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# The *Karsikko* and Cross-Tree Tradition of Finland

## The Origins, Change and End of the Custom

Janne Vilkuna

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According to an East-Finnish custom that came to an end around the beginning of the 20th century, the *karsikko* (conifer shorn of branches) and the cross-tree were prepared when the deceased was taken for burial. The Roman-Catholic Church and the Reformation introduced into folk beliefs the idea that the deceased did not journey all the way to the community of the dead. Restoring the social order of the community that had been disturbed by death then required that the dead be placed in the intermediary stage dictated by the tripartite division of the rite of passage in status. It was also necessary to establish a boundary between the living and the dead as a precaution against the undesired return of the deceased.

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### The history of settlement in Finland

In the 12th and 13th centuries Finland was joined to Sweden and the Roman-Catholic Church through crusade activity. Long-term hostilities between Sweden and Novgorod/Russia ended in the Treaty of Pähkinäsaari in 1323. The border established in this treaty passed from the Karelian Isthmus to the Gulf of Bothnia. Over the centuries, Sweden was engaged in wars with Russia and succeeded in moving the border towards the east (the borders of 1595 and 1617), and the Baltic lands were also incorporated into the Swedish realm. In the 18th century Sweden lost the Baltic regions and eastern parts of Finland (the borders of 1721 and 1743, see Fig. 8), and Finland was finally ceded to Russia in the early 19th century (the border of 1809). Finland became an Autonomous Grand Duchy of the Russian Empire, and the Lutheran faith remained the main religion there.

Karelian settlement had already formed in South-East Finland at the end of prehistoric

times. These settlers developed into the population of Southern Savo. From the end of the 15th century, the slash-and-burn farmers of Savo were engaged in a process of expanding settlement spreading into the eastern and south-eastern areas that had been joined to the realm. They also spread towards the north to the arable southern river valleys of Kainuu and Lapland, and to the west to Central Finland and as far as Ostrobothnia (Fig. 1). In the early 17th century Savo Finns, assisted by the crown, settled in the forested regions of Middle Sweden (so-called Forest Finns).

At the end of the 16th century the Reformation changed the Roman-Catholic Church of Sweden into the Lutheran church. During the 17th and 18th centuries, the organization of parishes in Savo, where settlement consisted of individual farms and holdings, became more dense, and Christianity began to influence the population in real terms.

Settlement history and geographically determined routes of communication in different areas, which dictated the division of the coun-

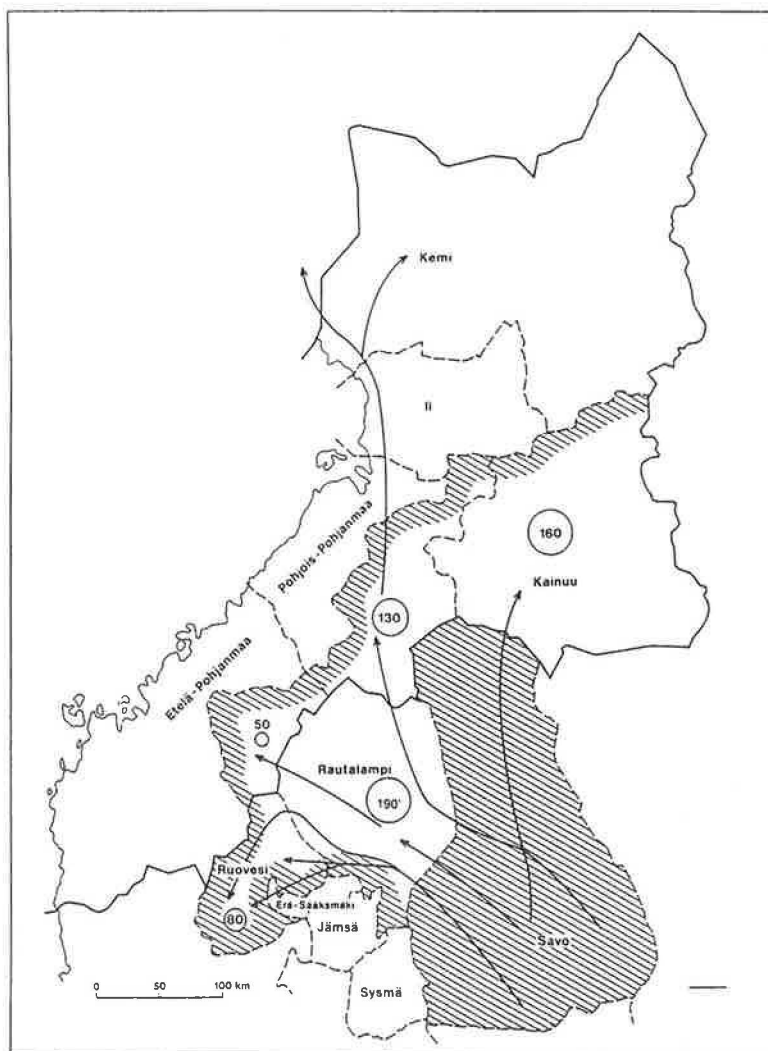


Fig. 1. The spread of the Savo Finns outside their original regions in the 16th century. The hatched area indicates a substantial portion of Savo settlement. The circles and the numbers within them indicate the number of families with Savo-type names in 1580. The arrows mark the directions of colonization (Pirinen 1982: 274).

try into administrative areas, explain the areas of folk culture that could still be observed in Finland in the 19th century (Fig. 5).

### The subject of study – A lost custom

In Eastern Finland it was still customary in the late 19th century to prepare a *karsikko* or cross-tree for the dead in connection with burial. The *karsikko* and the cross-tree were usually prepared in connection with funerals approximately midway on the journey from the home of the deceased to the cemetery (Fig. 2). In Finnish, the term *karsikko* derives from the

verb *karsia* (to debranch) and accordingly means a conifer shorn of branches, but the term is also used of memorial markings on boards, the walls of buildings, and rocks.

The funeral procession stopped at a certain point, ostensibly to repair vehicles or for some similar reason. The memorial markings (e.g. a cross, the initials of the deceased, the year of death, and the date of death or burial) were then carved in a blaze mark on a selected tree, or a board with these markings was affixed to it; the participants had a drink of spirits; a hymn was sung; and the deceased was 'bound' to the tree with incantations and rites of

