

## Greed and Work in Finland-Swedish Folklore

**G**reed, or avarice, is one of the cardinal sins. Protestant Swedish Finn folklore demonstrates expressions of greed, even if the actual term is not mentioned. In folk religion Christian norms and values are combined with elements of folk belief. Theologians certainly clarify the gospel, but how lay people have implemented it should also be considered. With the help of proverbs and folklore legends from rural Swedish-Finland in the nineteenth century, I want to reflect on the idea of the Sabbath, or holiday, and work, in combination with considerations of envy and 'the limited good'. Greed can be regarded as an expression for work in the wrong time and in the wrong way.

### Introduction

In his book *Geisterglaube in Ingermanland* Lauri Honko presented his readers with a key concept, that is to say, the concept of *onni* (Finnish), which means prosperity (Honko 1962, *passim*). His investigation demonstrates that a person who behaves decently, according to spoken and unspoken rules, will receive, by the help of the supernatural world, what he needs to make himself and his family and household a good living. He also showed that folklore contains the relevant norms and values behind these rules. Lauri Honko's book inspired me to look at other economic expressions in the rural culture of Finland. For instance, one might think of envy or the 'evil eye'. Each of them is a concept that is related to ideas about the balance of resources in a society (cf. Foster 1972, cf. Dundes 1981). Another notion is the concept of greed, or avarice. Who is greedy, and what happens to a greedy person, and why? Does he succeed in augmenting his fortune or does he lose what he has set his heart on?

With the help of proverbs and folklore legends from nineteenth-century Protestant, rural Swedish-Finland, I want to reflect on the idea of work and the Sabbath or holiday in combination with considerations about envy and 'the limited good'.<sup>1</sup> Is it possible, with the help of these concepts, to pinpoint avarice? How is the greedy person presented in folklore? My material consists of nearly a hundred texts, but here I will only offer two of the legends, as examples.

### What is greed?

In Swedish Finland there is a proverb called 'Snålheten bedrar visheten' (*Finlands svenska folkdiktning* 1923: 145). It corresponds to the English idea of being 'penny-wise and pound-foolish'. Its content brings the same message as Aesop's classic story about the dog that crosses a bridge with a piece of meat in his mouth. When he sees a bigger piece of meat reflected in the water, he opens his mouth wide, in order to snatch it, but thereby he loses the whole lot. The message is that man should be happy with his share and

1 Due to historical reasons Finland is a bilingual country. According to law, Finnish and Swedish-speaking Finns, or Finland-Swedes, have equal duties as well as rights to all kinds of social services, including education, and religious education. Folklore from Swedish-speaking informants from the nineteenth century is abundant. – Foster's thoughts about the limited good were criticized. However, I find the model of thinking useful for this paper. I am aware of the fact that Foster conducted his investigation in a living society whereas my material is taken from a society which is no longer there. Therefore my study is more of a theoretical conjecture than a description of people's actual behaviour. – A similar article was published in Wolf-Knuts 2013.



*Death and the Miser* by Jan Provoos, first half of the sixteenth century.

not hanker after more. In other words, man should not be avaricious or greedy. Otherwise he might lose his entire fortune.

In Swedish, *snål* has several meanings. *Norstedts Svensk ordbok* explains the concept firstly as being excessively economical or moderate, that is, the opposite of generous, secondly as scantily measured, insufficient, and, thirdly, as biting, as in the expression 'a biting wind'. In dialects, *snål* means desirous or even greedy, or avaricious. 'Greedy' or 'avaricious' is often translated into Swedish *girig*, which can also mean miserly or covetous. Generally, a person who is *snål* is unwilling to share with other people, he keeps all his fortune, goods, food or whatever to himself, whereas the person who is greedy or avaricious wants to enlarge and increase his possessions. The expression 'to be *snål* for something' normally indicates that somebody desires something specific to eat. Certainly, the two concepts *snål* and *girig* are closely related, for the one who wants more is unlikely to share what he has got. In this article the concept of *snål* should be interpreted as greedy or avaricious (*girig*), for the material concerns people who like to (unduly) increase their property.

