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# Magic and Witchcraft in Their Everyday Context

## Childhood Memories from the Nineteenth-Century Finnish Countryside

Laura Stark

Witchcraft and magic were still being widely practised in Finland when, in the late nineteenth century, the Fennoman intelligentsia under Russian rule instigated a massive campaign to collect Finnish-language folklore. This campaign began in the 1880s under the direction of the Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society (henceforth FLS) in Helsinki, and continues to the present day, reaching its peak in the Kalevala Jubilee Year Collection Contest of 1935–36. In the decades prior to the Second World War, this campaign relied on the assistance of rural inhabitants, many of whom had little or no formal education. It resulted in the vast collections of the FLS Folklore Archives, which include tens of thousands of narratives and descriptions related to magic and over 52,000 variants of magic incantation texts. These collections shed considerable light on the diversity of magic and witchcraft practised in the Finnish countryside before the Second World War. In contrast to the microhistorical approach which has been used to analyse court documents on Finnish witchcraft trials of the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, the sheer abundance of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century source materials on magic and witchcraft has allowed Finnish folklorists to use a different approach which has been called “the archaeology of cultural thought” (Apo *et al.* 1998:25, note 1). In this orientation, folklorists have focused on ancient and enduring models at the mental level of culture, in other words, semantic structures of folklore and the processes underlying its use (*ibid.*). Finnish folklorists of the Cultural Thought School have not sought the unusual individual or exceptional event which illuminates the norm, as is often the case in microhistory or history of mentalities. Indeed, Finnish folklore materials derived from interviews with or writings by rural commoners do not facilitate the case study approach familiar from microhistorical research based on “official” documents. Folklore texts are rarely lengthy, nor do they necessarily allow the kind of dissection of detail

or following of “clues” that historical documentation can provide. What archival folklore texts do offer is the possibility to discern broad and systematic patterns of culturally-shared and recurrent thought, behaviour, and meaning.

One drawback to the hundreds of thousands of folklore texts on magic recorded in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is that they tend to omit personal experiences of magic, detailed information on how magic rites were carried out, and explanations regarding how magic was integrated into the daily lives of rural inhabitants. In this paper, I examine two early twentieth-century texts which are unique among the archives on magic and witchcraft housed in the FLS Folklore Archives by virtue of the fact that they provide coherent frameworks of meaning to the magic practices and beliefs they describe, and moreover they integrate these practices and beliefs into everyday contexts that would have been familiar to nineteenth-century Finnish magic specialists and ordinary magic users alike.

Before I discuss these texts in more detail, however, I would like to comment on what I mean by the term *magic* in the context of rural nineteenth-century Finland. Within Finnish folk discourse on magical harm, the terms *taika*, *noituus*, *konsti*, and *temppu* referred to knowledge of cause-and-effect relationships that were understood by early modern persons to fall outside the category of the “natural” or “normal”. Based on the abundant sources of the Folklore Archives, it is clear that early modern rural persons tended to have very clear ideas about what they considered “normal”, and these concepts helped them to quickly deduce a supranormal cause if something out-of-the-ordinary had occurred. The “ordinary” world was seen to operate according to commonsense means, as opposed to the “non-ordinary”, “non-natural” or supernatural world where puzzling, fantastic, or hard-to-explain things occurred. Christian miracles, angels, saints and divine intervention were part of the “non-ordinary” world, as were omens, the Devil, nature spirits, and magic. Indications that something “non-ordinary” was occurring included livestock going missing in the forest, attacks by forest predators on livestock, a cow ceasing to give milk, snakebite, sudden illness, the prolonged crying of infants, and loss of affection between lovers or newlyweds. Rather than being attributed to luck, chance, or fate, these negative occurrences which fell outside of the narrow definition of the “ordinary” course of events were immediately assumed to be caused by some kind of malevolent, intentional agency, either human or non-human. In other words, the Finnish terms I gloss here as “magic” referred to any *unnatural* mechanisms for making things happen which derived from secret knowledge. As Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966:11) pointed out, magic, like science, allows persons to define the parameters of the “normal” and “natural” within narrowly-defined limits. Thus the ideal – whether a harmonious marriage, the predict-

able behaviour of animals, or a healthy body – was taken to be the natural state of affairs, whereas anything less than a successful outcome was deemed unacceptable and meant that an immediate explanation – usually a supernatural one – was called for (Stark 2006:43–45).

