

Blending the vernacular and esoteric

Narratives on ghosts and fate in early twentieth-century esoteric journals

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Finnish spiritualist and theosophical journals of 1905–20 brought esoteric teachings and vernacular belief traditions into dialogue with each other. Theosophical journals, in particular, released interpretations of Finnish mythology and the national epic the *Kalevala*, connecting them with the Ancient Wisdom. Both spiritualist and theosophical journals published belief narratives, which ranged from traditional migratory legends taking place in rural environments to the personal histories of urban residents. In mainstream thinking of the modern era, belief traditions were valuable only as vanishing traces of the nation's past. In esoteric journals, they proved the existence of a spiritual reality. The narratives could be published as such, but traditional interpretations, especially those involving Christian morals, could be revised and replaced with explicit esoteric interpretations.

In this article, I analyse the use of traditional vernacular beliefs and mythology in Finnish esoteric journals published between the years 1905 and 1920. These were *Omatunto* (Conscience, 1905–7), *Tietäjä* (Sage, 1908–20), and *Spiritisti* (Spiritualist, 1909–13). These journals formed the first regular forum where esoteric and vernacular views of spiritual reality were brought together in Finland. While the decision to print pieces and interpretations of folklore in esoteric journals may have chiefly served the purpose of esoteric teaching targeted to wider audiences in the journals, it also had far-reaching consequences. Esoteric interpretations have left an imprint on, for example, Finnish vernacular ideas of the afterlife.

The belief traditions which were published and discussed in esoteric journals can be roughly divided into three different categories regarding their age and status in the modern environment. The first is the ancient mythology portrayed in epic and ritual folk poetry. This old poetry was already practically extinct in twentieth-century Lutheran Finland, but it had been collected into archives in numerous versions and also refined into the national epic, the *Kalevala*. It represented the prototype of folklore and had high prestige as a cornerstone of Finnish national culture (see Anttonen 2012). The



second is the belief tradition embedded in the everyday life of rural communities. From the modern perspective, it was backward and superstitious, but it was familiar and retained validity for many people. For folklore scholars, it had value as a remnant of the ancient Finnish world view. The third is belief narratives emerging in the modern environment. In those days, these were not regarded as folklore or tradition at all. They were simply items of news and arguments concerning spiritual reality – a discourse which belief narrative scholars today consider to be a folklore or vernacular belief tradition (see e.g. Valk 2012 and 2014). All these three forms of folklore were present in esoteric journals, and their different types of authority were used accordingly. They demonstrated that the ancient Finns had had an understanding of spiritual reality, that it was compatible with theosophy, and that spiritual reality was not only historically true, but also here and now. In esoteric journals, both old and new vernacular belief traditions were brought into a dialogue with international, recently formulated theosophical and spiritualist ideas.

Western esotericism and folklore in a modern world

Folklore and Western esotericism are two distinct cultural phenomena and are seldom handled together, especially because they belonged to entirely different social contexts. As scholarly concepts, however, they are quite similar in being construed umbrella terms for multifaceted traditions. Both these terms are modern conceptualisations for certain non-institutional traditions which were regarded as deviant and non-modern in the modern outlook. As such, they have been approached in the respective academic discussions either as a neglected but valuable cultural heritage or as an irrational and erroneous culture which needs to be avoided or corrected.¹ The same attitudes could be found in the public discussions in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth century-Finland. Both the existing folk belief tradition and esoteric ideas were criticised, ridiculed and even demonised in the media; the folk belief tradition dismissed as backward superstition and barbarity (e.g. Koski 2011a: 84–5; Stark 2006: 34–6), and esotericism as an erroneous and ungodly trend which is scientifically untenable (Holm 2016). Yet, they both had practising groups and proponents who felt that the cultivation

1 For folklore, see e.g. Anttonen 2005: 50–1; Noyes 2012: 15–6; for Western esotericism see Hanegraaff 1998: 17–18.

of otherworldly contacts gives deeper knowledge and capabilities than the modern sciences or medicine alone could provide. Despite these similarities, the two traditions had very different contents, practices, and social distribution.

Western esotericism can be widely defined as a tradition of the learned. It includes writings, symbols and methods for accessing deeper knowledge and individual progress in relation to the metaphysical. The image of the esoteric as secret and exclusive does not mean that esoteric knowledge and rituals would only have taken place and been transmitted in secrecy and amongst restricted groups. Exclusivity also refers to the special effort which is required in order to acquire the knowledge (see e.g. Faivre 1994: 5–8; Hanegraaff 1998: 11). Spiritualism and Theosophy are occult movements which emerged in the late nineteenth century as modern reactions to the modern era itself. Even though they fought materialism and upheld ancient forms of spirituality, they did not oppose the basic modern developments such as the Enlightenment and democracy. They sought to combine the newest scientific progress with their own spiritual and moral agendas. Thus, they made a practical contribution to modern societal development (Faivre and Rhone 2010; Pasi 2009: 60–1). In the Finnish press, spiritual and theosophical writers called for freedom of thought, expressed sympathy for the labour movement and promulgated fraternity and equality between the sexes (e.g. *Uusi Aika* 1901(1): 1; *Tietäjä* 1908(1): 1–2). In particular, spiritualists offered naturalist interpretations of ghosts and expected scientific methods to develop further so that they would prove the naturalness and realness of spiritual phenomena (e.g. *Spiritisti* 1909(3): 53–5, 69). Esoteric movements which emerged in the late nineteenth century consciously opposed certain mainstream characteristics of the modern world, but were part of and contributed to the modern discourse.

