The Symbolism of Liminality

BY JUHA PENTIKÄINEN

1. The rites of the threshold: van Gennep's prestructuralism

Arnold van Gennep belongs to such a group of scholars as were not particularly appreciated by his own generation. His work *Les rites de passage* was published as early as in 1909, but his theory had no greater influence on anthropological studies of religion before than at mid-century. The English edition was published as late as in 1960. Durkheim had more readers and followers than van Gennep at his time. Later on, van Gennep's ideas seem to have been forgotten under the influence of functional theories of the 1920's. The British social anthropology criticizes him for generalizing too much and for neglecting a thorough analysis of any particular society. It is typical what M. Gluckman writes when introducing van Gennep's theory in the book *Essays on the ritual of social relations*[1]. Referring to Junod's classic monograph on the Tsonga, Gluckman makes the following statement: "Nevertheless I would myself still advise a student, wishing to study *rites de passage*, to go to the persisting excitement of Junod rather than to van Gennep himself. Van Gennep is dull to me in the same way as Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* is dull. [– – –] Van Gennep for me illustrates strikingly how a man can make an important discovery, and sense that he is on the way to further problems, yet be prevented from going on to exploit his discovery because he tries to prove his initial point beyond doubt in a form which his contemporaries and probably he himself, thought convincing."[2]

It is, of course, clear that many of van Gennep's thoughts do not hold in the light of current research. Consequently, his concepts have got redefinitions and his classifications reformulations[3]. It can be mentioned, for example, that he did not make any difference between the three main categories[4] of rites, i.e. rites of passage, calendar rites and rites of crisis. He did not pay particular attention to the analysis of social structure and social relations in any society either[5]. He was also too eager to show that his model

[1] Cf. Gluckman 1962, particularly 1 ff.
[2] Ib. 9 ff.
[3] E.g. Chapple 484 ff.; Beals 55; Gluckman 1962, particularly 1 ff.; Honko 1964, 129 ff.; Glaser 1971, 1 ff., 157 ff.
[4] Cf. Honko 1976, 71 ff. Honko summarizes his distinction in the following way (ib. 84):

	Definition criteria		
Rite category	Social orientation	Repeatable	Predictable
Rite of passage	Individual	–	+
Calendar rite	Group	+	+
Crisis rite	Individual/ Group	–	–

[5] Cf. Gluckman 13 ff.

was universal and concerned every ritual context and every society. But is this not true what comes to scientific and theoretical development in general? Some people prefer to generalize, some others to analyze. The progress of science needs both analysts and universalists.

One dilemma in the criticism concerning van Gennep's ideas might have been in putting his theory violently into too functional categories. Van Gennep has in general been regarded as a prefunctionalist[6] whose categories would have been better understood when using the concepts of social structure and functional relationships à la Malinowski or Radcliffe-Brown. I would prefer to consider him as a *prestructuralist*. He clearly strived after a structural pattern which should be universal and concern every ritual complex as well as every society. Because the contemporary formalistic schools[7] had not yet come far enough in their definitions, his concepts could not be very precise as far as structural analysis is concerned.

Van Gennep's basic idea is structural. According to his definition, *rites de passage* are rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age. In primitive communities these changes are generally made public and their importance is hallowed by rites which follow a pattern. First comes the *séparation* in which the individual is removed from his previous social position. This is followed by an interim period, *marge*, during which the individual is poised on the borderline between the two positions. The third and last phase is the full entry into the position (*agrégation*). Hence, *rites de passage* are divided into three groups: 1. rites of separation, 2. rites of transition, 3. rites of incorporation[8].