At the same time, the practice and narration of magic was a reaction against a crisis of “presence” in the impoverished backwoods of nineteenth-century rural Finland, in other words, the perception of constant threats to personal agency which meant a compulsion to continually adapt to external conditions. Rural Finns experienced themselves as “open” and vulnerable to their environment, and used magic to protect themselves from its intrusion into the self. This was because in their mode of experience, the world did not remain external to the self, but was entangled with it (see also De Martino 1973; 1980). Behaviours related to magic and the supernatural were also used to protect the individual from the harmful desires of other persons – seen as a form of physical agency – and to produce a perception within the individual that he/she could defy the other people’s intentions (see also Weiner 1983:701).

Within Finnish folklore scholarship, “magic” has often been divided into the ritual activity (*taika*) on the one hand, and spoken incantations or verbal formulas (*loitsu*) on the other. Rural Finnish informants distinguished between these two, but it was not necessary for both elements to be present in order for an activity to be characterized as magic. The term *sorcery* in this paper refers to magical harm thought to be caused by a human agent. In nineteenth-century rural Finland, sorcery beliefs bore little trace of the Church’s earlier diabolistic doctrine on witchcraft, and Finnish sorcery narratives in general appear to contain fewer references to demons or pacts with the Devil than do most other magic traditions in Europe.

A Finnish specialist in magic, able to perform sorcery, healing, and divination, was generally referred to as a *tietäjä*, meaning literally “one who knows”. The *tietäjä* was assumed to have secret knowledge others did not possess, and was versed in the ritual use of long incantations in the trochaic tetrameter now known as Kalevala metre. In their enormous repertoires of ritual and folk poetry, *tietäjäs* preserved knowledge which is partly the legacy of a shamanistic past (Siikala 1992). Although the majority of *tietäjäs* appear to have been men, some were also women, particularly in the northern areas of Finland. *Tietäjäs* generally received their knowledge from older *tietäjäs*, but they were also believed to have been born with special powers, namely, an inner force known as *luonto* which was hard enough or strong enough to withstand the harmful forces against which they battled using magic rites and incantations.

## The Archival Project and Key Texts

Finnish folklorists in recent decades have become increasingly interested in how and why the folklore texts in the FLS Folklore Archives were produced. Most of the texts regarding magic and witchcraft were either collected from rural inhabitants by educated folklore collectors, or were sent to the Archives by rural inhabitants themselves. These latter lay collectors wrote down their own experiences and interviewed their neighbours and family members. They then sent this information to the Archives, often in the hope of receiving monetary prizes. They were also motivated by rhetoric in which the Archival staff promoted folklore as the cultural heritage of the Finnish people, a form of national and local history. The collective memories of uneducated Finns were depicted as almost a living national treasure, and rural inhabitants were exhorted to collect folklore as part of their civic duty (Aspelin 1885:4, 216; Krohn 1891:1; Mustonen 1894:3; Stark 2006:136–138).

Whereas the information recorded by educated folklorists tended to be constrained by what they were interested in or what they happened to already know about traditional rural culture, the materials sent to the Archives by farmers, tenant farmers, and labourers better reflect the interests and priorities of rural commoners,<sup>1</sup> and provide a broader picture of the cultural knowledge they possessed. But not all texts sent by lay collectors are equally useful to twenty-first-century researchers. Instead, they tend to fall into two categories: insider narratives and key texts. The knowledge shared within nineteenth-century rural communities was in many ways uniquely local as opposed to the more universal knowledge taught in schools today. People who knew each other's circumstances and life histories needed only to refer obliquely to knowledge of shared events when telling each other tales of magical practices and events in their locality. Moreover, when they felt that something inexplicable had a supernatural cause, they had no need to make this deduction explicit to their reader. Instead, when they wished to imply magical causation, it sufficed to refer euphemistically to a “dog” (the embodiment of mobile magical harm), or to mention persons climbing up a tree backwards or mumbling while standing on a low, flat, stone (*alapaasi*, *alakivi*). Since insider narratives were written down as if told to close acquaintances, they tend to leave semantic linkages unexplained, to merely allude to magic and the supernatural, and to contain more dialogue than commentary. Whereas insider narratives are thus often difficult for the twenty-first century researcher to comprehend, in key texts, by contrast, the narrator has made an effort to address his text to persons outside his immediate culture, for example to folklore collectors and the staff of the Folklore Archives, and to explain the underlying concepts, categories, and events of his narrative. A primary way in which key texts illuminate older cultural concepts and causal links embedded in

narrative is through narrative “framing”, in other words, the placing of commentary, explanation, or other signals of narrative distance and intent “around” the dialogue or the core events of the plot. Key texts can thus be seen as cultural “bridges” which can be used by twentyfirst century researchers to more easily access the cultural knowledge of rural nineteenth century Finland.

