

## **Body, Performance, and Agency in Kalevala Rune-Singing**

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The first written account of Kalevala rune-singing dates back to 1778. At that time, Henrik Gabriel Porthan, professor of rhetoric at Turku Academy, presented his classic work: “*De Poësi Fennica*.” His dissertation contains an interesting detail—an attention to the rune-singers’ bodily movements, position, and physical contact (1983:80):

Singers sat either side-by-side or facing each other, each clasping the other’s right hand, with knees touching, one naturally touching the right knee and the other the left, where they rest their arms. While singing, they slowly rock their bodies so that they almost look as though each one wanted to touch the other with his head, and their facial expressions are solemn and contemplative. Very rarely do they sing while standing up. If they occasionally do, they do so as though inspired by the muse and begin the song standing up; nevertheless, as the song progresses, they would, clasping each others’ right hands, seat themselves and continue the song in the customary fashion.<sup>1</sup>

Porthan established the prototypical image of rune-singing. Thanks to his account, rune-singing was imagined as a ceremonious performance involving bodily contact between two male singers. Readily adopted by his students, the image was in turn passed on to nineteenth-century scholars and folklore collectors. Because it served as a model for many later reports, its authenticity and relevance has been widely discussed. The bodily position of two male singers has been seen as a sign of the special value of Kalevala poetry. For the scholar of heroic epic poetry, the physicality of its performance worked as evidence of the genre’s import and character. Lately, the question of body language in performing Kalevala epic poetry has been trivialized and thus interest in its study has diminished.

In the end, the discussion of body language in performances of

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<sup>1</sup> Translations from the Finnish, here and elsewhere, are my own.

Kalevala epic poetry proved unfruitful. Scholarly debates revolved around the reliability of Porthan's description instead of paying attention to the possible variety of performance strategies. The study of body language and performance settings reveals the field of meanings and values attached to rune-singing in various contexts. In examining these questions, however, we have to consider the praxis of rune-singing as a whole. This article deals with the differences in the habitus of rune-singers from the point of view of performance. The performance strategies of rune-singing are examined by paying attention to its bodily expressions and the way in which such movements relate to the performers' aims for self-expression and social recognition.

### **Variation in Performance Strategies**

The Kalevala meter was once the poetic code throughout much of the Balto-Finnic area: among the Estonians, Finns, Izori, Karelians, Livonians, and Votyans. The Balto-Finnic peoples were and continue to be a culturally diverse lot. Thus, rune-singing praxis—its institutional contexts, performing styles, performers, and their goals and poetic skills—varied, often in fundamental ways, according to the region and people in question. The place and significance of Kalevala poetry in a community had an impact on its reproduction and interpretation. Because many of the poems were known in several cultural areas, even in the form of very different variants, the comparative studies of individual poems largely ignored the cultural variation of rune-singing practices. The same concern affects the new approaches dealing with individual singers and their small communities. Much of the research on Kalevala poetry has thus been produced either under the assumption that, although the ways of singing varied in different cultural areas, rune-singing culture can be characterized as a totality with similar features, or on the basis of generalizations regarding specific forms of rune-singing.

In his work *Language and Communicative Practices* (1996), William Hanks investigates bodily anchored practices of performances in socially constructed and situational fields of communication; he employs the concept of habitus to illuminate these practices. For Hanks, habitus is made up of routine modes of perception, action, and evaluation, or “a set of enduring perceptual and actional schemes” (240). The concept was originally presented by Pierre Bourdieu, who himself defined the concept in his *Outline of a Theory of Practice* in a way that connects cognitive functioning, bodily practices, and agency: “a subjective but not individual system of

internalized structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class and constituting the precondition for all objectification and apperception” (1977:86). The concept of habitus is a useful tool for examining variation in rune-singing practices. We may assume that the cultural differences in rune-singing areas meant different modes of rune-singer habitus. Such variation in habitus no doubt existed within the same local communities as well.

Charles L. Briggs (1994) has studied the relationship between oral performance and bodily practices in ritual healing; through an incantation the seer could recreate the patient’s body. The bodily practices of seers themselves are highly culturally ordered and closely tied into their habitus and performance. Public performances as such are characterized by organized body language that creates clues for the interpretation of mediated messages. In the performance event individuals are transformed into social actors by manipulating their appearances, movements, gestures, decorations, and so on. Situated acts of bodily constructions are for this reason important keys for interpreting oral poetry. Briggs examines bodily practices in terms of agency, defining the concept on the basis of work done by Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff as “the capacity to infuse action with subjectivity, meaning, and social power” (Briggs 1994:151-52). Physical contact between two male Kalevala singers has been linked to the idea of the “competent singer.” How did bodily practices of rune-singers reflect their aims for prestige and social recognition? How did these practices express shared and individual values and emotions?

Like Pierre Bourdieu (1983), Hanks links the concept of habitus closely to the concept of social field, a space of position and position-taking in communicative acts, understanding habitus as having a “capacity to create homologies across distinct fields” (Hanks 1996:241). When defined as formations and situational guides for our corporeal orientation to the world, fields are not closed domains but have varying forms. Hanks states that fields that can be disjunctive at one level can belong to a common larger whole—as, for example, the fields of shamanic curing and agricultural ritual among Yucatan Maya. The notion of intertextuality of Kalevala epic and incantations refers to the fact that these genres represent a larger field connected to the mythic knowledge of the other world performed by singers and seers. The concept of field has its advantages in incorporating communicative acts in the socially organized world. On the other hand, as a concept it is as vague as social life itself.