The concept of folklore, in turn, was coined to denote the beliefs, practices and expressive culture of the uneducated, non-modern rural population. Unlike participants in esoteric movements who consciously promoted their ideas against the mainstream in a modernising society (Järvenpää 2017: 199–200), performers and audiences of folklore in rural communities were assumed to simply repeat the collectively legitimised traditions and, in ideal definitions, even to be unaware of their culture's and discourses' status as folklore (Honko 2013: 39–40). Folklore was defined as cultural items which were known by every member of the community. The idea of folklore being collectively created over generations presented folklore not only as old

and non-modern, but also as average and conventional. These definitions neglected to take into account the esoteric knowledge of vernacular specialists (see Ben-Amos 1972: 3–7).

The early ideological formations assumed a backward, common folk community whose expressive culture was bound to be wiped away by the arrival of modernisation and education. In a traditionalist and romantic outlook, folklore and especially traditional beliefs and mythology reflected the authentic collective consciousness of the nation, unspoiled by reason and modernity. Therefore folklore, particularly the ancient epic poetry and the *Kalevala* as a literary work reflecting it, played a central role in Finnish nation-building in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Anttonen 2012; Valk and Sävborg 2018: 13–14). The otherness of folk protected the researchers from facing the problem of supernatural beliefs which modern science could not accept (Koski and Honkasalo 2015). In the course of the twentieth century, the ideological and artificial requirement for the collectivity of an authentic folk tradition, as well as its otherness, has been gradually rejected (see Bronner 2000: 93–4). The personal creativity and special skills of individual folklore performers were acknowledged (Dégh 1995: 50–3). In Finland, special attention has been given to good rune singers and to the secret knowledge of vernacular ritual specialists; the *tietäjäs* (Siikala 2002: 79–84). This important similarity between esoteric and vernacular traditions was also noticed in esoteric circles and highlighted in their journals (e.g. *Tietäjä* 1908(1): 4–6). Starting from the 1960s, updated definitions of folklore also recognise that folklore as vernacular, culturally shaped forms of communication and meaning-making exists in all communities and also in the modern world and urban milieus. Folklore does not need to be old by definition, and its performers and users do not necessarily represent otherness (Anttonen 2005: 61–3; Knuuttila 2008: 448–56).

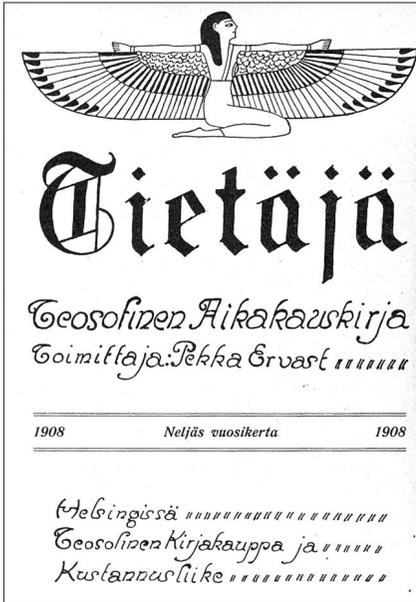
However, non-institutional belief traditions continued to be regarded as a form of otherness. A cultural or scholarly interest in them was only to be legitimised by their status as remnants from the past. Contemporary and non-agricultural beliefs in ghosts, spirits or witchcraft had no legitimate reason to exist in the modern world. Until the 1980s – and in many contexts to date – such phenomena had been written off as stupidity, or were approached as social, psychological or medical problems rather than being studied as part of a national or western culture (Hufford 2005: 26–7; Koski and Honkasalo 2015: 1, 4–6). In the 1970s, the folklorist Leea Virtanen's studies on vernacular belief narratives including telepathy and extrasensory

experiences still received an ambivalent reception within Finnish and international folklore scholarship and in the popular media, endangering the good reputation of the scholar herself (Enges 2014). Similarly, the learned esoteric traditions of experimenting with the spiritual world, labelled as superstition after the Enlightenment, were only settled into a serious and legitimate research of western esotericism during the last decades of the twentieth century (Hanegraaff 2013: 156–7, 355–61). It is therefore not surprising that the convergence of esoteric and vernacular traditions has not yet got much attention.