In the discussion that follows, I reflect on the ways in which Frans Leivo’s 38-page “*The secrets of Pekka’s wife Kaisa, a folk doctor and magic-worker*”<sup>2</sup> and Pekka Vauhkonen’s 78-page “*Recollections of magic belief in my childhood*”<sup>3</sup> function as exceptional key texts by providing narrative reconstructions of how magic and the supernatural were integrated into the everyday life in the authors’ childhood communities.<sup>4</sup> In his handwritten text submitted to the Folklore Archives in 1930, Leivo (born 1878), who was a photographer and lay folklore collector, claimed to have reported “word for word” the conversations he overheard in his youth between a female magic-worker from Western Finland, whom he named Kaisa to protect her anonymity, and the clients who came to her home seeking advice. In 1921, Vauhkonen, a construction foreman from Eastern Finland, sent to the Folklore Archives his handwritten manuscript describing the magic he remembered having been practised by his family and others in his rural community, and explained the beliefs underlying those practices. Although it is not possible to determine the extent to which the events and persons described in these texts are based on fact, at the very least, they represent a form of *realistic ethnographic fiction*. The folklorist Satu Apo (2001:18) has used the term realistic ethnographic fiction to refer to writers who want to give a realistic depiction of their topic and at some level aim to provide a holistic view of the cultural thought and practice of a given group or community, even if the actual events and expressions they describe cannot be verified as fact. According to Apo, such literary sources are more trustworthy when they fulfil two conditions: the narrative deals with the culture in which the author himself was raised, and the writer is committed to a realistic (historically plausible) mode of presentation. It is the *holistic* descriptions of cultural thought and practice in these narratives which are particularly valuable and can provide unique insights into the culturally-shared meanings and social dynamics of that culture.

In this paper I ask: what new information regarding magic in Finland is provided by these unique recollected narratives? What do these texts tell us about the relationship between magic and the context of everyday life in which it was performed?

## “The Secrets of Pekka’s Wife Kaisa, a Folk Doctor and Magic-worker”

Frans Leivo was born the son of a former soldier and peddler in rural Western Finland. At the age of five, he began to weave the decorative string sold by his father. At the age of eight he learned to read and write, and by his own account proceeded to read everything he could find (Leivo 1918). He had to wait until age fifteen to begin primary school, and then trained under a painter and a coppersmith, eventually becoming a photographer and lay folklore collector. In 1930 at the age of 51, Leivo sent his manuscript to the FLS and prefaced it with the following introduction:

I have written these so that the old customs of the people will remain to the world of science if the Finn. Lit. Society or those studying the past of the folk would like to receive for themselves some illumination. I have written it in the dialect of Nousiainen district, word for word, like it happened. Most of it I heard as a young boy while listening to conversations, and wrote it down secretly. In other words the advice and conversations are perfectly accurate. Only the names have been changed. Kaisa is the healer (*puuskari*) and magic-worker (*taikuri*) Kuppar Eeva, who has been mentioned [by me] many times before. In other words, this is the complete, practical truth.

From his preface it can be seen that Leivo received his information not in the usual manner of interviewing the magic-worker or her clients, but by secretly recording the conversations between them. Leivo later constructed his narrative by framing long sequences of dialogue within the context of a typical day in Kaisa’s life which consisted of a series of visits from clients already known to her personally. His text is therefore built almost entirely from detailed exchanges of speech between the magic-worker and her clients. In constructing his text, Leivo’s decision to situate magical knowledge within the context of everyday social interaction differs significantly from the approaches to folklore collection which prevailed in Leivo’s day. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the belief, myth, or rite in question needed to be divorced from its context so that it could be compared, categorized, and typologized in order to contribute to both reconstructions of folkloristic origins and international folklore classification. Leivo opens his description with the first visit by an elderly man:

Pekka’s [wife] Kaisa was both feared and respected in the district. She was a folk doctor or healer (*puuskari*), a *tietäjä*, magic-worker (*taikuri*), and a minor witch (*noita*). Once it happened that somebody had stolen a ruble’s worth of money from old man N.N. The old man suspected and accused a certain girl of the theft, but the girl became furious at this and promised to go to Kaisa and have the old man bewitched into a miserable state. The old man heard of her threat, and went first. Kaisa was sitting near the hearth brewing coffee when the old man stepped inside. “Good midday,” said the old man. “God grant a good midday,” answered Kaisa. “Who has given grandfather a fright?” “Well, some money has been stolen from me and I think that a certain girl took it.” “We will see,” said Kaisa. She went out and fetched a frog



Jaakko Lonkainen (born circa 1853) was a sorcerer (*tietäjä*) and blacksmith who lived in the same district of Eastern Finland as Pekka Vauhkonen. Here he plays a horn flute. Huikkola village, Kitee district. Courtesy of the Finnish National Board of Antiquities. (Photo: A. O. Väisänen.)

and walked around [the old man] three times clockwise and counterclockwise with the frog and then set the frog down on the ground and watched which way it jumped and said, “The thief comes from that direction.” Then she poured alcohol over which spells had been uttered (*taiottu*) into a chalice and looked into it and showed it to the old man and said: “Look and see who the thief is, he is a fat man, not a girl.” The old man was startled by this and said, “can you get [the money] back?” “Yes indeed”, said Kaisa.

In Leivo’s narrative Kaisa then proceeds to advise the old man to go to church before the following Sunday mass and place a needle in the church



bell ropes and say: “As many devils should come to torment you as these bells have been rung for the graves of [departed] souls.” The old man then asks Kaisa if he should pay her something. She responds that no payment is necessary, but that if he wishes to leave a gift, then he should leave it on the table. The old man puts 10 kopecks on the table and leaves. The next Sunday, the old man carries out the rite as instructed and, as Leivo explains: “When the old man [...] came home [after attending church], the money had been put behind his front door, the thief had heard of the old man’s visit to Kaisa and, fearing Kaisa’s magic powers, had brought the money back.”<sup>5</sup> Leivo then continues to the next visit:

... After “grandfather” had left, old woman Lehmälä arrived: “May God grant you a good day.” “May God grant, may God grant,” answered Kaisa, “how is grandmother today?” “Well, nothing special, but I had to come once again and ask you for advice, since I heard that people come when they need wisdom and help.”

“Old woman Lehmälä” has a number of concerns on which she seeks Kaisa’s advice: a cow does not come home from the forest,<sup>6</sup> her churn produces no butter, and another cow will not allow itself to be milked. Kaisa advises ritual remedies for the first two problems, but in response to the last, she tells her visitor that it is the result of “an evil person’s words”, to which the old woman replies that she has suspected as much. The old woman then offers her own opinion, telling Kaisa that a witch’s arrow should be sent to kill the person who has tormented her innocent cow, and asks if Kaisa can do it. Kaisa, however, responds that she does not want to send a witch’s arrow to kill the perpetrator, since it involves baptizing the arrow in God’s name. She explains that there are other ways to cure the cow if only one knows who has caused the problem. She advises taking ashes from the home of the perpetrator and placing them inside soft bread which is then fed to the cow.

When the old woman then complains that her son feels a strong lust or yearning for a girl that he does not even like or respect, Kaisa declares that many girls feed young men something in drink to attract them, usually menstrual blood in coffee but sometimes other bodily substances in food.<sup>7</sup> Kaisa continues: “I have explained these matters to you because I know that you are older than me, that is why I dared to tell you. One is not allowed to explain them to a younger person, then one loses one’s [magic] power...”

When the old woman asks how the love magic can be rendered ineffectual, Kaisa advises her to invite the girl to her home and throw coffee dregs in the girl’s face and say, “drink now devil, I will give you drink, as you have given me drink earlier.”

After the old woman leaves, Kaisa proceeds to advise six more visitors on remedies for supernatural rashes, cattle diseases, the stings of wasps and bumblebees, toothache, leg pain, chronic coughing, blisters and rashes, childhood illnesses, hypothermia, headaches, warts, and breast pain when nursing a baby. When Kaisa’s husband joins the conversation with an anecdote

dote regarding his own experience of toothache and how he was assisted by a place spirit, the conversation turns to place spirits residing in houses and outbuildings, and Kaisa discusses the difference between place spirits and spirits of the dead, until the suffering visitor reminds Kaisa that she still needs a remedy for her toothache. When a male visitor asks how he can have better success in trapping forest animals, Kaisa is unwilling to reveal any actual magic – such success is in God’s hands, she emphasizes. She advises the disappointed visitor instead to lay his traps carefully and ensure that as little as possible of his own scent remains on the traps. To assist another visitor, Kaisa goes to look at her sick cow and diagnoses that it has been tormented by a nightmare (*painajainen*).