The structural emphasis becomes very clear in the last chapters of the introduction where van Gennep describes the phenomenon of crossing frontiers and other territorial passages. This part of the book has particularly been criticized by functionalists because it seems to confuse the universal borderline between "this world" and "the other-worldly". Van Gennep describes regional moves as follows: "Precisely: the door is the boundary between the foreign and domestic worlds in the case of an ordinary dwelling, between the profane and sacred worlds in the case of a temple. Therefore to cross the threshold is to unite oneself with a new world. It is thus an important act in marriage, adoption, ordination and funeral ceremonies. [– – –] Consequently, I propose to call the rites of separation from a previous world, *preliminal rites*, those executed during the transitional stage *liminal* (or threshold) *rites*, and the ceremonies of incorporation into the new world *postliminal rites*."[9]

He closes the chapter on "The Territorial Passage" with the following

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[6] Cf. Gluckman 1962, particularly 1 ff.; Honko 1964, 129 ff.

[7] E.g. Propp 20 f., 60 ff., 95; Dundes 1964, 58 ff.; Greimas 203 ff.; Pentikäinen 1978 a, 23 ff.

[8] Cf. Van Gennep 8 f.

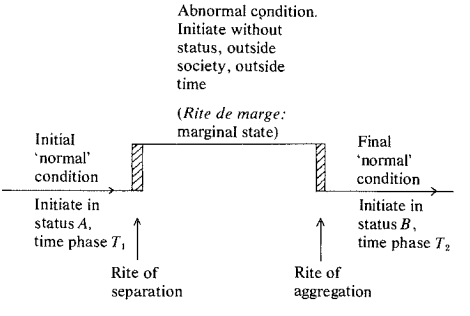
[9] Ib. 20 f. The term *limen* is Latin meaning 'threshold' and for van Gennep 'transition between'.

statement: "In order to understand rites pertaining to the threshold, one should always remember that the threshold is only a part of the door and that most of these rites should be understood as direct and physical rites of entrance, of waiting, and of departure—that is, as rites of passage."[10]

2. *The liminal stage in the ritual performance*

In his several writings[11], Victor W. Turner has further developed van Gennep's idea on liminal rites. Turner's way of analysis is mainly symbolic and process oriented. He also speaks about the structural analysis of rites and symbols. In his terminology, the concept of "structure" coincides with that of "social structure", according to the usage of British social anthropology. The concept of "anti-structure" and "communitas" are used in the description of the liminal stage: "In liminality, *communitas* tends to characterize relationships between those jointly undergoing ritual tradition. The bonds of *communitas* are anti-structural in the sense that they are undifferentiated, equalitarian, direct, extant, nonrational, existential, I–Thou relationships. *Communitas* is spontaneous, immediate, concrete—it is not shaped by norms, it is not institutionalized, it is not abstract."[12]

Under the liminal stage, people, for example the *initiands,* are beyond the boundaries of the normal social structure, its values, norms and obligations. The marginal state which starts from the rites of separation is an abnormal condition, outside society and time. For that reason it is possible for people to behave according to the habits and norms which do not coincide with those of the "normal" social structure and its conditions. For example, sexual freedom is a common characteristic of the marginal period in the initiation rites of many peoples. The marginal abnormal condition is ended by rites of aggregation which make new status relationships public to the community. The general three-phase scheme of rites of passage can be illustrated by the following figure[13]:



[10] Ib. 25.

[11] E.g. Turner 1969, 94ff.; 1974, 1ff.; 1974a, 13ff., 231ff.; 1975, 145ff.; 1975a, 207ff.; Ms 1ff.

[12] Turner 1974a, 272ff.

[13] Cf. Leach 78.

Van Gennep characterized the condition of the initiates in the following way: "The novices are outside society, and society has no power over them, especially since they are actually sacred and holy, and therefore untouchable and dangerous, just as gods would be."[14] Turner expresses the same as follows: "They are dead to the social world, but alive to the asocial world. [– – –] In liminality, profane-social relations may be discontinued, former rights and obligations are suspended, the social order may seem to have been turned upside down, but by way of compensation, cosmological systems (as objects of serious study) may become of central importance for the novices, who are confronted by the elders, in rite, myth, song, instruction in a secret language, and various non-verbal symbolic genres, such as dancing, painting, clay-moulding, wood-carving, masking, etc., with symbolic patterns and structures which amount to teaching about the structure of the cosmos and their culture as a part and product of it, in so far as these are defined and comprehended, whether implicitly or explicitly. Liminality is a complex series of episodes in sacred space–time, and may also include subversive and ludic events."[15]

