, and people with differing Karelian roots or identities. Silvonen is conducting a wider research project in this area.

We are extremely grateful to all those who have been willing to share their thoughts about the relationships of Karelian and Finnish culture. The persons we analyse in detail have had the possibility to read and comment on the manuscript. We ourselves are also part of the discussions, with positions partly defined by scholarly backgrounds in Finnish folklore studies and partly by personal ones.

Karelian culture in Finland

The Karelian language has been spoken in eastern parts of contemporary Finland and in adjoining Russian areas. Historically, the Karelian language developed in the Russian Orthodox ecclesiastical sphere and Finnish language in the Catholic (later Lutheran) regions. The movement of the state border between Novgorod (later Muscovy, Russia, Soviet Union) and Sweden (Finland) caused various exiles, migrations, assimilations and changes to ethnic, linguistic, and religious identities. After the Second World War, the contested area of Border Karelia and the Karelian Isthmus were ceded to the Soviet Union and the whole population was evacuated to other parts of Finland. An estimated 50,000 Karelian speakers were a minority of the population of these areas: the majority of the *circa* 400,000 evacuees spoke so-called 'Karelian dialects' of Finnish (Sarhimaa 2017; Palander *et al.* 2018; Grünthal 2020).

As a result of the evacuation, the speech community of the Karelian language dispersed across Finland. The local Lutheran Finnish-speaking populations rejected the newcomers' different language and cultural features, as well as their Eastern Orthodox faith, which were interpreted as foreign or Russian. The national ideology in post-war Finland emphasized ethnic and linguistic unity, and this was supported also by many Karelians. This led to complex processes

The areas referred to as Karelia marked with black dashed line and the ceded Finnish Karelia marked in yellow by Silvonen. Original map: Grünthal 2020: 6.

of assimilation. Many Karelians decided or were pressured to change their Karelian ('Russian-sounding') names into Finnish ones, not to pass Karelian language on to their children, to baptize them as Lutheran, and not to display their ethnic identity in public (Sallinen-Gimpl 1994; Kananen 2010; Sarhimaa 2017).

Nowadays, Karelian speakers in Finland are mostly descendants of the Border Karelian evacuees or the refugees from Soviet Viena and Olonets Karelia, or migrants following the collapse of the Soviet Union, mostly elderly people. The estimated number of everyday users of Karelian in Finland is 5,000 persons, with some 11,000 persons knowing the language well and circa 30,000 identifying as belonging to the speech community. In Russia, the estimated number of speakers is 20,000. In Finland, the Karelian language does not have a legally recognized status, unlike other old minority languages (Sarhimaa 2017; Koivisto 2017).

Karelian and Finnish are defined by a common linguistic origin and long history of mutual interaction. While some dialects of Karelian and Finnish are close to each other, others are more distant and not mutually intelligible. Linguistically and culturally, the eastern dialects of Finnish are closer to Karelian than to western dialects of Finnish, but they have been tied to the western ones by the creation of the Finnish literary language. Some of the eastern and south-eastern dialects of Finnish are called Karelian dialects. Owing to the political and scientific views of the time, the early-twentieth-century linguists often defined Karelian as a dialect of Finnish. It is still not commonly known that there are Karelian speakers both in contemporary Finland and in Russia, and that Karelian is a language of its own (Palander *et al*. 2018).

In the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century nation-building process in Finland, it was important to create a clearly different national identity from Swedish or Russian ones. Popular education aimed at creating a modern Lutheran nation with one literary language, and the folk traditions, belief systems and dialects of the spoken language were seen as something to document, study and apply in new literary contexts (see e.g. Anttonen 2005), not as something to cherish as a living tradition. In the national romantic ideology, Karelia was extolled as possessed of ancient and noble (although primitive) Finnishness or despised as filled with backward otherness, corrupted by Russian impacts. This dual perspective is still visible in contemporary popular Finnish conceptions, which often have difficulty accepting Karelian identities that are separate from Finnish and Russian ones (Sihvo 2003 [1973]; Tarkka *et al.* 2018; Stepanova 2020).

Ownership of the oral tradition

Valdimar Hafstein (e.g. 2014) argues for acknowledging the collective, distributed authorship that may have taken place along long continuums of time. For contemporary agreements and legislation, this kind of authorship is invisible, which excludes local or indigenous communities, and exposes their tradition to free use (see also Kuutma 2009). Current Western views of ownership of tangible and intangible traditions are typically formed in relation to national legislations and processes of international organizations such as UNESCO. These settings also affect small, traditional and indigenous local communities, whose traditions may get used in new contexts without consent. Sometimes local traditions may get transformed into national heritage (Kuutma 2009, 2015; Hafstein 2014).