Theosophical and spiritualist journals in early twentieth-century Finland

Spiritualism and Theosophy were already being discussed in the Finnish press as contemporary trends in the late decades of the nineteenth century. These movements were thus familiar to the reading audience by the beginning of the twentieth century when the first esoteric journals came out (Holm 2016: 101–4; Kaartinen 2018: 20–1). Initially, spiritualists and theosophists such as Pekka Ervast, Martti Humu and Jalo Kivi published articles on esoteric issues in newspapers and journals of the labour movement. The first newspaper which engaged in esoteric teaching and regularly published theosophical essays was the weekly *Uusi Aika* (New Age), edited by Pekka Ervast and Jean Boldt for a short period during 1900 and 1901. Focusing on Theosophy, pacifism and the labour movement, it combined societal and spiritual issues and fostered equality, morality, and individual development (*Uusi Aika* 1900(0): 1). Even though *Uusi Aika* could be characterised as the first Finnish-language theosophical journal (Granholm 2016: 566), it did not proclaim itself to be one, and the theosophical content was reduced towards the end of its period of publication. Like the later esoteric journals, it published personal narratives and hearsay as anecdotal testimonies. But rather than establishing a spiritual reality it aimed to prove the existence of social injustice. Due to its pioneering position, *Uusi Aika* expressed its aims very clearly and thus elucidates the beginnings of the esoteric press in Finland.

The first actual theosophical journal, following the agenda of the international Theosophical Society, was *Omatunto* (Conscience, 1905–7). Martti Humu (an alias for Maria Ramstedt) functioned as the editor-in-charge, assisted by Pekka Ervast and Veikko Palomaa. *Omatunto* came out once a month and published both original and translated articles on occult and



The first issue of *Tietäjä* in 1908. 'A theosophical journal. Editor Pekka Ervast. Fourth volume.' *Tietäjä* was identified with its predecessor *Omatunto* which came out three years; hence the first number already represented fourth volume.

253–4). Continuity between *Omatunto* and *Tietäjä* was highlighted for the readers by stating that it would be mostly produced by the same authors and have similar content as before:

If we browse the volumes of *Omatunto*, we can notice that its columns have included contemplations upon many aspects of theosophical inquiry. There have been texts about the basics of theosophy and the aims of the Theosophical Society, general fraternity, esoteric research, all kinds of philosophical questions, the Bible and Christianity, vegetarianism, sexual life, societal problems, reincarnation, white and black magic, natural health care, evil and criminality, many religious dogmas, the religion of the ancient Finns, the role of women, mediumistic and spiritistic experiences, astrology etc. etc. ... Writings of similar and new questions will be included in *Tietäjä* as well. (*Tietäjä* 1908(1): 1–2)

related issues, as well as belles-lettres, reports, and correspondence. *Omatunto* encouraged readers to participate and send in their own pieces on related issues to be published in the journal. A regular column for questions and answers also invited interaction: readers were asked to send not only questions but also answers to earlier published questions. The Finnish branch of the Theosophical Society was established in October 1907, and the last issue of *Omatunto* in December included an announcement concerning a slight change of form and a new name for the theosophical journal: *Tietäjä* (Sage). The new journal was officially an organ of the new Finnish branch, and the new editor-in-chief was Pekka Ervast (*Omatunto* 1907(12):

In the first issue, the new name was also thoroughly explained. The word *tietäjä* means literally ‘the one who knows’ and refers to adept local men and women who were believed among the common folk to be able to heal illnesses and locate stolen goods with the help of their special knowledge and second sight. These specialists of vernacular religion had held positions of authority and performed public rituals in earlier times. In the modern ‘civilised’ society, they were dismissed as backward quacks and charlatans. Therefore it was stated that the aim was not to bring back ‘superstition’ but to highlight that behind it there is an old wisdom which has been forgotten during the course of the Christian era. The new name was chosen not only for the appreciation of the truth in folk belief traditions, but also in order to encourage all people to seek hidden knowledge themselves (*Tietäjä* 1908(1): 4–6). The choice for the new name was clearly an alignment towards bringing together vernacular and esoteric views on spiritual reality. It also brought Theosophy closer to Finnish culture.

The spiritualist journal *Spiritisti* (Spiritualist) was established in 1909, in a similar way as the Finnish Spiritualist Society,² and its editor was Jalo Kivi (Jaakko Jalmari Jalo-Kivi). Among its contributors, we also find theosophists; for example Martti Humu, who had been the editor-in-charge of *Omatunto*, now published in *Spiritisti* (see e.g. *Spiritisti* 1909(4)). Kivi’s style was polemical towards the church and also towards theosophy despite their cooperation (Järvenpää 2017: 209). Spiritualism’s relationship with Christianity, as well as the natural foundations of the spiritual world, was often discussed in *Spiritisti*’s pages. The journal also had a column for



Spiritisti, April 1912. ‘A spiritualist journal for handling spiritism and related psychic questions. Editor Jalo Kivi. What is beyond grave? What awaits us after so-called death? Spiritism elucidates these questions.’

