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## **ORAL HISTORY – A NEW PARADIGM IN FINNISH FOLKLORISTICS**

Folklore research and fieldwork were unquestionably done in Finland until the end of the 1950s in the way scholars had adopted decades earlier. The emphasis was on traditional, rural folklore consisting of fixed texts. Collection and research had already started in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century with the old epic poetry and incantations, somewhat later the documentation of fairy tales began, and gradually various genres of non-fictional prose also became a topic of interest.

Some folklore among the folklorists exists about the profession concerning various aspects of activity by past researchers and staff at the Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society. One story relates how in the mid-1950s some influential people at the Archives had decided that the collection of folklore material would be soon come to an end and then only the research needed to be done. However, a change of paradigm was soon to occur in the 1960s, and perhaps a suggestion of that shift appeared in the paper presented by the recently appointed professor of Folklore Studies at the University of Helsinki, Matti Kuusi, at his inauguration in 1959. His main thesis was that there is no end to the existence of folklore and its gathering and there are clear analogies between the forms of traditional, pre-industrial folklore and modern popular culture<sup>1</sup>.

Another work symptomatic of the change was the study of the folk religion of Ingrian Finns, particularly the role of the tutelary spirits<sup>2</sup>. Based on the functionalist viewpoint, this work emphasised the study of the folklore as a part of the total culture and the importance of contextual information. At the same time this was a clear departure from the old geographic-historical school that had dominated Finnish folklore studies until that point.

In the early 1960s a general readiness to adopt new ways of collecting and studying folklore arose among the younger generation of folklorists. A breakthrough occurred when young scholars from the Nordic countries conducted a fieldwork seminar in Vöyri, Finland in 1965. The presentations and discussions held at the seminar marked a shift in a new direction influenced by new streams in American folklore studies, a gradual shift of emphasis to persons knowing and performing folklore, i.e. on tradition-bearers, on the performance of folklore, the documentation of the performance situation and the wider context of the folklore<sup>3</sup>.

The technological, social and cultural development of society, however, made it gradually more and more difficult to find and record pure traditional folklore (oral, anonymous, collective, schematic<sup>4</sup>; for archives and as the subject of research. Stories and songs were encountered less often and became shorter and their performers older. In a way, this change – the gradual disappearance of traditional folklore – forced collectors and researchers to seek something else to gather and to concentrate more on contextual information. As a consequence, the complete life story of the respondent was sought and recorded on tape, various aspects of the past folk life and culture were recorded as the narrators remembered them, and in an ideal case some “real” folklore also found its way onto tape. Conversely, the new recording technology, portable tape recorders, gradually but profoundly changed fieldwork practice and finally the whole ideology. It became possible to record not only folklore texts, but the entire narration and generate a real discussion since the interviewer no longer had to bother writing down the main content of the narration<sup>5</sup>.

The new paradigm that emerged during the 1960s had its roots in several areas: cultural anthropology and American folklore studies, social sciences and folk life studies. An influential work in this vein was the study of the individual as tradition-bearer, *The Religion of Marina Takalo* by Juha Pentikäinen<sup>6</sup>. Marina Takalo was an illiterate woman from Russian North Karelia who emigrated to Finland in the early 1920s. Pentikäinen interviewed her repeatedly during the 1960s using the then new deep interview method. The study turned interest from texts to persons in folkloristics, although the author himself considered it a “religious- anthropological study”.

Towards the end of the decade a new way of gathering material for folklore archives was found: campaign-

style writing competitions. This, in turn, generated a new concept: “memory data,” which has since equated with “oral history.” It was first used in 1965 – 1966 concerning memories of the Finnish Civil War in 1918. Subsequent campaigns involved Loggers’ recollection stories in 1969 and those of construction in 1970. This way of gathering material for archives became popular in the 1970s. Several professional groups and organizations desired to cooperate with the Archives. Their aim was to document their own tradition and recollections and the publication of a book reflecting the main themes of the material.

Nevertheless, new materials seemed strange in the eyes of the folklorists. Various recollections and personal stories written by the participants did not fit into the old scheme of genres nor meet the traditional definition of folklore: collectivity, anonymity etc. Although new types of materials were collected, they did not deserve the attention of folklorists. For instance, there were several new phenomena in the Finnish folklore presented in 1974 in the book *Folklore Today*<sup>7</sup>, but not a single article about oral history or personal narration. The only hint in that direction was an article concerning the labour tradition<sup>8</sup>. In the early 1980s “oral history” was still hardly mentioned in the papers delivered at the Nordic Congress of Ethnology and Folkloristics<sup>9</sup>.