Greed, or avarice, is one of the deadly sins (cf. Staats 1986: 734–70). Like other cardinal sins (*peccata mortalia*) in medieval times, greed was said to lead to eternal death. Since then, these sins have received attention in Christian education even if, in the Protestant Church, they are not regarded as holding such an exceptional position as is the case in the Catholic Church. Among other documents, some of the Ten Commandments – the Fifth, Seventh, Ninth and Tenth – warn humans about greed. Even today, they play an important role in arguments about ethical matters. For instance, greed is regarded as one of society's strongest driving forces (cf. Stanley Weiser and Oliver Stone's movie *Wall Street*, 1987).

Greed has many forms, such as a wish for money or *filargyria*, or a general longing for things or for sex, or a 'spiritualised' wish for knowledge (as in the Faust legend). Greed is said to have helped maintain the social balance between rich people, who are obliged to give of their riches, and poor people, who should stay poor, in order for the rich to help them. The ideal of the Catholic Church was asceticism, and the corresponding ideal of the Protestant Church was modesty, which implies thrift, industry, enterprise and an

economic ability (cf. Newhauser 2000; Wolf-Knuts 1991: 63). Avarice is the counterpart of these skills and qualities. In this article, greed means to lay hands on something or somebody in an unfair way, and it is expressed as an intense desire to increase one's riches by specific actions. These riches are not necessarily money, but can also include other coveted objects.<sup>2</sup>

## Work

The concept of work is a complicated one. In classical Greece work was not suitable for a free man, whereas today work is a precondition for freedom. Here I will not consider the concept from all its perspectives. In this paper, work can mean effort, hardship, ambition, something a person does for a specific purpose, an occupation, a task, workmanship, or a product.<sup>3</sup> 'Work' can be a concrete thing one does for one's living, and it can also be symbolic; for instance one's heart, or machines are said to be working. Sometimes work has a qualitative connotation, think for instance of the proverb 'Arbetet adlar mannen' (Work ennobles man).<sup>4</sup> Often just manual work is what is meant by the term 'work'. For example, one of my students did not think of writing an essay as work, for it didn't involve getting her hands dirty.

Pekka Hakamies has demonstrated how, by the help of schemes, he was able to discern general 'truths' about the world. 'By the help of schemes people picture the surrounding reality', he stated (Hakamies 2001). Also Finland-Swedish proverbs contain guiding principles for how to arrange the surrounding world. 'Arbetaren är sin lön värd' (He who works owes his wages) shows that one's living depends on one's effort for better or for worse. 'Arbete och möda, daglig spis och föda' (Work and drudgery; daily food

and nourishment) means that one receives what one deserves. 'Arbetet skämmer ingen' (Work does not spoil anybody) tells us that there is work of different quality, and that nobody is too noble to work. 'Arbeta så lever du' means that work is a precondition for life, which can be improved, for 'Ju mera man arbetar, desto bättre skall man få' (The more one works, the better it will be).

Man works for his existence, but also for his independence, in order to maintain or reach social ideals. Work can be regarded as a form of therapy. Work gives status. If a person in Finland is 'hyvä työhminen' (Finnish for 'a good worker') he is industrious and skilful, and extremely respectable and estimated. Very interesting is the proverb 'Man skall ej arbeta så väl, att man svälter ihjäl' (One shall not work so well that one starves to death). There seems to be a limit to how industrious a person can be, or how high quality a product should be.

Work can be regarded as the opposite of spare time, or the Sabbath. In the time when my material was collected, the church understanding of holidays dominated. The Third Commandment goes 'Tänk på vilodagen så att du helgar den' (Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy) (Luther 1962: 6). The holiday started on Saturday evening at six o'clock with the ringing in of the Sabbath (cf. Wolf-Knuts 2002; Skjelbred 1983: 74–8; Bringéus 1958: 115). Work on Sundays was not acceptable unless it was vital, such as taking care of cattle or children.

