



Finnish Charms: Appropriating Folk Magic from the Kalevala and Kanteletar

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***Kylä vuotti uutta kuuta,
miero päivän nousendoa.
Miepä vuotin minjoavani,
miepä vuotin minjovani.***

*The village waited for the new moon.
They said my brother would return
empty handed when he was off hunting.
They were wrong. The eagle caught the duck.*

Värttinä, "Kylä vuotti uutta kuuta"

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*Truly they lie, they
Talk utter nonsense
Who say that music
Reckon that the kantele
was carved by Väinämöinen...
out of a great pike's shoulders...
no, music was made from grief
molded from sorrow...
so my kantele will not
play, will not rejoice at all...
for it was fashioned from cares
moulded from sorrow.*

My Kantele, Kanteletar 1:1

One of the least well known of modern reconstructions of folk magic must certainly be the realm of Baltic magic found in the ancient texts of Finland, but it has found a perhaps surprising popular resurgence in recent years. The reprinting of Kati Koppana's *Snakefat and Knotted Threads* has brought a handbook of folk magic to a new generation of reconstructionists, but the nineteenth-century collections *The Kalevala* and *The Kanteletar* continue to provide a rich supply of magical practices. While originally the outgrowth of a rising sense of nationalism in nineteenth-century Finland, the two collections of myth and folklore also record a number of magical charms that give some insight into the ancient practices of the Finns, since lost in the (relatively) late conversion to Christianity and the long-practiced denigration of the indigenous tongues particularly by Swedish and then Russian political control.

The rebirth or rediscovery of Finnish magic has resulted in a popular magic tradition, much like similar recoveries in British, Norse and Mediterranean traditions, but it has also had an artistic effect that surpasses these more well-known traditions, particularly in the field of music. At the heart of this musical renaissance is the kantele, the traditional Finnish lap harp which Väinämöinen, the eternal sage of the *Kalevala*, creates, loses and then recreates to the joy of not only the people, but all the woodland animals as well (despite the rather somber tone of the poem with which I began). Just as the original kantele mesmerized all who heard it, the reborn instrument (both acoustic and electric) has exerted an irresistible hold over the musicians who have led the new folk movement across Scandinavia since the 1990s, including groups like Värttinä, Garmarna and Hedningarna who explicitly use the magical traditions of the north in their music, calling on goddesses and gods as well as singing charms and curses.

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While I highly recommend all of these groups (most of whom have CDs available through Northside music here in the States), I want to focus primarily on Värttinä today. If they are known much in this country beyond Finnish-American circles, it is probably due to their collaboration with Indian musician A. R. Rahman on the music for the stage performance of *The Lord of the Rings*, presented in Toronto and in London (where I saw it). The group began as a celebration of the particular voices and harmonic styles of the Finno-Ugric region, particularly Karelia, home to the Kaasinen sisters, Sari and Kari, who were key in organizing the first version of the group and its first self-titled CD. The style features strong vocals (some have even called them harsh) and close harmonies that often sound somewhat disturbing to Western ears.



"Värttinä" means spindle and as you might guess by their choice of that name, from the start the group focused on the particular experience of women, much of it inspired by the folksongs and poems collected in *The Kanteletar*. While *The Kalevala* was collected and assembled by doctor and folklorist Elias Lönnrot to provide a coherent epic narrative to the mythic tales and traditional songs performed by the rune-singers in the towns and villages of Finland, *The Kanteletar* was a more loose catch-all of lyrics and ballads. The lyrics are sorted by those sung by all, then those sung by girls, those by boys, by women and by men. It is this gendered experience that the women of Värttinä try to capture in their songs, many of which replicate the experience of the chants and ritualized charm songs of *The Kanteletar*. Singing itself is a magical act, as both *The Kalevala* and *The Kanteletar* make clear—Väinämöinen is able to sing his upstart competitor, Joukahainen, up to his neck in a swamp with only the power of his voice, and a good number of the women's songs include lullabies which act as protective charms over the children in their arms or draw unsuspecting lovers near.

Värttinä's breakthrough album, *Seleniko*, contains many good examples of both traditional songs in this vein as well as the group's invention of new lyrics for traditional tunes that follow the same style of charm magic. For example, "Lemmennosto" [darling-buying] offers a love charm to incite passion in a potential lover:

*Fire up, young man's heart!
I will put a flame on your hips
If you don't care I will swear
And conjure up the flames of love
May the lovers have good fortune and many children.*

In their liner notes, the group notes that "the old magic runes were traditionally recited with a low and closed mouth voice," presumably one supposes to hide the fact that the singer is casting a spell. The song is reminiscent of the "Grinding Song" from *The Kanteletar*, where the girl singer uses the motion of grinding in the quern to accompany her spell of enchantment:

*Mouth draws wolf into trap
Tongue draws stoat into the snare
Will a maid into marriage
Wish into another house.
Grind, grind, young maiden
Grind, young maiden's will
Grind hand, and grind foot
Grind mitten, and grind stocking
Grind, grindstone and grind
A maid to a husband's house;
She has a mind for a man
Smoulders for the village boys.*

The repetition motif so typical of ritual magic and charms works here in concert with the act of grinding meal to bring about the desired state, marriage with the chosen man. A similar charm song can be found on 1994's *Aitara*, where the chant focuses on the mystic powers of the night fire, "Yötulet." The repeating refrain weaves a spell of enchantment, "Come, lasses, to the night fire, come closer to the blazing," for it is here that "we'll make magic by the flames, declare our vows to each other." The aim of the spell is, unsurprisingly, to enchant their future husbands, "the man I saw in my dreams."