2 In Finnish Suomen Spiritistinen Seura. Finns used the term ‘spiritism’ until the 1940s (Holm 2016: 114).

questions and answers, but the answers were declared to come from spirits – not from the editors as in *Tietäjä*. *Spiritisti*'s last issue came out in the spring 1913; the publication suffered from financial problems (Holm 2016: 90–1; Järvenpää 2016: 68).

Many active spiritualists and theosophists were also active in the labour movement and wrote for socialist newspapers. The labour organisations rejected cooperation with esoteric movements around 1906, however, because they felt that the class struggle was compromised by esoteric ideas of spirituality, love, charity, and especially the law of karma, which portrayed poverty and suffering as legitimate consequences of transgressions committed in earlier lives. The struggle for societal equality nevertheless remained a feature in esoteric journals (e.g. Järvenpää 2016: 37–9, 46–7 and 2017: 201–2; Kemppainen 2017: 186–9). It was important to disseminate the new, enlightening ideas to all societal levels:

Thought belongs to everyone, and its light will shine in the humblest dwelling as well as in the drawing rooms of the sophisticated, bringing with it the more profound life which results from an emerging interest for higher issues. (*Uusi Aika* 1900(0): 1)

Friends of light and truth, spread the light of truth everywhere! Spread 'Spiritisti' to every palace, to every hut; to the noble as well as to the lowly, and to the rich as well as to the poor. (*Spiritisti* 1909(2): 35)

There is no precise information about the circulation of the journals. However, Jalo Kivi had mentioned unofficially in 1912 that *Spiritisti* had about two hundred subscribers. It seemed to be being distributed in various parts of Finland (Järvenpää 2016: 66). Theosophical journals were more successful. *Omatunto* already had more than a thousand subscribers by 1906 (Granholm 2016: 566), which was before the Finnish branch of the Theosophical Society was established and the journal had changed its name to *Tietäjä*.

Mythology, belief traditions and belief narratives in esoteric view

The appreciation of Finnish mythology and the ancient worldview reached its peak with the reception of the Finnish national epic the *Kalevala*. The *Kalevala* was compiled by Elias Lönnrot and published first in 1835 and

later as a completed version in 1849. It is based on thousands of verses of folk poetry which Lönnrot and other collectors had written down from rune singers and sages in remote Finnish and Karelian villages. Finnish folklorists distinguished between the *Kalevala* as a literary work and the original poems. They focused their attention to the archived poems, their aesthetic form and historical development (Honko 1979: 142–3). Theosophists were well aware of the scholarly research but in their view academics only studied the outer form of the *Kalevala*, whereas theosophical inquiry found its true spiritual meaning. Theosophists regarded the *Kalevala* to be a holy book which included keys to esoteric knowledge (Carlson 2008: 416–7, 424; Ervast 1999: 3–11).

The firm status of the *Kalevala* as a building-block of Finnishness gave authority to the spiritual outlook of the ancient poetry as an alternative to materialism. The *Kalevala*'s connection to theosophy was also internationally acknowledged. The founder of the theosophist movement, Helena Blavatsky, had written an essay about the *Kalevala*, praised its animistic worldview and recognised its similarities with the Ancient Wisdom (*Tietäjä* 1909(3): 78).³ Rudolf Steiner gave a public lecture in Helsinki in April 1912 on national epics and especially the *Kalevala* (Carlson 2008: 422). The *Kalevala*'s theosophical and later Rosicrucian interpretations were many. One of the leading esoteric interpreters of the *Kalevala* was Pekka Ervast. Following Blavatsky's views, he saw the *Kalevala*'s heroes as psychological or mental-spiritual powers which, nevertheless, exist independently in an invisible reality (*Tietäjä* 1917(4): 161; see also Carlson 2008: 417, 423). Detailed accounts of the similarities between the Finnish ancient mythology or religion and the Ancient Wisdom were written in theosophical journals by, for example, Martti Humu (*Omatunto* 1905(1–4)), and Väinö Valvanne (*Tietäjä* 1909(7–8)). These served readers who were already well-versed in Theosophy. For a wider audience, the main point was the spiritual world view. Pekka Ervast wrote about the world view of the *Kalevala* in 1917:

3 The Finnish translation of Blavatsky's essay titled 'Suomen kansalliseepos' was published in *Tietäjä* 1909(3). The original had come out in *Lucifer*. It was also emphasised that verses from the *Kalevala* had been included in Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine* (*Omatunto* 1905(4): 60).