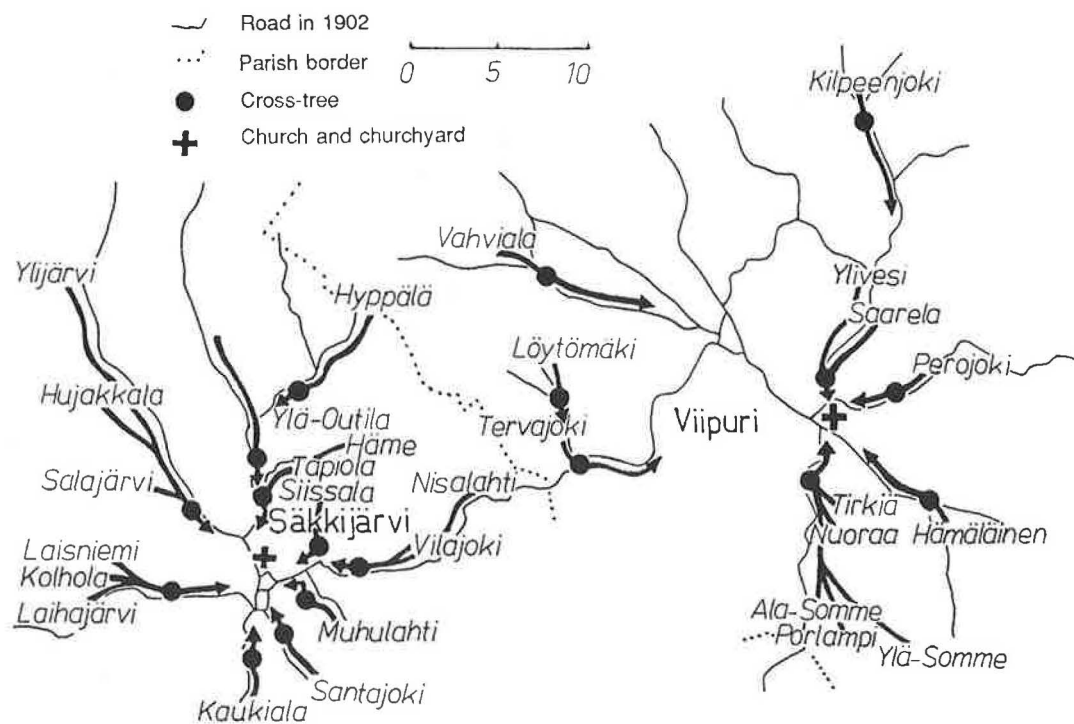


Fig. 2. Cross-trees at Säkkijärvi and Viipuri on the Karelian Isthmus. The arrows show the direction of funeral corteges from the home villages to the churchyard.

magic. From the early 19th century onwards in North Savo the *karsikko* board was affixed to an outbuilding of the farmstead only after returning from the cemetery. Around this time, memorial markings also began to be made on rocks or outcrops of bedrock, either along the funeral route or in the yard of the homestead. The *karsikko* and cross-tree custom died out in Finland at the beginning of the 20th century.

### Earlier studies

The oldest available information on the cross-tree or a similar custom in the Baltic regions dates back to the 17th century. A travel account written by Johan Brand, a German, in 1673 notes the following (Laugaste, E. 1963: 78):

“Noch haben sie unter ihnen diesen seltsamen gebrauch, daß, wan ein guter wirth, der bey ihnen werth und angenehm gehalten worden ist, gestorben, sie demselbigen zum guten an-

dencken, auf dem kirch-wege, irgendwo an einem baum, worinnen sie zuvor mit der axt überzweg ein loch eingehawen, welches untertheil nach der erden hin gespaltet wird, in dem riß einen stecken aufrichten, der eben so lang wie der todte gewesen, welchen sie oben aufspalten und einer anderes kleineres holtze einfügen, damit es eine gestalt eines kreutzes gewinne dieses bewickeln sie mit rothem und blauwen zwirn: und solle selbiges darzu dienen, daß man auch dem kirchweg, der doch von ihnen vermutlich nicht vielmahl betreten wird, des abgelebten guten menschen lange gedencken, auch dessen gewesene statur desto fleißiger erwegen möge; Ein frembder und rey-sender würde fürwahr von dieser sache keine andre gedanken fassen (wie auch wir im vorüber-reysen vermutheten:) es müßten die leute allhie lauter zauberer und hexen-meister seyn.”

In Sweden, Carl von Linné witnessed a similar custom in Dalecarlia in 1734 (Linné 1953: 42):

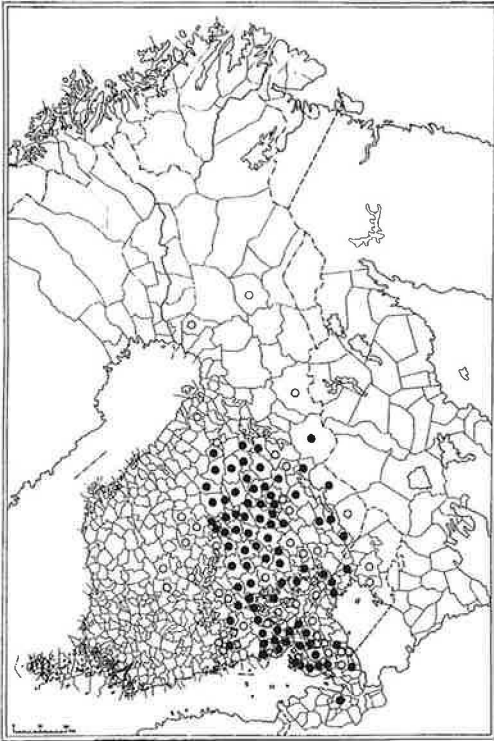


Fig. 3. The *karsikko* and cross-tree tradition of Finland. A black dot indicates two or several items of information on these practices. A circle indicates a single item of information.

“On the way from Mora to Elf-Dahl one could see by the roadside 7.5 kilometres from Mora a rare custom of the people of the region. By the road there were a few pines on which about 120 boards were nailed, e.g. in one tree were 56, in another 35, 14 in another, ten in another, eight in another. Each board was about half an ell long, 3 handbreadths wide, black with carved letters that showed white in the tree. E.g. Salg A.O.S Död 1670, d. 10 Jul. (E.g. Blessed A.O.S Died on the 10th of July, 1670). The oldest one seen was from 1670 and it has continued since then. When the people took their dead to church they commonly rested at this place, to which they had taken with them the name of the same deceased person written on such a board, this they nail in the death tree. Usually each village has its own tree.”

The oldest available definition of the *karsikko* is in Daniel Juslenius’s dictionary of the Finn-

ish language published in 1745 (Juslenius 1968: entry ‘carsicko’), and reads as follows: “carsicko, con putata arbor, quistad trä” (‘... tree shorn of branches’). Christian Ganander’s Finnish-Swedish dictionary from 1786 (Ganander 1937: entry ‘karsikko’) provides more detail:

“*karsikko kuusi, mänty* – trees shorn of branches, pine or fir, in Iisalmi, Kuopio, the Province of Viipuri etc., where they carve their marks in the tree, cut off the top and cover the top part with an iron or birch-bark, to the memory of their deceased friends, whose corpses they have taken to church. Under such a tree they drink spirits or beer and then carve the names of the deceased – they cut off the top of the tree and cover it, after a widow a branch like a hand is left as a sign that she may not remarry – after a young widow or widower two branches are left at the top as a sign that he or she may still remarry.” Ganander goes on to note that the *karsikko* is also “a fir with the top cut off, as a sign for surveyors – a fir shorn of branches as a boundary marker”.

In the 19th century, newspapers and periodicals featured descriptions of travels, mentioning the *karsikko* and cross-tree custom, obviously exotic to the inhabitants of Western Finland. The first article on the phenomenon was published in 1882 (Aspelin 1882), and was followed by several minor articles describing the custom.

