

Dreaming Cultural Heritage***Pasi Enges***

Silja Heikkilä 2021. *Unien elävä perintö. Etnologinen tutkimus unikäsityksistä ja unien kertomistilanteista*. [Dreams and living heritage. An ethnological study of dream conceptions and dream telling situations.] University of Jyväskylä, Faculty of Humanistic and Social Sciences. 213 pp. ISBN 978-951-39-8867-8 (print) ISBN 978-951-39-8866-1 (electronic).

Although defended within the field of ethnology, Silja Heikkilä's doctoral thesis can above all be described as a continuation of folkloristic dream research in Finland. Professors Leea Virtanen and Annikki Kaivola-Bregenhøj especially have, through their numerous publications, brought forward various aspects of dream traditions, e.g. the contents of dreams, their individual and collective interpretations and meanings, as well as the social transmission of dreams as oral narratives. Heikkilä explicitly identifies herself as continuing in this socio-culturally oriented research tradition. However, her purpose is to examine and define her research subject within a wider framework of intangible cultural heritage, thus emphasising the contemporary relevance and cultural value of the subject. She is not primarily interested in specific dream contents but focuses instead on people's thoughts about the meaning of dreaming and transmitting dreams in present-day society. These ideas, memories, beliefs, interpretations and evaluations, most often verbally transmitted, are the main focus of the study.

Theoretical and methodological framework

As an evidence-of-learning project, a doctoral thesis must meet certain criteria relating to the overall structure and presentation of the study, and in my opinion Silja Heikkilä's thesis satisfies these criteria quite well. The content of the book is logically arranged and it consists of eight chapters, the first four of which are dedicated to the theoretical framework and the next two chapters to the analysis. After the analysis section, the thesis is appropriately recapitulated with a chapter devoted to research results and another to a final discussion of the research subject as living heritage.

In the introduction, the author first briefly presents the subject as well as the key concepts of her study: *dream conceptions*, *dream-speech* and *living heritage*. Then, she provides the background for the study by describing her own relationship with dreams and dream narration and her earlier and present activities concerning the topic in the fields of art and science. Heikkilä proves to

be an active supporter of dream traditions, and the subchapter can be received as self-reflective positioning of the researcher, although it is not titled so. The research task is to fundamentally identify the living heritage of dreams, and on that basis to interpret the processes of living tradition as they appear in the research material's dream-speech. Before providing an answer to this overarching objective, the author poses six research questions concerning the characteristics of dream-speech, the formation of dream concepts in childhood, the different dream concepts emerging from the research material and the expectations, situational assessments and objectives present while communicating about dreams (20–21). All six questions are descriptive (of the 'what kind of' type), and at this point the reader has the impression that the study is mainly descriptive by nature. It is also noteworthy that the concept 'heritage' is not at all included in the research questions. Taking into account the title of the study, this can be considered a deficiency. It indicates that the objective of equating dream traditions with cultural heritage does not emerge from the empirical data, but instead from the theoretical thinking of the scholar.

In her discussion of cultural heritage and especially of living heritage, Heikkilä relies on the broad definition given by Unesco. The model on page 25 summarises the author's view of her research subject as consisting of immaterial and unofficial processes (rather than products), identified both individually and collectively as meaningful. When taking into account the overall nature of the work and Heikkilä's aim to find a new viewpoint for understanding dream traditions, I think this subject could have been dealt with more profoundly.

Chapter 2 presents the research framework. The approach of the study is phenomenological-hermeneutical: the author aims to identify and understand different life-worlds emerging from her research material. Also dialogicality, an approach present at different stages and in various relationships throughout the research process, is emphasised as an important aspect of the production of knowledge. The thematic interviews and questionnaires as well as the organisation and analysis of the research material is described in detail. The practical analysis tool is qualitative content analysis. At first glance, the amount of material seems quite small and somewhat biased: it consists of 62 persons, roughly two-thirds of whom participated in special dream groups, arranged in connection with seminars organised by the Dream Group Forum in Finland, and practiced a special method of sharing and discussing dreams with each other. The rest of the material consists of questionnaires circulated at university lectures and on Facebook. One could ask whether this material gives a satisfactory picture of the phenomenon. This must of course be judged against the goals of the study, and I admit that Silja Heikkilä manages to justi-

fy her decision reasonably well. Why not ask especially those who most likely have something experiential to say?