The visible world is a representation of the spiritual, real world ... This spiritual outlook is the *Kalevala*'s own, as the *Kalevala* too saw beyond the form the reality; a nature full of life and living creatures. When we hold on to this Kalevalaic understanding of life, we immediately reject the materialist outlook, because we believe in souls and spirits and the invisible world. (*Tietäjä* 1917(4): 159–60)

Esoteric journals did not publish pieces of mythology but rather presented new interpretations, as the *Kalevala* was read in schools and was presumably familiar to everyone. My analysis concerns chiefly the belief tradition. Mythology was assumed to be extinct, while the belief tradition is connected to the social reality and everyday concerns of the community. Still, there was a strong continuity between the animistic world view of the *Kalevala* and the everyday beliefs of the rural villages. Especially the ritual specialists of the vernacular belief tradition, the *tietäjäs*, still used incantations in remote areas, and conceptions of magical harm and various supernatural beings were common. However, the belief tradition of early twentieth-century villages was strongly influenced by Christianity and involved popular Christian interpretations and moral arguments. A vernacular belief tradition never forms a uniform world view. Narrative and ethnographic materials collected in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries show that belief narratives were the arena of a continuous debate between Christian and 'superstitious' views (Koski 2011a: 84–5; Stark 2006: 230–9), between modernisation and folk religion (Mikkola 2009: 205–11) and between vernacular belief and non-belief (Roper 2018: 223–7). The Finnish belief tradition provided ideas, for example, about omens and fates; various activities of the dead; guardian spirits of the natural and cultural environments; folk medicine and healing; magic practices aiming at improving one's success or harming one's rivals and enemies; adept men and women with magical abilities to heal or harm; breaches of the norm sanctioned by supernatural beings or powers, and so forth (see e.g. Jauhiainen 1998). The concern about other people's morals and the constant normative control by means of supernatural punishments were conspicuous characteristics of the Christian village cultures. Partly, it was legacy of the Lutheran Orthodox era which emphasised conformity and discipline (Koski 2011b: 10–2). However, the question was also concerning social dynamics: traditional belief motifs were used, for example, as ingredients of gossip in the local negotiations of social power (Koski 2011a: 58–61). In folklore studies, the various uses and meanings of recurrent belief motifs

have been exposed to detailed genre analysis (see e.g. Honko 1989; Koski 2016). Here, 'belief narrative' and 'legend' will be sufficient.

As a scholarly term, belief narrative is a wide concept which covers all types of stories with supernatural or speculative content. It does not matter whether the story describes one's own experience or whether it is a tale with an international distribution. The folkloristic definition of legend, in turn, necessarily includes a traditional plot or core motif, which researchers can recognise as a widely distributed piece of tradition. Legends are fluid and adapt to various uses as well as to new world views, environments and forms of communication. The traditional contents spread sometimes as news or gossip; they may transform into first-hand experience stories or be performed as pure entertainment. Legends reflect the local belief traditions and values and often discuss the interstices of social reality. They are not only performed as narratives but also imitated in real life and used as interpretative models for real events.⁴ In this article I use the term belief narrative unless it is relevant to point to the traditionality of the plot as a legend. In the esoteric journals, belief narratives are referred to as ghost stories, extraordinary or supernatural incidents, or extrasensory phenomena.

The use of belief narratives and motifs as gossip or social arguments is a good example of the fact that a belief tradition does not simply exist because people would believe certain phenomena to be real and true. On the contrary: the narratives, arguments and rituals are doubted and contested even among their users. Their popularity depends on their usefulness and applicability to socially and culturally specific purposes, and their validity can be established in each context separately. Belief narratives and rituals can be vehicles for promoting or maintaining certain values and world views (Valk 2014). Belief tradition as it prevailed in Finnish rural communities was not all useful in Spiritualism or Theosophy. In esoteric thinking, conformity to traditional Christian morals and success in agricultural livelihoods were irrelevant. Those topics of belief narratives are missing in esoteric journals, and stories which include, for example, suicide do not highlight a moral disapproval. In some cases, the accustomed normative interpretations of rural villages are explicitly revised. The relevant topics were fate, omens and

4 About legends, see e.g. Dégh 2001: 97–102; Ellis 2003: 5–12; Koski 2016: 113–25.

precognition, activities of the dead, and existence of the spiritual world in many forms.

The publication of vernacular belief tradition and ghost stories in esoteric journals seems to have been initiated by the readers. However, in early modern newspapers, it is not always clear which texts have actually been sent by readers and which are in fact written by the editors. A first step towards paralleling vernacular and esoteric knowledge and including experience stories in the journals was made in *Uusi Aika* (no. 8) in 1901. An assumed reader shared her experience of visiting an uneducated healer and blood stauncher who lived in a croft and had the most remarkable occult and theosophical knowledge. The text was a testimony of the existence of spiritual expertise among vernacular specialists and of its similarity to western esoteric traditions. The practice of publishing belief narratives gradually developed in *Omatunto*. The common belief tradition and vernacular experiences were first brought up when, in a letter to the editor, a reader asked for an explanation for reported sightings of ghosts of the dead and guardian spirits. He was given an explanation which combined vernacular tradition and esoteric views. (*Omatunto* 1905(3): 54.) In the fifth issue, the first testimonial story appears, describing discussions with a man who had received a telepathic message about the birth of his son (*Omatunto* 1905(5): 111). Gradually, editors started to collect and narrate similar content themselves. In *Omatunto* (no. 5) in 1905, five different cases were described under the headline 'Extraordinary incidents'. These included stories about extrasensory experiences, omens, and unusual skills (*Omatunto* 1905(6): 140–2). The next issue, in turn, included personal descriptions of the writer's own ominous dreams (*Omatunto* 1905(7): 172–3). Traditional and personal stories involving the spiritual and extraordinary started to come out regularly in *Omatunto*, and this policy was continued later in *Tietäjä*, as well as in *Spiritisti*.

