
New Glimpses at Finnish Indigenous Religion and Folk Beliefs

Pulkkinen, Risto 2014. *Suomalainen kansanusko. Samaaneista saunatonnttuihin*. Helsinki: Gaudeamus. III. Maps. ISBN 978-952-495-340-5.

Religious studies scholar Risto Pulkkinen's volume is an ambitious enterprise, doing more than the actual headline, *Finnish Folk Belief*, at first sight promises. In fact, the book not only covers what is usually understood as folk belief, i.e. the non-Christian popular traditions of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but also the ancient, pre-Christian religion, as suggested by the subtitle, *From Shamans to Sauna Goblins*. The author's aim is thereby to reconstruct the pre-Christian indigenous worldview and religion of the Finns and to describe the changes and gradual transformation into 'folk belief' due to Christian influences. The author uses the term 'folk belief' in two different senses, both of them quite unconventional. As the title of the book implies, his broader definition includes both indigenous ('ancient') religion and later folk belief. It is unclear, however, why the author has chosen this unconventional definition, which might create confusion among the readers. Also, Pulkkinen's narrow definition of 'folk belief' as the amalgamation of folk belief and vernacular Christianity is somewhat puzzling. The author does not give any explanation for this terminological choice, but it probably is an attempt to supersede the problematic dualism dividing folk belief from Christianity. This is quite commendable, but it might have been wiser to choose another term to denote this religious conglomeration in order to avoid confusion.

Pulkkinen's book is largely based on his university lectures and is meant to serve as a basic

textbook on ancient Finnish religion and folk belief, but it also addresses the wider audience outside the academy. His overview starts with a reconstruction of the proto-Uralic cosmography and worldview, traces of which can be found in Finnish mythology. Following the traditional approach of his predecessors, he then takes the Finnish reformist Mikael Agricola's 'list of gods' from 1551 as his point of departure when describing the ancient pantheon of Finns, or rather, those of the Tavasts and Karelians. The miscellaneous beings listed in this record are presented under the heading 'The Otherworld', which is somewhat surprising since the author admits that the dualistic distinction between this world and the otherworld was not straightforward. In spite of this awareness, he incorporates the dualistic model into the headline and classifies the superhuman agents along these dualistic lines. This chapter would have benefited from taking into account Lotte Tarkka's insightful studies on the otherworld and its symbolism, but her work is not mentioned among the cited literature.

Agricola's record is an invaluable source on Finnish indigenous religion, but it – as well as the very notion of 'folk belief' – directs scholarly attention in particular towards mythology and beliefs. The author is well aware of the problematic aspect of the last element of the term, 'belief', and problematizes it in his chapter on definitions. In spite of this, the cognitive side of religion is privileged in his book. A great deal of attention is allotted to reconstructing the Finnish worldview and to exploring the proto-Uralic worldview. Napolskikh's reconstruction of the proto-Uralic worldview can of course serve as an interesting source of inspiration, but in addition to it being quite schematic, it also has limited interpre-

tative value and there is an overarching risk of over-systematisation. Research today holds that ideas and beliefs are usually not well articulated in indigenous (and lived) religions, and therefore, they do not tend to form a neat, logically coherent system of ideas. This being the case, a strong emphasis on the cognitive aspects risks making the presentation of what we might call indigenous religion somewhat unbalanced, since practice tends to be more central in this type of religion and it is practice that gives the ideas a logical coherence. This is not to imply that a discussion of religious practice is lacking in the book; rather, it is not given the weight it deserves. For example, Chapter 8, Magic in practice, presents some important ritual practices, even though the usage of the term 'magic' in the book and the categorisation of practices as either benevolent or damaging is somewhat problematic.