In Sweden Nils Lithberg (1919:1–3 and 6) demonstrated the connections between the Central-European *Totenbretter*, the trees of the dead seen by Linné in 1734 in Dalecarlia, and the *karsikkos* and cross-trees of Finland. He regarded all these phenomena as cultural relics, but left open the question of their original distribution and origin. Uno Holmberg (1924) showed that the common origin of the various *karsikko* forms was to be found in rites of precaution, thus linking the *karsikkos* of Finland and the Baltic regions. In later years, the *karsikko* and cross-tree custom has been described in many local histories, and new information has been acquired on its details. The custom has been studied (Pentikäinen 1963

and Kemppinen 1967: 45 – 46), but a common feature of all the studies has been to describe the custom as archaic, and its development and changes have not been explained. Lauri Honko wrote of the *karsikko* custom in a Nordic encyclopaedic dictionary of medieval cultural history as follows (1963: entry *karsikko*):

“... by the end of the Middle Ages the custom had reached the north-western periphery of its area of distribution. In its East-Finnish core area, possibly in the centres of Savo-Karelian settlement near Lake Ladoga, it definitely existed much earlier. It is hard to ascertain whether the primary function is to be found in burial traditions or in rites of initiation. The only older element that the above tradition groups have in common is the technique of cutting the branches, whereas the result, a peculiar form of memorial tree, can easily be linked with different ritual functions.”

The directions of ethnology have changed over the past four or five generations of researchers, but the ultimate goal remains the same: to understand the present through the past. The present author's study on the *karsikko* and the cross-tree phenomenon was inspired by two challenges. Firstly, is it at all possible to view and understand the past from the perspective of the present, especially when the object of study is an extinct tradition that has been lost? The second challenge was to investigate how much, if at all, one aspect of culture can be used to outline a broader perspective of the culture within which the individual phenomenon existed. Does change in one area of culture indicate a broader process of culture change?

### A lost custom reconstructed

In modern monographs aiming at the reconstruction of the course of customs and the reasons for their origin, changes and ending, it is not possible to use only one, or a few, research models, or to approach problems from the perspective of one discipline alone. The subject must be studied with methodological pluralism in the culture-historical and diachronic as-

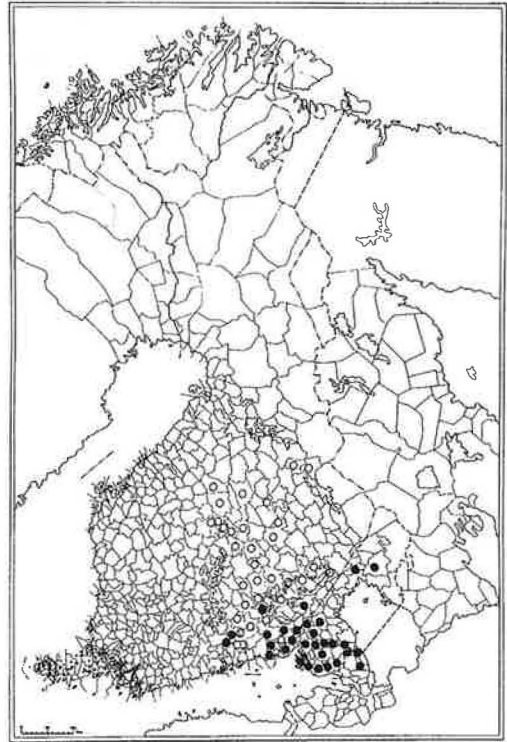


Fig. 4. Cross-trees and trees of other names with carved crosses. A black circle indicates the parishes where the tree was called a cross-tree, or was given a parallel term. A white open circle indicates the parishes where a cross was carved, but the tree was not called a cross-tree but a *karsikko* or some other term.

pects, and it should be attempted to include as many synchronic aspects as possible. The further back in time we go, the more limited the source material becomes. In a diachronic study of phenomena several centuries old it is therefore necessary to consider all pertinent information, even though it may derive from sources generally used by other disciplines.

New times introduce new models and methods, and generations of researchers will accordingly differ from each other. This does not mean, however, that all that is old should be rejected. Correctly applied, many old and time-proven methods still produce useful information.

Since the *karsikko* and cross-tree custom has died out, it can be mainly studied through material preserved in the terrain and through data from folklore archives, museums and lit-

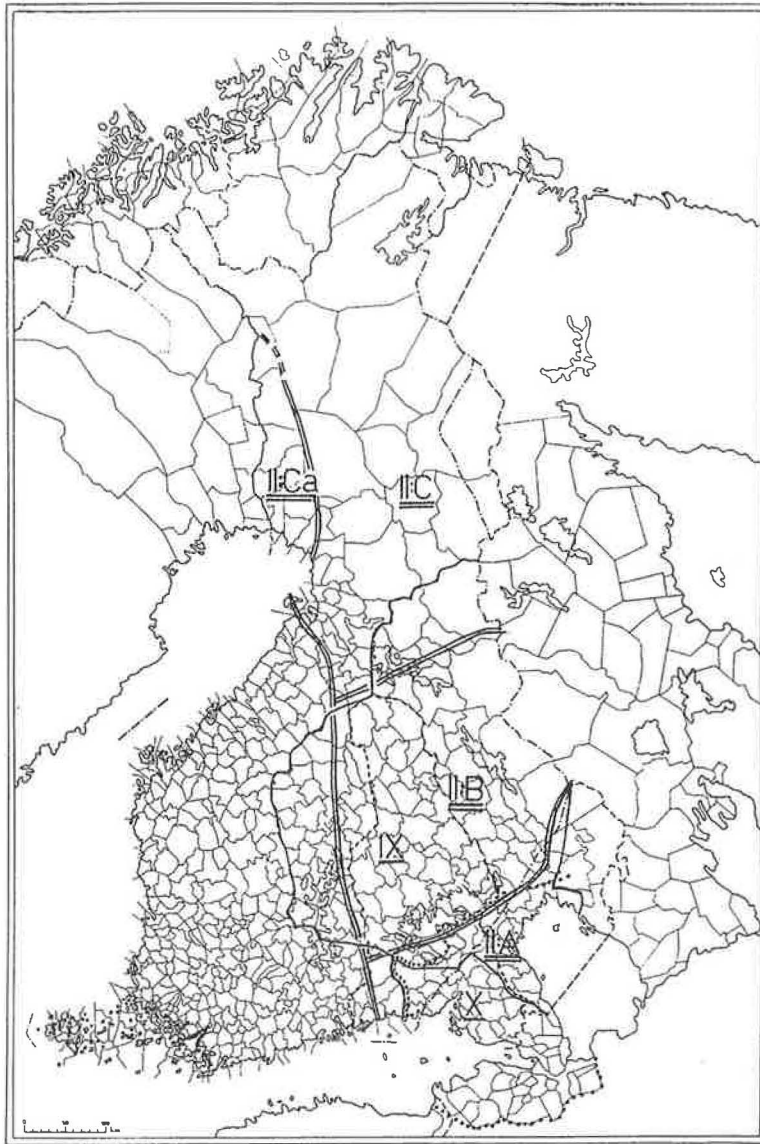


Fig. 5. Map showing areas of folk culture and Finnish dialects in Eastern Finland and the Province of Viipuri and Savonlinna in 1635. The South-East Finnish area of folk culture is marked with a double line and the numeral II:A; the area of Savo-Karelian culture is shown with a double line and the numeral II:B. The Savo dialects of Finnish are marked with an unbroken line and the numeral IX. The Viipuri dialects are marked with an unbroken line and the numeral X. The South-East Finnish dialects are marked with a dotted line, and the Province of Viipuri and Savonlinna is shown with a dashed line.

erature, which describe it as it was still known in its final stages from the 1850s to the beginning of the 20th century. It is no longer possible to ask the bearers of the tradition further questions. Even information related to the ending of the custom, among other features, was not collected when still possible.