Capitalist and liberal ideas about the ownership, rights and freedom of individuals intertwine with the discussion about cultural appropriation (Bucar 2022). Cultural appropriation can be defined broadly as 'the use of a culture's symbols, artefacts, genres, rituals, or technologies by members of another culture' (Rogers 2006: 474). Typically, a central element in the concept is the offensiveness of uses to the members of the minority culture, especially a profound offence striking 'at a person's core values or sense of self' (Young 2005: 135). Yet, many scholars highlight the complexity of the concept (e.g. Young 2005; Matthes 2016; Haapoja-Mäkelä 2020; Bucar 2022). First, it embodies the risk of cultural essentialism, that is, understanding cultures as stable and permanent entities connected to rigid ethnic formations. It is also problematic to see all borrowing and interaction between cultures as appropriation. Liz Bucar (2022: 210) elaborates that 'borrowing becomes appropriation when it relies on and contributes to existing forms of structural injustice'. When the borrowing relates to religion, the risk of profound offence is usually present (pp. 15–16). Second, it is not always simple to define who is an insider, an outsider, or an authority, since vernacular cultural communities are diverse and often without clear hierarchies. The diversity of community can lead to situations where the cultural insiders appropriate their own culture (pp. 28, 205.)

With Finnish and Karelian, the setting is complex in terms of minorities, majorities, insiders and outsiders. The closeness of the Karelian and Finnish traditions and languages, the assimilation processes of Karelians into Finnish society in the early twentieth century, and the unrecognized differences between national and ethnic identities, as well as the diversity of Finnish and Karelian ethnic, religious and cultural identities, have rendered Finnishness and Karelianness as overlapping, fused and sometimes inseparable. Karelian, Finnish, or Finno-Karelian/Karelo-Finnish identities are constructed of many elements, which makes discussions about ownership and rights difficult. However, it also makes the case special in terms of the broader discussions about ownership and cultural appropriation.

From Karelian ritual laments to diverse contemporary lament practices

Traditionally, Karelian laments are an essential element in the rites of passage of marriage and death, ensuring a safe transition to new social roles or the otherworld, and re-organizing the social structure of the community. There are also laments for conscripts, commemorative laments, autobiographical laments and everyday laments about casual worries and cares (Honko 1974; Nenola-Kallio 1982; Konkka 1985). According to traditional Karelian beliefs, laments are the language that is heard in the otherworld by *syndyzet* (the otherworld, the ancestors, and also the deity) and *spuassuzet* (especially the deity, often Christ). As an expression, the lament is a unity of text, music and emotion, composed anew in the performance each time, according to traditional means, in highly metaphoric poetic language. Musical and vocal features are distinctive, and the emotionality of the performance is understood to be important for a proper, ritually effective lament. Lamenting is considered different from other kinds of crying, music and songs (Stepanova 2014, 2015; Silvonen and Stepanova 2020; Silvonen 2022b; see also Tolbert 1988).

In the early twentieth century, traditional ritual lament was on the wane, as a result of changes in the social, cultural and political spheres. While maintained as a

Pietinen, Finnish Heritage Agency

Oksenja Mäkiselkä, a Karelian lamenter, performing in the centenary anniversary celebration of the *Kalevala* (Finnish national epic) on 28.2.1935.

private tradition in some Karelian families, Karelian and Ingrian lamenters were also invited onto stage and radio in the context of early-twentieth-century Finnish nation-building. After the Second World War, Karelian-speaking Orthodox evacuees also performed at song festivals and Karelian feasts (Tenhunen 2006). Especially in Finnish Northern Karelia, the enthusiasm for Karelian traditions brought lamenters and other tradition specialists into local museums and tourist attractions, and the Karelian-language culture was integrated into the regional identity (Tolbert 1988: 40–3; Söderholm 1989: 184–5).

On stage, Karelian lamenters adapted to suit the aesthetic and cultural values of modern or Lutheran Finnish contexts. The public performances differed from the ritual tradition in their contexts, meanings or modes of expression, and they generally began to resemble classic poetry recitation (Söderholm 1989: 186). Traditional Karelian ritual lament, causing prejudice in Finnish contexts, was mostly abandoned (Kananen 2010: 262–5; Sarhimaa 2017: 64–5). At the same time, the laments slowly became more widely used and appreciated in new Finnish contexts. The folk music revival from the 1960s led to the founding of the folk music department at the Sibelius Academy in 1983, with some students specializing in Karelian and Ingrian laments. The lamenter association *Äänellä Itkijät ry* ('those who cry with voice') was founded in 2001.

The field of contemporary lament in Finland is diverse. The practices, meanings, performances and expressions have been moulded into new contexts with varying relations to the traditional lament (Tenhunen 2006: 287–310; Wilce 2009: 209–14 and 2017; Silvonen and Kuittinen 2023). Traditional lament has also been upheld privately in some Karelian families (Anonymous A, oral communication 2021). The main interpretations of lament in the field are laments as music, healing lament, new spiritual practices, and laments as part of Karelian identity. Interpretations are very individual, and people may relate to one or several of these.

To discuss the diverse field of laments in contemporary Finland, the anthropologist Jim Wilce (2017) uses two categories: liberalists, who apply and interpret the tradition rather freely, and traditionalists, who follow the traditional forms, practices and meanings, even though contemporary contexts may also differ from the traditional ones. Since Wilce's work, the situation has changed notably: the discussion of cultural appropriation and ownership has emerged, and the question of the relationships of Karelian and Finnish identities has become important.