Leivo’s narrative evokes a vivid picture of a community of individuals and their concerns over illness and non-natural events in daily life. In Leivo’s account, Kaisa seems to have a neighbourly, comfortable relationship with her visitors, and she appears to be willing to listen patiently to their many complaints and worries. At times, Kaisa refuses to engage in magic when it goes against her personal moral code. Contrary to the stereotypical image of a female magic-worker, Kaisa is married, and although we glimpse her husband only briefly in the narrative, he appears to feel at ease in occasionally joining in the conversation between Kaisa and those seeking her advice.

It is worth noting that in Leivo’s text, Kaisa and her visitors almost never explicitly refer to magic or sorcery by name. In this, his account resembles more closely an insider narrative than does Vauhkonen’s, which uses explicit terms for magic (*taikailu, temppu, konsti*), and provides brief explanations of folk concepts which according to him are “probably unknown to most enlightened persons of today”. In the discussions between Kaisa and her visitors, by contrast, the notion of magical causality is merely implied.

### “Recollections of Magic Belief in my Childhood”

If Leivo’s text illuminates the negotiation and transfer of magical knowledge from healer-sorcerer to client, Vauhkonen’s text tells us what “ordinary” persons did with the magical knowledge they possessed or received from specialists, and how they understood it. Vauhkonen’s descriptive narrative is the longest single text concerning magic practices I have found in the Folklore Archives. It contextualizes magic belief and practice in daily agrarian life and provides detailed descriptions of people’s attitudes and expectations during rite performances.

Although some information exists regarding Frans Leivo’s life, much less is known about Pekka Vauhkonen. Vauhkonen mentions in his text that he grew up on a farm owned by his family. He was probably born in the 1850s or 1860s in the village of Puhossalo, from which he wrote later in life. Al-

though it has not been possible to ascertain his precise date of birth, one Kalle Vauhkonen, the son of an itinerant labourer, was born in 1838 in the same village and was probably Pekka's father. Puhossalo was a village in the district of Kitee in North Karelia, from which have been recorded some of the most complex and archaic incantations and descriptions of magic rites (see also Siikala 2002:281–282). It is clear from his handwriting and writing style that Vauhkonen had received some education in his youth, probably even formal schooling. At the same time, his lyricism and use of alliteration in his prose reflects a familiarity with older conventions for composing traditional Kalevala-metre poetry. By his own account, Vauhkonen never practised magic as an adult, although he had an uncle who was a famous magic specialist, and he himself witnessed and participated in numerous magic rites carried out in his childhood home. Vauhkonen opens his recollections by writing:

Both my parents believed strongly in magic, and trusted to wizardry and incantations. And my uncle was the best and most famous sorcerer (*poppa*) or wizard (*velho*) of his day and locality, even in the whole wide region. Just like the best doctors of today, he was driven around many districts healing the sick and diagnosing magical harm and illnesses originating from other sorts of causes (p. 1).

In April of 1922, the secretary of the FLS, E. A. Tunkelo, wrote Vauhkonen to ask for more information regarding whence Vauhkonen had learned his magic incantations. In response to Tunkelo's request, Vauhkonen sent to the FLS poems in traditional Kalevala metre which he himself had composed. In these poems, Vauhkonen described how he acquired his folkloric knowledge as a child from his family "in a backwoods cottage", and emphasized the rural poverty of his childhood by describing himself "as a wretched child with a sooty shirt" (see Stark 2006:128).

