

MARJA-LIISA HONKASALO. *Reikä sydämessä: sairaus pohjoiskarjalaisessa maise-massa*. Tampere: Vastapaino, 2008. Pp. 276. ISBN: 978-951-768-220-6.

Marja-Leena Honkasalo's hearty monograph *Reikä sydämessä* (Hole in the Heart) tells the story of an anonymous village afflicted with coronary disease in North Karelia. The area is the eastern-most region of Finland and it comprises 'the black spot in the world map of health' with regards coronary disease. From 1970 to 1997 the area was the object of an extensive medical research and health-care program, called the North Karelia Project, funded by the state of Finland and the World Health Organization; the manner in which the Project intervened in local ways of life was central for modernizing the area (pp. 34–39).

To my knowledge Honkasalo's book is the first social scientific research venture focusing on the North Karelia Project or coronary disease in the area. Honkasalo calls her study 'a meaning-centered medical anthropology'. This means that even though she has, in addition to anthropology, a background in medicine, she does not focus on the disease itself, but instead on its local cultural meanings and how people make illness meaningful and tolerable through social action (p. 14). This approach differs from the branch of medical anthropology that focuses on and deconstructs the nature-culture dichotomy – an approach that Honkasalo considers irrelevant to her study (pp. 71–72).

Honkasalo finds interesting tensions between the theories of local common sense and those of medical science. The heart, for example, is not only the central inner organ of western physiology, but also a symbolic centre—in North Karelia as well as worldwide (pp. 88–90). Honkasalo's informants believe that the heart can get wounded (Finnish *syänrikko*) because of emotional stress related especially to social circumstances such as poverty, the daily struggle for livelihood, hard work, loneliness, and families being broken up by migration. Difficult historical experiences such as war or the famine experiences of past generations are also mentioned as factors contributing to coronary disease. Paradoxically many of the causes of a 'wounded heart', such as emotional stress and sorrow, also result from the good life that informants seek. For local men this means communality, and living in one's own, self-built house; for women such values as tolerance, getting along emotionally and economically and taking care of their husbands and relatives. Both men and women seek to stay rooted in the North Karelian landscape, which is unfortunately associated with the emotional stress and sorrow related to a wounded heart (Chapter V).

By contrast, the North Karelia Project emphasized the lack of a healthy diet, physical exercise and other aspects of a wholesome way of life together with genetic vulnerability as the key factors for the disease (pp. 125–126). To summarize, Honkasalo's monograph suggests that local people, especially men, blame coronary ill-health on social inequality while the Project drew attention principally to the unhealthy lifestyles of sufferers. Although Honkasalo does not exactly compare these different types of knowledge, she mentions how some later medical studies have implicitly criticized the North Karelian Project for its emphasising individual choice and genetic factors over social factors (pp. 95–96, 125–126). A layperson could interpret these latter studies as giving some credence to local beliefs concerning the social causes of illness. Furthermore, due to the decades of extensive popular enlightenment by the North Karelia Project, locals are relatively aware of the medical discourse. Although differences and contradictions between the folk and medical theories still exist, the popularization of medical theory forms a part of the today's folk concepts of heart disease.

Honkasalo traces historical layers of the folk concept of illness by using traditional oral poetry of the area (*Suomen Kansan Vanhat Runot* I–XIV [1908–1944]) as comparative material. This remarkable corpus of Finnish and Karelian oral poems, collected at the beginning of the nineteenth century, has earlier been used by many folklorists who have sought to understand the agricultural society of the time but it has rarely been connected to more recent ethnographic field material. This section examines folk concepts of heart diseases in the *longue durée*, also exploring historical transformations.

Concerning methodology, and particularly her fieldwork, Honkasalo makes some interesting observations. One of them relates to the slight cultural otherness which she experienced as an urban Finnish medical anthropologist among her rural informants (pp. 45–48, 53–57). Another is her analysis of the senses, both the expressions of bodily sensations by her informants and her own reflections on them. She analyzes her sudden feeling of exhaustion during some field experiences, a probably common but still surprisingly little discussed phenomenon among fieldworkers. As she points out, bodily sensations can function as keys for understanding the other, especially the suffering of her informants in this case. Although an interviewer may have different sources for her experiences of injustice than her interviewee, rising emotions can help to articulate relevant questions concerning the field material (pp. 61–67). Also very helpful was the method Honkasalo acquired from folklorists of listening to the taped interviews repetitiously instead of only making and reading transcriptions. She notes how this helped the more holistic production of the voices of her informants, allowing her to access them in their entire corporality, not only as expressed in words (pp. 58–61).

Honkasalo's work is a well written ethnography about an important issue, and it can be recommended especially to researchers working in North Karelia and to medical anthropologists more generally. In addition, Honkasalo herself recommends the book to any one who has some connection to coronary disease, either through work, as a patient or a relative (p. 23). It is perhaps for this reason—to facilitate its use by non-academics in Finland—that the book is written in Finnish; the language, however, although beautiful and mainly clear, might still be too complicated for some potential readers not educated in the social sciences.

For me, the book's most interesting issues related to sensory and bodily sensitivity; Honkasalo's reflections concerning the value of fieldworkers' emotions are also praiseworthy. As a reading experience and a description of the field the monograph is somewhat dark and sad, which is of course understandable given its topic; it demonstrates how people tolerate sorrow and suffering in a way that is not the opposite of agency, but a form of it. Yet it would have been fruitful to hear something about the humor with which informants in North Karelia make sense of their illnesses. Or do they?

REFERENCES

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