Recent discussions about the ownership of laments

In 2019, the young Karelian activist Tuomo Kondie stated in an interview with Yle (the Finnish Broadcasting Company) that the Karelian minority had been oppressed in Finland and the national epic of Finland, the *Kalevala*, was originally stolen from the Karelians (Mikkonen 2019; about the *Kalevala*, see Tarkka *et al.* 2018). The interview and Karelian social media activism started a new kind of public discussion about Karelian culture and its uses in contemporary Finland, and it is still ongoing.

The most visible activists are affiliated with Karjalazet Nuoret Suomes – Karjalaiset Nuoret Šuomeššа ry (KNŠ, 'Young Karelians in Finland'), a youth association founded in 2019 with a focus on Karelian language and culture. The activism arises from the severely endangered situation and unacknowledged status of the Karelian language, as well as the various problems of identifying as Karelian in contemporary Finland. Besides Kondie, Maura Häkki has also engaged in effective social media activism and given interviews with the traditional media under their own name and identity (e.g. Kurko 2021). The focus of the criticism includes some of the most recognizable symbols of Karelian culture, which often get labelled as Finnish in public discourse. In October 2021, anonymous activists published a zine (Černiläl itkijät 2021) that criticizes Finnish researchers, artists and others involved in the field of laments. This was followed by some comments about Finnish lamenters in social media, and various private discussions among lament practitioners.

To process the conflict about the relationships of Karelian and Finnish culture, the Kalevala Society (foundation for art and research) organized four panel discussions starting in December 2021. The Karelian Culture Association and other institutions also organized seminars on the subject. The authors of this article have participated in many of these, while Kallio also participated in some private meetings of four Karelian activists and three researchers in 2021–2, and Silvonen has conducted research interviews in the diverse field of laments (2021–3).

While the discussion especially about the *Kalevala* has engaged wider Finnish audiences, those about laments have mostly involved people practising or studying laments or claiming their ownership. One target of critique has been the 'Kyynelkanavat – Laments in Contemporary Finland' project (2021–4) of researchers and artists, including the ethnomusicologist project leader Elina Hytönen-Ng and the folk-music pedagogist Emilia Kallonen (e.g. 2023); the Orthodox church musician and folklorist Riikka Patrikainen and the professional folk musician Liisa Matveinen; and the folklorist Viliina Silvonen and professional folk musician Emmi Kuittinen (e.g. 2022, 2023). In the project, the personal relations to laments and Karelian culture are diverse, which at the beginning of the project was not explicit.

The third panel discussion of the Kalevala Society (2022) focused on the lament tradition in particular. It engaged three lamenters with different approaches and identities, Liisa Matveinen, Lea Tajakka and Emilia Kallonen; two activists, Maura Häkki and Tuomo Kondie (chair); and researcher Viliina Silvonen. The panel evoked confused discussion on social media and an open letter to the *Äänellä Itkijät* members by Emilia Kallonen (2022), then the chairperson of the association, explaining and defending the association's practices. Another panel was held a year later at an international lament conference organized by the Kyynelkanavat project (2023) with the founder and honorary chairperson of *Äänellä Itkijät*, Pirkko Fihlman, the Karelian artivist (artist and activist) Mirva Haltia-Holmberg, and the folk musician Emmi Kuittinen.

Laments in Finland

In contemporary Finland, there are conflicting opinions about what the laments are, what one can do with them, and what is ethically correct. The partly overlapping main groups in the field are professional folk musicians, members and course participants of the *Äänellä Itkijät* association, and lamenters in the broader fields of new spiritualism. There are also lamenters who identify strongly with the Karelian language or the traditional Karelian concept of laments.

Professional folk musicians and performing arts

Conceptualizing laments as performing arts and bringing lament to concert venues emphasize the idea of laments as primarily music and art. While having a relation to earlier Karelian stage performances, this often detaches the practice from its original ritual contexts and culturally shared meanings (see also Haapoja 2017: 72; Silvonen 2022a: 18). However, some performing arts events can come close to traditional commemorative or everyday lamenting (for example, the lament performances at the graveyard in the art event of the Kyynelkanavat project in 2021).

Liisa Matveinen was the first to study lament as a professional folk musician at the Sibelius Academy in the 1980s. She learned lament from old Karelian lamenters, interviewing them and imitating laments from old archive tapes. Matveinen, a Finnish-speaking Karelian Orthodox herself, heard lamenting in her childhood (for example, at the Karelian Orthodox *praasniekka* feasts). Her serious stance on lamenting is based on the vernacular Karelian Orthodox religion. She emphasizes the traditional lament language and poetic devices, distinguishing lament from singing (Kalevala Society 2022). While her laments closely reflect Karelian tradition, she also accepts the use of the Finnish language and new musical interpretations (*ibid.*).

Viliina Silvonen

Liisa Matveinen, Emmi Kuittinen and Emilia Kallonen lamenting together in turns in a concert at Tartu, Estonia, in August 2023.