The first campaigns for collecting oral history focussed on distinct professional groups or historical events like the civil war or emigration from the part of Karelia ceded to the Soviet Union during the Second World War. The materials on these events can be characterized as “oral history” since they represent the collective experiences and attitudes of the people involved, although the materials formally consist of mainly personal stories and recollections. The initiative regularly came from the outside. In the campaigns organized later on, the personal character of the materials became more evident – personal stories and autobiographies that reflect personal, in extreme cases unique, experiences more, like the “great family chronicle” or the “story of the unemployed.” Common to both types of materials is the first person narrative about the past.

Theoretical comprehension of the new material began in the 1980s and one of the first texts was an article by Leea Virtanen dealing with personal narration<sup>10</sup> – a bit paradoxically, as she was one of the strongest critics of the collection policy of the Archives. In her article she used the concept of *chronicate* initially introduced in 1934 by C.W. von Sydow<sup>11</sup>, which was meant to be analogous, to the term *memorate* used in the research on folk religion. It was defined as a story about a historical event based on personal experience. Another term was also introduced: *joculate*, in regard to a first-person story about a humorous event. However, these terms have not since been widely used.

One of the researchers at the Archives has later characterized the accumulation of new materials as a widening of the scope of collecting. In addition to the old agricultural tradition other traditional cultures have become topics to be recorded. In these campaigns “tradition” has a broad meaning: “memory data” – reminiscences about past events, people and life as well as characterizations of life and work today. The aim has been to document some aspects of everyday life in the past and present. In this way, information is gained concerning issues that remain outside official statistics and documentation, like oral history about the life, desires and struggles of people<sup>12</sup>. An early prototype of this work were some rare old descriptions of rural everyday life of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that were later highly valued by researchers<sup>13</sup> as unique documents. It seems, however, that the shift in the recording policy of the Archives has been less a result of a conscious reasoning than a spontaneous, only partially conscious and controlled development.

An important step in the formation of the new collection policy was the adoption of labour tradition and culture as a relevant subject of research. For a long time workers’ traditions and culture were ignored by professional researchers and folklore collectors. There were several reasons for this, including the ideological<sup>14</sup>. During the 1960s the situation changed along with a general change in the ideological atmosphere in society. Gradually labour folklore and traditions were acknowledged as sufficiently valuable for collection and study – and by the labour movement itself.

In Sweden such work already started in the 1940s, in Norway in the 1950s and in Finland at the end of the same decade; research was more active in the Scandinavian countries than in Finland. One of the pioneers in Finland was Ilmar Talve, Professor of Ethnology at the University of Turku, who had begun this research in Turku in 1959, collecting of the “memory data” of workers<sup>15</sup>.

The broader recording and documentation of the workers’ oral history started in 1960 when the “Workers’ Memory Data Committee” was established by the labour organizations. Its aim was to document everyday life, working conditions, free-time and organization activity. By the late 1960s already 50 000 pages had been written by 3000 people. Selected materials were published in the form of workers’ oral history anthologies<sup>16</sup>.

Gradually the responsibility for documenting workers’ culture and traditions was taken over by the Archives. Its first significant campaigns were the collecting of memories from the Finnish Civil War 1918 (1965 – 1966) and loggers’ life and traditions (1969). By then the documentation included the memories of various professional groups as well as any special group discernible in some respect in the society (e.g. patients in tuberculosis sanatorium). Due to economic and social development, the proletariat as a distinctive social class with its own

culture has to a great extent disappeared; its former members have been integrated into the society and, conversely, collecting memories of the past and present has achieved a classless character, as the majority of citizens in Finland nowadays represent a broad middle class. So, “proletarian folklore” has suffered the fate of agrarian folklore.

This development has led to a broadening of both the concept of “tradition” and the general consciousness of the existence of an entity called “tradition.” Practically speaking, all memories or reminiscences narrated or written can be categorized as tradition in the public discourse, and several groups, be they social, professional or regional, are interested in gathering and displaying their “tradition”. In actuality, “tradition” in this sense refers to any cultural phenomenon in society, in the broad sense of the term “culture.”

