

The Might of Word and Song

by Dr. Pirkko Graves

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Imagine yourselves in a Finnish farm house some 600 - 700 years ago. Imagine it is the gathering of your clan to celebrate harvesting. There's much to eat and to drink because such gatherings are rare. A special event is the performance of runo-singers. The clan may have singers among themselves, or a couple of itinerant singers may appear, defying a long walk through deep, dark forests and braving bears, wolves, lynxes, elks. The singers are specially gifted in that they are able to remember and recite a great many runo-cantos, which they have learned from earlier singers. They would also be the teachers to the following generations to secure this ancient oral tradition. The singers follow the old custom of singing: They sit opposite to each other, grasp each other's hands, and sway back and forth in the rhythm of the old, monotonous tune.

This archaic song tradition was a vital, living tradition throughout Finland until the 1500s. The crusades had brought Christianity to the country about three centuries earlier, but now the Reformation forbade the singing of these pagan songs. (In return, the Church gave people the Bible translated in Finnish.) The song tradition gradually disappeared from the Western part of the country, but was preserved in the East, Karjala or Karelia. In early 1800s, a physician, Elias Lonnrot, began systematically to write down runo-singers' songs, and in 1835 published a collection of the songs, called Kalevala. Kalevala, as you know, is the Finnish national epic and is a compilation of folk poems which vary in age. The oldest poems, dating presumably back 3000 years, describe the birth of the world, the taming of fire, or the freeing of the sun and the moon from their imprisonment. The more recent songs reflect Christian influence: for example, the song of Marjatta, who conceived a child from wild lingonberries, is clearly a Finnish version of Virgin Mary.

The runo-songs are in trochaic verse, each line with eight syllables. The verses have two unique characteristics — alliteration and parallelism. The latter means that a line is repeated in the next line, but using different words. I shall read a couple of verses from the original Finnish Kalevala, hoping it gives you a feel for the poetry.

These features, alliteration and parallelism, together with the ancient language, make the translation of Kalevala a formidable enterprise. Yet, it has been translated to 53 languages, including at least six English translations. I shall follow the work by Eino Friberg, who was born in Finland and grew up in the US. Himself a writer and a poet, and with his knowledge of Finnish, I think he succeeded better than the other translators in capturing the lyric quality of the Kalevala poems.

The runo-songs describe various stories and adventures of Kalevala's heroes. The central personality is Vainamoinen, a mighty singer and a sage. Two other heroes are worth mentioning: Ilmarinen, a smith with superior skills as he forged Sampo, which was to bring everlasting richness and happiness; and Lemminkainen, a womanizer, whose charm and beauty were legendary. They form a challenging contrast to the heroes of the other ancient epics of the world, who are warriors and blood-shedding soldiers. (cf. the Norse Legends, Niebelunger Lied; Beowulf.) And, although the Kalevala heroes may forge their own swords and use them in fights against their enemies, their role as warriors is secondary. Their superiority stems from their knowledge, wisdom, and song. This feature – the might of word and song – is one that I hope to convey to you. I believe that the Kalevala heroes have a message to our contemporary world, where violence and lethal weapons determine, more often than not, who are the leaders.

I shall tell you three stories, with quotations from Friberg's translation, to introduce you to the ancient world of Kalevala.

The first story describes the contest between Vainamoinen and Joukahainen.

Joukahainen purposefully challenges Vainamoinen to decide which one of the two knows the most. In this poem, Vainamoinen is portrayed as old and knowledgeable, in fact, a famous sage, while Joukahainen is a cocky and self-assured youngster. I think we can listen to the story with our contemporary ears as well, and find familiarity in the tension between the generations, between old and young.

Joukahainen, “the lanky lad of Lapland”, was sorely envious of Vainamoinen’s widely spread reputation and decided to ride to meet with Vainamoinen, much against his parents’ warnings. He replies to them,

“Father’s counsel is a good one
and my mother’s better still,
but my own is best of all.”

It took three days before he met Vainamoinen. Arrogantly, Joukahainen refuses to yield right-of-way to the ancient and recklessly smashes Vainamoinen’s sleigh “into kindling.” Vainamoinen first thinks it was an accident caused by the young man’s lack of skill and mildly scolds the youngster,

“Of what clan may such as you be
rushing on so stupidly,
recklessly against a man?”

Joukahainen rashly replies,

‘I’m the young man Joukahainen,
Now you tell me who you are,
Of what lineage are you,
From what mob, you miserable man?”

He continues to be provocative, and when Vainamoinen suggests,

“Draw aside a little now;
you are younger far than I am”,

he challenges Vainamoinen directly.

“Young or old, that doesn’t matter.
He who has the greater knowledge,
He who has the mightier memory,
Let him hold the road ahead,
Let the other move aside.”