Emmi Kuittinen, an alumna of the Sibelius Academy, performs laments in traditional Karelian and Ingrian style and has also composed music and songs inspired by laments. She shares Matveinen's understanding about the importance of traditional poetic expression (Matveinen was one of her teachers), but mainly uses the Finnish language. Kuittinen's style of lamenting is influenced by contemporary aesthetic values. She does not make specific religious or spiritual interpretations but shares the idea of laments as speech to the deceased loved ones. She is explicit that her style and practice are not fully traditional (Silvonen and Kuittinen 2022, 2023; Kyynelkanavat 2023). In Wilce's (2017) terms, Matveinen is a traditionalist, whereas Kuittinen shares the traditionalist understanding of laments but also applies liberal ideas to the tradition.

Matveinen says that when she was learning the tradition, she often thought of who was allowed to lament and the possible contexts for lamenting. She asked the older Karelian lamenters how they felt about someone lamenting who had not learned the tradition orally in their family. Their answer was that it would be fine if one had the necessary sensitivity and the will to lament. For Matveinen, it is important that the lament tradition does not disappear (Kalevala Society 2022). Kuittinen (Silvonen and Kuittinen 2022: 86) and Emilia Kallonen, a lamenter artist (Kalevala Society 2022), also talk about the importance of reflecting on these questions. As a professional folk musician, Kuittinen thinks that it is valuable to display other music cultures than Western ones to increase diversity, but that anyone wanting to use the culture really needs to get to know and understand it (Näätänen 2023: 29).

In the performing arts, the ideas of what laments are or how they can be applied often derive from the wider ideologies of contemporary folk music (see e.g. Hill 2007; Haapoja 2017). Liberal global ideals about renouncing nationalism, sharing culture, and music connecting people universally originate from broader ideologies that emphasize global solidarity and reflect environmental, anti-racist and anti-patriotic discourses (Haapoja 2017: 127). In this field, laments are mainly used in stage performances. Knowledge of the traditional lament language and practices is usually strong, but the contexts, performances, language and melodic features are renewed, and the cultural coding and communal recognition of the practice differ from traditional lament (Silvonen and Kuittinen 2022). Despite making references to traditional Karelian culture, performances are usually set in the frame of contemporary artistic practices rather than being displays of tradition.

The lament association *Äänellä Itkijät* and the healing lament

The main activities of the *Äänellä Itkijät* association are lament courses, lament circles and other events (Äänellä Itkijät 2010 and n.d.; on lament circles, see Hytönen-Ng and Kallonen 2023). Most of these practices take place in Finnish settings and in the Finnish language. Yet the idea of continuing and sharing the tradition is strong in the association, and the current practices are usually discussed as a revival (see e.g. Tenhunen 2006; Wilce 2009, 2017). The idea of all cultures being shared for the common good is often present (e.g. Kallonen and Äänellä Itkijät 2019).

Pirkko Fihlman initiated the first popular lament seminar in 1998, inviting researchers, old Karelian lamenters and Liisa Matveinen to teach lament (Tenhunen 2006: 294). Although Fihlman has a Karelian family background from Border Karelia, she first learned about laments when asked to lament for an amateur theatre play in 1997. On the basis of her own experiences and career as a social worker, she emphasizes the healing power of the tradition and seeks to transmit it to wider audiences (pp. 339–46).

While the interpretations of laments in *Äänellä Itkijät* are varied, the emphasis is often on emotional and psychological interpretations: genuine inner grief is the starting point for a lament, and laments provide the means to process emotions in ways that are lacking in contemporary Finnish society (Tenhunen 2006; Kallonen and Äänellä Itkijät 2019; Kyynelkanavat 2023). The healing power of laments is understood to be part of the process of lamenting: the lamenter confronts their deep emotional charge and turns it into lamenting

(Kallonen and Äänellä Itkijät 2019).

The idea of the healing lament is very popular in contemporary Finland, as seen by its visibility in the media and lament courses offered by supporters of this interpretation. Wilce (2017: 274) notes that courses of healing laments 'share features with other New Age healing courses'. Indeed, such features as lament retreats, lament altars, and objects on display at a lament course – or associating lamenters with shamans even – are connected to the new spiritual movements. These interpretations are often defined by liberal ideas, eclecticism, emphasis on individualistic experience and spiritual development (see e.g. Hunt 2003: 139; Frisk and Nynäs 2012).

In contrast, Matveinen's and Kuittinen's courses, for example, emphasize the lament's traditional poetics and ritual contexts, not therapeutic or spiritual qualities. The healing ideology also is attached to some art practices but not shared by the whole field of performing arts (see Silvonen and Kuittinen 2022: 93).

In relation to the Karelian tradition, the healing lament reflects a new, liberal interpretation. The older archival sources do not mention healing effects but talk about physical, mental and emotional hardness, and thus the potential danger of lamenting (e.g. Tolbert 1988: 80; Silvonen and Stepanova 2020: 216).