Oral history has gradually developed since the Second World War as an internationally known and legitimate discipline in the field of historical studies<sup>17</sup>. Finnish folklorists and historians joined the international discussion in the 1980s, although Jan Vansina’s book *Oral Tradition*<sup>18</sup> had already attracted attention in the early 1970s. New connections between sociologists, folklorists and ethnologists and historians emerged in the late 1970s because oral history was a phenomenon existing between folklore and history, and life stories between folklore and sociology. There was also a paradigmatic shift in Finnish sociology in the early 1980s away from quantitative surveys and Marxist theory to qualitative research and narratives as material. For instance, J-P Roos did a study in 1987 of biographies of Finns, and the material for this was collected in written form through a campaign<sup>19</sup>.

Initially, sociologists were more interested in the personal narrative materials collected at the Archives. In 1993 the director of the Archives could still write that personal narrative materials seem to have been interesting for those who do not have the need to question their authenticity as tradition, thus hinting at a difference between the sociologists and folklorists<sup>20</sup>.

In general, three different (but not mutually exclusive) viewpoints can be discerned in Finnish folklore studies in the past two decades which use personal narratives as source material. Those representing the first viewpoint concentrated on the way people construct their life, their identity, and relate this. This includes reflecting on the dialogical interview process and the positions and relations created in it. The second orientation concentrates on the study of memory, the production of narratives and the situation-boundedness of narration. The third looks at the way common experiences and ideas are expressed in personal recollected narration; this is the real oral history.

One of the most important works devoted to the dialogical relationship between the informant and the researcher has been Laura Aro’s doctoral dissertation *I in the Village*. In her work she reflects the position of both participants in the interview, “bridging the gap” between the I and the Other. She calls the stories she recorded “identity narratives,” which is approximately the same as life stories. The title of the book is consciously ambiguous as there are always two I’s, the researcher visiting the village and the narrators continuously living there. The identity of each informant is construed during the discussion in the interviews but the story does not belong to any of the participants in the process since it is a cooperative effort. The work is influenced by hermeneutics and the cultural critique of cultural anthropologists since the 1980s, and the methods have been borrowed from narratology and discourse analysis<sup>21</sup>.

A good example of the second orientation is the study by Annikki Kaivola-Bregenhøj about Juho Oksanen and his personal stories. Here the emphasis is on the narration, on the process of memory and the production of the story. Kaivola-Bregenhøj has heard the same, favorite stories of Juho Oksanen several times and use narratological analysis to compare the text produced by the narrator each time. Her findings are that common and idiosyncratic traits crystallize in Oksanen’s personal stories and are quite closely related to the forms that exist in traditional folklore<sup>22</sup>.

The difference between Juho Oksanen and Aro’s informants is in the character of the stories they tell. Juho Oksanen’s stories refer to various interesting events in the past of the local community though not necessarily to his own life; the stories recorded by Aro are clearly autobiographical.

Several examples of the third group, studying oral history, concern workers’ lives and collective memories. The title of Ulla-Maija Peltonen’s dissertation is *Memories of the Civil War. A study in the Formation of the Finnish Working-Class Narrative Tradition after 1918*<sup>23</sup>. Her main material were stories about the atrocities of the civil war, particularly in the aftermath of the war. For several decades the only public narrative, the official history of the war, was told by the winners, the Whites, and the Red narrative was preserved in oral history, stories and memories told by Reds and their relatives. In this way there is a certain emancipatory motivation to counterbalance the one-sided truth of the war.

Peltonen examined the stories from the perspective of theme-analysis and motif-history and compared her material with traditional historical legends. Certain similarities between the war stories and traditional folklore are noted. Consideration has also been given to the functions of the stories. The atrocity stories told by Whites conformed with the stories told in the propaganda and were used as a motivation for the harsh measures taken by the Whites during and after the war. The main function of the stories told by the Reds is to preserve their own

history and, sometimes, mental compensation or revenge by the virtual punishment of the Whites guilty of the worst atrocities. This is achieved by discussing the miserable fate of those people, their fears of reprisals, psychic and moral instability as a consequence of their deeds.

Jyrki Pöysä's study<sup>24</sup> of the formation of the social category of the logger in Finnish culture is also a good example of the possibilities offered by the new materials and new approach to them. The aim of the work is to study how the category of logger has been understood over the course of time, how the loggers have been divided into sub-categories, how they differed from other rural people and how this is represented in folklore and oral history. The study is based on materials gathered by a campaign in 1969.