3. *The ritual movements of the Karelian wedding drama*

From the structural point of view, the liminal stage could also be regarded as a crucial phase in the sequence of the ritual drama. When rites of passage are investigated as structured symbolic behaviour, it is also possible to find and isolate smaller units of analysis. In my study on the White Sea Karelian wedding ceremonies I used the ritual movement[16] from one status to another as the basic unit of structural analysis.

Concerning the transformations of statuses, we can differentiate six basic positions[17]. In the case of the girl, she is moved from her 1. previous statuses as daughter (of her parents) and member of family (group and family line), youth etc., to that of 2. a wooed girl, 3. *antilas* ("the girl to be given away" referring to liminality) and 4. bride in the course of the wedding ceremony. After these steps there are still two positions which are made public later on, namely that of 5. wife after having become officially registered by an Orthodox priest, and that of 6. spouse and mother after having borne her first child. In the case of the boy, we can differentiate the statuses of 1. son, member of family groups, youth, etc., 2. suitor, 3. *seniehhä,* 4. bridegroom during the wedding ceremony itself; and after that 5. husband, and in the last phase 6. spouse and father.

The wedding itself took only a few days from the first step to the last, sometimes everything took place during one day. The whole process concerning transformations of statuses, however, could take several years. So

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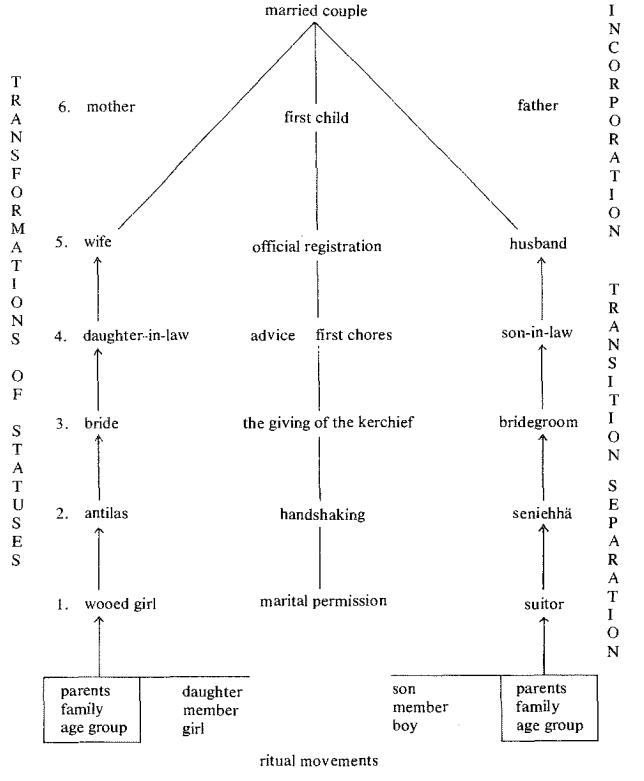
[14] Van Gennep 114.
[15] Turner Ms 10f.
[16] Cf. Lawson Ms 18ff.; Pentikäinen 1978, 182ff.
[17] More thoroughly in Pentikäinen 1978, 199ff.

prolonged a period was significant from the functional point of view: it gave enough time for the young couple, particularly the new wife, to become emotionally separated from her previous groups and to become united into a new solidary group in their own nuclear family.