The main problem concerning the Finnish material is that, with only few exceptions, it covers only the period from the 1850s to the ending of the custom in the early 20th century.

Consequently, the following procedure was adopted in studying the *karsikko* and cross-tree custom. Subsequent to a review of earlier studies and literature on the subject, material available from museums, archives and published sources was used to describe the custom and its specific features, maintaining a distinction between its forms and its functions. In other words, the task was to investigate what actually happened when the *karsikko* and cross-tree custom was followed, what was seen

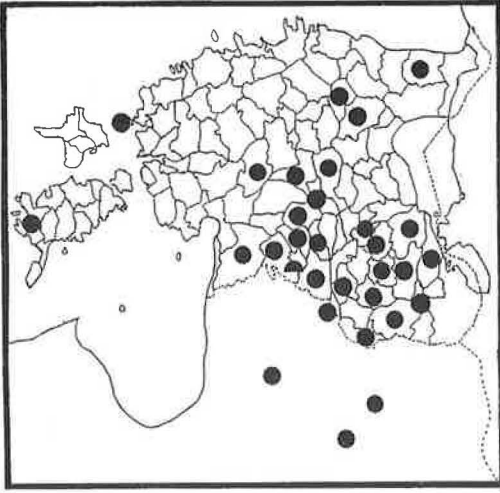


Fig. 6. Cross-trees in the Baltic regions. Cross-stone marked with half-circle.

and understood to happen, and what the community wanted to happen. The following stage was a cartographic presentation of the distribution of the custom. The social distribution is investigated through a sample of preserved *karsikko* sites: the deceased concerned were identified with material from church archives. Following from the distribution and its specific features is an overview of the history of the custom and a suggested relative chronology.

The discussion on the function as a status-related rite of passage makes reference to Arnold van Gennep's theory of the rite of passage (van Gennep 1965).<sup>1</sup> In reality, the deceased is passive, but in the rite he or she is made active through actions conducted by the community.

The forms and functions of the custom have been compared with information from other cultural areas. The Swedish custom of the tree of the dead disappeared in the 19th century, but this custom still survives in South-East Estonia (Fig. 14), where it was studied as comparative material both in archives and in the field.

## The distribution of the custom

The *karsikko* and cross-tree were common among the Lutheran population in Savo in Eastern Finland and in South-East Finland, but neither among the Lutherans of Western Finland, nor the Greek-Orthodox population of Karelia. The distribution of these customs is shown in Figs. 3 and 4. In Fig. 3 a black dot indicates two or several items of information on these practices; a circle indicates a single item, whereby it was possible to construct a map giving some indication of how common the custom was in its later stages.

According to its forms and the relevant terminology, the tradition is divided into two main areas. The *karsikko* was common in Savo and the western parts of Northern Karelia, while the cross-tree was native to South-East Finland, the Karelian Isthmus, and the Baltic region (on the Baltic region, see Fig. 6).

In the 16th and 17th centuries the Savo Finns expanded their settlements towards the west, north-west, and the north (see Fig. 1); the *karsikkos*, however, did not occur in all the areas settled by them. They were completely absent from the regions settled by the 'Forest Finns' in Sweden and Norway, who originated from Savo, and the zone settled by the Savo Finns in Ostrobothnia. In Kainuu and along the Siikajoki River they are known only from the areas bordering on Savo. The distribution of the *karsikko* and cross-tree custom corresponds to the old administrative Province of Viipuri and Savonlinna, which at the time was a natural economic zone defined by routes of communication (Fig. 5, with the Province of Viipuri and Savonlinna in 1635 marked with a dashed line). The distribution of *karsikkos* and cross-trees also corresponds to the areas of Finnish folk culture as defined by Ilmar Talve (1974). In comparing Figs. 3 and 4 with Fig. 5 showing the South-East Finnish area of folk culture (double line, symbol II:A) and the area of Savo-Karelian culture (double line, II:B), one notes how the *karsikko* area merges with the area of Savo-Karelian folk culture, while the cross-tree area merges with the area of South-East Finnish folk culture. Note also the relationship of these distributions with the



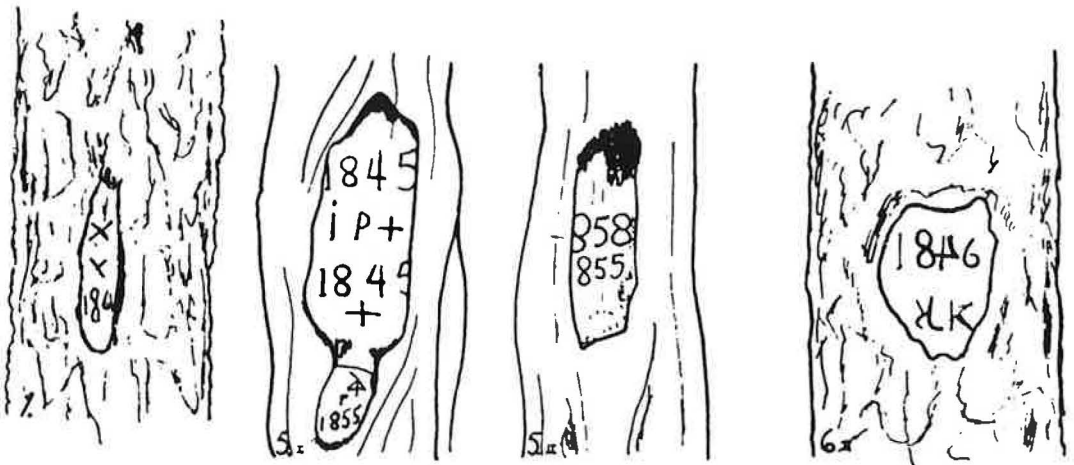


Fig. 7. Examples of markings on blaze marks in *karsikko* trees in Central Finland (Lappalainen 1963: 388).