Like Leivo's text, Vauhkonen's manuscript is not divided into chapters or sections but rather represents one continuous narrative flow. However, the narrative can be thematically divided into twenty different sections, plus an opening introduction and a closing statement. These are: (1) Introduction/My uncle Pekka the sorcerer, (2) The *hittara* or *hikinenä*, (3) Divination, (4) Curing the *hittara*'s infection, (5) A failed rite for removing toothache, (6) Supernatural infection from things related to death and water, (7) Great wizards and their paraphernalia, (8) A wizard (*velho*) rescues a small boy lost in the forest, (9) The forest "covers" an ox,<sup>8</sup> (10) "Closing" the forest, (11) "Breaking" someone's health and causing supernatural infection from the earth, (12) Curing abscesses, (13) Supernatural infection from the earth (*maahiainen*), (14) A rite to cure goitre, (15) A salt cure for warts as a joke, (16) Breaking someone's luck or health (*rikkeet*) and sending back the "dog", (17) Failed love magic, (18) Supernatural infection from sauna steam, (19) Rites for when cows are let out for the first time in spring, (20) Cattle diseases, (21) The beggar feared for his sorcery,

and (22) Closing words. In this paper, I focus on sections 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 16, and 22.<sup>9</sup>

Vauhkonen's manuscript not only describes but also traces out the logical connections between magical specialists, supranormal illness, divination, curing, sorcery and revenge, mysterious disappearances in and near the forest, magic related to courtship and marriage, and magic employed to protect cattle. Although Vauhkonen used his own dialectal terms for many of the supernatural beings and illnesses he discussed, his account closely follows other recorded descriptions of Finnish magic and the supernatural recorded in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (see Stark 2006).

An important thematic thread which runs through Vauhkonen's account is supernatural infection from the environment, for which Vauhkonen uses different terms. One of these is *hittara*, which was, according to Vauhkonen, supernatural infection conceived of as an agent capable of intent:

*A hittara* was generally a sort of invisible and inconceivable being, which was aggressive and ready to attack people, especially when [the victims] were frightened by something. The water spirit (*wesihiisi*) and *kalma* [= supernatural force linked to death] were great evil-doers in the empire of the *Hittara* (pp. 4–5).

Another term, commonly used in other descriptions of supernatural infection, was *kalma* (in Vauhkonen's text: *kalama*), which referred to supernatural infection from places and objects associated with death such as graveyards or cemetery soil (Jauhiainen 1998:126–128; see Stark 2002:46, 48–49). In addition to the forest and cemetery, supernatural infection could also result from contact with bodies of water, the earth, wind, and fire (Stark 2006:254–285). Infection was seen to be particularly likely to occur when the human victim of the infection had violated a norm so that the water, earth, fire or cemetery became angry, or if the human victim took fright when near the source of infection, which was thought to open the boundary between the self and the external world so that outside forces could penetrate the human body.<sup>10</sup> Vauhkonen provides an example from his childhood of a toothache believed to have been the result of infection by a water-dwelling *hittara*:

Now comes to mind something laughable, the following case from my childhood. I had a terrible toothache which had continued for a long time. My parents tried to figure out, ponder and guess whence the *hittara* had infected me, had begun to gnaw at my teeth. Finally they decided that it had infected when I had gone swimming in a bay and nearly drowned about a kilometre and a half from our home. Into that bay emptied a small brook known for its evil, as a dwelling place for the *hittara*. Now there was nothing to do but go quickly to appease the *hittara*, to take it a bundle of twigs as a gift.

On Sunday morning, before tasting a crumb of food – that is when the magic (*tai-ka*) worked the best – my father hauled me onto his shoulders and left to carry his son to the bay. There I was supposed to hurl the magic bundle into the bay, once my father had first made a circle with it three times around my head. My attempt at

throwing it did not really succeed perfectly, since I was still not used to carrying out magic acts.

My father scolded me severely for having failed, and probably called me a blockhead, and believed that our magic (*taika*) was all for nothing, and would have utterly no effect. And in fact it brought no relief to my suffering at all. It hurt so badly that still now in my memory I can feel a terrible thudding in all of my teeth, even in those which didn't grow naturally but for which money was paid to have them artificially fitted.

Since my father was convinced that I was incapable of carrying out the magic (*konsti*) properly and that the magic had for this reason remained ineffective, we revisited that spot another time or two to renew the magic (*temppu*), but the *hittara* did not disappear even after that. The pain only continued.

So we had to come up with some new magic (*konsti*). Now my father carved three sticks from a piece of wood. I was supposed to use them to dig at the roots of my aching teeth so that they would be bloody. Then we took those sticks to the forest and used a hammer to drive them into the wood of a growing rowan tree. The *hittara* was thus finally nailed to the tree to “squeeze the tree, to pinch the rowan” (pp. 10–13).