In the preface, Pulkkinen asserts that the book does not make an independent contribution to research, but rather it should to be viewed as a summary of the state of field. According to him, the interpretations presented are largely agreed upon by scholars. However, in some instances he allows scope for his own speculations and those of others. He justifies his resorting to speculation – which to my mind is not limited only to a few instances – somewhat offhandedly as a way of enhancing the reader's interest in the topic at hand. Given the fact that the volume is meant especially for undergraduate students and non-specialists, his speculations may be problematic if not ill-advised, as a new-beginner lacks the tools for a critical appraisal of the theories and interpretations presented in the book. As the running text lacks references, with the exception of several concrete instances, it is difficult for a non-specialist to distinguish between generally accepted knowledge and speculation. Moreover, it would also have been important to clarify and problematize the value of different source categories for the study of ancient religion and folk beliefs, for instance place names, rock paintings and modern fiction. Unfortunately, this is not the case and the reader is not informed, for instance, as to why certain rock (and Sámi drum figures) should be interpreted as souls of the dead descending into the land

of the dead or as depictions of altered states of consciousness (pp. 151 & 242).

Even a scholar who is fairly familiar with the topic and the source materials might find it difficult to evaluate the source value of the folklore materials included in the book. This concerns, for instance, the data related to Forest-Finns living in Central Scandinavia, which is allotted a central position in Pulkkinen's book, but which can be viewed as problematic in several respects. The description of mummifying the corpse of a dead family member by smoking it in the sauna can be mentioned as one dubious example. Pulkkinen judges this piece of information as reliable (p. 202), but it seems that he has obtained his evidence from J.V. Palmqvist's dissertation in *History of Religions* (1924), which is marred by serious problems with respect to sources. Palmqvist, who did not know Finnish, served as a vicar in Värmland, and his informants included such local authorities as a vicar and a churchwarden. It seems to me that they probably would have viewed local legends about the 'peculiar' practices of the old Finns with a certain amount of bias.

Since the book addresses new beginners and non-specialists outside the academy, in my mind it makes it a scholar's responsibility to be particularly critical of the knowledge he/she produces, since educated guesses gradually turn into facts in the complex transmission process they will be subjected to.

The author allots special attention for the so-called Forest Finns in his book, which is quite natural given his prior interest in this group. In Finnish scholarship, Finn Forests, especially in Värmland, have traditionally been regarded as an isolated reservoir, which preserved the Finnish language and cultural traditions from the 16th to the 17th centuries. The Forest Finnish materials therefore have constituted an important source for making philological and cultural comparisons. Pulkkinen reinforces the conventional, but quite misguided, view of Finns being isolated in the backwoods of central Scandinavia when he claims on several occasions that Finns lived in 'a vacuum'. This common view has been challenged by Swedish scholars throughout the 20th century, who have argued that Finns were from the very

beginning deeply involved in the local communities and the larger society.

This supposed isolation has served to explain the assumed uniqueness of the Forest Finn culture. Pulkkinen contributes to this prior exoticisation of the Forest Finns. This is particularly conspicuous in his discussion of their ideas and practices related to death. The author claims that Finns in central Scandinavia, having lived 'in a linguistic and cultural vacuum', particularly excelled in corpse-magic and were to a much higher degree preoccupied with it than their Swedish neighbours or the Finns in the motherland (p. 318). Even in this case, though, we have reason to doubt the reliability of his sources.

Pulkkinen's ambition was to produce an updated textbook on ancient Finnish religion and folk belief. The book allots much attention to ancient religion, which probably can be explained by the author's prior research interests, i.e. the indigenous religion of the Sámi and other northern Finno-Ugrian groups. Because of Pulkkinen's evolutionary approach, the later folk beliefs serve

primarily as a source for the reconstruction of indigenous religion instead of being studied in their own right and in their actual context. The question is if this emphasis on ancient religion is the most expedient one given the fact that several seminal studies on Finnish mythology and indigenous religion already exist, for instance Anna-Leena Siikala's *Mythic Images and Shamanism: A Perspective on Kalevala Poetry* and Lauri Honko's broader Finno-Ugrian studies included in *The Great Bear* and his numerous encyclopaedia entries, not to mention Juha Pentikäinen's work within this field.

Even though Pulkkinen's volume can serve as a useful outline of the ancient Finnish worldview and indigenous religion, there still is an urgent need for an updated, comprehensive synthesis of research on folk belief when using this term in the traditional sense to denote the traditions of 19th and early 20th century Finland.

Marja-Liisa Keinänen