Shamanistic interpretations linked to laments

Neo-shamanistic practices are often characterized by a search for a spiritual past that has been long lost because of Christianity and modernization. In this quest, minority or indigenous traditions are often used in ways that are criticized by the minorities and can in many cases be seen as cultural appropriation. At the same time, some communities may see themselves as minority groups that have (historically) been persecuted by the world religions or states (Huhndorf 2015; Urban 2015). These conflicting views have also been visible in social media discussions around the laments and new spirituality.

Although the very same people can practise both laments and other spiritual or religious practices, they do not necessarily mix them (see e.g. Rautaniemi and Käppi 2017; Souri 2019). There have been combinations of separate sessions for neo-shamanistic drumming circles and lament workshops (Krabbe 2020), or a person can perform as a shaman-violinist and give lament courses with a lament altar (Paldanius 2021). We are aware of only occasional examples of combining drumming and laments: here, the performance is reminiscent of singing and the purpose does not seem to be travelling to the otherworld but rather entering into a more meditative state of mind (see also Rautaniemi and Käppi 2017). Yet, shamanistic interpretations are popular in the contemporary field of laments, including in the *Äänellä Itkijät* association (e.g. Heijne n.d.), although these are also denied by some of the practitioners (e.g. Kallonen, Kuittinen, and Matveinen, oral communication 2021). The lamenter may be equated with a shaman and their lament to a journey to the otherworld.

The main origin of the shamanistic interpretations of laments seems to be the work of the musicologist Elizabeth Tolbert (1988: 73–81). Tolbert was inspired by the folklorist Lauri Honko's (e.g. 1974: 58 and 1978: 85) phenomenological comparison of lamenters and shamans. She took this comparison further and combined it with her fieldwork among contemporary lamenters in the 1980s, interpretations of archival sources, and research into shamanism (Tolbert 1988: 73–4). Jim Wilce (2009: 47) refers to Tolbert and his own fieldwork when suggesting yet further interpretations of the shamanistic aspects of lament. Their publications have also affected the popular field in return, reinforcing shamanistic interpretations.

The idea of lamenting having shamanistic qualities is not supported by older archival material or ethnographic sources. The traditional Karelian lamenters did not see themselves as healers, sorcerers or shamans, although some of them were ritual specialists (other than lamenting) or healers too. In traditional Karelian society, all women were supposed to be able to lament. Although laments were seen as speech to the otherworld, they were not a means to travel in-between the worlds. According to traditional Karelian conceptions, the lamenter's soul does not leave her body, and it is the lament that is heard in the otherworld. Thus, the shamanistic and new spiritual interpretations of the lament tradition are mostly not in accord with the traditional emic understandings and belief system of Karelian lamenting (see e.g. Silvonen 2022a: 36–7).

Laments relating Karelian identity

Some lamenters explicitly emphasize the meaning of laments for Karelian identities and beliefs. Two of them, Lea Tajakka and Mirva Haltia-Holmberg, have also participated in recent panel discussions. At the inception of the *Äänellä Itkijät* association, this perspective was also present, as seen in the lament in Karelian by one of the founding members, Lyyli Arhipov (Yle Areena 2011).

For the Finnish-Karelian Lea Tajakka, laments are a way to connect with her Karelian family and culture, and lamenting means maintaining the community through commemoration. She grew up in Eastern Finland with Orthodox Karelian culture. Like Matveinen, she remembers lamenters performing at the *praasniekka* feasts in her childhood. Tajakka lamented for the first time after her mother died, and she describes how the lament just came from deep inside. Tajakka has also attended Finnish lamenting courses. She cherishes the traditional Karelian lamenting but also sees possibilities for various new applications based on the Karelian tradition. She feels that the Karelian language is her only option for lamenting, but she does not oppose lamenting in Finnish. For her, lament is mostly a private practice (Kalevala Society 2022).

Mirva Haltia-Holmberg is a Karelian artivist working for the revival of Karelian culture and identity. In spring 2022, she published a short film *Itkunaiga* ('Time for/of lament') on YouTube as part of her studies of Karelian language and culture at the University of Eastern Finland. The traditional style of the song and the lament in the video derive from her family tradition, documented in Finnish archives. Haltia-Holmberg relates mainly to the vernacular Karelian beliefs and some vernacular Orthodox traditions, but not to the Orthodox Church. While Karelian laments for her are about communication with *syndyzet* and are for Karelians only, she does not oppose new kinds of Karelian uses of tradition. Her online works about Karelian culture are meant to help other Karelians reclaim and revive their culture, and she is affiliated with KNŠ as a senior member (Kyynelkanavat 2023; Haltia-Holmberg interview 2023).

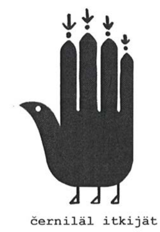
Haltia-Holmberg and Tajakka approach lamenting from the perspective of traditional meanings and practices rather than liberalist interpretations, and Holmberg also voices intergenerational traumas related to assimilation and repression of public expressions of Karelian language identities in Finland.