Vainamoinen’s reply is still calm, even humble.

“Who am I to be a singer,

Who am I to be an artist?
All my life I've passed my days
In the solitary clearings,
Listening to my cuckoo calling."

But he agrees to compete with Joukahainen, who now gives a long list reflecting his knowledge of customs and ways of living. He notes that the ceiling is the best for a "smoke hole" while the flame is kept neat the earth. He describes how best to locate and find seals, pikes, and salmon; how reindeer is used for plowing in the north, but a mare in the south, and an elk in "hinter-Lapland". He names the three largest waterfalls and two highest mountain peaks. Vainamoinen interrupts him.

"Childish notions, woman's tattle,
Not for bearded men and married.
Speak to me of origins,
Birth of things, of things unique."

Joukahainen now shows that his knowledge goes deeper, and he names animals that are related to each other ("I know the adder for a serpent"), and gives a long list of minerals, plants, and trees,

"Water's born upon the mountain
And the fire out of heaven,
From the rust the seed of iron,
Copper from a rocky cliff."

Vainamoinen, however, is not impressed and asks,

"So, what more do you know-
this the end of all your chatter?"

Joukahainen shows his knowledge of geology and explains the origins of the earth and foolishly adds that he was present when the earth was created.

"I was but the sixth of seven,
of the seven heroes then
Present at the earth's creation,

Spreading out the sky above,
Setting up the pillars of heaven,
Raising up the rainbow there,
Leading on the lights of heaven,
Guiding forth the sun and moon,
Lining up the Greater Bear,
Scattering stars across the sky.”

Vainamoinen’s patience is now gone and he accuses Joukahainen for outright lying. But Joukahainen, forever brash, does not give up but challenges Vainamoinen for a sword fight. The sage, full of scorn at the liar, refuses to fight with him,

“They don’t frighten me at all,
Not your knowledge or your weapon,
Swords or spells, whims or notions,
But apart from all that nonsense,
I’m not going to measure swords,
Not with you, you pitiable creature.”

This incenses Joukahainen, and he threatens to turn the sage into a pig,

“Him I’ll sing into a pig,
Charm him to a snouted swine.”

Now Vainamoinen’s wrath is roused and he begins to sing with a power so mighty that

“Shook the earth, the lakes splashed over,
And the copper mountains quivered,
Cliffs were cracking, boulders breaking,
On the shore the stones were splitting.”

His singing scattered Joukahainen’s sleigh, horse, and sword to trees, sky, and water, while Joukahainen himself was sinking deeper and deeper in a swamp. The young man, humiliated and frightened, recapitulates and humbly pleads Vainamoinen to reverse his magic spell. He promises to give the sage his swords, horses, all of his gold and silver, his land even, but to no avail. He is sinking deeper, deeper, and deeper.

“Sunken to his chin in quicksand,
To his beard in a bad place,
To his mouth in marsh and mosses,
To his teeth in fallen fir sprigs.”

Finally, he promises his sister, beautiful Aino, to the old sage. Who

“Was delighted beyond measure:

Winning Joukahainen’s sister

“For his old age – sweet provision.”

He sings for three hours to reverse his incantations. Thus wisdom, knowledge, and genius of the old age gained a victory over a thoughtless youngster, too full of himself, too self-assured.

Vainamoinen is by no means a heroic character consistently; over and over again he falls in love with young women and, to quote Friberg, “an old man in love is a great fool.” In later stories, Vainamoinen is able to regain his earlier powers, and is even braver and more concerned about his clan and people. His words are mightier, and his knowledge of the origins of the world is supreme. The next story describes some of this transformation.

Vainamoinen decides to visit Tuonela, the land of the dead, to gather more wisdom and charms. He needs a boat to cross the river Tuonela and he builds one using his own devices:

“He the great eternal seer,
Made a boat with magic knowledge,
Built a vessel with his singing,
Built it from a single tree,
Segments of the fallen oak.”

But the incantation was “halted” as three words were missing, and to find them, he descends to Tuonela using ruse and conniving. The old trickster, however, was found out by the daughter of Tuoni (the ruler of Tuonela), who says:

“How did you get to Manala,
Without dying or disease,
Neither in the course of nature
Nor by other doom diseased?”

And the old conniver is kicked out of Tuonela, into the Tuonela River. But rather than drowning, he is rescued, as the truly ancient, truly wise sage Vipunen – who has been long dead – swallows him. Vipunen, “Oldest sage with oldest wisdom, in his mouth the greatest magic, in his bosom endless power” finally releases Vainamoinen after the latter has tormented and tortured the ancient sage. Vipunen generously reveals Vainamoinen the three missing words for the boat building. In addition, he also

“Opened up his ark of sayings
and revealed his store of verses
For good singing, best of chanting,
Of the deepest origins
From the very birth of time.”