This narrative and others like it in Vauhkonen's text suggest that incantations and magic rites most often intersected the lives of ordinary rural inhabitants in situations of illness or suffering. However, the failure of a magic rite to produce results was rarely grounds for losing faith in magical cures – not least because rural Finns had little choice but to rely on informal healing methods, since medical doctors were extremely few in relation to the rural population.<sup>11</sup> Another important reason for the persistence of faith in magic was that many explanations for illness involved *relationships* with supernatural agents rather than mechanical rites. If the rite failed, then the reason could be that the supernatural agent responsible had not been correctly identified or it had not been properly placated.<sup>12</sup> In some cases, it was believed that a sorcerer needed to be powerful enough to dominate and subdue supernatural agents of infection such as *hittara* and *kalma*, and Vauhkonen explained that one needed to force *obedience* from the illness-agent before healing could take place. The “wizards” referred to in his description below were famous *tietäjäs*, while the ineffective “little tricks” were procedures carried out by minor household healers:

... When often those little tricks were of no avail, then people complained, bewailed, and marvelled over what a strange tooth disease this was, since it obeyed no one and nothing. Such a disease might no longer be an ordinary one, brought about by a small *hittara*, rather, a strong *kalama* itself had attacked. That blackguard was not about to obey anything. There had to be an especially famous and skilful wizard in order for it to obey, and those kinds of wizards were quite rare. But uncle Pekka and a certain woman named Margetta, and Eerikäinen of Haso farm, they were the sort from whom *kalama*, even the Devil himself, fled (pp. 14–15).

According to Vauhkonen, magic specialists were believed to derive part of their power from the magic pouches they carried with them, which typically contained:

...small bones, three snake heads obtained in spring before St George's Day [April 23], a snake's assembly stone,<sup>13</sup> snakeskin, teeth and claws from a bear, bear grease, asafoetida herb (*pirun pihka*), arsenic, incense, and Ukko's soil, etc. etc. Ukko's soil is the sort of earth taken with an important person's knife from under one's left heel when thunder (*ukkonen*) rumbles for the first time in spring (p. 25).

Those who possessed magic pouches were "terribly dangerous" and could command fear and respect from others. As Vauhkonen explains, "[i]t wasn't good for anyone to make him or her angry, rather, he or she was someone to be flattered and fawned over" (p. 26, see also Stark 2006:174–175).

### "Sending Back the Dog" to Magical Malefactors

Although "infection" from earth, forest, lakes, wells, fire or cemeteries was a common mode of explanation for illness,<sup>14</sup> not all supernatural illness was blamed on natural surroundings. Human agents were also seen to be capable of causing magical harm through sorcery. Vauhkonen, like many other persons who supplied information to the FLS Folklore Archives, referred to this magical harm caused by human agency as "breaking" (*rikkominen*), and described it as "one of the most terrible things that a malicious person could do to other persons using invisible power." Such "breaking", according to Vauhkonen, could be used to make another person become epileptic, go insane, or to cause him illness or suffering for the rest of his life.

In nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Finland, when persons feared that they were victims of "breaking", they usually turned to a *tietäjä* for help in identifying the source of harm and retaliating against it. At this point, the identity of the malefactor was not always known. This was often precisely the reason why counter-sorcery was undertaken, since it was seen to be effective in identifying unknown culprits. It was widely believed that according to the natural laws of magic, counter-sorcery would automatically target the guilty and bypass the innocent, relieving the victim of the problem of actually having to identify his enemy (Stark 2006:180–186).

When a *tietäjä* performed counter-sorcery to punish the perpetrator of magical harm, it was thus believed that the magical harm itself (widely referred to as a "dog") would find its own way back to its sender or "master", regardless of whether this sender had been identified by the *tietäjä*. The "dog" was thought to attack its master or mistress even more furiously than it had attacked its original victim, causing sudden pain, illness, or even death, according to the *tietäjä*'s instructions. At this point, the malefactor could be identified once word circulated through the village that someone had suddenly suffered an inexplicable attack of pain or illness. There exist at least fourteen narratives collected in Finland between 1897 and 1961 which describe the "dog" being sent back to its sender. These narratives describe the relationship between the victims and perpetrators of the magical