The paradigmatic change in the collection and later research on the folk tradition has also generated various new terms: memory data (= oral history), recollected narration, personal story, life story, personal narration, historical memory, everyday narration, rumor; chronicate, joculate. Some of these concepts have a fixed and generally accepted meaning, but many are overlapping and vague and are used more or less in ad hoc meanings as there is no general agreement about them<sup>25</sup>.

“Reality is socially constructed” has become the slogan of a new orientation in folkloristics, and more widely in cultural studies, and is based on ontological and epistemological viewpoints of constructivism. According to this idea, materials do not exist as ready entities in the field, as supposed by essentialism, but are construed through the interview in the cooperation between the researcher and informant. This is definitely true, for instance, about the identity stories studied by Laura Aro, life stories and autobiographies, but it is not so apparent if we consider the old folklore, epic songs or fairy tales, that were told by the community even before the appearance of folklorists.

The new paradigm has gradually developed in Finnish folklore studies since the 1960s, partly as a conscious choice based on new ideas from American cultural anthropology, partly as an unavoidable consequence of the natural development of culture in the modern world. The new orientation initially became popular in the fieldwork and collection program of the Archives but it took a long time before folklorists were ready to accept the new materials as a relevant topic and source of research. Nowadays the gathering and study of “oral history” or “personal narration” is the main trend in Finnish folkloristics. Through the “narrative shift” in cultural and social studies<sup>26</sup>, the concepts of narrative and narration are joining an even wider sphere of research which, in turn, emphasizes the importance of the new paradigm in folklore studies. Narrativity is no longer a quality of the material but of the research as well. Some, however, may think this is going too far.

<sup>1</sup> Virtanen, Leea. *Suomalainen kansanperinne*. – Helsinki, 1988. – P. 23.

<sup>2</sup> Honko, Lauri. *Geisterglaube in Ingermanland I*. FF Communications 185. – Helsinki, 1962.

<sup>3</sup> Fältarbetet. Synpunkter på etno-folkloristisk fältforskning. – Helsingfors, 1968.

<sup>4</sup> Virtanen, Leea. *Suomalainen kansanperinne*. – Helsinki, 1988. – P. 22.

<sup>5</sup> Abrahams, Roger. *The past in presence: An overview of folkloristics in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century*. – Folklore processed in honour of Lauri Honko on his 60<sup>th</sup> Birthday 6<sup>th</sup> March 1992. Ed. by Reimund Kvideland et al. *Studia Fennica Folkloristica* 1. – Helsinki, 1992. – P. 48.

<sup>6</sup> Pentikainen, Juha. *Marina Takalon uskonto. Uskontoantropologinen tutkimus*. – Helsinki, 1971.

<sup>7</sup> Laaksonen, Pekka. *Kansa ja kansanrunousarkisto*. – Elias. SKS:n jäsenlehti 4/1993.

<sup>8</sup> Hako, Matti. *Työväen kulttuuri*. – Folklore tänään. Ed. by Hannu Launonen & Kirsti Mäkinen. – Helsinki, 1974.

<sup>9</sup> Hodne, Bjarne. *Commentary*. In: *Trends in Nordic Tradition Research*. Ed. Lauri Honko and Pekka Laaksonen. *Studia Fennica* 27. – Helsinki, 1983. – P. 171.

<sup>10</sup> Virtanen, Leea. *Henkilökohtainen kerronta*. – *Kertomuserinne. Kirjoituksia proosasaperinteen lajeista ja tutkimuksesta*.

<sup>11</sup> Kuusi, Matti. *Kronikaateista*. – *Kertojat ja kuulijat. Kalevalaseuran vuosikirja* 60. – Helsinki, 1980. – P. 39.

<sup>12</sup> Jauhiainen, Marjatta. *Harkkohytistä terästehtaaseen. Masuuni- ja sulattooperinne Kansanrunousarkiston keruukohteena*. – *Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seuran jäsenlehti* 2. 1987. – P. 17.

<sup>13</sup> Raussi, Elias. *Viirolahden kansanelämää 1840-luvulla*. Ed. Sulo Haltsonen. – Helsinki, 1966.