Karelian criticism of lament in Finland

The zine 'Padotut kyyneleet' ('blocked tears') written under the pseudonym '*Černiläl itkijät*' ('those who cry on ink') in 2021 was the first wider (semi-)public criticism of the Finnish field of laments. It blames Finns for exploiting the lament culture of the evacuees, dismissing Karelian experiences, knowing the tradition only on the basis of books or archival sources, claiming ownership of a tradition without appropriate ethnic relations or identities, and making Karelians pay Finns for lament courses in order to learn an edited version of the tradition that was first beaten out of the minority by other Finns.

While the zine only vaguely indicates the objects of criticism, it seems to target various fields: different kinds of past and present researchers, folk-music practitioners, and lament-course leaders. As the professional fields are relatively small, many of the targets felt directly attacked. Later discussions in social media have also included direct criticism of some practitioners who do not have Karelian identities – or at least public ones – or who have neo-shamanistic backgrounds, which the activists seem to take as the most offensive.

In an Instagram post about neo-shamanism, Maura Häkki (2021b) writes that the appropriation and misuse of the Karelian tradition is structural and normalized in Finland, and Finns feel entitled to freely use any Finnic minority traditions. In particular, they criticize the field of neo-shamanism, using the concept of 'plastic shaman' (see Aldred 2000) for members of the majority making use of and misinterpreting the minority group's spiritual traditions. For activists, what they call Karelian 'old belief', including the ritual lament, is a closed religion. (If we understand correctly, the term refers to the traditional folk belief or vernacular lived religion in



The covers of the Minizine.

contemporary family settings. Although they recognize syncretistic aspects, the 'old belief' is not associated with the Orthodox tradition or the Old Believers of the Eastern Orthodox Church.) Similar views relating to laments have been expressed in shorter social media comments by other activists. In another post, Häkki (2021a) poses ten questions to researchers of Karelian culture concerning their research motives, cultural sensitivity, power structures and the impacts of research on the Karelian minority.

During the panel discussion organized by the Kalevala Society in 2022, Häkki told of having learned that laments are about communication with the ancestors, being related to the identity, language and collective worldview of Karelians. Häkki asked who is allowed to decide how the Karelian laments are modernized and detached from their original contexts: for Karelians, laments are something sacred. The Karelian perspective is defined by fear of assimilation and appropriation, and faced with marginalization in Finnish society, as Finns without any Karelian identity even are free to practise and transform Karelian culture. Both art and research have important roles in defining what is Karelian culture and minority, and how these are understood in society. Tuomo Kondie added that for both him and Häkki, the dominant experience is that of a painful and traumatic loss. Karelian culture is accepted as a Finnish hobby, but when Karelians are trying to revive and reclaim their culture, it is seen as something dangerous.

In these sources, we interpret the Karelian criticism as resulting from and targeting several key aspects on different levels:

1. The history of oppression, difficult intergenerational experiences, and the present endangered state of the Karelian-language minority in Finland (see e.g. Sallinen-Gimpl 1994; Kananen 2010; Sarhimaa 2017), which are unknown to most members of Finnish society.

2. Finnish humanistic research history that has mostly discussed Karelians as a subgroup of the Finnish people and used nineteenth-century Karelian folk culture and belief systems as a source for constructing the Finnish past, thus denying independent Karelian ethnic and linguistic identity (see Sihvo 2003 [1973]; Tarkka *et al.* 2018; Stepanova 2020). The fields of laments and neo-paganism draw on this research, and outdated scholarly attitudes often keep recurring, including in many academic contexts.

3. A shortage of humanistic research, art and public discussion that makes the minority experiences and the differences between Karelian and Finnish cultures visible and understandable (see Häkki 2021b). This is contrasted with those parts of current art and research that claim all Karelian traditions to be Finnish or present Finnish-majority perspectives of Karelian traditions, such as:

a. Contemporary lamenters who organize courses for anyone interested, selling or transmitting the Karelian tradition with interpretations that often differ from traditional practices and meanings, while claiming to safeguard the Karelian tradition.

b. Artists who think that music and culture are universal phenomena, that performing and transforming minority traditions automatically supports the minorities, and that all traditional music is free to use.

c. New spiritual and neo-shamanistic practitioners using or reframing Karelian traditions, combining these with elements from other traditions, or interpreting laments as a Finnish tradition.

These different levels of criticism are difficult to handle in quick social media or face-to-face discussions. The activists often draw on Anglo-American post-colonial discourses relating to linguistic, ethnic (BIPOC+) and sexual (LGBTQIA+) minorities. As the wider public is often not familiar with these, the discourse has also led to various counter-reactions. Yet, the panel discussion of the Kalevala Society in 2022 and its repercussions seem to have taken an important step in increasing mutual understanding.

The initial and unsolved problem is that the experiences and needs of the Karelian minority are rarely known in Finland. The sociolinguist Anneli Sarhimaa (2017) argues that Finnish society has silenced the Karelian-speaking minority and does not even properly recognize it. In general, the activists bring up minority experiences that have been mostly dismissed in earlier public discussions. At the same time, the activists are not always fully familiar with the fields of contemporary research and art.

Who is Karelian?

