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## Religious Ritual Contested\*

### Anti-religious Activities and Women's Ritual Practice in Rural Soviet Karelia

After the October Revolution, the Bolsheviks sought to establish a new atheistic order which would eradicate from the public consciousness all vestiges of "religious prejudices", which were regarded as a residue from the imperial era and an instrument used to exploit the masses. Even though it was generally held that religion would automatically disappear from socialist society when its material precondition, the class society, was abolished, the regime made concentrated efforts to speed up the process by means of virulent anti-religious propaganda. The ultimate goal was to wipe out the persistent remains of the bourgeois system of values (Lahtinen 1991: 68). No force was to be used since it was feared this would merely offend the religious sentiments of the people and strengthen their adherence to religion. Theoretically, the ultimate goal was to be achieved through education and information, but in practice, anti-religious activities were at times quite brutal. These attacks were successful in curtailing the activities of religious institutions in Karelia, but did not bring to an end the religious practices of lay people, which were continued, in one form or another, throughout the entire Soviet period. One fundamental reason for the survival of religious rituals, both Christian and indigenous, was the fact that they were so deeply embedded in people's consciousness and intimately integrated with their everyday lives. Every important phase and turn in human life was sanctified by rituals. The goal of the present paper is to examine what forms anti-religious attacks took in Soviet Karelia and how people reacted to them. I will focus on the attacks against the very fundamentals of the ritual complex of the church and, by extension, on the effects of these attacks on the indigenous ritual complex, which co-existed in parallel with that of the "official" religious institutions.

The two fundamentals of Orthodox liturgy were the sanctification of time and human life. The smallest temporal cycle was the day, structured by Matins and Vespers. The next, larger, cycle was the week, which commemo-

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rated important events in the history of Christian salvation. Finally the greatest cycle, the church year, which, with its fasts and feast days (*prazdniks*), commemorated and celebrated holy persons and major events in the history of Christian salvation (Sidoroff 1988: 42ff.; Piironen 1984b: 94ff.). Religious holidays and festivals were not only an intellectual commemoration of holy events, but were also a re-experience of sacred history. As Per-Arne Bodin has pointed out, these events took place once in the past, but also in *nunc aeternitatis*, eternal now. Many of the Orthodox hymns describe biblical events in the present tense, repeating the keyword "now". (Bodin 1993: 16f.)

The turning-points in the agricultural year were tied to the church calendar, which had assimilated the pre-Christian seasonal calendar. An individual's life cycle was also intimately linked to the course of the church calendar. Everyone was named after the saint whose day was closest to their birthday and this saint served as the person's heavenly guardian. Moreover, human life was sanctified by the sacraments: baptism, Chrismation, the Eucharist, Repentance and Holy Matrimony etc. These sacraments, together with the indigenous rites of passage, divided the human life span into different phases.

As the sanctification of time and human life were the very fundamentals of Orthodox ritual practice, I will focus on the anti-religious attacks which aimed at annihilating these fundamentals. First, I will discuss anti-religious actions aimed at abolishing sacred time-reckoning, which underlay the ritual system of the church, and actions aimed at abolishing the religious rituals and festivals which were tied to the sacred calendar. The "rites of fasting and feasting" must have been particularly provocative to anti-religious activists since they could be seen as a public manifestation of people's commitment to a competing and forbidden system of values. According to Catherine Bell, "in these rituals, people are particularly concerned to express publicly – to themselves, each other, and sometimes outsiders – their religious commitment and adherence to basic religious values" (Bell 1997: 120). The function of religious feasts as a manifestation of the participants' adherence to religion was accentuated when the observance of religious holidays came under attack. In a corresponding manner, the Communists manifested their atheistic stance by working on the religious holidays.

Second, I will examine the attacks directed against sacred space, which served as the *locus* of ritual performance and celebration of religious feasts. The chapels and churches, which were the concrete bases for church rituals and religious feasts, were seen by the authorities as centres of potential resistance and were therefore to be confiscated or closed down.

A third factor, vital to the survival of ritual traditions, was, of course, the existence of ritual specialists. Through the so-called "parasite laws"

the clergy were deprived of their civil rights. Priests, not being considered workers, were defined as *kulaks* and were deported in great numbers during the first wave of de-kulakisation (Conquest 1986: 203). With the deportation of religious specialists, women found an increasingly important role as ritual leaders both in Soviet Karelia and elsewhere in the Soviet Union. Consequently, the third goal of the present study is to view the reallocation of ritual roles after the deportation of the clergy with the special focus on the performance of rites of passage.

Women's ritual roles and people's reactions to the anti-religious campaigns will be studied within the wider framework of folk religion, which was a conglomerate of popular orthodoxy, Old Belief and indigenous religion. We may say that folk religion and its rituals, by its very existence and persistence, contested the official atheistic policy.

## The sources

I have studied the anti-religious campaigns in Karelia during the 1920s and 1930s from material published in the Soviet Karelian newspapers *Karjalan Kommuuni* (the "Karelian Commune", abbreviated KK), which was later renamed *Punainen Karjala* ("Red Karelia", abbreviated PK). These Finnish-language papers reflect the official ideology and view on religion of the time and, to some degree, give us a glimpse of the contemporary religious situation in Karelia. We can also read indirectly and directly about people's reactions to the anti-religious campaigns, but we must bear in mind that this publication was an official instrument of anti-religious propaganda and therefore gives a somewhat distorted picture of these reactions. According to these papers, various anti-religious campaigns were initiated at the spontaneous request of the people, but we know that this was seldom true.

Literature published by Finns who worked in occupied areas of Karelia during the War of Continuation (1941–44) gives us a further insight into people's reactions to the anti-religious order.

I have also used folkloristic data, relying primarily on the archive collections in Helsinki and Petrozavodsk, to study people's reactions to anti-religious activities. A further important source for this study are the publications by Karelian and Finnish folklorists who conducted fieldwork in Karelia during and after the Soviet period. Yet another source are the field interviews I have conducted with about forty women who were born between the years 1909 and 1937. Their life-spans cover almost the entire Soviet period and give us valuable information about the popular religious practices of the period.