For studies of bodily practices in performances of Kalevala poetry, the concept of performance arena presented by John Miles Foley (1995) is useful in its specificity. Performance arena could simply be understood as a

spatial metaphor referring to the locus of the performance event. But, being a site for distinct cultural practices, performance arena includes reference to patterned actions and their perceptions and interpretations. Foley states: “It marks the special arena in which performance of a certain kind is keyed—by the speaker and for the participating audience—and in which the way of speaking is focused and made coherent as an idiom redolent with pre-selected, emergent kinds of meaning. Within this situating frame the performer and audience adopt a language and behavior uniquely suited (because specifically dedicated) to a certain channel of communication” (47-48). Performance arena, as such, gives hints or determines the mode of performing and its interpretations. In Kalevala epic singing, performance arenas are shaped not only by space but also by the bodily practices reflecting the character and demands of different performances. The ideal setting of the performance arena is then closely connected to the ideal modes of singing.

My starting point for examining the details of performance practices of Kalevala rune-singing is that the praxis of rune-singing is tied in many ways to the organization of other cultural practices (Honko 1998:139). The Kalevala epic recorded in the late eighteenth and early twentieth centuries in Balto-Finnic areas represents not just one but several specific forms of culturally patterned oral discourses related to different cultural domains and institutions. That means that performance arenas, modes of performances, habitus and gender of performers, importance and interplay of genres, and generic models and registers of rune-singing were not fixed or randomly improvised constructions but were guided by the goals and value orientations of performers and their interlocutors.

### **The Ideal Model of Singing**

In Finland, knowledge of Kalevala rune-singing has its longest history in Savo, Ostrobothnia, and Kainuu. Epic art vanished quickly, however, and the documents we now have date from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The oldest record of epic rune-singing is given by Jacobus Petri Finno, who died in 1588 and reported that epics were sung on festive occasions and on journeys to pass the time and as a means of entertainment, the singers competing with one another (Salminen 1934:130). Similar performance arenas and entertainment functions are hinted at by H. G. Porthan in his classic description of rune-singing in 1778: epics were sung above all at feasts, where Bacchus was the bringer of pleasure, and during rests on long journeys made by the inhabitants of the highland in

order to sell their products and buy commodities in the coastal towns. Forty or fifty people would travel together in long caravans, and in the inns dozens of travelers might come together. Porthan describes these overnight stays at inns as follows (1983:83): “A large crowd with leisure time makes for an animated evening. Generally, such a caravan has no shortage of poets or trained singers, and these artists never lack for runes.” Porthan’s well-known account of rune-singing practices is based on information from Western Finland and Eastern Finland and also undoubtedly influenced later reports. In a footnote to the main text he adds (82): “We have written the words according to the Savo dialect (as most other examples) because they are directly taken from the mouths of Savo people.” He also asserted that singing was the only form of entertainment of inhabitants of Savo and Karelia.

Porthan was an extraordinarily gifted writer. Indeed, the detail and vividness of his descriptions of rune-singing can easily mislead the reader into thinking that the man actually witnessed such performances (79-80):

Our peasant friends of the muse follow an original but inherited custom when performing their poems. They always sing in pairs, ceremoniously, surrounded by a throng of listeners standing there with their ears pricked up. The leading singer is either the only one capable of performing the songs, or the one with the best command of the art; he may be older or simply have a higher status in the community. At any rate, he is the one who assumes the role of the poet whenever there is a need to improvise. He chooses for himself a partner who is referred to as either a supporter or an accompanist. The two share the task of singing in the following manner: when the leading singer has reached the line’s third-last syllable, that is the final foot, the accompanist joins him in song. In fact, the accompanist, who is well acquainted with the theme and the meter, has an easy time estimating the remaining foot. After this, the accompanist repeats the line on his own, slightly varying the tune, as though he were gladly giving it his approval. During these moments, the leading singer remains silent until the accompanist reaches the final foot, which both then sing in unison. Then the singer performs the next line, which the accompanist repeats in the same manner, and so on until the end of the poem.”

Porthan eloquently describes the role of listeners in establishing the performance arena and the ceremonious behavior of singers. The description of rune-singing published by Elias Lönnrot in the *Morgonblad* 1835 seems to follow Porthan and is general in its nature (Lönnrot 1902:223). On the other hand, even before Porthan and Finno, a student by the name of Gabriel Paldan had, in a letter to Johan Ervasti, already

mentioned rune-singing in similar situations (Andersson 1969:155). And in 1795, Jakob Tengström also wrote about singing sessions with all the vividness of an eyewitness. His depictions of the singers' use of their bodies resembles Porthan's descriptions (Salminen 1934:160-61):

In particular, one of the best entertainments at social gatherings and feasts was when, the food and drink having been served, one or more singers would perform songs to the delight of the assembled guests. The poet himself, or someone else, preferably an elderly man who could reproduce ancient or more recent songs from memory, would seat himself on a chair or a long stool, leaning towards the singer or accompanist sitting opposite him, knees touching, hand in hand. One would accompany the singing so that when the singer, at a slow, solemn pace, his body swaying to the rhythm, had almost finished singing the first line, the other would join in the last two or three syllables, which they sang together. The accompanist repeated the same line, but varying the melody slightly. While he was doing this the main singer had time to compose or recall the next line, until he again joined in the final syllables sung by the accompanist. Then he would again sing the next line alone, to be repeated by his companion. This continued until the end of the poem, when the singers were regaled and entreated to continue for the pleasure of those present. But when they came to the end of their repertoire, grew tired, or their voices became hoarse, it seldom happened that there was no one ready to take their place. All those present, young and old alike, gathered round the singers, listening with pleasure and attention to the songs that were thus handed down over the years, from one generation to the next, without their ever being written down. Since this form of entertainment appealed to the people more than any other social pastime, the singing would sometimes continue uninterrupted until late into the night, being finally halted by more feasting, sleep, and inebriation.