<sup>14</sup> Hakamies, Pekka 2001: *Ponjatije “narod” i istorija predmeta fol’kloristiki v Finljandii*. – *Etnichna istoriya narodiv Evropy. Istoryko-etnologichni doslidzhennya i nacional’na ideja. Zbirnyk naukovyh prats’*. Vyp. 9. – Kyiv, 2001.

<sup>15</sup> Talve, Ilmar. *Teollisuustyöväen työ- ja elämänoloista ennen I maailmansotaa*. – *Työväenliike kulttuuritekijänä*. Ed. Matti Hako. – Helsinki, 1969. – P. 84.

<sup>16</sup> Huhtanen, Heimo 1969: *Työväen muistitiedon keruu*. – *Työväenliike kulttuuritekijänä*. Ed. Matti Hako. – Helsinki, 1969.

<sup>17</sup> Thompson, Paul. *The Voice of the Past. Oral History*. – Oxford, 1978. – Pp. 53 – 59.

<sup>18</sup> Vansina, Jan. *Oral tradition: a study in historical methodology*. – London, 1965.

<sup>19</sup> Roos, J.-P. *Suomalainen elämä. Tutkimus tavallisten suomalaisten elämäkerroista*. – Helsinki, 1987.

<sup>20</sup> Laaksonen, Pekka 1993: *Kansa ja kansanrunousarkisto*. – Elias. SKS:n jäsenlehti 4/1993. – P. 6.

<sup>21</sup> Aro, Laura. *Minä kylässä. Identiteettikertomus haastattelututkimuksen folklorena*. – Helsinki, 1996. – Pp. 343 – 352.

<sup>22</sup> Kaivola-Bregenhøj, Annikki. Narrative and Narrating. Variation in Juho Oksanen's Storytelling. FF Communications 261. – Helsinki, 1996.

<sup>23</sup> Peltonen, Ulla-Maija. Punakapinan muistot. Tutkimus työväen muistelukerronnan muotoutumisesta vuoden 1918 jälkeen. – Helsinki, 1996.

<sup>24</sup> Pöysä, Jyrki. Jätjän synty. Tutkimus sosiaalisen kategorian muotoutumisesta suomalaisessa kulttuurissa ja itäsuomalaisessa metsätyöperinteessä. – Helsinki, 1997.

<sup>25</sup> Aro, Laura. Minä kylässä. Identiteetikertomus haastattelututkimuksen folklorena. – Helsinki, 1996; Ukkonen, Taina. Menn1995. – Pp. 73 – 75.

<sup>26</sup> Heikkinen. Tarinan mahti – Narratiivisuuden teemoja ja muunnelmia. – Tiedepolitiikka 4/2000. – P. 48.

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## **УСНА ІСТОРІЯ – НОВА ПАРАДИГМА У ФІНСЬКІЙ ФОЛЬКЛОРИСТИЦІ**

*Технологічний, соціальний і культурний розвиток суспільства призвели до того, що вже в 1960-х роках ставало все важче знайти й записати чистий традиційний фольклор. Поступове зникнення традиційного фольклору примусило збирачів і дослідників шукати інші об'єкти для збирання і зосередитися на контекстуальній інформації. У 1960-х роках був винайдений новий шлях збору матеріалів для фольклорних архівів – проведення масових записів. Це, в свою чергу, генерувало нове поняття – “дані пам'яті”, які прирівнювались до “усної історії”. Хоча нові види матеріалів були зібрані, вони не привернули уваги фольклористів. Теоретичне осмислення нового матеріалу розпочалося в 1980-х роках. Мета полягала в тому, щоб документувати деякі аспекти сучасного і минулого побуту. Збиралась інформація, яка стосувалася проблем, що залишалися поза увагою офіційної статистики і документації, насамперед, усна історія. Це призвело як до розширення поняття “традиції”, так і загального розуміння його суті. З практичної точки зору всі спогади, розказані або написані, можуть бути поділені на певні категорії. Парадигматичні зміни в зборі матеріалів і пізніші дослідження народної традиції також породили нові поняття: дані пам'яті (=усна історія), пригадана розповідь, особиста історія, життєва історія, історична пам'ять тощо. Деякі з цих понять мають фіксоване і загальноприйняте значення, але багато з них перекривають одне одного, або невизначені і використовуються більшою чи меншою мірою із спеціальним значенням.*