## The abolition of sacred time

Sacred time pulsed in cycles of various lengths. The day, the weekly calendar and the church year repeated the history of Christian salvation. Wednesday and Friday were fast days as a commemoration of Christ's suffering. Karelian weekdays were divided into "sacred" days, fast days (*pyhä*) and non-fast days (*argi/arki*). *Pyhä* in Karelian, besides denoting "holy", also meant "fast". On such days a believer had not only to keep to a particular diet but, at least in earlier periods, abstain from sexual intercourse. Sunday, which was not a fast day, was dedicated to the resurrection of Christ and was called the "holy day" (*pyhäpäivä/pyhäpäivä*) (Jetsu 2001: 158f.).

An important step towards the elimination of sacred time-reckoning was the prohibition of the observance of the Sabbath. The authorities sought to achieve this by abolishing the seven-day week and in the wake of collectivisation, a "continuous" five-day calendar was introduced. This extreme measure was never accepted, and in 1940 the seven-day week, with Sunday as an official day of rest, was reintroduced (Pospelovskiy 1988: 56f., 71, 91). According to Elisabeth Wood's study, older women in particular had opposed the introduction of the five-day week (Wood 1997: 211).

The annual calendar also revolved around events in the life of Christ and the Mother of God as well as numerous saints. Each church and chapel was dedicated to a certain holy person or to an event in their lives and days dedicated to these persons or events were celebrated with *prazdnik* feasts. A number of villages formed a *prazdnik* network and *prazdnik* gatherings were important social events, especially for the young who often found their marriage partners at these festivals. The celebration of church holidays was also forbidden and a shift to a secular feast calendar initiated.

At the beginning of the 1920s, the authorities attempted to propagate against religious holidays by subjecting them to ridicule in dramas arranged by the Komsomol at the time of major church holidays. Anti-religious festivals were also arranged in Petrozavodsk. These activities proved to be far too offensive, even to non-believers, and their public performance was discontinued. During the Krushev period, similar types of campaigns were tested again (Laitila 1991: 48f.).

It was not only the ordinary people who "wandered in the darkness" who had difficulties abandoning the celebration of religious holidays. During the 1920s it was not uncommon for party and Komsomol members to observe religious holidays, choose a church wedding, baptise their children and attend church services (Young 1989: 135–42). An anonymous author expressed his or her dissatisfaction with the Finnish members of a communist youth organisation who attended church once a year on Easter

night. She or he complained that “many observe this custom more conscientiously than their duties to the Youth League”.<sup>1</sup> In 1930 the collective “Our victory” was accused in the press of faithfully celebrating church holidays. According to the newspaper, the collectivists should be ashamed of themselves since they were expected to show a good example to private households.<sup>2</sup>

During the 1920s and 1930s, newspaper campaigns were initiated against religious celebration immediately prior to the major religious holidays, especially Easter and Christmas. The celebration of these holidays was challenged by specially arranged work campaigns. Working during a religious holiday came to serve as an anti-religious manifestation. After each holiday, *Punainen Karjala* published reports on the success or failure in deterring these religious celebrations, as well as the success of work campaigns and other alternative celebrations. After the Easter celebrations in 1930, the reading-room in Essoila, Olonets, was criticised for not having arranged any anti-religious activities for Easter. The same publication was pleased to report that the anti-religious Easter celebration at the Finnish pedagogical institute had been a great success, attracting a large audience.<sup>3</sup> In a later issue (no. 100), the discussion of the inefficient anti-religious activity of the reading-room in Essoila continued. This time the pseudonym “Jussi” accused the central reading-room for the Säämäjärvi region of negligence in its anti-religious work. According to “Jussi”, they had not arranged the kind of entertainment which would attract young people. The audience had largely consisted of the organisers themselves, while the nearby church had been packed with people.

A more subtle method in the struggle against religious feasts was to change their religious content into a secular and political one. The religious content were not replaced by secular entertainment, but by a programme considered to be physically and intellectually edifying. A number of notices in *Punainen Karjala* inform us of how a traditional village feast was turned into “an occasion of enlightenment”. In Kostamus, for instance, a sports competition and a soirée with a play were arranged on the day of the Mother of God. The festival was attended by 250 people from nearby villages.<sup>4</sup> Feasts with such political and edifying content were not found to be so attractive everywhere. In Nokeus, the village *soviet* had arranged a meeting on St George’s (*Jyrinpäivä*) day, but, as the annoyed reporter writes, after three hours wait only three villagers turned up. Not even all the mem-

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1 PK 1927, no. 45: 2.

2 PK 1930, no. 164: 2.

3 PK 1930, no. 96: 2.

4 PK 1927, no. 15 (103): 2.

bers of the council were present, but celebrated the day in the traditional manner.<sup>5</sup>

In order to speed up the abandonment of religious festivals, a new festival calendar was introduced in the Soviet Union, in which religious holidays were replaced by secular ones (see Lane 1981: 130–39). This, of course, was the same strategy the church had once employed when seeking to replace indigenous, “heathen” feasts with Christian festivals.

### Religious sanctions against the violation of sacred time

The Soviet era brought two crucial changes in traditional time-reckoning. Firstly, it involved a shift from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar in 1918 and secondly, a shift from a religious calendar to a secular one. The former shift had been a pan-Orthodox topic of discussion at the beginning of the 20th century. I have very little source data for how people in Soviet Karelia reacted to these changes, but we may get some idea of their emotions if we examine how people in the Finnish side of the border reacted to the shift from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar. In spite of the fact that the clergy sought to convince the people that the change of calendar was merely a technical issue, the decision in 1921 to switch to the Gregorian calendar provoked strong opposition among parishioners in the Karelian Borders. Some parishioners justified their opposition with the claim that God only understood Russian and old time-reckoning. Some saw the change of calendar as tantamount to a change of faith (Hämynen 1995: 116ff.). An article in *Karjalan Kommuuni* indicates that popular reaction to the decision made by the synod in Moscow to switch to the Gregorian calendar in 1923 was far from calm. The paper reported somewhat triumphantly of people’s disapproval. A “kulak peasant” was said to have complained that the “crooked priests had even sold the holidays to the Bolsheviks”.<sup>6</sup> This brief survey clearly shows how deeply the traditional time reckoning was anchored in people’s minds.