Belief narratives as proof of the existence of the spiritual world

In *Spiritisti*, belief narratives were published regularly under the heading 'Yliaistillisia ilmiöitä' (Extrasensory phenomena). The intention to publish such narratives was introduced in the journal's third issue and readers were invited to send their own stories too. The editor Jalo Kivi wrote: 'Under this title we will publish both from home and abroad factual narratives about extrasensory incidents which have taken place, so to speak, outside the spiritualist circles' (*Spiritisti* 1909(3): 69, 76). The credibility of the evidence

was enhanced by mentioning the impartiality of the source. Another persuasive strategy was the normalisation of the phenomena by highlighting their naturalness. In the spiritualist view, the western world erroneously assumed that these so-called ghost stories resulted from superstitious fears among the common folk which should be civilised. Kivi argued: 'But nature functions according to its own laws. It cannot be "civilised". Its secret powers do not cease to function even though we sit on the school bench and cram information into our heads.' It was highlighted that the narrators have affirmed the incidents as true and that they are not that uncommon after all: 'We do not need to fetch them from abroad, because even in Finland they are happening in various places almost daily' (*Spiritisti* 1909(3): 69).

After this first introduction, belief narratives under the title 'Extrasensory phenomena' appeared usually as such without further comments. Pure folk legends without any commentary stand out among the spiritually, scientifically and theologically educational texts. But they served a purpose. The stories were probably found entertaining by the readers, but even artistically elaborate folk narratives also tend to make a point. Narratives convey messages and arguments – yet sometimes only implicitly. They may take a stance on moral and ontological questions as well as in societal collisions (Koski 2011a: 45–8; Siikala 1984: 32–4). In *Spiritisti*, the stance was taken for example against materialists and the rationalist clergy. Besides the explicitly stated function to prove that such events happen, *Spiritisti*'s stories provided examples of how a spiritual reality manifests itself in physical reality. This was referred to in the introduction: 'We do not explain now the natural powers which are expressed as "ghosts". The explanation will be given later in *Spiritisti*'s columns' (*Spiritisti* 1909(3): 69).

The belief narratives in *Spiritisti* mainly reflected the vernacular world view and values which were sometimes in accordance with esoteric thinking and sometimes not. Folk legendry of rural villages was an arena for a continuous debate between Christian interpretations and others which were labelled superstitious and non-modern, but there were also widely accepted beliefs. In the vernacular belief tradition, it was self-evident that the dead only come back if they have sinned or if they have been mistreated or left without a proper burial. Jalo Kivi's explanation in *Spiritisti* likewise mentions for example suicides, crimes and bothering things as reasons for haunting (*Spiritisti* 1912(40): 86–7). It was also known in the belief tradition that ghosts had to be asked why they had come back because otherwise the problem would not be solved. This can be seen in the next story. It is the synopsis

of a narrative which came out in *Spiritisti* in a long and detailed version. It represents a well-known Finnish legend motif C325; ‘Thief finds no peace, walks the earth upon death’ (see Jauhiainen 1998: 100):

A church warden died, and afterwards, his son and daughter-in-law who were farmers kept finding him at home at night reading the Bible as he had used to do. They were afraid and behaved as if the ghost was not there. The local Lutheran minister, ‘a genuine materialist’, heard a rumour about it and went to correct the couple for superstition and for spreading such stories. He refused to believe their assertions that it was true. But back home the minister found the ghost sitting at his own desk. He asked the ghost why he was there, and it turned out that the church warden had stolen money from the Church charity funds and his son should be requested to pay back the sum for him. Apparently the son did, because the ghost never came again. (*Spiritisti* 1909(3): 69–70)

This version includes a typical evidential pattern for affirmative legends: that the non-believer – here, the minister – finally witnesses the supernatural phenomenon himself and has to forgo his scepticism. It is also noteworthy that in this narrative, both the unbeliever and the sinner are men of the church. Nevertheless, it is the minister who solves the problem once he has learned the facts. Another legend from the same set lacks any references to these power struggles. This too is a synopsis:

A man driving a horse carriage picks up a stranger near a bog by the road. They have a chat and the man says who he is. On the way, the driver has to pop into a house for some errands. Leaving the house he regrets he cannot stay longer, because this fellow is waiting there in the carriage and is probably bored already. The inhabitants of the house tell him that this particular person has recently committed a suicide on the bog. When they go out, there is nobody on the carriage. (*Spiritisti* 1909(3): 70–1)

This story is an early version of the legend ‘The Vanishing Hitchhiker’ which later became one of the most widespread urban legends. Attuned with the moral climate of rural villages, this version of the narrative portrays the ghost as a suicide. In late twentieth-century urban versions, the moral

fault of the deceased has been omitted, and the phantom hitchhiker is, for example, a victim of a car accident.⁵ Both examples above included partly anonymised coordinates of place and time, implying that the narrator or editor knew the details but did not make them public.