Drawing on the facts presented above, as well as on certain other sources and accounts by folk singers themselves, Elsa Enäjärvi-Haavio (1949) constructed a picture of how two men would solemnly sing heroic epics. The performance arena could be either festive, involving alcohol (beer in Finland, spirits in Karelia), or simply part of everyday life, that is, a journey or fishing expedition, when men had more idle time to spend together. A line sung by a solo singer was repeated by a second, sometimes to the accompaniment of the kantele. Enäjärvi-Haavio concludes (133): "It seems that the men's singing in pairs was chiefly bound to the life of the old Finnish heroic poetry. Both the custom and the heroic poetry covered more or less the same area: Finland and East Karelia."

Enäjärvi-Haavio's construction of festive rune-singing has been contested by Leea Virtanen and other writers who, on the basis of the

Karelian ethnographic material, rejected the notion of two men singing together, not to mention their bodily position (Virtanen 1968). Knowledge about Karelian rune-singing fails to affirm—or contest—Porthan’s account, which he made on the basis of the Finnish or, more accurately, Savo and Ostrobothnian observations of festive singing. I would like to point out, however, that there are other accounts to support his claim. Bishop Alopeus from Porvoo, for example, remembered in 1885 that in South Savo, in Juva and Puumala, old poems were sung before 1832 in the following way (Salminen 1934:160): “The singers, who were old men, sat facing each other, holding both hands (*kädet ha’assa*), moving their bodies back and forth, so that, in turn, the one pulled the other to him. To his mind, the song was beautiful and festive.”

Interestingly enough, folk poets who wrote and performed Kalevala-meter epic songs about local and contemporary events during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries followed apparently valued traditional modes of performance on important occasions. They would assume the festive rune-singing position when performing publicly, even though their habitus as singers differed dramatically from that of traditional rune-singers. For example, on May 30, 1800, when Pietari Väänänen represented the farmers of South Savo at the meeting of parliament in Norrköping, Sweden, he also sang a poem of praise to honor the King of Sweden. His first few lines describe how poet and accompanist sing the song. The poem was printed on a leaflet, which provided instructions for how the song should be performed. He declared that the poem of praise should be sung “according to the old custom of Savo” (Laurila 1956:106). In 1845 in the Punkaharju village of Kauvoniemi, August Schauman saw three famous folk poets, Olli Kymäläinen, Pietari Makkonen, and Antti Puhakka, perform both their songs and “songs from the Kalevala.” Folk poets sang both individually (possibly their own songs) and together, hand in hand (*haka toisehen hakahan*) (*ibid.* 107). The men were on their way to Helsinki to perform their poems. G. D. Budkovski visually captured the event in a work of art. His painting, which now belongs to the Finnish Literature Society, portrays Kymäläinen and Makkonen seated and holding each other’s hands in the classic rune-singing position.

H. G. Porthan’s account of rune-singing performance contains a footnote that has received little scholarly attention (1983:108): “If both performers enjoy equal authority and expertise, they will occasionally change roles, taking turns at being singer and accompanist. More often, however, the more experienced singer selects a younger poetry enthusiast as his helper, and after having the leading role shows his skills.” The hierarchical master / novice setting is also emphasized elsewhere in

Porthan's texts (1983:105). Although his accounts may exaggerate the real learning practice, they do tell us something about the cultural value of rune-singing skills and the effort and dedication needed to learn songs, rune-singer habitus, and performance strategies.

The ideal or prototypical image of rune-singing performance given by H. G. Porthan and other late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century sources observing mainly Finnish (Savo and Ostrobothian) singing practices includes a festive and public performance arena where the performers, two elderly men, and the audience are clearly separated from each other but, at the same time, in intensive interaction. The singer and accompanist would bodily convey the force and exalted nature of heroic songs. As they sang, the men would hold hands and, with their knees touching, slowly sway to the rhythm. The very physicality of these performances contributed to their emotive power. Today, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century accounts of the beauty and solemnity of rune-singing appear clichéd and forced. Still, even later reports from Karelia refer to the inspirational powers of the poetry (Salminen 1921:144): "People could still recall how, as the men began to sing about Väinämöinen, both the lead singer and the accompanist, and the entire audience, would be moved to tears: 'it was so poignant.'"

Their bodily positions, turned towards each other and holding hands, symbolized a sense of unity, even brotherhood, albeit hierarchical. Shared alcoholic drinks furthered this mood of fraternity. Likewise, the task of the accompanist—to maintain the lead singer's rhythm—worked to achieve the same effect. This unity meant more than simply male companionship; it reflected the high prestige accorded to epic rune-singing within the rural order. Indeed, this highly regarded form of singing was the medium for presenting knowledge about mythic-historical events. The elevated style of archaic expressions and words alien to everyday life keyed the same interpretation of epic (cf. Kuusi et al. 1977).

With slow and measured movements the singers underlined the dignity of their songs. The images of elderly male singers are compatible with their society's hierarchical order—a society in which seniority and manliness were highly esteemed. The image of Väinämöinen, the main hero, conveyed these values. Indeed, the ideal rune-singer was a personification of Väinämöinen, the prototypical singer, old and wise, whereas his opponent was Joukahainen, the young and foolish, according to epic poetry. The "older – younger" or "master – novice" setting was repeated both in epic poems, for example in the so-called Singing Contest and in performances where the main singer was accompanied by another singer with inferior skills. The agency of publicly performing rune-singers

was tied into the powerful images of the mythic-historic tradition and its heroes; it reflected the values of a male-dominated society in which age was synonymous with leadership and wisdom.