The structural sequence of the ritual movements and status transformations in the wedding ceremony



4. *Ritual as transmission of symbols*

Ritual behaviour is always the communication of the symbols which transmit some religious or other messages to the participants aware of their meanings. According to Firth, "symbols are instruments of expression, of communication, of knowledge and of control"[18]. He strongly emphasizes the importance of political symbols as instruments of power and control. Turner seems to share this idea when writing in his book *The forest of symbols* as follows: "I could not analyse [these] ritual symbols without studying them in a time series in relation to other 'events', for symbols are essentially involved in social processes. [– – –] From this standpoint

[18] Firth 77. Cf. Turner 1975, 145ff.

the ritual symbol becomes a factor in social action, a positive force in any activity field."[19]

According to Firth, symbols are "storage units", which consist of a maximum capacity of information. Hence, he continues, the total significance of a symbol is only understood once it has been viewed from each ritual context in which it is found. Turner sees three levels of interpretation: 1. an *exegetical,* given by the participants themselves, 2. an *operational* which is drawn from the context in which the symbol is found, and 3. the *positional* meaning, which is obtained by way of comparisons[20].

Symbols are communicated in the interactional situations between individuals in certain social groups. From this point of view, symbolic behaviour and its learning is a process meaning "becoming human through culture". Geertz writes: "When seen as a set of symbolic devices for controlling behaviour, extrasomatic sources of information, culture provides the link between what men are intrinsically capable of becoming and what they actually, one by one, in fact become. Becoming human is becoming individual, and we become individual under the guidance of cultural patterns, historically created systems of meaning in terms of which we give form, order, point, and direction to our lives. And the cultural patterns involved are not general but specific—not just 'marriage' but a particular set of notions about what men and women are like, how spouses should treat one another, or who should properly marry whom; not just 'religion' but belief in the wheel of karma, the observance of a month of fasting, or the practice of cattle sacrifice. Man is to be defined neither by his innate capacities alone, [...] nor by his actual behaviour alone, [...] but rather by the link between them, by the way in which the first is transformed into the second, his generic potentialities focused into his specific performances."[21]

5. *Emics of the ritual: the world view of the rites*

Marett at his time summed up his ideas about the nature of "primitive religion": "Primitive religion is danced out, not thought out." It is only natural that ritual is the most decorative and observable side of the religion. Marett's sentence is onesided, however, because it emphasizes too much the behavioural aspects of the so-called "primitive religions". There are dogmas, myths, folk beliefs and other cognitive elements in every religion, although they cannot be observed as easily as ritual behaviour but, rather, are expressed by informants in conversation. There is a world view[22] behind every ritual performance. It were as great failure to study rites only on the basis of textual observations concerning the ritual acts. Malinowski re-

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[19] Turner 1974, 20.
[20] Cf. Turner 1965, 82 f.
[21] Geertz 52.
[22] On the concept, cf. e.g. Pentikäinen 1978, 34 ff. Cf. Dundes 1971, 93 ff.; Jones 79 ff.; Smith 68 ff.; Kearney 247 ff.; Manninen 3 ff.

marked as early as in 1926: "The text, of course, is extremely important, but without the context it remains lifeless."[23] The context analysis of the ritual performances means a careful study of the uses, meanings as well as functions, both latent and manifest, of any ritual act[24].

In the *emic*[25] study of the ritual we put a great emphasis on ideas, interpretations, attitudes, feelings, and meanings expressed by the informants themselves, either spontaneously or in an interview between a scholar and an informant. This material brings afore the "native's point of view", as some cultural anthropologists have expressed the matter. Meanings concerning the same ritual act can vary even in a small community. The cognitive and conative knowledge of the active leader of the rite is usually wider than that of the passive participants. For that reason, we can speak about the specialized knowledge of the rite performer, i.e. the ritual repertoire[26] of a specialist. He is usually more aware of the old symbolic links of the ritual units than the other participants. Their opinions are important because they usually are a testimony of the collective tradition, i.e. the knowledge shared by most people in the community.