If the switchover to the Gregorian calendar initiated by the clergy caused such a storm of protest, it is easy to imagine what the reactions were to the Communist regime’s rash and insensitive scheme to eliminate the religious calendar altogether. As the observance of holidays was reinforced by the strongest religious sanctions, we may assume that the people viewed the orders to work on holidays with the utmost horror.

Folklore sources stress that there were three special days (“Fridays”) when people were not supposed to work: Good Friday, the eve of Pente-

5 PK 1927, no. 55: 2.

6 KK 1923, no. 95: 2.

cost and Ilja's (St Elijah) day.<sup>7</sup> There are a number of tales describing the kinds of punishment meted out to people who did not observe the prohibition against work on these particular days. Ilja, who had assumed some of the features and functions of the ancient Karelian god of thunder, was known in the popular traditions as a fierce being who would punish those who worked on his day. One source relates that hay gathered on Ilja's day was burned by the thunder.<sup>8</sup> Another source warns that anyone who desecrated Ilja's day could be struck dead. This is said to have actually happened in the village of Kormilisto, where it was claimed that Ilja killed a man who had made hay on the eve of his day. The narrator himself had been punished by Pedru (St Peter) for working on Petru's day. He and his wife had collected firewood in the forest and on that very same day a cow had died, a clear instance of the saint's revenge.<sup>9</sup>

Considering the harsh punishments for working on religious holidays, it is understandable that believers must have felt terrified when the shift was made, first to Gregorian, and then to the secular calendar. Those who chose to observe the holidays according to the new calendar were taking a great risk. According to a record from the village of Rämälä in Salmi, a farmer named Ojapelto and his wife were killed in the summer of 1934 because they had harvested rye on the "old" Ilja's day.<sup>10</sup>

An article in *Karjalan Kommuuni* shows that the change in the calendar caused chaos within the festival networks, since some villages retained the old feast calendar and some switched to the new.<sup>11</sup> The safest solution to the existence of different calendars during the transitional period was perhaps to follow them both, as was done in the village of Supuski on the coast of Murmansk – a nightmare for anti-religious activists. According to one correspondent, the village celebrated 160 annual holidays. Not only did the people celebrate the church festivals according to both calendars, as well as birth and name days, but also celebrated the new revolutionary feasts.<sup>12</sup> We may assume that Supuski was not the only village of this kind, but was representative of a common phenomenon in this transitional period.

The new secular feasts were introduced to replace religious festivals, but it seems that during a transitional phase people could integrate the new Soviet holidays into their religious calendar. Some sources indicate that the work-free time allowed by the Soviet feasts may have been inter-

7 Salmi: Martta Pelkonen < Anni Mikkilä, b. in Orusjärvi; SKS 1940: 298.

8 Tulomajärvi: Helmi Helminen < Akim Lomojev, b. 1874; SKS 1944: 3376.

9 Salmi: Martta Pelkonen < Johor Lammas; SKS 1940: 411.

10 Salmi: Martta Pelkonen < Outti Feodorantytär; SKS 1935–40: 372. Also < Johor Lammas; SKS 1940: 410.

11 KK 1923, 95: 2. Cf. Hämynen 1995: 118.

12 PK 1928, no. 43: 2.

preted in terms of the observance of the Sabbath. Indeed, the official proclamation of the "Revolutionary holidays and special days of rest" specifically stipulated that it was forbidden to work on major holidays, such as New Year's day, the first of May etc.<sup>13</sup> An informant from Porajärvi maintains that during the "*kolhoz* era" the first of May was the only *prazdnik* which was celebrated. People were forbidden to work for three days, but had to work twice as much at Easter.<sup>14</sup> A newspaper notice indicates that the religious sanctions for failing to observe the Sabbath could also come to embrace the celebration of the first of May. A headline in *Punainen Karjala* declared ironically that "Even God has acknowledged the first of May as a holiday". According to the article, an old woman in Tumtsa got a headache after working on the First of May, which she interpreted as a supernatural punishment for having worked on a holiday. "It seems that God looks upon the first of May as a holiday as well, since he gave her a headache for her sin", the writer concludes sarcastically.<sup>15</sup>

In spite of the massive campaigns against religious celebrations, people held on to their feasts for quite some time, but, as Pekka Hakamies' survey shows, collectivisation seems to have been the crucial turning point for the decline of traditional village culture. People celebrated their *prazdniks* until the villages were collectivised (Hakamies 2000: 283). By inhibiting people's free movement, collectivisation contributed to the breakdown of the social networks which underlay the inter-village *prazdnik* celebrations. By regulating work schedules, the working collective could hinder people from taking part in festivals in other villages. A folklore record from Porajärvi mentions that the so called *ativo* visits, which were an important part of these celebrations, ceased with the collectivisation of the villages.<sup>16</sup> The wars, the liquidation of "non-prosperous villages" and labour migration broke down the last remnants of the social network which was the foundation of the village feasts. After the Second World War, the ethnic composition of the villages changed and, as one of my informants put it, the newcomers did not know the local feast traditions while the festival networks were too weak to be able to integrate the newcomers.

Collectivisation struck a further hard blow at the celebration of *prazdniks*, since it often involved the closure of the local church or the chapel to which the feast quite concretely was tied.

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13 PK 1928, no. 12: 4.

14 Porajärvi, Jänkäjärvi: Helmi Helminen < Pero Ahtoinen, 95 yrs; SKS 1943: 1314.

15 PK 1930, no. 143: 2.

16 Porajärvi, Kuutamolahti: Helmi Helminen < Maša Kottarainen, 52 yrs; SKS 1943: 1293.



## The abolition of ritual space

At the end of 1929 an intensive attack against churches was orchestrated, reaching its peak during the first months of 1930 (Conquest 1986: 203). A report from 1938 reveals that of the 594 churches in the Olonetsian episcopacy 539 had either been closed down or put to other use, allegedly "at the request of the workers" (Makkonen 1989: 67). Churches and chapels were turned into secular establishments, serving as schools, cinemas, cultural houses, public dining rooms etc. A new wave of closures took place during the Krushev period (Pospielovsky 1988: 121–28).