### The Broken Voice of Savo Singers

Observations of rune-singing in Savo or other Finnish areas are rare after the 1850s. The disappearance of the tradition has been explained by the fulfillment of the long campaign of the Lutheran Church and growth of literacy. By the end of the nineteenth century Finland had a 20 percent illiteracy rate, while in Karelia—where rune-singing was still known but not practiced as much as before—92% of the people were illiterate. The appearance of new dances, instrumental music, and above all the establishment of many new publishing houses in inland small towns with the marketing of leaflets of songs in the Finnish language offered new and alternative forms of entertainment. The value ascribed to festival rune-singing gradually diminished. The tradition thus transformed into modes of discourse that suited the new conditions.

An interview situation recorded by an undergraduate student, Anna-Leena Kuusi, as late as August 14, 1965, in Juuka, a border parish between North Savo and North Karelia, includes references to the trends already noticeable in the collections of the last century. According to the notes given to the Finnish Folklore Archives, farmer Matti Kuivalainen, born in 1897 in Juuka, performed a poem entitled the “Knee Wound of Väinämöinen” during the discussions. The collector had stated “possibly literary influence” in her field notes:<sup>2</sup>

*Ite vanha Väinämöinen  
soittaja iänikuinen  
teki veikaten venettä  
vaan empä minä siitäkään mitenkä se siinä on . . .  
se tuloo sotkuksi  
. . . niin se löi kirveellä siinä jalakaasa sitten, ni  
niin meni tietäjän tuvillen  
jotta  
“Onko täällä rauan rannan kahtojoo  
veren summan sulukijoo”  
niin  
se*

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<sup>2</sup> The italics in the following passage and translation signify the lines of the poem.

*Ukko uunilta urahti  
 halliparta paukutteli  
 "Ompa sulettu suuremmatki  
 jalommatki jaksettuna,  
 lahdet päistä,  
 virrat niskoilta vihaset"*  
 jotta  
 vaan sitte se kurkisti  
 jotta tuota  
*"Mikä lienetkään sä miehiäsi  
 ku urohiasi  
 kun tuota  
 "Verta on jo seihtemän venettä  
 lattialle las . . .  
 polonen sun polovestasi,  
 lattialle laskettuna." (SKSÄ 33/1965)*

- Muistatteko oliko siinä mitään jatkoo, sitten?
- Oisi siinä, vaan en minähän häntä kunen muista.
- Ette muista, oliko se, paransiko se sen haavan, mikä siinä sitten?
- Niin on, se sulukenu kait. . . ." (SKSÄ 33/1965)

*Old Väinämöinen himself  
 the eternal singer  
 crafted a bark with his wits  
 well, I don't really know how this goes . . .  
 it gets all mixed up  
 . . . well, he cut his foot with the axe then, well  
 well, he went to the seer's cottage  
 so that  
 "is there anybody who can look / see this iron shore?  
 who can block this blood?"  
 well  
 he  
 The old man atop the stove snarled  
 the snowy-bearded one bellowed  
 "Bigger ones I've blocked  
 Grander ones I've plugged  
 bays from the headlands  
 wicked rivers flowing from the neck / throat"  
 so that  
 and then he just looked around /  
 so  
 "What sort of man may you be  
 what kind of fellow*

when . . .  
 “The blood fills seven boats  
 flows to the floor . . .  
 from the knee of woeful you  
 blood to the floor.”

- Do you remember if or how it continued?
- I reckon it did, but I can't remember how.
- Do you remember, was it, did the wound heal, or what happened then?
- Yes, I reckon it closed up. (SKSÄ 33/1965)

According to the archival practice of the sixties, the aim of collecting was simply to record the folklore item and the discussion directly related to it. Without any additional information it would be difficult to draw conclusions on the basis of recording. But, because Anna-Leena Kuusi is a younger version of the present writer, the character of the recorded poem can be discussed here.

The notions of “literary influence” were already common in the last century in the archival collections of the Savo epic. In the case of Kuivalainen’s poem, the collector referred to the *Kalevala*, in which she found a group of similar lines. Rereading this short and distorted poem in 1999, I was struck by the description of Väinämöinen’s wound: it bled so much that seven boats filled with blood. Although the line is rare, it did occur in oral tradition. In fact, it appeared in a variant recorded in Kainuu (SKVR XII 1, 29) but was left out of the *Kalevala*. Upon closer examination, the poem proved to be built both of orally transmitted phrases, for example “polvesta polosen pojan” (“from the knee of the woeful boy,”<sup>3</sup> SKVR XII 1, 16), and of phrases that are traditional but also published in the *Kalevala*.

Although the mix of lines betrays a literary influence, it also testifies to the artist’s knowledge of oral poetry. Moreover, this little poem—with its partially distorted meter—conveys a powerful sense of originality through its idiosyncratic structure. The poem appears to be Matti Kuivalainen’s (or his father’s) re-creation, composed by using the bricolage technique typical of the habitus of folk poets. Folk poets of bygone centuries used the Kalevala meter and sometimes also lines of traditional poetry when creating new songs telling of contemporary events and local people (Laurila 1956:35-37). In nineteenth-century Savo, traditional rune-singing was assimilated into new modes of discourse; thus, singers eagerly incorporated published

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<sup>3</sup> The “boy” here is Väinämöinen, who is sometimes referred to as a boy in Ostrobothnian poems.

poems into their own repertoires, which they were continuously creating and re-creating. This art of bricolage cannot be explained by literacy alone—although many have sought to do so (Laurila 1956); instead, these were new ways of seeking agency in communities where class hierarchy was becoming more evident than before. In a society where ethnic myths had value only in the secret world of seers, agency, still anchored in poetic expertise, was sought through wit and humor—and thus they attempted to portray the world around them.