The complexity and diversity of Karelian identities significantly affect the ongoing discussions about Karelian laments in

Finland. As a result of the history of assimilating, idealizing, exoticizing, silencing and projecting on the past the Orthodox Karelian-speaking Karelians, the dominant discourse treats all Karelians as a subcategory of Finns. This view is also shared by many people with Karelian ancestry: not all descendants of Karelians have a Karelian identity, and many do not even know they had Karelian-speaking grandparents (Leppävuori 2015). Many Karelians in Finland position their ethnic and cultural identity as somewhere between Finnish and Karelian, or as both, while others understand themselves as Karelian only (e.g. Kalevala Society 2022; see also Selin *et al.* 2023: 8 n. 21). Thus, 'Karelian' can refer to different intersecting national, linguistic, ethnic, cultural and religious identities – and, similarly, 'Finnish' can refer to very different levels and aspects of identity and culture. This, in part, complicates the popular discussions.

A minority of Karelians, especially those who identify with the Karelian language or who are not citizens of Finland, understand Karelians and Finns as two different people with their own languages and cultures. This view has not been socially accepted in Finland, although it is supported by sociolinguistic research and ethnographic data (Sarhimaa 2017; Stepanova 2020). Karelians face dismissive and assimilating opinions when expressing their independent Karelian identities, and the new Karelian activism has faced disproportionate reactions, documented, for example, in the comments sections of media articles or on online discussion platforms (e.g. Kurki 2022; Ylilauta 2022).

The activist criticism describes Karelian identity and ethnicity in ways that are new to Finnish public discussion, aiming to create a new discourse for Karelian experiences that have not been expressed in public before. These efforts surprise and sometimes irritate not only Finns but also those Karelians who see their Karelian identity as a part of the Finnish one (see e.g. Örn 2022).

Indeed, while people with Karelian ancestry have often been interested in Karelian traditions, it has not been common to claim Karelian identities in public. Thus, especially at the beginning of the debate about laments, the activists tended to assume that persons who did not publicly declare their Karelian identity were Finns (only). Many targets felt hurt, not only because of the new kind of criticism but also for being mislabelled (Anonymous B–F, oral communications 2021). The public criticism has motivated several people to publicly declare their Karelian identities or ancestral relations, be it in folk music (e.g. Jää 2022), neo-pagan or neo-shamanistic movements (e.g. Souri 2019; karhukainen 2022), or the research project Kyynelkanavat, where all but one participant identify as Karelian or Finno-Karelian through family roots. The *Äänellä Itkijät* association itself, from the very beginning, has identified as an organization aimed at 'cherishing, upholding, advancing and promoting lament traditions and Karelian culture' (Äänellä Itkijät n.d.) with several Karelian founding members. The expressed identities (through the family to Finnish- or Karelian-speaking traditionally Lutheran or Orthodox Karelian backgrounds) also fit the definition of Karelian identities set forth by the KNŠ association, which also emphasizes belonging to the culture and community (KNŠ n.d.).

Liz Bucar (2022: 205; see also Fonneland and Kraft 2014) has analysed situations where the 'owners' of a religious practice do not form a unified community, noting that 'religious insiders can steal their own religion'. Some insiders, for example, may interpret sharing and re-contextualization as a sign of mainstream acceptance, whereas the others see this as contributing to the marginalization of the minority (Bucar 2022: 28). Indeed, as shown above, the heterogeneous Karelian community has diverse and contradictory views about what can be done with the Karelian lament tradition – and by whom.

In Finland, the processes of modernization have emphasized national identity and weakened local and ethnic ones (see e.g. Anttonen 2005). In contemporary society, ethnic Finnishness is mostly talked about in ethno-nationalist and populist right-wing discourse (see e.g. Norocel *et al.* 2022). While the liberalist, universalist discourses try to avoid problematic nationalistic or racist ideologies, they may also make it more difficult to recognize positive ethnic and national identities, and, as here with the Karelians, difficult ethnic minority positions.

The official status of the Karelian language in Finland is slowly improving (Koivisto 2017: 423–7; Sarhimaa 2017). EU minority-language policies, indigenous and minority research, discussions about cultural appropriation, and the rise of social media have made it easier for minorities to verbalize their situation and claim recognition. And yet, the experiences of the Karelian-speaking minority are often not known or recognized by Finns, Finnish-speaking Karelians, and Karelians who identify as Finns. This kind of unintended ignorance, combined with a poor recognition of power relations, can lead to practices that the minority sees as harmful (Bucar 2022: 13). The core issue, then, might not be the personal Karelian or Finnish identities themselves but the ways in which the different actors position themselves in relation to the minority perspectives and experiences. Claiming Karelian identity does not determine the effects that artistic, cultural or academic work has on the popular understandings of the Karelian minority and the possibilities of the minority to build the independent cultural and linguistic identities it needs, for example, for safeguarding the Karelian language (see also Young 2005; Bucar 2022).