## Material and method

Beside the proverbs my material consists of tales from the Swedish-speaking parts of Finland around the turn of the 1900s. However, there are always some methodological problems with this kind of oldish archive material. The texts are most likely merely résumés of what the storytellers said, and therefore they are not good enough for a linguistic analysis of spoken language. Due to a method of collecting folklore according to underlying political ideas of how folklore was diffused among different peoples the material is not representative of a place or an era. We can only state that this kind of tale was told at a specific time in a specific place. Likewise, due to the collectors' main focus on the motifs of folklore items instead of their functions, we do not know anything about the situational context, in which the tale could have been actualised without a collector taking part. The tales are anonymous. We hardly know anything about the informants' age or gender.

- 2 An unsolved problem remains the Doctor Faustus cycle. It is not clear if Faustus's longing for knowledge is a kind of greed or if he has rather overstepped the boundaries between earth and heaven, divine and human.
- 3 In trying to understand the meaning of the concept of work in a Finland-Swedish context I was inspired by *Svenska Akademiens Ordbok* and the third volume of *Finlands svenska folkdiktning*, the volume containing proverbs and proverbial sayings (*Svenska Akademiens Ordbok* 1903: s.v. 'Arbete'; *Finlands svenska folkdiktning* 1923: 3).
- 4 If nothing else is stated, expressions and proverbs are given in Swedish, with an English translation in brackets.





*Deadly Sins. Avarice* by Jesus Solana.

However, the cultural context can be reconstructed to some extent. From associated scholarship we know quite a lot about the history, theology, economics, that is to say, the ways of life in rural Finland around 1850. This knowledge should be utilised when analysing folklore material. Orvar Löfgren gives a good example in his article about Swedish fishermen and their beliefs. He analysed folklore material against the background of a broadly reconstructed cultural context, which made it possible for him to regard the fishermen's worldview as a system 'mirroring [their] social and economical reality' (Löfgren 1981: 67). He wrote his article when folklore studies had changed from text-critical research into the study of the human beings who had told the stories in the archived material. Consequently he stated: 'It takes a different kind of analysis to find this inner logic and consistency in the material, an analysis that does not start with the concrete forms but looks for the underlying structures' (Löfgren 1981: 84). In this way he was able to sort out expressions for greed, envy, luck, and work among fishermen.

Protestant Christian ideas about work and greed will be a central starting point for my attempt to un-

derstand a couple of legends. Protestant Christianity has dominated belief in Finland over the last few centuries. The Ten Commandments were one of the bases for folk religiosity. They were widely taught as part of the preparation for confirmation. Therefore, they were generally recognised. My task is to interpret Finland-Swedish tales about greed, but I cannot do this in the same way as a theologian would do it. I have to reach the forms of belief that rural people cherished (cf. Pleijel 1967: 64). Consequently, I have to interpret the tales after re-situating them with the help of knowing what rural society in Finland in the nineteenth century was like and with the help of theoretical perspectives on an extraordinary situation, supply of resources, and work (life among the rural Swedish speaking population is described, for instance, in Ahlbäck 1983).

### Theoretical perspectives

In 1926, the Swedish folklorist Carl Wilhelm von Sydow maintained that some specific natural objects, animals and human beings catch the attention because of their extraordinariness, and moreover, that people tend to associate supernatural power and/or danger with them (von Sydow 1971: 200–14). When people's everyday lives and routines were interrupted, they had to manage in an unexpected situation; they had to explain, interpret, and understand it in order to defend themselves and to escape, maintaining an equilibrium as much as possible. My starting point is that stories about greed are stories about an extraordinary situation which could be risky for the individual and for society.

I also want to consider the tales from two other perspectives; namely envy and the limited good. According to George M. Foster, 'envy is present when one person has something a second person would like to have' and envy functions along two axes; the competitive axis and the fear axis (Foster 1972: 168, 166). When looking for evidence of greed, the competitive axis of envy is a suitable tool for me. However, my legend texts are not speaking about envy *expressis verbis*. This is always a problem, for the legends are just telling a story about people in everyday life, not mentioning all kinds of terminology that I, as a scholar, am looking for. So the word 'greed' is extremely seldom mentioned in the legends. I am the one, who has to interpret the texts, and, in a way, I already do so before I start to analyse them. By selecting these from the enormous stock of folklore from Swedish-Finland I regard the legends as texts, the

cultural background of which is based on thoughts about the balance between earthly possessions. I try to demonstrate that this selection of texts can be interpreted as legends about greed.