Matti Kuivalainen was undeniably a poet. In addition to performing his father's humorous poems, he also performed a long narrative poem about his trip to Helsinki. He used the Kalevala meter, models of new rhymed folk songs, and even popular songs. Unfortunately, he was not a very able poet, and thus the meter takes some obscure paths. Several scholars have noted the “broken” voice of Savo singers when using the Kalevala meter. Metrically, the best parts of Kuivalainen's performance were dialogues, which seem in general to have preserved the classical meter better than episodes describing action. The latter were usually rendered in prose by Savo singers. The shift to prose reflects the changed modes of performance: Kuivalainen, like many nineteenth-century seers, did not sing his poems but recited them rhythmically.

Why was Kuivalainen interested in these kinds of poems? Even though it is not mentioned in the field notes, Kuivalainen was living in a lonely cottage surrounded by marshland. Farmer Atte Räsänen, who had recommended Kuivalainen as a performer of poetry, took me to Kuivalainen's cabin along the log path over the marsh. The discussion with Kuivalainen actually came to an abrupt end because Räsänen took over and began to tell tall tales. Apparently, this was not the first time the two men had spent time together. They were friends who had passed the time by telling humorous stories and drinking their preferred beverage—vodka.

Kuivalainen never sought to perform as a bard or as a dignified performer in the public arena. On the contrary, he constructed his poetic habitus on the values of humorous entertainment in a private performance arena. His own poems were generally ironic. Similar tendencies can be observed in Savo oral poetry of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Performers transformed elevated styles and romantic expressions into a humorous code—by changing the register nearly totally. The ambivalent and sometimes broken voice of the Savo singers contains yet another dimension. As he finished his recitation Kuivalainen, with a bit of prompting by the collector, reluctantly mumbled these words: “Yes, they stopped.” By the half-expressed phrase “stopped blood,” he referred to the poem's use as an incantation. Even Kuivalainen himself appeared ashamed

to bring the topic up. A great part of the epic poems of Savo were used as—or incorporated into—incantations during the last century.

Kuivalainen, Räsänen, and possibly their like-minded friends may be compared to Kaapro Vatanen (died 1850) and Sylvi Kurtenius (died 1845) from Iisalmi. They too were renowned for their poetical drinking sessions. Speaking to Kaarle Krohn in 1885, a local informant derided their pastime by using the verb *loruilla*, “to perform nonsense poems, rhymes.” In other words, their art was hardly appreciated. The pair’s repertoire included parts of the Singing Contest, the conflict between Väinämöinen and his young rival Joukahainen, and the Origin of Beer (SKVR VI 1, 29 and 65). Sometimes the performances of drunken singers led to serious problems. In 1643, for example, a man named Erkki Matinpoika was taken to the Elimäki and Vehkalahti court because he and another man sang an epic poem about St. Stephen “wrongly” during the St. Stephen’s Day festivities. According to the legal records, the two men had indeed performed a distorted version of a ritual song; their version could be regarded as ironic, but also as an evil charm (Siikala 1992:227-28). Comparable “singing schools,” private circles of male-singers, could also be traced in other places in Savo. For example, C. A. Gottlund, in the early nineteenth century, had amassed a vast collection of humorous poetry (often sexual) from Juva men. Some of the men were locally recognized seers with a command of both incantations and Kalevala epic poems. Matti Immonen, for example, presented a long narrative poem about the marriage of Väinämöinen and the Mistress of the North.

Clearly, Porthan’s account of ceremonious epic performances featuring the controlled physical performances of male singers has little to do with the leisured and alcohol-inspired singing sessions taking place among friends. In private male gatherings, singing and drinking encouraged physical and mental relaxation and created a “cosmic unity of men.” Instead of ascending the stage to be gazed upon, these male singers—and hence their bodies—could hide within cabins or saunas. In the private sphere, they could dodge the controlling eyes of the village women. These kinds of gatherings epitomize values such as equality and loyalty. Moreover, the setting and participants themselves favor secular, humorous, locally bound epic genres; thus heroic and mythic epic songs are laced with irony, thereby losing all the features of Kalevala poetry’s elevated style.

Creating a private male world through shared drink and song appears to be a nearly universal phenomenon. I have encountered such groups in the *tumu nu* drinking circles in the Cook Islands, South Pacific, as well as among various ethnic groups in North Russia. The organization of space among a circle of friends establishes their own common ground; the backs of

their bodies turn into shields against the world beyond. The group's communal power is established through their common space. This space acts both as a symbol of unity and of their successful—however fleeting—escape from the pressures of day-to-day life.

### **Ambivalent Habitus of Karelian Singers**

Many of the rune collectors who went to Karelia had inherited Porthan's ideal image of rune-singing, along with his aesthetic norms for Kalevala poetry. Thus encounters between rune collectors and rune singers were fraught with misunderstanding and conflict because of differing value orientations. The aesthetic sensibilities of collectors, in turn, determined which poems would be worthy of the written record. Poems had to be clear in content and complete in form. Meetings with "recommended" singers often ended in disappointment. A. A. Borenius was one of these dissatisfied travelers. Huotarini Kostja was praised as Uhtua's best singer, but turned out to be "a confused master of incantations" (Niemi 1921:1091). Sages, on the other hand, were reluctant to give away their magical capital. After all, their words were of economic value. Collectors had to state quite often that seers either refused to perform or simply ran away.