In spite of the threat of arrest and deportation, protests were held throughout the Soviet Union against church closures. In some parts, women opposed both collectivisation and church closures in the so-called *bab'i bunty*, women's uprisings (Viola 1992: 189). No such uprisings took place in Soviet Karelia, where collectivisation proceeded relatively smoothly. However, judging from the contents of the newspapers, not all women in Karelia accepted the closing of their churches without dissent. That women, much more than men, could protest against these violations with impunity was perhaps due to the fact that they were not so readily regarded as anti-Soviet (cf. Viola 1992: 189).

A teacher, Siina Taulamo, writes that two women from the village where she stayed had travelled to Moscow with an appeal for their church to be saved, but in vain. These women did not, however, accept the decision but fiercely opposed it, which later led to their arrest (Taulamo 1985: 49f.; see Järvinen 1998a: 57). Erkki Piironen, who worked as a priest in the occupied areas in Olonets, also mentions that two women, Katarina Fomkin and Maria Lukijeva from Suolusmäki, travelled to Moscow to plead to the president of the USSR for their church. Their journey did not succeed (Piironen 1984a: 101). On the other hand, the journey to Moscow by one Anna Antonovna in Solomanni was successful in preventing the church being turned into a clubhouse (Piironen 1984a: 55).

In some areas, where the churches and chapels had already been closed, women fought for their re-opening. One correspondent, who had travelled around the Karelian countryside, mainly in the Uhtua and Paatene regions, during the summer of 1927, maintains that there was not a single village, with the exception of Klyssinvaara, where there was a priest or an open church. The writer does report, however, that in some parishes there was a religious revival among the wealthy peasantry. In several places the peasants made demands for the re-opening of the church and the employment of a priest. These campaigns were often led by women, especially in Kiimasjärvi and Repola. In view of women's "backwardness", he found the situation worrying and urged men to explain to their wives and daughters the pointlessness of re-opening the churches.<sup>17</sup>

A newspaper article from February 1930 tells us that the conversion of the local church in Ruva into a club, led forty people, the majority of them women, to found a religious association. But, as the author wrote ironically, these women were illiterate and were not able to act as preachers. In their desperation the women apparently tried to force some members of the Youth League to take over this task, but, for obvious reasons, failed. The women's enterprise came to an end and they had to hand back their prayer house to the village *soviet*.<sup>18</sup>

### Religious sanctions against the violation of sacred space and objects

In spite of the fact that Karelian peasants have often been described as only superficially Christian, their strong reactions to the closure of the churches and the deportation of their priests bear witness to a strong attachment to their religious institutions. The believers in Jeletjärvi were said to have complained that being without a chapel was like having lost an arm.<sup>19</sup> The pulling down of church bells and icons and the closure of the churches not only offended people's religious sentiments. These objects and places were associated with taboos which strictly regulated people's behaviour. Warning tales describing the dreadful punishments that would afflict the person who broke the taboo have functioned as sanctions for certain religious norms, such as observation of the Sabbath or the showing of respect to sacred space and objects (Jauhiainen 1998: 213ff.). In anti-religious Soviet Karelia, the importance of these tales as the affirmation of religious belief grew in importance.

A popular narrative theme, which constantly re-occurred in my interviews, was the supernatural punishment which was meted out to party functionaries and administrators who had participated in the violations of sacred places and objects. It was a commonly held belief that God, the patron saint of a church or a chapel, or the personified building itself, could punish those who did not show it due respect. For this reason, people may have been frightened to visit public buildings which had originally been churches or chapels. *Punainen Karjala* reports that old women in a village did not like to go to the "Red Corner", the cultural club, since it had originally been a chapel.<sup>20</sup> We may assume that dances arranged in a club house which had been a church were seen as extremely sacrilegious.

17 PK 1927, no. 4: 2; no. 40: 3 and no. 49: 2.

18 PK 1930, no. 45: 3.

19 PK 1927, no. 88: 3.

20 PK 1930, no. 97: 2.

A common theme in my Olonetsian interviews was that the Communists who destroyed or stole church property were the objects of God's vengeance. A woman who is in charge of a small chapel dedicated to the Mother of God told us of the dreadful punishments which struck those who had desecrated the chapel during Soviet rule. She claimed that, one summer, sixteen cows on the local *sovhoz* had been struck by lightning as revenge for the fact that the chapel towels had been taken to the cowshed. These towels were originally given to the chapel as votive gifts by the local people. She further related that the chairman of the village *soviet* and the chairman of the *kolhoz*, the two most powerful men in the village, had demanded that her father, who at that time was the elder of the chapel, should give them the chapel's money. The men took "God's money" and drank it up, but they did not have to wait long for their punishment. Both of the men became sick and were admitted to hospital. Even although they performed the customary rite of apology, God was implacable: the men were doomed to die.<sup>21</sup>

These tales not only communicated the threat of punishment for violation of the chapel and sacred objects, but also provided the narrators with concrete proof of the existence of an omniscient and omnipotent God, which the godless rulers denied. The idea communicated by the tales that violations against sacred time and space were punished by the supernatural provided the outraged but powerless people with a sense that justice would be served. The unjust rulers could apparently avoid the legal, secular punishment, but they could not escape the wrath of God. The countless tales of supernatural revenge wreaked upon party officials and the leaders of the *kolhoz* gave the people some consolation by verifying that evil will be punished, not only in the afterlife, but in this one. These tales, which seem to have been a quite vital tradition, functioned as a safety valve by which people could ventilate their strong feelings of anger and frustration.

With the closing of churches and chapels, the central ritual arena was lost. These buildings, however, were not the only public sacred space. Cemeteries were also important cultic places and continued to be so throughout the entire Soviet period. As Juha Pentikäinen has quite correctly observed, after the closure of churches and the deportation of priests, religion moved to the cemeteries, where women kept it alive (1990: 33f.).