The idea of the limited good concerns ideas about a limited supply of something, and, that man runs the risk of receiving too little of it. If somebody receives or takes too much, somebody else will suffer. The idea of balance is crucial (Foster 1965). If balance is disturbed the situation is critical, and extraordinary.

I would like to combine the ideas of balance and limited resources with ideas about the value of work. John Lindow has inspired me in this with his investigation of the changeling. The changeling legends are probably about sick or developmentally-disabled children, who were seen as the children of trolls, whose mother swapped them for human children, when nobody was watching the cradle. His idea is that these stories do not only tell about aberrant humans, but that they also carry an economic message (Lindow 2008: 215–34). The stories portray the children growing in a very obvious way, which presupposes a lot of eating. However, a lot to eat, that is to say food, can only be produced by hard work, and as these children eat a lot, without being able to work for their food, they are regarded as a burden and must be explained as something strange, even non-human, something extraordinary. The proverb: 'Den som inte vill arbeta han ska heller inte äta' (He who does not want to work shall not eat) is relevant here as an explanation (2 Thess. 3:10). I think that this value of work, already fixed in the proverb, has an impact on legends, too.

### Work on the Sabbath

En man på Stor-Mälö begav sig en lång-fredagsmorgon ut att skjuta tjäder. Han sköt och sköt på en tjäder, och det föll ned liksom en bast-acko (skjutlucka i bastu), men fågeln bara spelade. Då mannen skulle gå hem, fann han ej vägen. Först på aftonen kom han till Västermälö. Sedan dess gick han aldrig ut att skjuta på helgdagsmorgnar. (*Finlands svenska folkdiktning* 1919: 794)<sup>5</sup>

This legend is about a man, who goes out hunting on Good Friday morning. He tries repeatedly to shoot

5 I do not provide a translation of the exemplificatory legends. Instead, I prefer to explain the contents in my analysis.

a capercaillie, without success. When he wants to go home, he cannot find his way and doesn't get back until the evening. This he regards as a warning and he never hunts on a holiday again.

I see the Ten Commandments as disciplinary methods. The Third Commandment reminds one to remember the Sabbath day in order to keep it holy. Consequently, the holiday should be respected. The general interpretation of the Sabbath is partly that it meets people's need for rest. Theologians say that in the same way that God rested on the seventh day after he had created the world, man should do the same, for man is said to be made in the image of God. However, I want to explore these statements a bit more. The man in the legend did something extraordinary. According to the Third Commandment one should not work on holidays. Hunting was regarded as work in a society where butcher's shops were rare. My interpretation of the text is that the man was greedy, and therefore went out to work – in other words hunting – at a forbidden time, in order to acquire more quarry than others, who were obeying the Commandment, and staying at home. Without competition, a shot and dead capercaillie would have given him a lot of good meat which under normal circumstances his neighbours would actually have had the chance to share with him. However, somebody, we cannot tell who it was, perhaps God, the master of prey, or somebody else (cf. Mansikka 1933: 234–5; today one might perhaps say 'nature'), prevented him from catching and killing the bird, and thereby prevented him from continuing to sin. This might not be the only explanation for the man's failure. Another one could be that the balance of resources in this particular community was maintained by supernatural interference. I suggest this story can be interpreted as saying that work can lead to food, but work must be conducted properly, at the appropriate time, and according to more or less unspoken rules about limited resources, and that balance must be maintained in sharing them, and, consequently, justice.