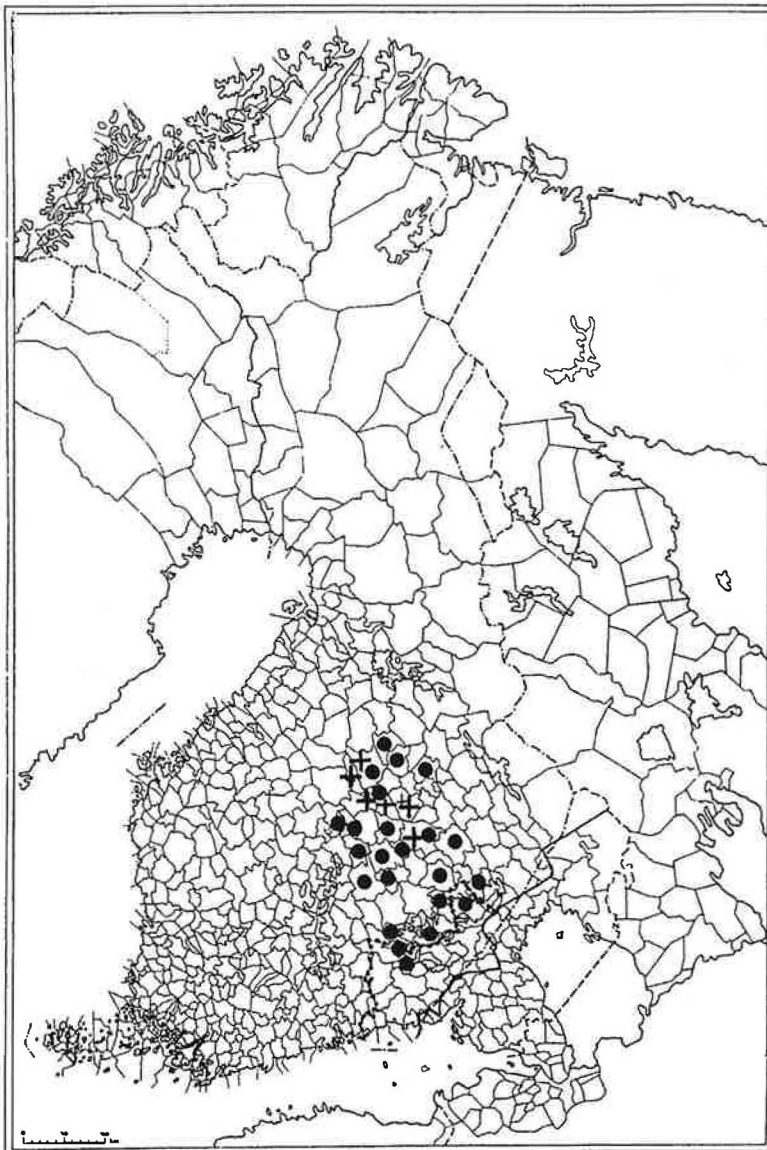


Fig. 8. Rocks and outcrops of bedrock with *karsikko* markings. The black dots indicate markings made during the funeral procession outside the yard of the farm or homestead, and crosses indicate rock *karsikkos* within the yard. The border of 1721 is marked with an unbroken line, and the border of 1743 is shown with a dotted line.

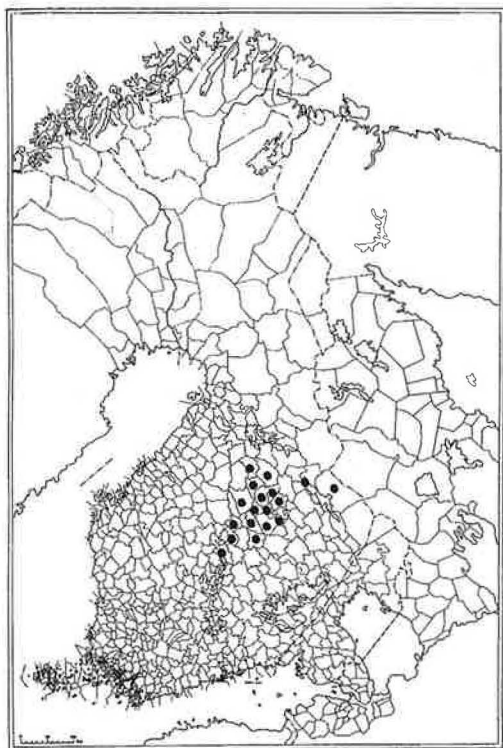


Fig. 9. *Karsikko* boards placed on buildings and hewn *karsikko* markings in walls.

Savo dialects of Finnish, marked in Fig. 5 with an unbroken line and the numeral IX, and the Viipuri dialects (unbroken line and the numeral X).

### The forms of the custom

As the term *karsikko* derives from the verb *karsia* (to debranch) and as the term is also used of memorial markings on boards, walls of buildings and rocks, their name indicates them to be secondary phenomena. The following relative typology of *karsikko* and cross-tree forms can be given on the basis of their locations and appearance:

#### *Karsikko* forms:

- debranched *karsikko* tree (no factual information)
- tree with or without branches with markings inscribed in a blaze mark (Fig. 7).

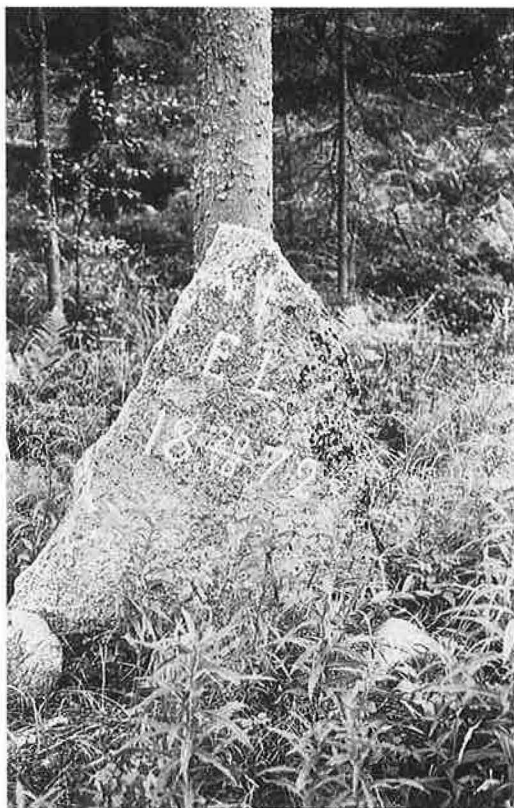


Fig. 10. An unfixed *karsikko* rock at Ohenmäki in Hankasalmi. The markings, chalked for photography, refer to the widow Eva Henrikintytär Laitinen of Kärkkäälä, who died at the age of 47 on the 13th of October 1872, and was buried on the 20th of October. Note that the date on the rock is the day when the deceased was transported past it, i.e. the day of the marking. Photograph by Janne Vilkuna 1978.

- tree with or without branches, with markings on a board affixed to it.
- marking on a rock or outcrop of bedrock outside the yard of the homestead (Fig. 8 and 9).
- board or hewn marking on the wall of a building (Fig. 9 and 10).
- marking on the foundation of a building or a rock in the yard of the homestead (Fig. 8).

#### *Cross-tree* forms

- tree with an incised cross design
- tree with an incised cross design and other markings concerning the deceased
- tree with an incised cross design and a board

with markings concerning the deceased (Fig. 12).

Absolute dates cannot be given for all the *karsikko* forms listed above, but the typological model and the age-and-area model (cf. Krohn 1926: 92–93; Wissler 1923) suggest a relative chronology whereby the custom of markings affixed to or hewn on the wall of a building and placing the *karsikko* in the yard (Fig. 9) appears to have evolved in the early 19th century. Similarly marked rocks or outcrops of bedrock did not become customary until the mid-19th century (Fig. 8).

The forms of the *karsikko* boards were partly modelled after grave markers, which in turn followed general trends of style. Rocks and outcrops of bedrock with markings concerning the deceased were possibly inspired by grave-stones and/or border markers.

## Function

The *karsikko* and the cross-tree did not differ in their original function, but only in the de-branching of the tree and their names. The *karsikko* and cross-tree custom belonged to a

rite of passage (funeral), but in addition to the rites of separation it also had the function of a precautionary measure. It removed the deceased from the community of the living, thus settling the social disorder caused by death, and protected the community from a deceased person who might come back to disturb it. It also helped the deceased to remain in the grave and to refrain from wandering.