### **Continuity and change in women's ritual practice during the Soviet period**

When institutionalised religion was under attack and the clergy had more or less disappeared from the rural areas, laypersons, at least for a time,

21 Vieljärvi: Marja-Liisa Keinänen and Pekka Hakamies, video-tape 1998.

took over the performance of certain religious rituals (Young 1989: 228). In Karelia this was facilitated by the fact that people had been quite self-sufficient in religious matters even in pre-Revolutionary times. Heikki Makkonen has noted that in remote villages in the Karelian Borders only served irregularly by the clergy, people followed the church traditions unaided (1989: 128). Moreover, the Orthodox tradition has always emphasised the layperson's role in the performance of spiritual duties (cf. Koukkunen 1983: 124). The division of ritual duties between the lay functionaries largely followed the gender-based division of labour and the allocation of authority in the community. Ritva Saarikivi's study, which covers the Salmi region<sup>22</sup> before the Second World War, indicates that men, quite expectedly, occupied the positions of authority in parish matters. They sat on the parish council and acted as chapel elders. Men were also in charge of Vespers and the duties of the lector (Saarikivi 1974: 86ff.; Koukkunen 1983: 124). Even though no women in Salmi held the office of lector or psalmist, they did in fact often perform these duties, especially in remote villages. Saarikivi's study shows, moreover, that there were some women in the Salmi area who had acted as cantors and that women were particularly active as choir members (1974: 72–85ff.). In addition, women were in charge of the cleaning and decoration of the chapel with flowers and embroidered towels. There were women who specialised in baking the Host (Saarikivi 1974: 62–72). When the need arose, elderly women took charge of family rites, for instance, administering emergency baptisms.

The Orthodox tradition of active lay participation in church services and ceremonies had provided the people with the knowledge required to carry out religious ritual during the Soviet rule, when the clergy was no longer there to perform these ceremonies. Makkonen's study of the pre-war Karelian borderlands shows that elderly people in particular mastered the prayers, hymns and the liturgical order and the blessing of the dead and could even guide the priest in the performance of these rituals if the need arose (1989: 76). A rural dean had once interrupted the evening service in Vegarus in order to attend a dying parishioner and discovered on his return that one Grandma Akuliina had continued the service, reading both the cantor's and the priest's lines. The dean was amazed that this illiterate woman knew the texts and the liturgy of the evening service by heart (Makkonen 1989: 129).

People's religious self-sufficiency in pre-Revolutionary Karelia was further enhanced by the relatively large number of priestless Old Believers, who did not accept all the sacraments of the church and who had their own ritual specialists (Laitila 1995: 314f.). Among Old Believers, women could function as preachers, could baptise, and could conduct funeral cere-

<sup>22</sup> The Salmi region covers here, besides Salmi, the parishes of Korpiselkä, Suistamo, Suojärvi and Impilahti.

monies (Pentikäinen 1986: 20). A record from 1908 shows that the Old Believers in Tunkua were visited several times a year by two women from Voijjärvi, Fokla and Jelena, who functioned as "kind of priests". They held services, buried the dead, baptised children and even determined the penance for those who had sinned. These women also charged for their services (*Karjalan Heimo* 1999: 135).

This self-sufficiency in ritual matters was further facilitated by the fact that, even prior to the October revolution, indigenous rites of passage were often regarded as more important than church rituals. Pertti Virtaranta, has pointed out, that the church played only a minor role in weddings in northern Karelia. A male *patvaska* and a female lamenter had the key role in the ceremonies, not the priest. The church wedding was performed when people found it convenient, either before or after the indigenous wedding ceremony. (Virtaranta 1958: 691.) According to customary law, marriage in northern Karelia acquired its legitimacy through the indigenous wedding ceremonies (Pentikäinen 1987: 198).

Both Old Believer and mainstream Orthodox women, played important roles as leaders of indigenous rites of passage. They acted as lamenters at weddings and funerals and, as birth assistants, performed the crucial rituals for the new-born, even baptising children. In rural areas, particularly in distant villages, the priest's role was apparently marginal, if not nominal. Vicar Sergei Okulov's description of a funeral ceremony in Sortavala at the end of the 1880s shows that the function of the priest could at times actually clash with that of the female lamenter. He complains that the lamenting women disturbed his performance of the service at the cemetery, and called for measures to be taken to put an end to the custom:

How would the performance of the ceremony in the graveyard have turned out if I had permitted everyone to cry out aloud on their relatives' graves during the performance of the litany? It would have been impossible to hear the litany at all. Although none seemed to bother listening to it in any case. During the performance of the litany, people (mostly women) just peacefully chatted with one another, even by the graveside where the ceremony was being performed. They are accustomed to these practices and it is a monumental task to get them to stop. (Merikoski 1944: 52.)

Makkonen's study indicates that the priest was not always present at the wake, but if he was, he conducted the *panihida*. At funerals he conducted either the *panihida* or a litany. A priest could also attend the memorial feast (Makkonen 1989: 128, 136, 177). Since the deceased had to be buried three days after death, a priest was not always able to reach remote villages in time and the villagers buried their dead without him (Makkonen 1989: 143). Poverty hindered people in these villages from calling for a priest

since they were not able to finance his journey.<sup>23</sup> Baptisms were often delayed for the same reason and people had to wait until the priest made his regular visit to the village or was invited there by some wealthier farmer.<sup>24</sup>

Even though the functions of the priest at the rites of passage appear to be quite marginal when compared to the vast indigenous ritual complexes in pre-Revolutionary Karelia, we should not underestimate the significance of church rituals. At the beginning of the previous century, the church was clearly increasing its influence over the performance of rites of passage. The folklore sources indicate that a priest's blessings were regarded as crucial for the soul of the deceased to find peace (e.g. Paulaharju 1995: 142; Virtaranta 1958: 750, 756). One of Helmi Helminen's informants has asserted that the soul of the deceased would not be able to settle down if it had not been blessed by a priest, but would fly about like a bird.<sup>25</sup> Iivo Marttinen reports in 1912 that, in larger villages in northern Karelia, people were increasingly complying to the demands of the priests by holding the church wedding ceremony before the indigenous wedding ceremonies, as people did "elsewhere in the world".<sup>26</sup>

After the clergy were removed from the village scene during the first decades of Soviet power, women, who already had a relatively strong position as ritual leaders, expanded their field of ritual activity. When the last priest was taken away from the church of the Holy Cross in Petrozavodsk, women continued to perform those ceremonies which were permitted to lay people. Anna Antonovna performed services in the village of Solomanni. After the convent of Klemenitsky was closed, Sister Daria officiated at services in various parishes (Piironen 1984a: 18, 157f.). In 1930, *Aamun Koitto*, a journal for the Finnish-speaking Orthodox, published fragments of a letter by one Pelagia K. from Repola, in Soviet Karelia. Since there were no longer any priests in Repola and the women had obviously lost their struggle to re-open the church, she had written to a priest in Finland and asked him to pray for her and the others. She described her religiosity and her religious activities thus "Pelagia K. is a pious Christian. She baptises children, blesses the deceased and sells neck crosses to people" (*Aamun Koitto* 1930: 45).