In Archangel Karelia, rune-singing was regarded with ambivalence for several reasons. The arrival of Old Believers in Northern Karelian areas meant even more religious pressure. A number of collectors' accounts attest to its impact. From the Old Believers' point of view, singing was *räähkä*, a sin. Martiskaini Teppana dreaded the consequences of his singing and after a collecting session prayed late into the night (Inha 1911:37-42; about Miikali Perttunen, see Niemi 1921:1079, also 1142). Trade trips to Finland had also changed value orientations. Rune-singing was no longer valued in Uhut, the most prosperous village in Archangel Karelia, and, accordingly, poems were not so "complete" there as in the small villages near the Finnish border (Niemi 1921:1085). The Jamanainen brothers, who were photographed by I. K. Inha, exemplify the loss of interest in rune-singing. Both brothers enjoyed high social status in Uhut. They were embarrassed, however, when asked to perform. After much persuasion, the men agreed to sing, but only in a closed room so that none of their peers could see them.

A number of circumstances contributed to the knowledge that we now have of Archangel Karelian rune-singing. Firstly, the collecting situation involved a clash of values between the collectors and the singers. Secondly, the collecting took place during a period of accelerated cultural change that brought into conflict several competing ideological alternatives. The most

apt word to describing an Archangel Karelian singer's habitus may be ambivalence, reflecting the singers' social, religious, and practical aims. This ambivalence has confused researchers trying to draw conclusions about Karelian performance practices.

According to Jacob Fellman, who made a trip to Archangel Karelia in 1829, everybody there could sing rune-songs (Fellman 1906:496-98). For this reason, and because of the ambivalent values later attached to rune-singing, the scale of performance arenas and strategies in Karelia shows great variety. A very large number of reports, some from the twentieth century, link the performance of Kalevala poetry with the everyday life of the extended Karelian family (Virtanen 1968). Vihtoori Lesonen, for example, reported that her father was a keen singer who, as he wove his nets by rushlight, would sing to his children and those who gathered at his farm on long winter evenings: "There they would pose riddles, tell tales, and sing poems" (Niemi 1921:1128).

According to the travel accounts the best singers were usually men, and this was consistent with Porthan's ideal image of the rune singer. Epic poetry on Kalevala themes was regarded as a masculine tradition (Virtanen 1968:50-51); epic poems were sung on fishing expeditions, during free moments spent in the forest saunas, or at religious village festivals, the *praazniekkas*, when people had sometimes traveled long distances to see their relatives (SKSA, Krohn 0071; Härkönen 1909:36-38). On the other hand, the rune collectors also met many female rune-singers in Archangel Karelia. Most women tended to favor ballads, legend songs, and epic-lyrical songs more than anything else (Virtanen 1968:19). However, there were female singers, such as Hännini Maura, who not only mastered the mythic-historical epic but also interpreted it in an innovative and personal way. Judging by the ethnographic writings available, women well versed in the seer tradition also had a command of epic songs.

From the villagers' point of view, the ideal epic singer was more than just a singer: he was a *laulaja-tietäjä*, singer / sage or singer / seer. Because incantations were often sung in Karelia, such a definition appears quite natural, having its roots in the past (Siikala 1992:226-31 and 293-94, on singer-seer). On the other hand, the singer's habitus is marked by ambivalence—from a performing singer to a seer who used epic poetry as a store of knowledge about the other world.

No clear border separated the sages' secret and traditional chants from the publicly performed epic songs. Both had preserved ancient mythical motifs and images. Surprisingly often, Kalevala epics also had a ritual function. Two of the most popular songs in the area of Karelia around Lake Ladoga, "Lemminkäinen's Adventures" and "Wooing the Daughter of

Hiisi,” were used by sage-matchers at weddings to provide magic protection. According to information obtained by Kaarle Krohn, even the Sampo poem was performed ritually (SKSA, Krohn 0072): “During the spring and autumn sowing, the people first sang the sowing spell, and then the song about the forging and stealing of the Sampo and the chase by the Mistress of Pohjola (the North). The rest describes how Väinämöinen banished the frost sent by the Mistress of Pohjola.” The same notes by Krohn state that a number of other epic songs were performed in ritual situations analogous with their content.

These features of interplay between epic poetry, incantations, and communal ritual poetry may in part be the outcome of the sage’s central position in Karelian culture. Collectors in search of rune-singers were often told to consult the sages. In fact, A. A. Borenius wrote that a singer’s reputation often rested upon his knowledge of chants, whereas the best singers of epic poetry were frequently anonymous (Niemi 1904:475). The high prestige ascribed to magical knowledge is also illustrated by the fact that many rune-singing families were the descendants of a mighty witch or sage (Virtanen 1968:9).