This is why, the emic study of the ritual is holistic and process oriented. It concerns rites both as social and individual acts. Abrahams characterizes "the oral performance" as follows: "A performance is a coming together occasion on which performer and audience bring mutual patterns of expectation to the situation of performance. The performer then, gives his ability to actively produce a narrative will be relying heavily upon the audience's understanding of the lineaments of both the type and its individual manifestation. Of importance in such an approach is not the items itself but the total event in which the item provides the primary focus. The performer serves to heighten awareness of this possibility of participation. His role as presented is to activate the sense of meaningful encounter, meaningful transaction. He differs from the members of his audience only in that he has a productive competence within that type of performance, while their's is, at least at the moment, a receptive competence."[27]

In his micro studies when dealing, e.g., with Ndembu ritual processes, Turner often describes ritual acts and symbols using local and regional terms. It is clear that this kind of culture bound terminology often gives a more trustful picture than the alternative analysis using only internationally accepted concepts. Turner describes Isoma ritual in the following way: "My main aim [in this chapter] is to explore the semantics of ritual symbols in Isoma, a ritual of the Ndembu, and to construct from the observational and exegetical data a model of the semantic structure of this symbolism. The first step in such a task is to pay close attention to the way the

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[23] Malinowski 17f., 24.
[24] Cf. e.g. Berglund 19ff.; Pentikäinen 1978, 51ff.
[25] Cf. Pike 8ff.; Pelto 67ff.; Harris 1968, 568ff. 1976, 465. Pentikäinen 1978, 28ff.
[26] Cf. Pentikäinen 1978, 324f.
[27] Abrahams 15f.

Ndembu explain their own symbols. [– – –] We are here trying to discover 'the Ndembu inside view', how the Ndembu themselves felt and thought about their own ritual."[28]

In his later papers, Turner makes an attempt for an *etic* study of symbols. According to him, symbology is not only "the study or interpretation of symbols" but also "representation or expression by means of symbols". He continues: "The term 'comparative' merely means that this branch of study involves comparison as method, as does, for example comparative linguistics. Comparative symbology is narrower than 'semiotics' or 'semiology', and wider than 'symbolic anthropology' in range and scope of data and problems."[29] He also makes a distinction "liminal" vs. "liminoid" and emphasizes the need of a terminology for the description of the ritual life even in modern society. According to him, "liminoid" belongs to the analysis of the industrialized high cultures. Turner writes: "In the so-called 'high cultures' of complex societies, the liminoid is not only removed from a *rite de passage* context, it is also 'individualized'. The solitary artist *creates* the liminoid phenomena, the collectivity *experiences* collective liminal symbols. This does not mean that the maker of liminoid symbols, ideas, images, etc. does so *ex nihilo;* it only means that he is privileged to make free with his social heritage in a way impossible to members of cultures in which the *liminal* is to a large extent the sacrosanct."[30]

6. *Liminality and the supernatural*

Most examples above have concerned rites of passages. Liminality is then a marginal phase between old and new statuses, a period lasting some limited time and in most cases leading to a normal condition and a new social membership and status. The liminal stage is abnormal and antistructural, deviates from the usual one even so far that—depending on the religion in question—people at that phase are considered to be more apt to the influence of the supernatural than usually. For example, the frequency of the supranormal experiences is quite high during or around the liminal periods among people going through rites of passages and their intimate groups as well. The presence of the supernatural thus somehow belongs to the normal picture of the liminal phase. Supernatural experiences are even expected for, and the manifestations of the supranormal beings have a positive function for the community. It is important from the point of the community in question that the liminal stage can safely be passed by and the normal life started after that.

Liminality can also become a continuous problem which will disturb the life of the community and have supernatural manifestations. This concerns,

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[28] Turner 1969, 10f.
[29] Turner Ms 1.
[30] Ib. 47.

for example, religious beliefs dealing with the so-called "dead without status".

My religio-phenomenological study[31] shows that the exceptional character of these dead appears in many cultures in at least three different ways: 1. Burial ceremonies differ from normal usage. Those who died a "bad death" are buried with special rites—without a coffin, without ceremony, apart from others or they are left unburied. 2. There is no group which feels obliged to equip the dead or to concern itself about what will happen to the dead in the after-life. He who has died a bad death is from this point of view similar to a stranger who is unprovided for. 3. An individual who has undergone a bad death is not believed to succeed in reaching the community of the dead. It is feared that he will only get half way and remain in an eternal transition phase and haunt the living in one form or another.