Vipunen releases Vainamoinen, who now is able to finish his boat. And his reputation as the mightiest sage alive is strengthened.

Among the runo-singers, many women were widely known for their skill to remember and recite runos and thus to preserve them to generations to come. Among Kalevala’s forceful personalities, many women stand out. Foremost is the ruler of Pohjola (Northland), Louhi, a matriarch who battled against the southern heroes, Vainamoinen and Ilmarinen. In her battles, she often recruited the aid of her daughters, who seduced the men to fall under the mother’s power. My favorite person, however, is the mother of Lemminkainen. The runo that tells about her is perhaps one of the more lyrical and moving descriptions of maternal love that I know. Here’s the story.

Lemminkainen, as we remember, was a womanizer and a charmer no woman could resist, including one of Louhi's daughters. He was successful in his wooing of this daughter, but Louhi, the mother, decided that Lemminkainen was to perform three impossible tasks before she could give her consent. One was to kill the swan of Tuonela, swimming in the river which divides this world and the next. Lemminkainen got killed and his body, cut in pieces, was thrown into the river.

His mother receives a sign of her son's death and begins her search for him. But no one is willing or able to help her until finally, the sun comes to rescue:

“Lost and dead your darling boy,
Gone down Tuonela's dark river,
Timeless carrier of the dead –
Taken by the downward current
To the homes of Tuonela
To the caverns of the dead.”

The mother requests the famous smith Ilmarinen to forge a copper rake and, hurrying to the river, she begins to rake, upstream and downstream. Finally, she is able to find the son's body parts.

“With great care she gathered them
And put the severed parts together,
Bone to bone and flesh to flesh,
Joint to joint and vein to vein.”

But Lemminkainen remains lifeless:

“Yet she could not give him words,
Could not charm his tongue to talking.”

She needs a healing ointment and asks a honeybee to collect the miraculous honey for her. The bee's first trip, to the woodlands of Tapio, brought honey, but it was not successful in restoring Lemminkainen. The mother requests the bee now to fly

“Over nine seas to an island
To the new-built house of Tuuri

There the honey most delicious

There the best of medicines.”

But that special honey did not work, either, and the mother asks the bee to go for one more trip,

“Fly up to the highest heaven

To the very ninth of heaven.”

And the bee does fly

“By the ring around the moon it flew,

By the border of the sun,

By the shoulders of the Bear,

Past the seven stars it flew,

To the great Creator’s cellar,

To the realm of the Almighty.”

There, the bee found the honey and brought it to the mother. Her praise of the honey was exalted:

“These are now the very ointments,

Nostrums of the high Almighty,

With which God himself anointed,

The Creator poured on wounds.”

She rubbed the honey on her son’s body with great care; then spoke “the spell of waking”:

“Rise up from your lying down

And awaken from your dreaming,

Up from all these evil places,

From the bed of evil fortune.”

Lemminkainen is returned back to life, and after telling the mother the events leading to his death, he is nursed back to health.

“To his former handsome self,

A little better than before

And more gentle than of old.”

He returns home together with his mother; as the poem says,

“With his most devoted mother,

With his much respected parent.”

Last, I shall describe the creation of Kantele, the instrument which the runo-singers often used to accompany their singing. Kantele is a distant relation to zither, although it sounds different. (I’ll play a sample afterwards.)

Vainamoinen, himself a notable singer, built the first Kantele, and when at the end of Kalevala, he departs to give way to the new ruler of Karelia, he leaves kantele as a heritage to the Finns.

According to the folk poems, the first kantele was built of the jawbones of a giant pike. No one else but Vainamoinen was able to play this new instrument, nor could anyone else after him play it with similar skill and power. One poem describes how Vainamoinen held all living things spellbound with his playing. All living creatures from forests, air, and water gathered around him to hear him.

“Now the music rose to joyance,

And the joy to high rejoicing,

All the music felt so real,

On from song to song high hymning.”

Even the gods - Ahti, the god of waters, the Daughters of Air, the Moonmaid, and the Sunmaid, - stopped their activities to hear

“This enchantment of old Vaino,

Music of the old poet immortal.”

And when Vainamoinen went on playing

“There was not a single person,

Not the hardiest of men,

Neither any man nor woman

Who did not break out in tears

Or whose heart remained unmelted.
For the sound was wondrous moving,
So melting was the old man's playing."

The sweetness of kantele brought tears in Vainamoinen's eyes as well. And when
the numerous tears fell into water, they changed into pearls,
"That would honor any king,
And delight the great forever."

Imagine now that we are all present, to witness the creation of kantele and listen
to its music which can make us joyful and sad. I shall play a short piece by a contemporary
Finnish kantele virtuoso Hannes Ihalainen.