But the habitus of singer / sage did not fit all Karelian singers. For some singers epic poetry had only a performative function. The most renowned singers of Western Archangel Karelia—Arhippa Perttunen, the greatest contributor to the *Kalevala*, and his son Miihkali Perttunen—were definitely epic singers, not seers. Arhippa Perttunen scorned incantations and thought that performing them was sinful. His son Miihkali was of the same opinion. If we want to speak of the epic singer’s habitus, we also need to pay attention to established performance arenas and audiences in addition to evenings at home devoted to domestic tasks. The main question, then, is whether epic songs played any role in public gatherings. Arhippa Perttunen himself provided a clear answer when describing singing competitions organized at feasts. He told Elias Lönnrot about all the singing competitions he had won. As we can see from the passage below, Lönnrot’s meeting with Arhippa taught him much about singing performances and competitions (Lönnrot 1902:223-24):

Perhaps some would be interested to know how a good singer conducts himself while singing. When there are no other singers present, he’ll sing alone, but if there are two singers, as is required of festive singing, they will sit either facing each other or beside each other, clasp each other’s hands either with one or both hands and commence their song. For the duration of the song, the body rocks back and forth, so that it appears that the two of them are taking turns pulling each other closer. One first sings the first line of the poem and is joined by the other at the last part, and

then repeats the entire line. As this repetition takes place, the first singer has time to think about the next line and thus the singing progresses, either by singing poems that have already been composed or by creating something entirely new. The mark of a good social gathering is the presence of many singers. During such feasts, singers often take part in singing contests. Their friends and acquaintances make bets as to who will beat their opponents. Arhippa told me that the villagers often urged him to join such contests, but he could not recall ever being beaten. But how do they compete in rune-singing here? - Not the way they would in music academies; the prize is not awarded to the one who sings the best songs, but to the one who can sing the longest. First, one singer sings a poem, and then he allows one of his rivals to sing a comparable response. Then the first one sings again, and thus it continues with each taking turns. If a singer's poetic repertoire is exhausted and the other one can still keep singing, then the first singer has been beaten. If both singers are inferior talents, the spectators can laugh at their attempts to get in the last word. The contest then begins to resemble something of a chicken fight: the one who can cluck the longest believes himself victorious. Here, too, some of the best songs have been doomed to obscurity; for some can only recall words and fragments and try to use them to beat their opponents. The good singers, however, are an altogether different story. As the poem says, "Singing day after day, night after night" truly happens here, and only slumber can put a stop to the battle, and then neither of them or both are deemed victorious.

Leea Virtanen has concluded that the solo-repeat mode of singing was unknown in Karelia (1968:40). There are, however, some reports of two men singing together in Karelia. In his letter to Kaarle Krohn, I. K. Inha describes a rune-singing performance in the following way (Enäjärvi-Haavio 1949:99): "If I recall correctly, it was said that when they were singing, singers would sit face-to-face on either side of the table, with one holding the other's left hand in his right hand, their elbows on the table, so that the other hand was free to tilt the glass." Accordingly, Iivo Härkönen depicts the Karelian rune-singing performance as the bodily contact of two male singers (1909:36-38).

Even though Härkönen's portrayal tends to romanticize rune-singing and underscore its masculine values, it nevertheless mentions feasts, *praasniekka*, as a performance arena for rune-singing, a detail that Virtanen overlooked. Annual festivals were especially important celebrations and included among other sorts of late nineteenth-century entertainment, e.g. dancing for younger people. The performance of runes on festival occasions is noted also by Kaarle Krohn. Jyrkini Iivana, a son of Jyrki Malinen, told him in 1881 that "on festival days, old men when drunk would sing Kalevala poems without any particular order, only Kekri (an autumn festival) had its

own song, the Song of the Ox, which was then specially sung among the others” (SKVR I, 2, 896).

According to A. Berner’s photograph (found in Kuusi et al. 1977) of two singers—Jyrki Malinen and Ohvo Homanen, related to the Malinen family—the men were familiar with a mode of performance requiring them to sit beside each other holding hands. On the other hand, the Jamanen brothers from Uhtua, who were photographed by I. K. Inha (1911), were made to assume a “rune-singing” pose, but it was utterly foreign to them. Those who traveled to Archangel Karelia in search of runes found that there, too, singing was done in pairs. Rune-singers often spoke of performers who accompanied them. Arhippa Perttunen, for example, told Elias Lönnrot that his father, who was also a skilled singer, had sung on fishing trips with his helper. The other man was also an able singer, but no match for Arhippa’s father (Lönnrot 1902:221-22): “Often they would sing throughout the night, hand-in-hand by the campfire. They never even sang the same poem twice. At that time I was just a little boy and listened to them, so slowly I learned the best songs.”

In Archangel Karelia, rune-singing was an art practiced by just about anybody and on any occasion—even though the collected poems show that most people remembered only a few epic songs. Obviously, when people sang at home while either spinning or repairing fishing nets they did not assume formal postures or use gestures aimed to impress an audience. Those with more knowledge and skills in rune-singing might have had an ambivalent habitus of *laulaja / tietäjä* or singer / seer, or of either orientation. Sages (the masters of the seer tradition) did not perform in public; on the contrary, they would work their magic in a place closed from outsiders, in the sauna or the forest. Their bodily practices included ecstasy, frenzied hopping, spitting, and so on. The ritual behavior of the seer was intended to have an impact on the patient. Some of the accounts of the ritual uses of epic poetry refer to public performances, but there is little information on the performing strategies available.

In public performances, especially at annual festivals and weddings, Karelian male singers would sing with an accompanist if there was one available. The best singers had a strong performer habitus, differing from that of the seer in its value orientation. Singers like Arhippa Perttunen and Jyrki Malinen performed publicly, competed in rune-singing, and used formalized body language in legitimating their position as rune-singers. In Karelia, the amount of bodily control depended on whether the performance arena was private or public and on the nature of audience.

