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ARTICLES BY:

Satu Apo, Professor, University of Helsinki

Katarina Eskola, Dr.Pol. Sc., University of Jyväskylä

Raija Julkunen, Dr.Pol. Sc., University of Jyväskylä

Jaana Kuusipalo, Lic.Pol., University of Tampere

Anna-Maija Lehto, Ph.D., Statistics Finland

Maria Lähtenmäki, Ph.D., University of Helsinki

Aili Nenola, Professor, University of Helsinki

Paavo Nikula, Attorney General

Anu Pylkkänen, Dr. of Jurisprudence

English translations: Hildi Hawkins

Typography and layout

Raija Pitkänen

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FOREWORD

The modern image of Finland includes Finnish women. We are mothers, wives, family breadwinners, participators and influencers. We have engaged in full-time work more than our European sisters. We are extremely well-educated and we are politically active. The individualisation of women has been characteristic of Finland: we have had our own voice, our own wage and often, at least spiritually, a room of our own. In the background of this strong individualisation is Europe's first women's rights to vote and stand for parliament, which date from 1906. In Finnish, the personal pronoun, *hän*, does not distinguish gender, as it does in most languages. We are women of will, something for which we can thank the strong women who have gone before us, our inspiring examples.

This book was born because we wanted a work in English based on the most recent research about the history and present-day lives of women in Finland for Finland's chairmanship of the European Union. It reflects the high standard of women's studies in Finland. The book is also, for Finnish readers, an interpolation by women's studies concerning the position of Finnish women today. It describes Finnish women, who are citizens both as wage-earners and as mothers.

Foreigners often ask how is it that we Nordic women, if we have families, are able to engage in full-time work. We answer that this is made possible by school meals and the law on day-care for children. In Finland, women's politics has a long tradition. We acquire more educational, cultural and social capital than men do.

We do not wish to tell our story as 'know-alls', as a model for others, but to emphasise the choices and survival strategies of Finnish women. The book describes the 20th century in the lives of Finnish women, but our sights are also on the new millennium, which must have a woman-friendly face.

We believe that the northerly dimension includes the capable women of Finland.

Päivi Lipponen Päivi Setälä



SATU APO

The mythic woman

Uniter of nature and culture

In the imagination of hunting men, woman was both desired game and frightening beast. According to ancient folk poems, the woman's lower body was constructed of the softest meats of forest birds, but also of the jaws of bears and wolves. Woman was also connected with nature in the sense that her body was governed by the same cycles as the moon and plants; women were thought to be sexually most ardent at the time when the trees blossomed, scented the air and spread their pollen. On the other hand, woman administered the holiest and innermost circles of culture, the home hearth. She transformed the products of forest, waters and earth into food and clothing.

But it was not only nature and culture that met in the woman of antiquity. She also carried within her body a link with the world hereafter and its invisible powers. It was through woman that the child made its way into the world of mankind; children were believed to arrive from the upper world, from heaven, 'the shoulders of the Great Bear', or from the netherworld, the underwater kingdom.

In her multidimensionality, woman resembled the bear, the most sacred creature of the northern coniferous zone. Both combined nature, humanity and the supernatural. The bear was the most human of animals: it could walk on two feet and use its paws. Like human children, the bear, too, originated in the heavens.

It was, therefore, no wonder that in northern Eurasia tales were told about the marriage of bear and woman and of their children, from whom the human race was descended. The bear-killing festival of Finnish and Karelian hunters followed the form of a wedding: a bride was selected for the male bear, a 15- to 16-year-old girl, and for the female a young boy. But in the festival it was necessary to take care lest bear and woman come too close: both bear and woman had their own supernatural forces, the combination of which might have dangerous consequences.

Within the woman's body was a store of power with the help of which she was able magically to protect those living beings which were important to her: children, cattle, men and growing plants. The woman might leap over the being or object which needed protection or pass it between her legs; she might also bare her lower body, in which case the power of an attacker ricocheted. Women protected their valuable cows with their bodies as they grazed in the forest in the summer, threatened by bears and wolves. If a woman encountered a bear in the forest, she was to raise her skirt. Then the beast would disappear from her path. The use of the woman's lower body as a magic tool (in Greek, *anasyrma*), is known from classical and mediaeval historical sources throughout Europe.

THE SACREDNESS OF THE BODY

Although the woman had less physical strength than the man, the supernatural power concealed within her body was stronger than that of the man. Unlike the man, the woman could also produce harm with her power. She could, for example, ruin a horse or its harness – in other words, the equipment the man needed to escape from home and move freely in the world.