The doctrine of the church did not refute the popular belief that the deceased would return home from the grave. In some cases, the church even encouraged this view. When the pastor read the Finnish words of the funeral service: “From earth thou hast come, and earth shalt thou become again; Jesus Christ, Our Saviour, shall wake thee on the last day” (corresponding to “Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust...”), common people could easily get the idea that an active deceased person was put in the grave and that he would rise on the Day of Judgement. The concepts of folk beliefs regarding birth and death can be presented in a highly simplified and generalized form with terminology connected with the composition of the human being, as by Asko Vilkuna (1959: 111–112):

S = spirit; V = life; C = body; P = guardian spirit;

		birth	first tooth	death
C cccccc	V vvvvvvvv cccccccc	S ssssss vvvvvv cccccc	P pppppppp ssssssss vvvvvvvv ccccccc	M
corpus (body)	vita (movement)	spiritus (respiration)	persona (guardian spirit)	morte

In birth, a human being has already received both a body and life (movement); at the moment of birth he receives his spirit (respiration). With his first tooth, he receives a guardian spirit. In death, both life and the spirit leave the body, in which or near which the guardian spirit remained. It should be noted that already during the person’s lifetime the guardian spirit could leave the body and return to it. With regard to death, the diagram is

simplified: folk belief did not form a logical order, nor did it require one.<sup>2</sup>

The *karsikko* and cross-tree custom was normative and socially sanctioned. From Säkki-järvi on the Karelian Isthmus it is told:

“Once, however, a person who did not know about the matter did not make a cross mark on a tree when taking a close relative of his to the graveyard for burial. It then happened that

Fig. 11. *Karsikko* board under the eaves of an outbuilding of the Repola farm at Runni in Iisalmi, North Savo. The markings were for Olli, Henriikka and Anna-Liisa Repo, children of the household, who died of scarlet fever and were buried on the 21st of March 1894. The letters were painted in black with a stencil. Photograph by L. Pohjakallio 1978.



the deceased hopped up and sat on the coffin lid, and the man ran home frightened. He told this to people in his village, who instructed him to mark a cross on a birch-tree. The man returned to the place and having found the tree, carved the cross. When he went to look at the coffin, he found the deceased lying peacefully inside. Without further setbacks, he then went to bury his relative.”

Through later changes in folk beliefs, the *kar-*

*sikko* and cross-tree customs also came to preserve the memory of the deceased. In some cases the custom survived, as appears to have been partly the case in 20th-century Estonia, because it had turned into an unsanctioned usage. Consequently, it was no longer motivated by a norm but only by the power of a tradition inherited from one’s forefathers.

The position and structure of the custom in the beliefs of the community is shown in the following diagram:

MODEL:

community	institution rite	sanction	function
PRAXIS: family household kin village	funeral	suprasocial	to move the deceased into the after-life; to settle disorder; to secure the well-being of the community
	the <i>karsikko</i> and cross-tree custom		to remove the deceased from the community of the living; to prevent his return to disturb the well-being of the living (and himself); to preserve the memory of the dead

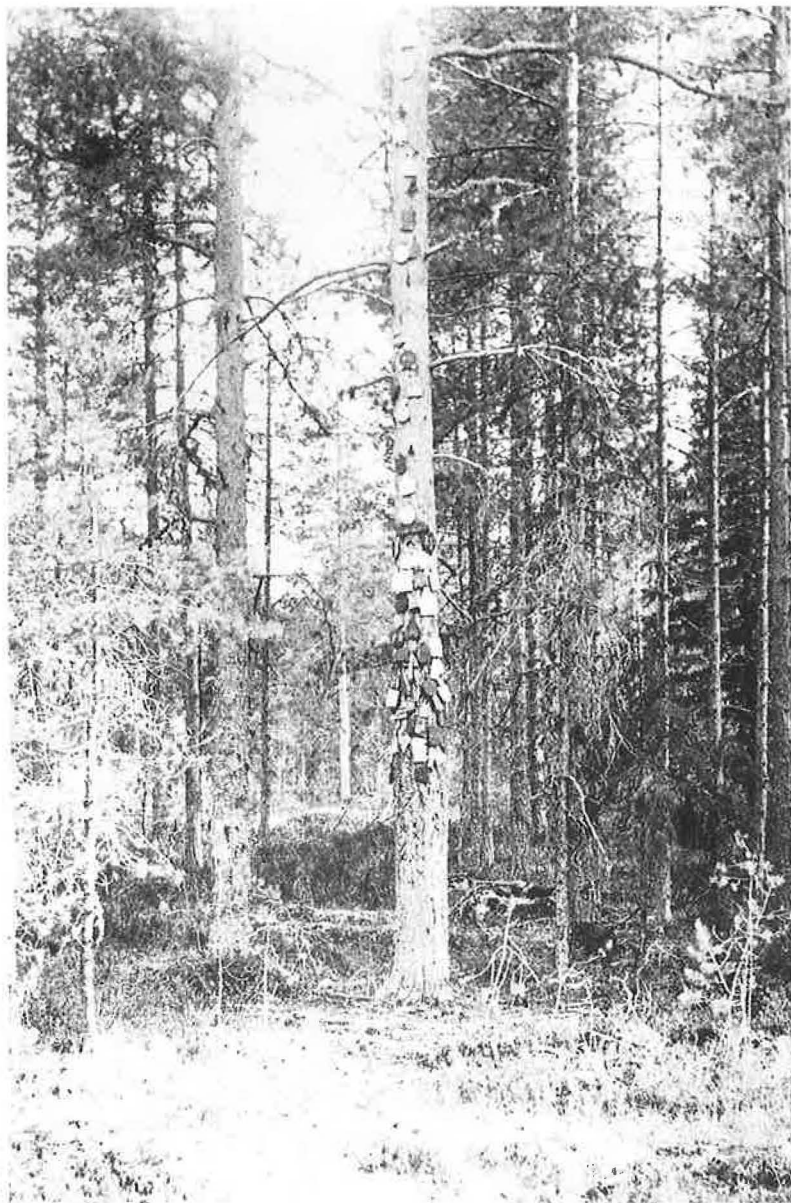


Fig. 12. A cross-tree at Uusikirrko on the Karelian Isthmus. Photograph by V. Mainov 1883. Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society.

### Social integration

The social integration of this custom in earlier times must remain the subject of conjecture. In the *karsikko* area of North Savo and Central Finland the sex, age and social status of the deceased of a sample of 100 *karsikkos* was studied. It should be pointed out, however, that the sample tells for whom the *karsikkos* were made, but does not with any certainty

reveal for whom they were not made. In the area sampled, the custom was followed for the members of all the social classes in the farmer culture, although the preserved *karsikko* sites are clearly linked with the land-owning, or freeholder, class. It was not dependent of the age (as many as 32 were for children under five) or gender of the deceased, nor on the way he or she died (cf. Fig. 11 showing a *karsikko* board for three children who died of an epi-

demic). The same is indicated by information from the cross-tree area of South-East Finland. *Karsikko* markings on rocks and bedrock were mainly for members of the freeholder class.

## Ideological background

The psychological and ideological background of the *karsikko* and cross-tree custom resides in the universal belief that the funeral meant the removal of the deceased from one status to another and that the body might return home to finish uncompleted work or because of dissatisfaction with his or her present role.