In the following passage, I will examine more closely women's ritual practices in Soviet Karelia, in particular the rites of death and baptism, since these were the most viable of the religious rites of passage. Christel Lane's study shows that the wedding ceremony was the most readily accepted of the Soviet secular rituals. The secular name-giving ceremony and

23 *Aamun Koitto* 1907: 32.

24 E.g. Suistamo: Siiri Oulasmaa < Paraskeeva Makkonen; SKS E246: 205-08, 1959. Suojärvi: Lyyli Home; SKS 1979: 40.

25 "Ei ole asetustilaa vainajalla ennen 'pajatusta'" (Tulomajärvi: Helmi Helminen < Marfa Jeforov, b. 1873; SKS 1944: 3766).

26 Viena Karelia: I. Marttini MV:KTKKA 967: 157ff., 1912.

the secular funeral rituals never attained the same degree of popularity (Lane 1981: 247). In conclusion, I will try to identify some of the reasons for the survival of the religious rites of passage and for women's greater involvement in these rituals.

### **Women and the cult of ancestors**

Among the agrarian Finno-Ugrian peoples, the living and the deceased members of a family formed an organic unit. This means that death did not lead to non-existence, but was merely a transition from the community of the living to the community of the ancestors (Honko 1968: 153f.). The ancestor cult was based on reciprocal relations between the living and the dead. The dead were assumed to influence every human enterprise in either a negative or positive way (Paulaharju 1995: 209). The deceased functioned as upholders of tradition and ritual and as the guardians of the moral and social order (Honko 1968: 153, 162). These functions proved to be important for the continuation of ritual traditions during the Soviet era. Women, who by tradition had central ritual roles in the cult of ancestors, continued to communicate with the deceased by means of laments and dreams. As lamentation gradually declined in post-war Karelia, dreams became more important as a means of communication. According to Irma-Riitta Järvinen's survey, a central theme in women's dreams was the performance of ritual duties. The significance of the ritual and the importance of ritual compliance was reinforced through dreams and the deceased could even instruct the living on the proper performance of ritual (Järvinen 1998b: 306f.).

Lauri Honko has divided the rites which were the basis of the ancestor cult into rites at the moment of death, preparatory rites, funeral ceremony and commemorative feasts (1968: 154). Even here, the division of ritual roles between women and men largely followed the traditional gender-based division of labour, even though these rites were mostly performed by women (Jetsu 2001: 101). As several scholars have contended, the rites of death were an extension of women's daily activities as care-takers of their families (Nenola 1990: 500; Jetsu 2001: 104). Women usually washed the corpses, though in some areas this practice was gendered, with men usually washing male corpses and women female corpses (Paulaharju 1995: 92; Saarikivi 1974: 96). Women had prepared the burial outfit in advance and provided the deceased with the necessary religious objects. The deceased was to wear a cross round her or his neck, a headband, and an icon and carry a "passport", the vernacular term for a prayer card (Jetsu 2001: 192–200). It was the duty of the men to prepare the coffin, carry the coffin and dig and fill the grave. The performance of these preparatory rites was supervised by the keener.

Women's responsibility for these, the most important of rites, explains why the performance of ritual duties had such a central position in women's dreams. The dead upheld the ritual traditions by expressing their dissatisfaction if the preparatory rites had not been performed correctly. During the Soviet era the proper preparation of the deceased for her or his journey was not always practically possible. Women's deep feelings of guilt for having failed to perform their ritual duties is strongly present in my interviews as well as in those of my Finnish and Karelian colleagues. Well aware of their duty to ensure the journey of their family members and friends to the other world, women were at pains to provide the deceased with the necessary objects, for instance, the "passport". This was not an easy task, since there were no open churches where these objects were sold. As "Maria Nikitina" explained, the boundary between the two worlds ran by the gate in Tuonela and could not be crossed without a "passport". For Soviet citizens, who had to be prepared to show their passports even when travelling within their home republic, not to mention other parts of the country, it was unthinkable that a person could cross any border without adequate documents. Maria illustrates the importance of a "passport" by a tale which describes the fate of a deceased who was sent on his journey without a "passport". The deceased had appeared in a dream complaining that he was not allowed to join the others in the other world, because he did not have a passport and asked the dreamer to send him one.<sup>27</sup>

Another of my informants, "Sandra Ivanovna" (b. 1929), said laughingly that she had three passports: one domestic, one international for travelling to Finland with and one passport for the other world. The latter caused her some trouble since it was originally intended for her mother and she was not sure if it was "valid". Her sister, who lived in a town in Central Russia, where there was an open church, had sent the "passport" but it had not arrived in time for her mother's funeral (1980) and Sandra had decided to keep it for herself.<sup>28</sup>

Formerly, it was the keener who guided the soul of the dead to the other world. Complaining that people nowadays did not know how to lament properly, Maria says that "people used to say that you had to mourn for someone deceased with [at least] three words". This was important, since mourning signalled that "there was a newcomer at the gate" and was therefore the precondition for the proper reception of the deceased in the other world. She told another warning tale in which a woman who had not been mourned appeared in a dream to complain that, because of this negligence, she had not been properly received into the other world. The woman who had been responsible for mourning or for hiring a mourner defended herself in her dream by countering that they had dressed the

27 Vieljärvi: M-LK < woman b. 1916. Tape 12b, 1998.

28 Kiestinki: M-LK field notes, 1996.



deceased in the finest funeral attire. The deceased replied that the dress had indeed been fine, but reminded her that one was also supposed to say the “three words” to ensure that one’s ancestors would meet the deceased at the gate. As the words had not been said, nobody met her at the gate and “the dogs of Kusma” tore her fine clothes to shreds.<sup>29</sup>

The Karelian lament researcher, Aleksandra Stepanova, has described the apprehension old women felt about their fate after death, when there were no longer any lamenters left to perform the obligatory dirges. They feared they might end up as placeless souls wandering about the other world. In order to ensure themselves a place among the ancestors, women would ask somebody to mourn for them, at least with a few words (Stepanova 1995: 142). When the tradition of ritual keening declined, old women took recourse to several strategies to avoid the fate of placeless souls. Some women composed their own funeral laments and dictated them to their relatives. One woman asked her daughter to read the laments at her funeral, while another recorded a keening on a tape recorder so that her relatives could play it at her funeral (Stepanova 1996: 225).