Chapter 3 introduces different definitions of dreams and dreaming, and here the central concept of the study, dream conception, is discussed more comprehensively. Chapter 4 contains a historical review of earlier research and a more in-depth subchapter on the socio-cultural aspects of dreams. Then, the author delves deeper into her main influences, that of folkloristic dream research and its two main orientations: folk belief research and the study of narratives. She especially reflects on and interprets the work done by the two aforementioned folklorists, Virtanen and Kaivola-Bregenhøj.

Analysing dream-speech

The first analytical chapter focuses on dream conceptions. The dream-speech of the interviewees and respondents is examined, with Heikkilä asking both *what* and *how* it has been discussed. In this chapter, she traces the ways in which dream conceptions are shaped and how their meanings may change throughout an individual's lifetime. She argues that in the end, different types of dream experiences are verbalised and categorised individually and are exposed to new interpretations in different social situations; dream concepts are reflective, multi-layered and flexible. The classification of dream types and interpretations is a redevelopment of earlier folkloristic classifications, and it works well here. A wealth of quotes from the research material illustrates the analysis.

Dream-telling situations are discussed in the second analytical chapter, and both the teller's and the listener's positions are taken into account. Just as dreams are unique, so too are the contexts in which dreams are told, and besides, the dream type and content as well as the place of telling and the people present are all factors guiding the situation. Prevailing expectations and the goals of the teller and the audience make the telling situation, e.g. confidential, explanatory and/or openly entertaining.

At the end of the study, the research questions set out at the beginning are logically scrutinised and adequately answered one by one. In the final chapter, Heikkilä ponders how respect for and transmission of traditions regarding the telling and interpreting of dreams meet the concept of living cultural heritage.

Folklore, tradition, heritage

As a folklorist, I am a little uncertain about the relationship between the concepts of folklore, tradition and heritage. Folklore can be defined as meaningful messages circulated as tradition among a given group (e.g. Hakamies 2015, 45–46). Does this meaningfulness make, without question, all folklore cultural heritage? Indeed, cultural heritage has been defined as 'a conscious process

of valuing and productising cultural and traditional phenomena' (Tieteen termipankki). Why not simply talk about folklore or tradition? Is a special type of activism and purpose-orientedness needed for something to be valued as cultural heritage? Silja Heikkilä approaches these questions in an interesting way, and the study is an important opening to further discussions.

Heikkilä's study shows that the tradition of narrating and interpreting dreams can be a vital part of oral tradition in present-day Finland. However, focusing on a limited population consisting mainly of 'dream-activists' does not tell us much about the status of this particular tradition among the Finnish population in general. To say something about that, a totally different research setting would have been needed. Convincingly, this study shows that when approached from the cultural heritage standpoint, the subject is not part of an official institution's responsibility and possible safeguarding actions. The tradition of sharing dreams and discussing them communally belongs to and is kept alive at a grassroots level. Moreover, academic interest may also play an important role in the multi-faceted processes of heritage making. For this reason alone, Silja Heikkilä's doctoral thesis is a welcome addition to humanistic, socio-culturally oriented dream research. It moves the heritage debate forward and opens new insights into what living intangible heritage can consist of at the moment.

AUTHOR

PhD Pasi Enges is a retired university lecturer in folkloristics at the University of Turku. His main research interests include Finnish, Scandinavian and Sámi folk beliefs and narrative traditions.

REFERENCES

- Hakamies, Pekka. 2015. "Folkloristiikka ja sen tutkimuskohde." In *Askel kulttuurien tutkimukseen*, edited by Jaana Kouri, 45–51. Scripta Aboensia 3. Turku: Turun yliopisto, folkloristiikka, kansatiede ja uskontotiede.
- Tieteen termipankki. Folkloristiikka: kulttuuriperintö. <https://tieteentermipankki.fi/wiki/Folkloristiikka:kulttuuriperintö>. Read 14.3.2023.