The woman's body was 'sacred' in the same way as the places of power in nature and in the environment built by human beings. The sacred places of the landscape included steep cliffs that rose from the water toward the sky, trees reaching up into the heights whose root-systems opened up cavities in the bowels of the earth, and deep sources whose depths could not be seen. All of these functioned as channels or passages which linked together the three main layers of the world: the upper world, dominated by the gods and guardian spirits of the species; the middle world, inhabited by human beings, animals and plants, and the lower, supernatural world, reserved for the dead and evil

spirits. The hearth built by human beings also formed an energy-charged channel: heat and smoke rose into the upper world, and fire, one of the four basic elements, was able to transform living beings and matter into something else. The body of a woman of child-bearing age belonged to the same sequence. Compared to a man's body, it was a channel with openings which a man could enter and from which a child emerged. The woman could also change the form of the proud phallus. In the images of the oldest sexual poems, intercourse is portrayed as a battle in which the woman's organ emerges triumphant. It squeezes the water from the eyes or the brains from the head of the man's organ, and finally eats its heart.

The woman had a strong link with fire and the hearth, either the living-room oven or the sauna stove. The link was based on both everyday activity and on symbolic and magical thought. By using the power of fire and the hearth, women of child-bearing age could close their open bodies. If they did not want children, they had to sit between the hot stove and the smoke-opening of the sauna.

The lower body of the woman could also be connected with the kingdom of death, either beneath the earth or in Tuonela, which was located in the dark north. An incantation from eastern Finland describes how a shaman-like seer descends to the kingdom of the dead via the lower body of a woman. The healer seeks knowledge to heal his patient; having gained the required 'words' in Tuonela, he rises back into the world of humankind through the same narrow and constricting passage.

Women demanded and apparently received respect for their special bodies and the forces they contained. If a man insulted a menstruating woman, she had the right to strike him with her skirt and thus magically give him periods for the rest of his life.

According to archaic thought patterns, every woman was sacred because her body linked the different layers of the cosmos; at the same time she was charged with invisible powers. The essential weight of the woman was not dependent on her external appearance, character or achievements. Every woman was a world-bearing structure whose links with the cycle of life – birth, growth and death – were consecrated and ritualised.

The metaphysical power and value of the woman did, however, have its shadow side: all the members of the community – including the woman herself – had to beware of the woman's special nature and its physical source, the

periodically opening body. A woman of child-bearing age should, in particular, beware of masculine means of transport: she should not on any account step over them. The open body of the woman attracted other forces: they were concealed in water, the dead and burial places, sacred idols and bears. As a result, women of child-bearing age were, already in prehistoric cultures, bound by many taboos.

A WINDOW ON PREHISTORY

The foregoing description of the most ancient images and concepts connected with women is based on oral poems which were gathered in the folklore archive of the Finnish Literature Society in Helsinki from as early as the 19th century. Although the Finnish and Karelian folk poem collection originates in a comparatively late period, from the late 18th century to the 1930s, they open up vistas of the most archaic European world view; this had originated and formed among the hunting cultures of the northern coniferous zone. Primitive hunting and fishing methods survived in Finland as additional livelihoods for the farming population until the 20th century. Although hunting technology changed, first with metal weapons and then with firearms, some of the old concepts remained, most clearly those connected with the forest, trees, water and their inhabitants. Ideas about the relationship of man and woman to nature and its various elements may also contain elements derived from hunting cultures.

The most archaic form of European agriculture, burn-beat farming, survived in Finland until the 20th century. At present it is not yet clear whether Finnish mythology and folk religion contain concepts and ideas corresponding to the beliefs of the earliest European farmers. Archaeologists have made hypotheses about these on the basis of worship sites, graves and objects found in them. The megalithic cultures of the late Stone Age reached as far as the shores of the Baltic. Among them, graves have been found in forms reminiscent of women's bodies. If this interpretation is correct, woman has been the channel to the supernatural world also in images and concepts other than those of eastern Finnish incantations. Of these, perhaps the most mysterious is a description of the mistress of the land of the dead, the birth-giver of diseases, who pulls 'even old women' down to the underworld with a net through her lower body. According to the archaeologist Marija Gimbutas, the people of Stone-Age

Europe worshipped the goddess of death, who assumed the shape of a bird; one of her attributes was a fishing net.

THE VIRGIN MARY

Most Finnish and Karelian folk poetry, however, points to agrarian communities whose lives and world-views were influenced by the Christian faith and the power of church and crown. Most of Finland – including its folk culture – has always belonged to western Europe. The influence of Russia and the Greek Orthodox church was limited to the eastern parts of what is now Finland. Unlike in the majority of western and central Europe, Finnish peasants were never serfs, except for in the south-eastern corner of the country, which was governed by Russia between 1721 and 1809.

