
Embroidery in the Semantic Framework

Survo, Vera 2014. *Obrazy vyshivki i obryadovaya semantika tekstilya v traditsiyakh Karelii*. (English Summary: The Images of Embroidery and Ritual Semantics of Textiles in the Traditions of Karelia). *Kansatieteellisiä tutkimuksia Helsingin yliopistossa* 18. Helsinki: Helsingin yliopisto. 238 pp. Diss. III. ISBN 978-952-10-9715-7 (print). ISBN 978-952-10-9716-4 (electronic). SSN 2341-569X (print). ISSN 2341-5703 (electronic). <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-10-9716-4>.

The book focuses on traditional and neo-traditional embroidery in Northern Russia, mostly in Karelia, both in the context of peasant life and contemporary post-Soviet culture. Karelia is a very special area of ethno-cultural contact between several ethnicities, mainly Russians or other Slavic people and Karelians and other Finno-Ugrian people. Because of her language skills and her ethnic background, Survo is capable of studying culture in Russian Karelia without limiting herself to just ethnically Karelian traditions.

The study is based on the rich field data collected by the researcher between the years 1986 and 2012 in Russia and on Russian and Finnish museum collections. The sources are dealt with in a highly qualified manner. The beautiful collection of photos taken by the author is also included in the dissertation.

The theoretical approach is challenging. Survo combines a traditional analysis of ethnic, historical and local differences with semiotics, according which the whole complex of embroidery is understood as a system of meanings. Embroidery is often seen as a language unto itself, mostly as a woman's secret means of communication. Survo sees the ornamentation and textiles as a whole as a special language of culture, a symbolic way of communication, and, additionally, as a concrete material phenomenon. The codes of objects, i.e. the codes of actions, along with the verbal code, express the common cultural meaning of an embroidered work.

The semiotic approach used by Survo is based on the theories of J. M. Lotman, B. A. Uspenskij,

M. M. Bahtin and R. Barth as well as contemporary Russian researchers like A. K. Baiburin and M. L. Gasparov. According to the cultural theory proposed by Lotman, cultural zones, which may be ethnic, social, gendered, aged, and so forth, are intertwined in a complicated way. This makes different kinds of borders and border zones important, and research must focus on them. One result of the emphasis on vague hidden cultural areas is the loss of ethnicity. Ethnicity loses its natural character, and ethnic differences no longer constitute the main topic of ethnographic research.

As a result, Survo's approach faces several inherent contradictions. Her choice to exploit two more or less contradictory methods, namely the traditional comparative-historical method used in the cultural analysis and the semiotic method, which highlights borders and 'grey' cultural zones, renders her interpretations somewhat obscure and confused. Sometimes the semiotic perspectives are dropped altogether. However, semiotics has also guided Survo's thinking in a positive way. As a matter of fact, semiotics does not provide any clear-cut method for empirical research.

The second chapter, 'Embroidering Technology' (*Tekhnologiya vyshivki*), discusses fabric, thread, coloration and the techniques of embroidery and it compares the embroidery of different ethnic groups in the Russian north.

The third chapter, 'Classification of Ornaments and Semantics of Images' (*Klassifikatsiya ornamenta i semantika obrazov*), focuses on how ornamental motifs (images) are classified and their symbolic meanings with respect to mythical conceptions of the world. The motifs may be geometrical, vegetative, zoomorphic, anthropomorphic or narrative in form. Embroidered ornamentation originally had deep mythic roots and had the function of offering magical protection. Distinctive ethnic features only emerge in terms of which particular motifs predominate in an embroidered work. Both of the first two chapters are full of information and are written in a thorough manner.