Dead-child beings are a typical example of the departed without status. From the religio-scientific point of view the problem with abandoned, murdered, unbaptized, aborted or stillborn children is that they have died before the necessary status-giving rites have been carried out. Their position is problematical in that they have never belonged to the group of the living and for this reason cannot belong to the group of the dead either. Burial ceremonies are either performed in a special way or left unperformed. From all this it is evident that the child is considered an "outsider"; he has at no point been a member of the family, nor has he been accepted in the group of the dead, which is the object of a cult.

The problem of the dead without status seems to be in their "eternal" liminality. It is an exceptional, unsatisfactory condition which is mostly suffered and experienced by those who are regarded as responsible for the supranormal manifestations. For that reason, it is quite natural that it is the mother of the murdered child which is attacked by the dead-child being. According to the ancient Nordic tradition, *utbörding* or *aepparâš* sucks or kills its mother after it has been given permission or an order to do so. This order can be given in a stereotyped formula incantation, as for example: "Suck your mother!" "Kill your mother!" or "Go and do your mother what she has done to you."[32] The family's response in the matter becomes clear in the following proverb, very common in Central Scandinavia and Finland: "Utbördingen är värst på släkten sin". (*Utbörding*, a dead-child being is worst for its family)[33]. Another rite which was considered to be very effective for the final elimination of the supranormal disturber was baptism. When the child got the name it was lacking for it was supposed to get peace and cease haunting. The double liminality was dependent both on the neglect of baptismal rites after childbirth and ordinary burial rites after death.

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[31] Cf. Haavio 129; Pentikäinen 1968 a, 92 ff.

[32] Pentikäinen 1968, 212 ff., 310 ff.

[33] Cf. ib. 217 ff.

"OK (= Olavi Korhonen): People have perhaps heard something like weeping in the forest?

SV (= Susanna Valkeapää): I do not know. Then perhaps it was *aepparâš*. I think you mean that. It is said that people have hidden a child where it was born and not told about it to others. Then it becomes a ghost. It also cries sometimes. And some hear it and also see it. But they see it in the form of a bird.

OK What sort of a bird?

SV Any bird. A white grouse, for example. Once at Palojaw're a white grouse was seen in the autumn, in the thicket and it screamed like a baby. And it was that sort of a child. There was a child to which they gave a name. You know, when it has got a name it did not haunt any longer.

OK In what manner was the name given to it?

SV Well, I don't know. I remember that I have heard that one should read the Lord's prayer backwards. Then it disappears easily. Just backwards it should be read when it is baptized. And a human name should be given to it. [– – –] Two names were given. A boy's name and a girl's name were given, when it was not of either group."[34]

7. *Marginality—A way of life*

A study of the threshold experiences and the liminal stage might also open some perspectives for a better understanding of creativity. It is a well-known phenomenon from the world of the arts that many authors, painters, and musicians seem to live a kind of continuous marginality. They also seem to enjoy their way of life and put a great emphasis on their marginal exceptional experiences which seem to be a necessary catalysator for their creativity. There are several examples about shaping under the influence of hallucinogenics and narcotics. Being a member of an oppressed minority has often meant an exceptionally great productive power. This concerns for example many famous Jewish scientists and artists. An immigration or a flight to an alien environment has also sometimes meant a new orientation into life. Feelings and experiences on marginality as a continuum have often meant remarkable impulses for creativity. This concerns both more developed and traditional societies. My Karelian informant Marina Takalo could be considered an example of a creative personality in a traditional rural community[35].

She was born in White Sea Karelia in 1890 but lived most part of her life as a refugee in Finland (i.e. from the year 1922 until her death in 1970). She was a representative of four different minorities. Her nationality was that of the U.S.S.R. until her death, she was a representative of a *staroviero* (the

[34] Ib. 332.