It was also a universal practice to prevent the return of the dead by preparing, through the means of magic, a boundary midway along the funeral route, or by stopping at an existing boundary. The *karsikko* tree was shorn of branches so that the deceased could recognize it when returning along the route; the marker branches had the same function. The *karsikko* and the cross-tree were thus originally the boundary of this life and the after-life. In the forested regions of Eastern Finland, similarly debranched trees were used as actual border markers and as 'worldly' boundary markers in initiation rites for brides (Heikinmäki 1981) and on the occasion of a first visit to a town (Talve 1978). In their external features, with respect to their name and the tree, these *karsikkos* are a loan from the *karsikko* for the dead. For example, the *karsikko* for the bride is a barrier, which can be broken with a drink of spirits, and the journey may continue to the bride's new home. It was not made when the bride passed this point.

The few preserved sayings related to the custom, coffin-nails hammered into the trees, pieces of clothing and other items that had been in contact with the deceased and were left at the foot of the tree all bound the deceased to the site of the tree with the means of sympathetic magic. Markings on the tree originally had the same purpose. A number of other customs also reveal the function of the *karsikko* and cross-tree custom.

An item of information from Sulkava in Savo relates:

"When we approached the Lohikoski rapids by boat, we marked the initials of the deceased, usually with his own axe, in the rock near the Kivitokee strait."... "The initials thus marked were called the *karsikko* of the deceased."

In this case it should be noted that the markings were made with the dead person's own axe, which was damaged in the process. It is also recorded:

"(Marking the cross-tree) was described there (Uusikirkko, Karelian Isthmus) and in the parish of Lappee with the phrase 'now the *saverikko* broke'"

The term *saverikko* means a binding, originally of withes and later of iron, for joining a shaft to a sledge. When a *saverikko* of withes broke, the journey was immediately interrupted, which in itself was not rare. Thus, some reason independent of human action was given for stopping. The reason for this was that the spirits of the dead could easily be misled if the right means were used. In this case, in which the deceased was being taken to the churchyard for burial and the funeral party had to stop to prepare the *karsikko* or cross-tree to prevent his or her return, this fact had to be kept secret from the deceased. Thus, the reason for stopping said aloud (!) to be some ordinary matter, such as the breaking of the sledge bindings. In this way, the deceased was kept "calm".

Some of the sayings used at the *karsikko* or cross-tree site find an explanation as partly relics of precautionary words belonging to the sphere of magic. This would explain two interesting sayings from Rautalampi, Central Finland:

"There, the deceased now holds reign over his tree, no axe can harm it", for a male, and for a female: "There she now tends her cows and sheep."

The saying related to the male has been explained by the fact that the tree was in some way sacred, and for this reason the living could not cut it down. These sayings, however, can

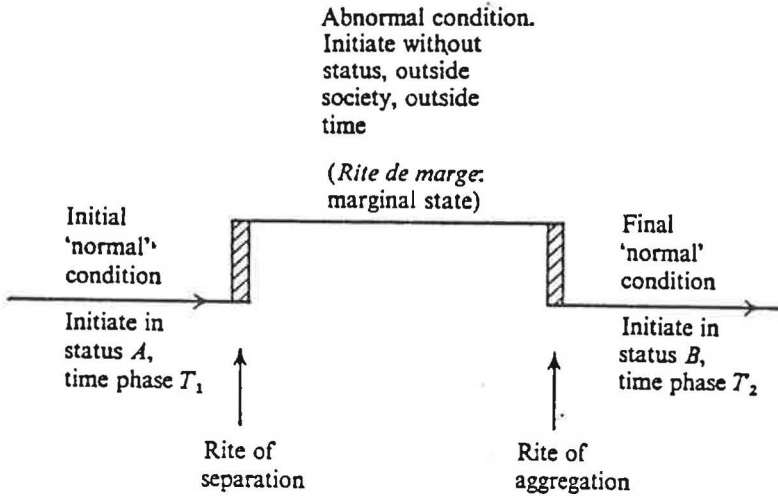
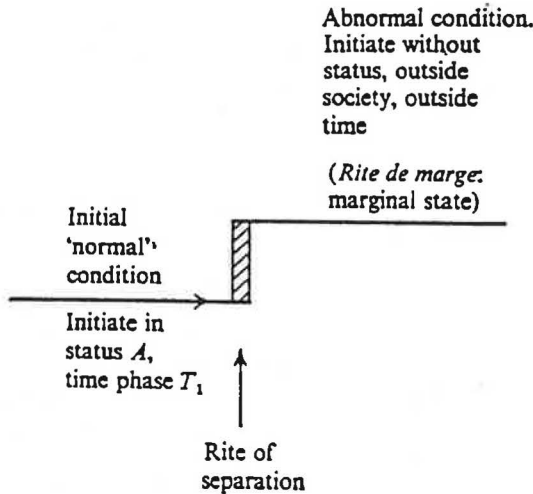


Fig. 13. The three-stage rite of passage according to Leach (1976, 78 fig. 7), and the rite of passage interrupted in the marginal state.



be understood as similar or parallel in content, because the explanation would not apply in the case of a female. The following natural explanation, based on the same idea, can be suggested. When the deceased came only as far as the tree, the dead housewife, to whom the cows and sheep at home were dear, had to stay there to look after her animals. The saying for the male depicts a man, for whom the axe was an important tool, though it could not fell the tree preventing his return. These sayings are thus a kind of spell formula.

The boundary nature of making a *karsikko*

is evident in the following information from Iisalmi, Northern Savo:

“The *karsikko* tree was cut when the deceased was taken to the grave, but it could also have been done earlier, so long as the last marking was made immediately after the deceased had passed the tree.”

In Savitaipale, Southern Savo, the following is related:

“When we came to the tree so that the body

was on the church side of it, spirits were drunk and a cross was carved.”

## Origin and changes

The original idea behind the *karsikko* and cross-tree custom was to separate the deceased from the community of the living in order to restore order. The fear of evil related to the deceased led to the need to prevent him from returning from the after-life. These are universal beliefs, and as such ancient. This is also true of Finland, but since the *karsikko* custom does not occur throughout the whole area settled by the Savo Finns, but only in the areas served by natural routes of communication and in the administrative zone that developed around it, it did not come about until after the above-mentioned spread of settlement, which had crossed the watershed areas to the north and north-west. This coincided with the Reformation, which influenced folk beliefs, thus creating the preconditions for the custom. Thus, the function, forms, and locations of the *karsikko* and the cross-tree, as known in Finnish folk culture, derive from the late 16th century or the 17th century at the earliest.

The process whereby the *karsikko* custom originated can only be assumed. A basic requirement was a system of beliefs concerning the dead, which was of prehistoric origin. The Roman-Catholic Church, and particularly the Reformation, introduced into folk beliefs the idea that the deceased did not journey all the way to the community of the dead (cf. diagrams of the rite of passage according to Leach 1976: 78, fig. 7, and interrupted rite of passage; see Fig. 13), but remained in the grave in an intermediary state to await the Last Judgement. The church now required that the dead had to be moved and buried in far-off churchyards instead of the local burial grounds, which conflicted with the norms of the beliefs concerning the dead. The community, in turn, took precautions against this breach of norms. Restoring the social order of the community required that the dead must be placed in the intermediary state dictated by the tripartite division of the rite of passage in status; it was also necessary to ensure that the dead re-

mained in this state. This made it necessary to establish a boundary between the living and the dead, and to take precautions against the undesired return of the deceased.