Wildness and Captivity

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The popularity of these songs attests to the singers' belief in their efficacy, although songs like *Kanteletar* tune "Irresistible" suggest that additional rituals may have accompanied the singing: "nature will bring you all right, blood will draw you to my side. Your own blood will take over—warm, it will make advances." In their 2006 CD, *Miero* [Outcast], Värttinä's song "Lumotar" [The Enchantress] they weave a similar incantation to stir a man's passion. It invokes the image of the cauldron with its opening, "I'm going to cook a man's mind, warm it up with fire." It is no surprise, perhaps, that the cooking fire and its pot have traditionally become the site of witchcraft with its repetitive stirring motions and the alchemy of cooking. The sympathetic magic of the fire representing passion is simple but profound. Or as Mari Kaasinen's lyrics put it, "Burn, mind of man! Let me set fire to your heart, so that you choose my body, and worship me forever." New lyrics, yet completely in keeping with the traditional mode.

Assuming the charm has worked, the next step, of course, is marriage; in Karelia that's a complicated procedure lasting days, as we see with the wedding of Louhi's daughter in Runo 21 of *The Kalevala*. The song I began with is a wedding tune from the traditional ritual, "Kylä vuotti uutta kuuta" [the village waited for the new moon]. It is a welcoming song for the new bride, sung to her traditionally by her groom's sister as the bridal party arrives at the newlyweds' home. The song uses hunting motifs to describe the marriage, referring to the bride as the "sorsa" or wild duck caught by an eagle. This somewhat predatory ambience is a motif repeated in many of the songs of *The Kanteletar*, particularly in the stories like "Palakainen," a murder ballad. There are many happier motifs in the songs, too, like those celebrating the moment when the bride leaves home full of hope, praising the beauty of the new bride and those instructing the groom on how to treat his new partner, including one (1:134) that warns the groom to "advise your maiden in bed, teach her behind the door" and by using gentle means unless she fails to live up to your standards, then "fetch a lash from the thicket." Ever conscious of gossip (another lurking danger), the song also counsels that you use these stronger means behind your own door so that the sounds do not carry to the village folk, and that you don't leave visible signs of your impatience because "the village ploughmen would see...the village magpies would slang." This advice is echoed in Runo 24 of *The Kalevala* but it is paired with a runo with instructions for the bride, too.

While the wedding may be a happy event for the whole village, there is little time to enjoy life once the long ritual is complete. If we follow the narrative of *The Kanteletar* songs, the giddy anticipation of marriage leads to the harsh reality of married life. For the wife there should be no more longing, but there are many dangers that must be dealt with in daily life. Many of the women's songs in *The Kanteletar* deal with protective lullabies or the complaints of daughters-in-law in close quarters with their new family. But sometimes laments are not enough—it is time for the curses. Curses can be a method of healing, as Värttinä's "Viikon Vaivanen" shows:

Flee from me, Disease. You came to us with the wind. Now I'll banish you to the bottom of the sea. If you don't obey, I'll cast you out to the home of Ukko Karhu and to the pen of Akka Karhu. They will chew up your bones.

The personification of the illness allows the singer to address it as she would an unwelcome guest, with threats and punishments, invoking the power of the gods. The traditional Karelian tune provides a mesmerizing rhythmic tune to capture the disease and cast it out.



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On a more mythic level, the group's 2001 disc, *Ilmatar*, named for the Goddess of the Air who gave birth to the world, contained an epic curse, "Äijo's Spell" with guest vocalist Ismo Alanko providing a bass echo that gives extra weight to the words. The insults hurled include "treacherous and cold-skinned viper, slithering and slit-eyed fiend." The lyrics bid the creature to "hear and know your lowly provenance," because to know a history and to name a creature is to have power over it in Finnish mythology, just as Väinämöinen had to know the origin of something like iron in order to use its power. The spell to cure the bite of the serpent adds to this knowledge of history a number of commands to the "hissing ghoul with jagged backside," asserting "never shall my blood refresh you" and demanding "cleanse the grievous wound you gave me, rid my veins of this your venom" and declaring that he will be "forever banished." While curses on the mythic level wield immense power, there is also a clarity of purpose in the more personal curse.

Laura Stark-Arola has written a great deal on the folk magic of women, including carefully mapping out the ways that women manipulated *väki*, the particular female energy that determined a woman's success and standing in the community. Often rituals and charms were dependent upon the force of a woman's *väki* and a curse like Värttinä's "Riena" [Anathema] from *Miero* would rely on a powerful *väki* to make it a success. The rage is plain in lines like "I throw off sparks, I tear from my tongue words as twisted as tree-roots." The words seek to make the magic palpable, even physical: "My loathing drips blood, my pain slashes, curses, drenches with pus." While this particular song does not call on the gods, it does appeal to the previously cursed snakes, for how low must this betrayer be that "snakes also curse you, serpents of death, oh that hissing will enter your head..." While not one of the traditional Karelian curses, one can't help feeling it would prove just as efficacious.

In this brief piece, I can give you little more than an introduction to these lively and living magical traditions. There's not even time to get to the excellent compilation CD *Wizard Women of the North* which contains a number of haunting tunes from the eerie herding calls to songs of incantation. To say nothing of the other groups whose names I invoked at the start, Garmarna who sing to the spring goddess Suvetar, "Feed us with honey-hearts, give us honey-drink" or Hedningarna who call out, "Strike a fire, father of winds, send out lightning, Väinämöinen." I only hope that we can provoke such a rich response in pagan-themed music on this side of the Atlantic one day.

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