As mentioned earlier, after the clergy disappeared from the scene, women took over some of the functions of the priests at funerals. It seems that the dead could also legitimise women’s taking over this priestly role. Helmi Helminen, who collected folklore in occupied Karelian areas during the Second World War, reports that the dead were said to complain that they were not let into the other world since they had not been blessed by a priest. One of Helminen’s informants, Pero Ahtoinen, said that a dead person had appeared to her in a dream complaining that the gates to the other world were closed. The deceased had screamed for the doors to be opened, but no one answered the calls. It was only after Pero had prayed for the deceased in the graveyard that the gates were opened.<sup>30</sup>

Heikki Makkonen’s study shows that in the towns of both Olonets and Suojärvi, women attended wakes more often than men (1989: 134). Women prayed for the soul of the deceased and sung psalms and, as Laura Jetsu’s study shows, continued this tradition even during the Soviet period (2001: 185f.).

Women also continued commemorative traditions, playing important roles in commemoration feasts. An integral part of the commemoration of the deceased was to feed them regularly at the cemetery or at home in front of the icons. Memorial days with a communion meal were celebrated at regular intervals. It seems that the deceased protested if these commemorations were not observed, thus making sure that the traditions were upheld (Järvinen 1998b: 310f.).

29 Vieljärvi: M-LK < woman b. 1916. Tape 12b, 1998. (Cf. Paulaharju 1995: 209).

30 Porajärvi, Jänkajärvi: Helmi Helminen < Pero Ahtoinen, 95 yrs, Putsila; SKS 1943: 1677.

## Baptism

According to church regulations, the performance of baptism was the prerogative of a priest, but could be performed by any Christian person in cases of emergency, i.e. when it was feared that a new-born child might die. If the child survived, the priest completed the baptism by reading the necessary blessings and performing the Chrismation, i.e. the ointment with holy myrrh (Valmo 1935: 282). The folkloristic sources show that it was usually the birth assistant who performed emergency baptisms in pre-Revolutionary Karelia. Some old women were seen as specialists in the field. On the island of Lunkula in Salmi, one grandmother, Törrö, who acted as healer and keener, was often asked to perform an emergency baptism. She had even been blessed by a priest for this duty. Another grandmother, Brander, who mastered the baptismal prayers, conducted emergency baptisms in the village of Kanabro. These grandmothers, even those who had not been blessed by the priest, knew the ceremony and had learned the prayers at church (Saarikivi 1974: 28f.). On the island of Mantsi, where neonatal mortality was particularly high, there were a number of old women who performed emergency baptisms (Rouhola 1997: 79).

We may assume that in pre-Revolutionary Karelia women's role as baptisers had been particularly important in those villages which only received sporadic visits from a priest. It is quite possible that in these places emergency baptisms became the rule rather than the exception. Since many women only had a vague idea of the doctrine of baptism and the baptismal regulations, they may not have seen its performance as the exclusive prerogative of religious professionals. Vicar Sergei Okulov's report from the end of the 1880s to the bishop of St Petersburg indicates that this may indeed have been the case. In one village, a woman who Okulov presumed to be the local birth assistant asked him to baptise a child. Her idea of the priest's role at baptism seems to have been rather vague as she told Okulov that she had already christened the new-born and was now asking him to do what ever "babbling" he found necessary. Okulov emphasises that the woman's choice of words was not due to any lack of respect, but she was expressing her request innocently in pureness of heart. As far as she was concerned, the priestly ceremonies were nothing but "babbling" (Merikoski 1944: 52f.).

As mentioned earlier, women who adhered to the priestless Old Believers could act as baptisers, even though Pentikäinen mentions that the task was often passed on from father to son. The parish priest registered the births on his rounds and confirmed the baptism by anointing the child with myrrh, which the people disapproved of (Pentikäinen 1987: 109, 181). There is some data to indicate that this kind of "double baptism" was not unusual. Ustinja Tokareva (b. 1906) was originally baptised into the Is-

lander sect by a female baptiser and was given the name of Ustinja. She was later baptised by a priest and given the name of Fedoša. It seems that she did not discover her "official" name until she was grown-up and working in Kiestinki where she had checked the church ledger.<sup>31</sup> "Palaka Arhipova", who was born 1917 in Lakkijärvi, was also baptised twice, firstly by "old women" and secondly by a priest who was doing his usual rounds of the villages.<sup>32</sup>

The fact that there were women who were specialised in baptising children, came to be crucial for the continuity of baptismal practices after the Bolshevik take-over, when the clergy could no longer provide people with this service. Data concerning baptism and baptisers in Soviet Karelia is, for obvious reasons, quite scarce, but it seems that in places where there was still a priest or deacon available, women saw to it that their children or grandchildren were baptised by them (Stepanov 1987: 152). This was also the case elsewhere in the Soviet Union (Bridger 1987: 181). In those areas where there were no priests, children were often baptised by old women (Listova 1992: 127f.). Erkki Piironen, who served as a priest in the Ladoga area during the Continuation War, observed that the wealthy had had their children baptised in Leningrad or Petrozavodsk, where a few churches were still open, while the children of the poor either remained unbaptised or were baptised by some old woman (Piironen 1984a: 15). A Finnish nurse who worked in northern Karelia during the Continuation War mentions that "old pious birth assistant-grannies" performed emergency baptisms in secret and read their blessings over the "little heathens" (Lindroth 1972: 35f.). Also my interviews show that old women performed baptisms after the priests were gone. "Outi Petrovna", who was born in 1919 in the village of Nokeus not far from the Finnish border, says that as long as the border was open, a priest from the Finnish side visited the villages and baptised children. Three of her siblings were baptised by the visiting priest, but the rest were baptised by the local birth assistant who was a "believer in God".<sup>33</sup>

Baptismal practices follow a similar pattern in my southern Karelian interviews, although there, a visiting priest or an old deacon are also mentioned among the baptisers.<sup>34</sup> My informants explain the female predominance of baptisers by the fact that women, contrary to men, possessed the necessary knowledge, the ritual "know-how" necessary for officiating at the ceremony. In some cases it is evident that the baptisers were particularly devout and active in some religious sect.