The following chapter, 'Socio-pragmatic and Ritual Functions of Embroidery' (*Sotsiopragmaticheskiye i obryadovyye funktsii vyshivki*),

is devoted to the textile production process. The process of manufacturing an embroidered work is the synthesis of practical and symbolic actions. Ideas of fertility, of spinning life's yarn, and visions of the afterlife and one's ability to influence practices related to textiles are all reflections of a highly gendered woman's world. The homemade textile is in itself a universal symbol. The whole process of making linen is gendered. The embroidered textiles themselves (embroidered towels, women's shirts and headdresses, bed linen) had very important roles in rituals, particularly those related to a woman's life-cycle.

The semiotic approach is made clearer in Chapter 5, 'Images of Embroidery in the Karelian Cultural Heritage' (*Obrazy vyshivki v traditsionnom nasledii Karelii*) and in Chapter 6, 'Cherished Tradition' (*Zavetnaya traditsiya*). Chapter 5 deals with motifs of embroidery, contemporary reconstructions of traditional costumes, female handicraft as a practice and as cultural memory, and the place of handicrafts in contemporary cultural processes. Neo-traditional forms of embroidery flourish in schools, art studios and other institutional places in Karelia.

Chapter 6 illustrates first the historical religious background of sacrificial practices, which include vows and gifts (mostly textiles) dedicated to saints and which were performed when a crisis situation emerged, such as the illness of a family member or livestock or prayers to banish bad luck. In the tradition of vows, special textiles (towels in particular) have a healing function. Consequently, the process of sewing performs the function of healing. Traditionally, embroidery served as a means of sacralising space. It was a kind of incantation. The canvas personified the idea of a road to and the transition to another world. The author situates her discussion of sacrificial practices within a description of pre-Soviet, Soviet and post-Soviet Christianity as well as official Soviet atheism. In fact, this part of the dissertation introduces totally new and very valuable information about religious life in Soviet times.

Survo uses the concept of 'the inner speech of traditions' (*vnutrennyaya rech' traditsii*), which refers to something outside logical analysis and which is seldom the object of research. It can

be defined as the voiceless religious activities of women that remained unnoticed in the official Soviet atheistic world. Another inspiring concept used by the author is 'ideas of the missing' (*smysly otsutsviya*). The author asks if the absence of decorations in contemporary sacred textiles, which are mainly store-bought ones, has any significance with respect to religious effects. Ornamental decorations are regarded as missing elements. Survo concludes that in the present day, the sacrificial function of textiles remains even if the embroidery practices themselves are changing and even vanishing and the symbolic role of ornaments has gradually diminished.

Within the changed conditions of modern life, the symbols of folk culture are able to once again become real and to be recoded. Nonetheless, modern embroidery, which is done in art studios, is only vaguely reminiscent of archaic decoration. Media images of the objects used in pre-modern country life now serve as a specific channel for the transmissions of concepts. On the one hand, such embroidery has become typical of the tourist industry. Modern interpretations of traditional heritage reveal a tendency to treat the realities of everyday life in a quasi-mythological manner and to transform ethnic culture into an object of consumption. On the other hand, Survo states, that the traditional symbols of embroidery as a reflection of the cultural heritage of the peoples of Karelia are subject to actualisation.

The author's conclusions about the deep symbolism of embroidery and its supposed mythological roots, both in terms of a pre-modern peasant worldview and post-modern Russian life, are developed quite well. When it comes to ethnicity, the functional, symbolic, conceptual and visual models as well as the compositional systems engaged in the embroidered ornamentation are commonly shared by Karelians, Vepsians and Russians alike. Yet, the ethno-local features can only be traced through secondary elements, i.e. the manner in which they are stylistically and technically executed.

The research was done over the course of 20 years, which has had an influence on the approach. The methodology has developed, and the new perspectives introduced in Survo's research

arise partly in response to empirical changes in the world. The old concept of folk culture (in Russian, narodnaya kultura) has taken on new meanings in post-Soviet Russia. Building on Juri Lotman's thesis, Survo states that embroidery represents a special language of cultural semiotics, one

which combines worldviews, mythology and aesthetics with the material sphere of ways of living. As a whole, Survo's research operates quite well on both the philosophical and empirical levels.

Kaija Heikkinen