[35] More thoroughly in Pentikäinen 1978, 58 ff., 326 ff.

Old Belief) minority group within the Russian Orthodox Church. Her ethnic identity was White Sea Karelian and, last but not least, she was illiterate in an almost totally literate society. All these minority identities which she emphatically wanted to preserve all her life through meant strong feelings on marginality and deprivations to her. Her family had great difficulties in finding any stable or satisfactory place in Finnish society. This can be seen from the fact that they were obliged to shift their place of accomodation in Finland over 30 times. Marina Takalo often felt to be an outsider in Finnish society. Her statuses in many social circles seemed to be very temporary. She would hardly have become a creative personality and at the same time an aware bearer of her Karelian culture without her marginal experiences.

In the following two examples on Marina Takalo's repertoire are quoted. The first part of her life history deals with her begging expeditions in her childhood. The second tells about the same period according to the generic grammar of an autobiographical lament.

"When mother came to be married into Vanhatalo, it was among the richest houses in Karelia. When accidents started to follow one another, then I—they had 12 children, I was the 11th one—had to run with a basket in my arms, walk about the village, collect bread, not for myself but for home. Forty kilometres from home sister was a maid in a house, I was there as a lodger. Every day I ran round the village, went to houses. When I went to the steps, I listened from behind the door to see whether there were any visitors. If there were, I didn't dare go, I went to other houses. When I returned, if there were still men from the village, again I didn't dare go. I used such cunning: I split a piece of bread into two, so as if I had gone to every house; because sister ordered me to visit every house. Then they gave me something to eat in that house where sister was a maid and I a lodger. When sister made soup, then in her meanness she put the film of the soup in my bowl. When I ate it, yes every time I put it in my mouth—first I always ate that—, I felt that I should vomit it, but it didn't help. Woe!, woe! It was the winter there, the next summer at home; in autumn I was sent travelling again. I certainly have not had such an onerous job in this world. I have worked hard all my life, but that was the hardest job of all. In autumn I had to go to live on the other side of the river of the village. I travelled by boat. The owner of that house came one time and asked if I would go to the river as his "fishnet-rower" (i.e. to row while he dragged the fish net). Never have I had any news more joyful than that, that I would be able to support myself from my own work. I was there till Christmas. Then mother came to fetch me home. For wages I was given two sacks of potatoes, one sack of grain, also clothes to wear. After that I was at home for my entire girlhood. Winters I had to go to drive logs, but what harm could that work do!"[36]

[36] Ib. 67 f.

Autobiographical Lament 340 (A.D. 1962)
"Ever since a doll-child I've grown up with a wretched lot and as a doll-child I've wandered (as a beggar) with a basket, asking from behind dorr-sills of the more flourishing for pieces of bread for a meal
and as a little duckling-child I've asked below the windows of the more generously fated for alms pieces for the first meal.
So, ever since a small duckling-child I've grown up with a lowly lot, and all my dear lifetime I've lived with a lowly lot at the jobs of those more generously fated,
ever since I wound up from there, the higher parts [i.e. Viena] of the dear world to wander here in the very foreign parts [i.e. Finland] of the world."[37]

The religious genres known by Marina Takalo offered her a large scale of ways for engaging in sacral intercourse. The messages transmitted through these genres were not always traditional ones. For example, autobiographical laments were for her the way of sacral intercourse with which she particularly wanted to address her God. Marina Takalo's ritual practices and world view underwent greater changes in course of her life history. Many norms, rites and customs crucial in Orthodox Karelian upbringing (such as prayers, the making of the sign of the cross, fasting) dropped off in the course of the emigrant phase. Despite that, her personal devotion did not weaken. The peculiar character of her religious views and interpretations which has respectedly been pointed out in this study clearly indicated that Marina Takalo, as an Orthodox, was an uncontrolled outsider.

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ARA Annual review of anthropology
FFC Folklore fellows communications

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[37] Ib. 252.

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