### Lost fortune

I Bollsta bäcken finnes en kopparkittel med pengar, som fru Märsta Påse lät sänka ner där under någon ofredstid. Två karlar fingo sedan höra om det och voro för att taga upp den. Men så språkade de sinsemellan och sade: 'Nu ha vi pengar så mycket vi behöver för vår tid', och så för kitteln tillbaka i bäcken. (*Finlands svenska folkdiktning* 1931: 663, 14)

A great number of legends tell about how a man tries to find a buried fortune (cf. Norlind 1918). One tells of a copper pot filled with money. Mårsta Påse had buried it during the war. Two gentlemen have found the place and as they talk together, they enjoy the thought of all the money that they will soon have, enough to last for the rest of their lives. At that moment the pot disappears. This legend deals with historical reality and with the supernatural world. In times of danger, fortunes are hidden in the earth. This might be the explanation for the folklore motif of buried fortunes. And it is completely realistic that people would try to find these buried fortunes. Here greed comes in. The money was not their money, but they still wanted to get it, even in dubious manner. Unfortunately they were not acquainted with the supernatural rule that demands complete silence, when trying to dig up a buried fortune.

Silence plays a many-faceted role in folklore, but here I am not going into details (cf., e.g., Bottigheimer 2007: 378–86; Tillhagen 1989: 142–5; Jungwirth 1935/6, 7: 1465–70). Here I want to highlight the fact that the men boasted of the fortune to come. In fact they said that they would have all the money that they need for the rest of their lives. We can see how they had calculated on getting rich with just one piece of work, namely, the digging up of this pot of money, instead of being honestly willing to work all their lives for their needs. They thought that they were smart, but again some powerful agent was strong enough to correct a false try. Work must be done continuously, every workday. To steal a fortune in order to be able to take it easy in the future was not the model of a rural society. According to the changing stories, work was the prerequisite for food. Work was the correct way of getting food. Stealing was not a respectable method, not even if one might be able to pay (stolen) money for the food that one needs. Everybody in a society should share the work, in order not to cause envy, to keep balance between accessible resources. To gain a fortune without making a proper contribution is not right.

## Conclusion

The two legends that I have referred to here were important enough to be documented and saved at three levels: storytellers told them and kept them; the recorders preserved them for the future, and the archive collections have kept them for the researchers. The legends were regarded as important, for they told about extraordinary things – people who tried

to gain something by the wrong means. The supernatural world plays an explicit or an implicit role. Its function is to explain why the legends end as they do. The supernatural appears when the protagonists are nearly 'there'.

My main point is, that greed is to do with work. Work was an important component in Finnish society in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But it was also important to work at the right time and in the right way. The institution of the Sabbath was solid. The holidays were there for God. He who hunted on Good Friday; worked on the wrong time, must expect a punishment, or at least a response from the supernatural world. A contrary way of thinking is found in the legend about those who attempted to dig up a fortune. They were working in a proper way at a proper time, but they triumphed before the work was completed. There is another proverb saying: 'Sälj inte skinnen förrän björnen är skjuten' which in English might be translated: 'Don't count your chickens before they are hatched'. It means that it is risky to count on something half-completed and plan for the future before the result is ready. Boasting and conceit combined with avarice led to the diggers' downfall.

To sum up: In rural society in Finland, could one work inappropriately, and could one work too much? So far, my answer is yes. My analysis of these legends demonstrates it, and I also refer to the proverb mentioned above: 'One shall not work so well that one starves'. It was certainly possible to work inappropriately although a hard-working person was highly admired. I see the Sabbath and the Ten Commandments as a means to avoid the misuse of work as a false virtue. Work should be done in a proper way, at a proper time, in order not to cause imbalance in a society, where resources were limited. If everyone respected this nonverbal rule, there would be enough for everybody.<sup>6</sup>

How do we regard work today? Is it possible to work in the wrong way and at the wrong time in Finland in the twenty-first century? Without any deeper investigation I am ready to answer in the affirmative, although working too hard does not perhaps concern food, but rather influences human relations, health, unemployment and the exploitation of natural re-

6 An interesting task might be to investigate legends about *bjära* or *mjölkhare*, the auxiliary spirits of the witch from this point of view. The witch herself does not work, but sends somebody else to do it, whereby she gains from this strategy – until she is revealed.



sources. Do the methods we use today to attain the continual growth that we call *onni*, prosperity, really correspond to the ends, or are they more similar to sheer greed? ■



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