## Female Body and the Construction of Self in Ingria

In the farming communities of South Karelia and Ingria, epic songs were clearly a feminine tradition (see Kuusi 1983 and Harvilahti 1992). Although certain records of men's epics, even of singing competitions, do exist (Enäjärvi-Haavio 1949:144), the bulk of epic songs in the Kalevala meter were sung by groups of women. Women sang as they went about their everyday work, at meetings and festivals for the girls and women as an accompaniment to dancing in circles and chains. The choral repertoire of women consisted of ballads, legends, and a vast array of epic-lyrical songs dealing with kin and family relationships. In addition, women added episodes from nature myths to their songs. Even serious epic poems, such as "Sun and Moon," which contains a mythical theme about the disappearance of the sun and the moon, were sometimes used to accompany dancing in Ingria. Maidens interpreted Kalevala poems from their own point of view, incorporating elements about themselves and village life. Framing mythical themes with motivating lines and motives or direct secularization shows that the significance of poems was poetic rather than indicative of a mythical worldview. Choirs of young girls would sing under the leadership of a solo singer, sometimes in multiple parts.

Ingrian maidens enjoyed traditional dances going back to medieval times. In addition to circle and chain dances, the girls would set off on singing walks in the period between the spring sowing and the autumn harvest. Such walks were also common in Russia and elsewhere in Europe (Enäjärvi-Haavio 1949:149-56). Dressed in their finest clothing, the girls wandered along the village lanes; having reached marriageable age, they were, so to speak, "on display." As they walked by, older people and potential suitors admired the beauty of the singing girls. The *praazniekkas*, local holy days, also provided young women opportunities to parade their beauty. Törneros and Tallqvist described the following scene from Ingria (Niemi 1904:374):

As on all festive occasions, the girls here too first passed the time by singing and dancing. Bands of girls walked hand in hand with garlands on their heads through the market field, singing as they went, at times coming to a halt, giggling and running into a circle in which two girls at a time tripped round like the Russian women in some of their dances. This would have gone on and been quite beautiful to behold had not the miserable boys, who did not seem to have had anything better to do yesterday afternoon than drink and fool around, interrupted the girls' quiet singing and dancing and began to behave in a coarse and uncouth manner. For they pounced on the girls in an unruly manner and dragged one girl

after another from the circle.

Girl choirs played a vital role in maintaining traditional singing; after all, girls were allowed to sing the sacrificial hymns at the joint ritual festivals, even though men were responsible for performing the rites (Haavio 1961:56). Similar ritual practices were observed in Ritvala parish, Western Finland, where young maidens walked in ritual procession, forming a cross along village roads and fields. During their walk, organized in rows of three or four girls, the performers sang ballads especially for this event. The purpose of Helka of Ritvala was to ensure abundant crops. The ritual, “holy” nature of the singing walks influenced the choice of performers: the singers had to be virgins, physically pure and intact.

Women’s group performances in Ingria and south Karelia were built on organized ways of constructing and displaying the body. Young female singers, dancing in circles and chains or walking in rows, were seeking empowerment in a culturally acceptable way. Singing, organized movements, and decorations transformed individual girls into social actors capable of expressing their subjective ideas, emotions, and hopes. For the young women, singing was an instrument of self-construction, fostering a sense of companionship and togetherness for the girls as a group. Finally, singing gave them an aura of importance and recognition. A sense of personal agency is reflected in their preferred songs: their repertoires included special songs describing the subjective attitudes and experiences of singers. Even in old age, when some of the women singers reminisced about their youth for collectors of folklore, they vividly recalled the feelings of joy and freedom that their songs inspired.

## Conclusion

The performative power of rune-singing was manipulated through the singer’s body (position, poise, decoration and so on) in various kinds of performance arenas. Rune-singing was attached to different social fields, and, accordingly, performance arenas were shaped in different ways even within the same community. Singing practices and singing habitus were also subject to considerable variation. Besides the classic bard-type, male singer habitus embodied in Arhippa Perttunen, the most famous singer of Kalevala poetry, there were singers who identified themselves as seers rather than singers, and—on the other hand—singers whose agency was based on bricolage-like creativity and wit in composing new songs within the changing societies of the nineteenth century.

H. G. Porthan's romantic model was inspired by actual Finnish-Karelian rune-singing. Nevertheless, the model only represents one mode of singing practiced in public arenas. As did the elevated poetic register, the use of body language keyed the performance. The group-singing of maidens formed a powerful contrast to the pair-singing of old men and represents a conflict with cultural values rooted into the Baltic region since medieval times. Being present, seen, and heard at public gatherings was no longer an exclusively male privilege. Young women had found a means to transform their subordinate position in the community into a temporary mastery of the village scene, and through their ritual walking, they gained control of important fields of social interaction. It is interesting to note that organized singing-groups of girls were performing when wandering village roads, open fields, and holy groves, in places to which everybody had access. They were seen and looked at. The performance arenas of male singers were much more restricted even when public: men performed inside festival houses or inns and in faraway forest saunas or traveling boats. It must also be remembered that private fields and performance arenas were not only domestic or connected to everyday labor, but also included different kinds of singing contexts. Circles of friends escaping the control of village women and seeking a temporary feeling of agency created performance arenas that transformed Kalevala poetry into humorous and ironic songs far away from heroic epic.

The dispute about festival performances in rune-singing seems to have arisen from the inability of empiricist folklorists to distinguish between public and private modes of performance. The image of male rune-singing introduced by Porthan appears to be based on detailed and reliable ethnographic data. This image, however, has no relevance for the singing practices employed in private or spontaneous performance arenas. In the larger Baltic-Finnic area, the private or spontaneous arena was no doubt far more common. As already known in Porthan's time, the distinctive bodily position assumed by a pair of male rune-singers when singing on ceremonial occasions signifies the special value accorded to Kalevala mythic and heroic songs. Nonetheless, it did not characterize all performances of these genres. The singer habitus varied, and this variation affected the reproduction and interpretation of songs.

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