Conclusion

At the heart of the dispute about laments in contemporary Finland is the question of ownership of Karelian traditions and the authority to transform and modernize them. Karelian laments have been re-interpreted, taken into new contexts, formed into Finnish practices, and spread into Finnish society not only by Finns but also by many lamenters with a Karelian background or identity. In the last couple of years, Finnish practices and interpretations have been critiqued as appropriation by Karelian activists, who are seeking to have independent Karelian identities recognized in Finnish society.

Jim Wilce (2017) describes the contemporary field of laments as consisting mostly of liberalist and some traditionalist approaches. For most people in the field of performing arts and in the lament association *Äänellä Itkijät*, lament is seen as a universal human expression that belongs to anyone who is interested. Musicians see laments as a special genre of folk music defined by aesthetics. In *Äänellä Itkijät,* the processing of personal emotions is interpreted as the central element of laments, which can benefit people from various backgrounds. New spiritual practitioners may also look for lost pre-Christian practices.

In general, when connected to the use of minority or indigenous cultures, liberal ideologies have been criticized for sometimes dismissing the elements of structural injustice and not recognizing the privileges of majority members (Bucar 2022: 13). Furthermore, according to Bucar (pp. 24–6), the distinction between spirituality and religiosity that is commonly made within new spirituality (e.g. Annunen and Utriainen 2023: 139–40) 'eases the way for appropriating the religious practices of others', as it can lead to the thought that spiritual elements can be borrowed without getting involved in religion. For activists, all non-Karelian practices are appropriation, and the core of laments is a traditional Karelian ritual practice connected either to Orthodox Christian or vernacular Karelian religion.

What makes the overall setting particularly complex is the closeness and partly blurred lines between Karelian and Finnish traditions, languages and identities. As a result of the long processes of assimilation, Karelian identities are not very pronounced in contemporary Finnish society, and they are often combined with Finnish ones. While Karelian identity is a key question of ownership for many Karelian activists, the views on the laments and who is allowed to lament differ considerably among the diverse range of people with legitimate Karelian or Finno-Karelian identities. Thus, the debate is not found only between Finns and Karelians but also between Karelians with different opinions about Karelian identities and laments, and their modernization.

Reflecting on responsible ways of borrowing religion, Bucar (2022: 213–6) argues that instead of picking up some elements while ignoring the profound meanings and the worldview behind the religious practice itself, one should borrow more: 'The exploitation of religious appropriation lies in the partialness of the borrowing'. In the case of Finnish uses of Karelian laments, this is clearly not a solution that would satisfy the activists. Some aspects of the situation can also be interpreted in terms of members of the culture appropriating their own tradition (see p. 205) by modernizing and re-contextualizing it in new ways to be used by outsiders.

Earlier practitioners with a strong family tradition and Karelian minority identity may have understood the modern uses of laments in Finnish settings or in the Finnish language as positive, being useful through their potential to reduce discrimination against the Karelian traditions and laments – and even make them appreciated – in Finnish society. In contrast, contemporary activists relate that for them, the main feeling connected with laments is one of loss and pain. From the perspective of lost or reclaimed language and cultural heritage, the practices that embrace the Finnish perspective appear as assimilation or cultural appropriation.

Thus, the underlying question in the debate is not only what the Karelian laments are or who is Karelian, but how the different uses and modifications of the Karelian tradition affect the present Karelian minority, in terms of both the minority identity and the majority conceptions of the minority – or the lack thereof. The popular perceptions of the minority by the majority contribute to structural inequalities. The current issues include whether the endangered Karelian language will get the legal position and the resources it needs, whether Karelian children can learn their language at school, or whether at the grassroots level of society it is possible to express independent minority Karelian identities without fear of discrimination or contempt. ■

A folklorist specializing in the Karelian lament tradition and its offshoots in Finland, **Viliina Silvonen** is interested in performance, poetics, emotions and affective power, historical and cultural meanings, and changing sociocultural contexts. She has studied the historical tradition especially via archival audio material, applying text, music and sound/voice analyses, and sensory ethnography, and contemporary lament using ethnographic methods and in collaboration with a musician-lamenter artist. Silvonen has participated in the ongoing discussions about Karelian laments in Finland in popular articles, panels and presentations. She has Karelian-speaking roots herself. Working as a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Eastern Finland in the 'Kyynelkanavat – Laments in Contemporary Finland' (2021–4) and 'Karelian Perspective to the Folk Music in Finland' (2023–4) projects, she is also a member of the multi-disciplinary research community of the Finnish Literature Society (SKS). Photo: Emma Suominen, SKS.

Kati Kallio works as a research fellow of the Finnish Research Council at the research department of the Finnish Literature Society, and is affiliated also with the University of Helsinki. Specializing in Finnic oral poetry (*runo* songs or Kalevalaic poetry), she is a folklorist interested in historical oral traditions, local genres, poetics, performance and intertextuality. She has participated in the recent discussions about the relationships of Karelian and Finnish identities in popular articles, blogs, panels and presentations. Kallio does not herself have Karelian identity or roots. The article is written as a part of the Academy of Finland projects 346342, 333138, and 322071 and the 'Karelian Perspective to the Folk Music in Finland' project (Pekka Suutari, University of Eastern Finland). Photo: Emma Suominen, SKS.

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