Some extrasensory phenomena evoked explicit commentary in *Spiritisti*. A newspaper called *Kaiku* had published news about a man who was murdered far from home and nobody could identify the body.⁶ So the murdered man appeared in a dream to his former boss and asked him to go and identify him. He also spoke about how he had been killed and what had been stolen from him. Below the report in *Spiritisti* it is commented:

It would be nice to hear how materialists or church teachers explain this dream. The former do not believe that anything exists beyond death, and the latter also claim that a person can't inform about himself after death, and keep him buried until 'waking him up on the last day'.

[This man] was now in any case totally self-consciously functioning after his death. (*Spiritisti* 1912(37): 17)

While the belief narratives in *Spiritisti* were chiefly about the returning dead, the belief narratives in *Tietäjä* handled a wider range of topics, ranging from healers and omens to guardian spirits. They were taken from newspapers, heard from friends and relatives, sent by readers, or experienced by the editors themselves. In *Tietäjä*, belief narratives appeared in various contexts, mostly in a regular column labelled 'Rajan takaa' (From beyond) which, however, also had other types of content. Without a general framing, the narratives were often commented upon separately. Here, in full length, is one narrative about fate, written by Väinö Valvanne:

The planning of our fate. On 2 August 1914, Mrs M., one of the most notable members of our society, had a dream. In her womb, she had a fully developed foetus ready to be born into this world. The dream was

5 About the Vanishing Hitchhiker, see, e.g., Brunvand 1983: 30–41; Virtanen 1987: 70–5.

6 The story in *Spiritisti* was based on two reports of the murder which were published in 1911 in *Kaiku's* issues 142 and 144A.

very impressive and remained in her memory in detail, also the date. She had been married but she had no intention to remarry. Before the end of the year, she had celebrated her wedding and when she felt she was pregnant, she remembered the dream and the date. And indeed: on 2 August 1915, she gave birth to a child.

This is one of the best proven premonitions, because she had talked about her dream to many friends already before she got married and before the child was born. In astonishment, we must ask if our earthly life is really planned beforehand so that events so precisely in detail can be known on the other side in advance. A childbirth at least is by no means an event the timing of which we could determine ourselves. (*Tietäjä* 1915(7–8): 303)

The same issue of *Tietäjä* included a story based on an incident reported in the newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*. A house had burned down and the inhabitants had gone missing in the fire, but their remains had not been found in the ruins. A young boy had dreamed that the woman who had lived in the house complained that she has to rest under the cottage and not in consecrated ground. On closer inspection, a hidden cellar was found where bodies of two suicides were found. The author V. Valvanne comments:

We often hear people saying that ‘there is no proof about life beyond death. Nobody has returned to tell about it’. The factual event above is one of the numerous examples which show how great ignorance such talk expresses. If a human being entirely ceased to exist after death, nobody would have known in this case for years, or centuries, or ever, where [these people] had ended up. Nobody on earth would have known about them if they had not come to inform us about themselves. (*Tietäjä* 1915(7–8): 304)

Neither of these two belief narratives from *Tietäjä* would have been regarded as folklore in their time. The former story describes an individual’s experience, and even though the beliefs that our lives and deaths are predestined and that the future can be seen in dreams are motifs of vernacular belief tradition, they are also common in European and Christian cultures in general. The second story is from printed news and therefore not from the ‘folk’, even though it represents the Finnish legend type A 801; ‘Dead person

appears in dream ... tells where own body is hidden' (Jauhiainen 1998: 79). What links these to the vernacular discourse in addition to the content's compatibility with belief tradition is the use of the rhetorical power of anecdotal evidence and the social nature of handling the issue.

Esoteric interpretations in belief narratives

The educational function of belief narratives is clear when they involve explicit esoteric interpretation. I will give two examples which fulfill this function in very different ways. The first is a description of the accidental death of a small child. The description only develops into a belief narrative when given an explicit karmic interpretation. It is first reported in the style of news, mentioning the full names of the people in question, as well as precise dates and times. However, the narrative also includes the mother's attempts to save the child and assures us that the parents would not have been able to prevent the accident from happening. It is noteworthy that the accident had taken place in the family of one of *Tietäjä*'s editors. He wrote the text himself, but in the third person, as if reporting someone else's life. The family lost their little daughter who was not yet two years old. Approaching the fireplace to warm herself, the girl had lost her balance and accidentally toppled a kettle full of boiling water on herself. Her skin was badly burned and she died on the following day in severe pain. The event is commented upon as follows:

Words cannot express the grief which the family felt after this accidental death. But as the parents believed in the unwavering justice of nature, they see in this death the fulfilment of the law of karma. Never before had any children died in the family. So many times before had the hot water kettle been on the stove and the little girl had safely pottered around the fireplace. But in the blink of an eye the moment came when the child had to face the punishment of the law. She had, of course, during her previous lives done something 'bad' which now resulted in her physical death.