Protestantism banished the Catholic saints from Finland from the 16th century onward. Their images on the walls of churches were whitewashed over. It was more difficult to reform the minds and oral poetry of the people. Thus the Virgin Mary walked the forests of Finland and Karelia right up to the 20th century. The reason why she was not abandoned was because her help was needed. In the images of healing charms, Mary, with the help of a bee, fetches medicines from beyond seven seas and sews broken veins together with needles of mist. She also arrives to help women giving birth in the sauna. With her she carries a golden axe; she uses it to open the portal of the mother's body and lets 'traveller into the world, the little-fingered one into the courtyard'.

In Orthodox Karelia, women constructed their own Mary on the basis the stories told by priests and monks. Women singers did not cleanse Mary of human feelings and desires. The more easily they were able to identify with Mary, the more support they gained from her for their own lives and experiences. The singers certainly accepted that Mary does not become pregnant after intercourse but after eating a red forest berry (*marja*, in Finnish), the lingonberry. But she desires pregnancy passionately. The berry shouts to the girl from the forest, and she cannot resist its call. In the sway of fervour verging on desire, Mary runs toward her caller: 'Hills flatten at her going, fells sway at her rising.' *Marja*, the berry, and Mary are physically united. The lingonberry rises first on to the girl's skirts, from there to her breasts and from her breasts to her mouth; from there it descends to her belly: 'It satisfies, it fills, it makes her with child.'



The Karelian women's Mary also experiences the shame of motherhood outside marriage. Her parents drive her away from home, calling her man-mad and even a whore. The desperate Mary wants to throw herself into the river. Then a miracle occurs: the river speaks to the girl and refuses to accept her, because she is carrying the son of God:

No, the stream will not take you,
nor will the rapids lift you:
you'll have a boy on your knees
the Lord Christ upon your lap.

WORK AND SKILL

Peasant women knew their own value. Although they accorded a higher station to men – this was taught by the Bible, after all – this did not mean submission. A 19th-century singer rejected a husband's criticism in direct words:

What can a man scold me for?
I am a woman like other women:
I milk the cows, bake the bread,
watch the child, cook the cabbage,
cut twenty-five bales of hay
– and still beside him lay.

A woman could hold her head high if she fulfilled the demands of her social role – which were exactly the same as in post-industrial Nordic culture. The woman engaged in productive work full-time. If she was the matron of a farm, she cared for the cattle and helped her husband in the fields. She might have had the help of maids or her own daughters. If the woman was the wife of a landless labourer, she engaged in paid work in the home or, more often, outside it. She helped landowners with the harvest, spun thread for their wives, gathered berries and leaf fodder and invented all sorts of ways of earning a livelihood for herself and, above all, her children.

The woman was also, of course, responsible for domestic chores. She prepared food, made clothes and looked after children. The singer rebuffing the criticisms of her husband has also added to her list the sexual responsibilities of the wife.

The work of the peasant woman was not merely simple toil. In addition to her hands, she was expected to use her brain. Extensive technical skill was indispen-

sable in a self-sufficient economy. Self-sufficiency declined in Finland relatively late; the reasons were sparse population, poor transport and the poverty of rural people. Thus, before starting their own families, girls were expected to acquire extensive technical skills in the spheres of the economies of food and clothes. In western Finland, for example, women were responsible for the brewing of beer and liquor. More complicated methods, however, were associated with the production of textiles. Most of these, too, were made at home.

Before a girl could give a linen shirt to her sweetheart, she had to execute a long sequence of tasks. She had to tend the flax field, sow seeds, weed the field, pluck the plants from the ground in the autumn, dry the flax, remove the husks and save the seeds. After this, she had to separate the fibres in the stems of the plants by first soaking the flax in the lake, drying the stems and then crushing the woody tissue. Crushing the flax was a difficult task in which the women were sometimes helped by the men. Next, the fibres were graded according to fineness, after which they could be spun into thread; the thread was twisted into warp and weft thread, which could be dyed. From the thread, the girl wove fabric which she then cut and sewed into a shirt, perhaps decorating it.

In addition to their technical skill, peasant women had other modern capabilities. Mistresses of houses were responsible for the planning of their sector of activities and for the rational use of resources. Farm activities were divided into masculine and feminine spheres. The matron was expected to estimate and check the sufficiency of food resources reserved for animals as well as people. Strict rationality and self-control were needed because Finland is the northernmost country in which the majority of the population has made its livelihood through agriculture. Winter caused a long gap in the production cycle; all families had to survive over the winter to spring. The brevity of the light period and growing season, for its part, demanded the sensible timing of farm tasks. For example, textiles were woven in the late winter, when there was sufficient light and cultivation tasks did not demand women's time.

The division of labour between men and women was both clear and flexible. Women could overstep the border of division of labour and carry out many masculine tasks, for example ploughing, sowing and fishing. On the other hand, men could not – without losing their reputations – participate in caring for cattle, although it included some physically demanding work, such as watering cattle.