In the Christian context, stopping along the funeral route involved the establishing of a boundary and in many cases the making of a cross, or visiting the site of an existing cross. In Eastern Finland and in the Baltic countries a cross-tree was prepared, that is, a cross was marked on a tree. In the area of the *karsikko* custom, the tree was also debranched.

In the Baltic regions, and also in the forested regions of Middle Sweden, the cross-tree custom may have emerged after the Reformation in the same way as the above *karsikkos* and cross-trees, and for the same reasons.

We cannot suggest any ultimate reasons why the *karsikko* and cross-tree customs were restricted to Savo and South-East Finland, and were not followed in Western Finland. One possible reason is the early Christianization of Western Finland already in the 13th century by the Roman-Catholic church. In this process, old folk beliefs were skilfully merged with the new faith. In sparsely settled Eastern Finland, folk beliefs were able to preserve many of their main tenets and rites that predated Christian times. A further reason may be the existence of both unseen and visible boundaries in the economic and social sphere of the village communities of Western Finland. Moreover, in the west the dead were buried in Christian cemeteries which the Catholic church had taken over from pagan use. The requirement of burial in far-off churchyards was not implemented in the eastern regions until the late 16th and early 17th centuries, when new congregations were established. Following the new order made it necessary to establish new boundaries with *karsikkos* and cross-trees. In Western Finland, the church and its cemetery were in the middle of the village, and had always been clearly separated from their immediate surroundings.

The *karsikko* and the cross-tree were originally prepared midway along the funeral route to mark, as a concrete boundary, the change in the status of the deceased, and to prevent his or her return. Boards affixed to trees find a





Fig. 14. A page from the photograph album of the farmer Endel Kama of Partsimõisa in Põlva, Estonia, showing photographs of his mother Ida Kama (deceased 1977) in her coffin and the carving of a cross-pine for the deceased in the forest of Looduse. The cross was carved by the husband of the sister of the deceased. Photograph by Janne Vilkuna 1991.

practical explanation, but the *karsikko* markings that began to be made after the beginning of the 19th century in the yards of homesteads (see Figs. 8 & 9) in North Savo are related to a change in function. The original custom had become normative. This meant that even when folk beliefs changed (possibly because of the influence of Pietism), the establishment of new congregations altered traditional routes to church, population grew, and the redivision of land altered the economic and social structures of the community, the rite still survived, despite the fact that its old function no longer existed. Normativeness preserved the rite, giving it the new function of cherishing the memory of the deceased. The *karsikko* markings now began to be made in the yard of the homestead instead of along the funeral route, and they became more ornamental than previously.

The *karsikko* and the cross-tree appear to have been originally made for all deceased persons, but as the function and meaning of the custom changed and the markings came to be made in the yard, social diversification set in. The new types of *karsikkos*, rocks and outcrops of bedrock in yards, markings on the walls of

buildings and boards affixed under their eaves, were largely limited to the upper classes of rural society.

In Sweden and Central Europe, markings made along the funeral route derive from a similar system of folk beliefs as the *karsikko* and cross-tree custom, but their forms developed according to local conditions. One of the reasons why cross-trees survived in Estonia may have been the fact that church-related customs, including these trees, helped maintain community identity during the period of Soviet rule.

### The end of the custom

In South-East Finland, the cross-tree custom retained its traditional forms throughout its existence, and did not end until the turn of the century, when economic and intellectual change began to influence the world view of the common people. This also appears to have been the reason for the disappearance of *karsikko* boards and rocks in Northern Savo, although here the custom had had a new meaning for the previous two or three generations. The last *karsikkos* and cross-trees were made

for people to whose world view they still belonged. This is indicated by the following information from Pihtipudas in Central Finland:

“After a relatively long interval, the last known *karsikko* was made at Kärväskangas as late as 1915 for Eenokki Vesterinen, the old farmer of the Vaatila holding in Korppiskylä village. It was told that the family debated for a long time whether or not to make a *karsikko*. The daughter-in-law – although a modern person – was strongly in favour of it, saying that the old farmer himself – if he could decide – would definitely have had a *karsikko* made, as he respected old traditions in all his doings – even carrying out spells.”

Sometimes a *karsikko* rock or outcrop of bedrock in the yard could become a memorial site. This would explain, for example, *karsikko* markings on bedrock for members of the household in the yard of Haukkalahti farm in Kirkkosaari at Pielavesi in Northern Savo. Of these, one of the most interesting ones was inscribed for Juho Tikkanen, a son of the family. In addition to the dates of birth and death, the inscription reads *J.T.HUKKU (J.T. DROWNED)*. Juho Tikkanen went down with the Titanic in 1912, and was not buried in Pielavesi. In spite of this, a *karsikko* was prepared for him.

A number of examples show that at present the custom may possibly be revived with new motives emphasizing the memory of the deceased and the identity of rural dwellers. The cross-tree custom is still followed in South-East Estonia (Fig. 14).

During historically documented times the non-material folk culture of Finland underwent two specific periods of change. The first was in the early medieval period in the 13th century when Christianity was introduced. The ensuing Reformation led to a complete change of attitudes regarding the dead in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, and it was only then that Christianity began to make actual inroads among the people of Eastern Finland. The *karsikko* and cross-tree custom most probably formed around this time. The second major period of change was that of industri-

alization. This coincided with a number of changes: the growth of rural population which required new congregations, cemeteries and burial routes; the redivision of land which promoted privatization; the improvement of popular education; and the spread of permanent memorial monuments and photography. These all began to have influence after the middle of the 19th century, ultimately wiping out the *karsikko* and cross-tree custom (cf. Anderson 1973: 47).<sup>3</sup>

## Notes

This article is based on the author's doctoral dissertation, Vilkkuna 1992.

1. Although many scholars have formulated concepts that have better explanatory potential and have developed further and added to van Gennep's theory of the rite of passage, its core – the three-part division of the rite – has remained as a fresh element in theoretical and empirical studies of passages of status (Gluckman 1962; see also Turner 1974: chapter entitled *Liminality and Communitas*, and Turner 1981: chapter entitled *Betwixt and Between*).

The main addition to van Gennep's theory is the observation that rites of crises performed by the community, to which the rites of passage belong, do not involve the individual so much as the community itself. A funeral has ultimately more to do with the relatives and the rest of the community than with its formal or nominal main figure, the deceased. A funeral can be viewed as a rite of passage for both the deceased and his or her relatives. Accordingly, the various stages of the three-part division do not necessarily coincide.

2. The Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Finland did not adopt the doctrine of an intermediary state (“The body will turn to dust, but the spirit will await the day of the coming of Christ”) until the 26th of October 1948 – after a vote in the church synod. The synod ruled not to accept the doctrine: “The body will return to dust, but the spirit returns to God” (Niinivaara 1971: 127).

3. Philippe Ariès (1978) points to four chronological levels in Western attitudes towards death. The emergence of the cross-tree and the *karsikko* in Finland falls in Ariès's second period and the ending of the custom is in the fourth period.

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