In the morning of the day of the accident, the parents had felt a peculiar pressure, as the child was approached by the astral tornado which then destroyed her body. (*Tietäjä* 1908(1): 32)

In the early twentieth century, it was more common than today that not all children reached adult age. Christianity, which usually advises the bereaved to accept the situation, did not really provide answers to grieving parents who would like to know why it was just their child who had to face such a terrible death. The folk tradition, in turn, tends to blame the victims themselves, hinting that they had committed breaches of the norm, or had sinned, and deserved the punishment. In this theosophical interpretation, a reason is given but neither the parents nor the little child are blamed. Acts deserving punishment had all been committed in previous lives, and the story also gives moral advice, urging people to lead a better life here and now. While the text may have been the father's way of informing his fellow theosophists about the situation and coping with the grief, it could also provide a model for other parents in a similar situation.

The second example is a multi-episodic narrative about a haunting which turns out to be a benign spirit's attempt to communicate. A metanarrative framing device tells us about the story's transmission in a way typical of legends: the author relates his narrator's cousin's first-hand experience. In the introductory episode, the cousin and her husband are troubled with persistent knocking in their house near Viborg. They react to it in a rational manner, try to identify any natural causes and also think that it could be a trick on the part of playful neighbours. Finally, they are advised by a Russian professor who suggests that it could be a dead person who is trying to communicate with them by knocking. Thus, they get in contact with the woman's former fiancé, a man who had died 14 years ago and who had said he wanted to protect the family. They have kept a record of all their discussions with him. After this introductory episode, three other episodes follow. In one of them, the spirit asks that a certain labourer who is a heavy drinker will participate in their discussion. The man comes and is so thoroughly impressed by the encounter that he entirely changes his life and stops drinking. Another episode mentions that the deceased had warned about a danger which threatens a family member, and that the bad consequences can be avoided. These two are both well-known motifs of belief narratives.

The third episode is the most interesting in relation to the educational aspect of the narrative. It is a dialogue between the deceased and the living people who have gathered to meet him and to ask him questions. It goes as follows:

They also asked him whether anything was troubling him. 'Nothing is troubling me.' Does he have a lot of unresolved issues? 'No, I do not.' Is he feeling fine? 'Everyone feels fine here.' Would you like us to take a clergyman to your grave? 'Take if you like, I don't need it, but I can pray together with him.' (*Tietäjä* 1914(5–6): 246–7)

This short dialogue debunks all the typical interpretations which would explain haunting in the prevailing Christian and vernacular discourses. Firstly, he is not a troubled soul who wants to come back to this world because of unresolved issues. Secondly, he is not suffering and is not in a 'bad' place where others would be suffering too. Third, he is not lacking a proper burial or blessing. Fourth, he is not a demon in disguise, as the Lutheran teaching would suggest, because he would find it appropriate to pray together with the minister. To apprehend the educational load in this short passage we need to know the cultural context and recognise the assumptions which it explicitly denies. It emphasises that there is nothing wrong with this spirit; he just finds it meaningful to be in contact with these people.

Negotiation of ontology and morals

It was not uncommon in the early press to publish belief narratives and legends as news. Ülo Valk has noted that the interpretations of folk legends in the Estonian press of the nineteenth century were usually Christian rather than vernacular, or they aimed at debunking the whole story. As such, they functioned in a way similar to vernacular oral narratives which expressed their narrators' opinions, interests and anxieties (Valk 2012: 244–9). In twentieth-century Finland, the debate concerning ontology and morals typical of belief legendry continued in written form in the press. Unlike other newspapers and journals, the esoteric publications defended spiritual interpretations. Folk belief tradition and esoteric movements of the early twentieth-century Finland shared an interest in the spiritual world and rejected materialist views. Brought together in the esoteric journals, these meaning systems gave validity and authority to each other. The contemporary domestic belief narratives provided good anecdotal evidence, and materials by which esoteric teaching could be linked to ideas which were already familiar to the wider audience. Older folklore, instead, linked them to prestigious pieces of national culture – the Kalevalaic poetry. Spiritualism

and Theosophy, in turn, contributed to the declining local belief traditions with new interpretations and vocabularies which linked them to modern sciences, urban milieus and novel societal values. Esoteric journals published some narratives as such but commented or revised others in order to bring forth their own ideologies. Similarly, the ancient mythology was, on the one hand, praised for its animist outlook, and on the other hand, given new meanings through theosophical study. Both the ancient folklore and contemporary narratives had significance for the esoteric movements for the same reason: they entailed the existence of a spiritual world and represented a world view which was not blinded by modern materialism.

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