31 Kiestinki: N. Lavonen & N. F. Onegina IJALI 2214:13, 1975.

32 Knäzöi: M-LK < woman b. 1917, Lakkijärvi. Tape 5a, 1996.

33 Kiimasjärvi: M-LK < 1. woman, b. 1919 Nokeus; 2. woman, b. 1931. Tape 2b, 1999.

34 During the Finnish occupation, Finnish priests baptised children in the village.

Baptism was not the only rite of passage at childbirth and there were also important indigenous rites whereby women incorporated the newborn child into the family.

### **Summary: Women as upholders of ritual traditions**

As Håkan Rydving has pointed out, it is important to examine religious change from the perspective of gender as the changes affect women and men differently (1993: 151). Indeed, we can discern a clear gender-specific pattern in religious acculturation in the Soviet Union. As men joined the Communist party and the anti-religious activists more frequently than women, it would be more accurate to talk about religious deculturation when depicting men's relationship to religion. Women, on the other hand, more often than men preserved their affiliation to religion, which was probably a great source of conflict at family level. It is interesting to note that the anthropologist William Christian has identified a similar gendered pattern in southern Europe during the Cold War. Men belonged to the militant Left, while women supported the religious Right and continued the performance of their religious duties within the family. (Christian 1984: 244.)

It is important to note that Karelian men, due to their greater mobility, were more subject to religious acculturation than women already in the pre-Soviet era. Seasonal labour migration brought them into contact with the cultural and religious traditions of their neighbours. Karelianist I. K. Inha, who travelled around Northern Karelia (Viena) in the year 1894, observed that it was largely women who maintained the Karelian language, customs and traditions, while men who travelled around in Finland as peddlers had assumed Finnish ways and ideas to a greater degree (Inha 1921: 396). A church report from 1908 in Tunkua complained that men who stayed a lot in Finland were indifferent to certain religious observances, neglecting for instance the fast (*Karjalan Heimo* 1999: 135). The Old Believer men who peddled in Finland also gave up their strict norm system earlier than women did (Pentikäinen 1987: 113). Young Northern Karelian men who travelled a lot in Finland viewed their indigenous practices with contempt and did not approve their family members' using spells (Vuoristo 1992: 124).

The continued religiosity of the women puzzled anti-religious activists and atheistic scholars and various kinds of explanations were offered to explain women's clinging to religion. Women's greater involvement in religious rituals was assumed to be due to their greater emotionality. Religious rituals simply appealed to emotional women more than to men. Some scholars argued that women suffered more during Soviet rule and there-

fore sought comfort in religion (Anderson 1993: 209). Women's suffering might, indeed, explain for instance the sudden renaissance of keening in some parts of the Soviet Union during the Second World War and the Afghan war (Honko 1994: 59), but is not a comprehensive explanation. At the end of the day, it was men who suffered more – they were persecuted or executed in greater numbers than women and it was largely men who were involved in revolts and fought the wars. Women who lost their husbands and sons could, indeed, express their despair through keening, although we should not view women and their practices merely in terms of deprivation, but rather examine these practices in a wider social and cultural context.

Furthermore, Soviet scholarship explained women's greater involvement in religion partly by their "backwardness", ignorance and lack of education, and partly through their social outsider status, which reinforced their psychological disposition to "dreaming" (Keinänen 1999: 153f.). As Soviet surveys show, the highest numbers of believers were found among poorly educated, elderly women who had worked at home as housewives (Bridger 1987: 178). We can agree with the Soviet analysts that women's "social outsiderhood" was indeed an important factor accounting for their continued religiosity. Women who stayed in the private sphere were not subjected to systematic political and anti-religious propaganda to the same degree as people who worked in public institutions. At home there was nobody, other than their husbands, to supervise and control their ideological purity.

Another important factor which facilitated women's perseverance in ritual traditions was the greater continuity in their social roles during the pre-Revolutionary and Soviet eras. Those ritual traditions which were closely intertwined to female duties, e.g. household duties involving childcare and care for other family members, or with female subsistence activities, e.g. cattle-raising, were more liable to survive. Women, whether they minded their own small cattle or that of the collective farm, could take recourse to traditional rites, for instance for healing cattle and protecting them against attacks from bears (Heikkinen 1994: 148ff.; Keinänen 1999: 162ff.).

The fact that women's ritual practices survived, at least to some degree, throughout the Soviet period, can probably be explained by these practices being an integral part of women's care for the well-being of their family members and friends. The secular Soviet rituals, on the other hand, dealt with the existential turning points in human life cycle in an impersonal and bureaucratic manner, focussing on the individual as an anonymous member of a collective, emphasising the individual's duties and rights as a Soviet citizen, and seeking to instil in the participants the proper Soviet values. A major reason for the secular ceremonies of name-giving and funeral only slowly gaining popularity among the people can be found in

their fundamental failure to give meaningful answers to basic existential questions, such as life, death and suffering. Quite contrary to the secular rites, women's traditions personalised and contextualised social transitions and placed them in a wider framework of meaning. We could characterise women's ritual domain in Susan Sered's words "as the arena in which the ultimate concerns of life, suffering, and death are *personalized*". Women's rituals deal with, "the lives, sufferings, and deaths of *particular* individuals". (Sered 1992: 32.) Unlike the secular rituals, women's rituals were designed to express and channel grief and suffering. Unlike women's traditions, the atheistic ideology could not offer any satisfactory answer to the issue of human fate after death. Instead of seeing death as complete annihilation, the tradition which women professed presupposed continued existence in another world. The bond between the dead and the living was not severed, but by the funeral rituals women merely transferred the deceased to the community of the dead ancestors. Through dreams and rites, they also maintained the contact between the living and dead.

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