Magical objects used by Finnish sorcerers (*tietäjäs*) included (clockwise from top left corner): a dried, coiled snake (Karvia district), a dried frog (Noormarkku district), a bear's claw (Pomarkku district), a piece of bear's throat (Isojoki district), a tree branch grown naturally in the shape of a loop (Pomarkku district), hide from a bear's paw (Pomarkku district) and a birch ring (Sotkamo district). Courtesy of the Finnish National Board of Antiquities. (Photo: E. Nikkilä, 1932.)

harm, the perpetrator's motivation in inflicting magical harm, the concrete means (magical food or objects) by which the perpetrator sought to cause the harm, the victim's realization that the harm (for example illness or snakebite) arose from malevolent human agency, the question posed by the *tietäjä* as to whether the "dog" should be sent back to the perpetrator and if so, how severe should be its "bite", the victim's response to this question, and whether "sending back the dog" was effective in causing suffering and/or remorse in the perpetrator (see Stark 2006).

What is not provided in these accounts, however, are detailed descriptions of the *actual magic practices* carried out by both the original perpetrator and the *tietäjä* who sent back the magical harm. While information on the former is understandably scarce, since very few persons wished to admit to having performed harmful witchcraft, Vauhkonen provides a comprehensive description of how a magic specialist assisted his family by performing a magic rite to "send back the dog". To my knowledge, this is the only detailed account of such a rite in the Folklore Archives. Vauhkonen's account is given here in full:

...That brings to my mind a bigger, mind-blowing magic rite (*taikailu*), which was also carried out in the sauna at my home, when I was a child.

Once, the majority of the members of our household were feeling rather poorly. At that time, you see, nothing seemed to be going quite right in our life. Somebody had “broken” the entire household. It was therefore necessary to fetch a sorcerer from somewhere who would correct the problem, release us from this “breaking”, send the dog to its home, as was said concerning release from “breaking”.

That sort of sorcerer could be found some twenty or thirty kilometres from our farm, and so he was fetched. For smaller difficulties, “releasers” could be found from closer at hand, from one’s own village, in fact, but none of them could release a person from more serious “breaking”. For that, he had to be an entirely “toothy-outhed man”,<sup>15</sup> a man who knew all the magic tricks, who could put the Devil himself in pincers, who could drive a knife into his heart.

And so! That sorcerer fetched from afar was, or at least pretended to be, the sort who was fully capable with his magic of making the Devil tremble in his trousers, of making the Evil One flee.

And so the sauna was heated and the entire group of us, from the father of the family to the smallest child, went to the sauna with the sorcerer. There the demon-frightener first bathed us, slapping each of us separately with a sauna whisk made of birch leaves, and at the same time reciting an incantation so that he foamed at the mouth.<sup>16</sup> Then he put each of us three times through a hoop fashioned from the blades of three scythes, first by lowering the hoop over each of us from head to foot two times, and then one time from bottom to top. While doing this trick, the sorcerer was in an extremely agitated state the entire time, but that was still nothing compared to what happened next. Now, you see, the sorcerer encircled each of our heads with a hunting knife, two times clockwise and one time counter-clockwise, and then in a fit of frenzied rage, hurled the knife into the sauna whisk lying on the floor, and then, holding the knife, flung the whisk out of the sauna window and against the cooking hut so that the wall of the cooking hut reverberated. Apparently in this way he flung out our tormentor, supposedly pierced to the core by the knife, thus sending the dog to its own home to bite and gnaw the person who had “broken” us.

That sorcery seemed to have been very effective. A certain person living not far from us was heard to have become so violently ill in the same moment that he<sup>17</sup> nearly died.

You see, a “dog” sent home in the proper manner was exceedingly severe, it could kill the “breaker” where he stood, depending entirely on what the person who sent it home wanted it to do. The sorcerer, in fact, usually asked the person he cured, from whom he sent the dog home to set it upon the “breaker”, how severe should be the bite of the dog sent home, should it kill right away, or merely torment?

Usually people were sufficiently merciful towards the “breaker”, so that his life was spared, but otherwise to be dealt with as harshly as possible, since he had worked his magic in the first place without reason, in order to harm another. Therefore that worthless lout should receive his just reward, and so be less willing to start bewitching a second time.

The release of our household from the “breaking” occurred in the winter. In the spring, we boys found the sauna whisk which had been thrown from the sauna to the cooking hut, about a half kilometre from our farm, near the road that led to the cottagers who lived on our land. Apparently our sorcerer had taken it there, had given the “dog” a ride that distance from our home. When we took the whisk apart, we found inside of it a forked piece of alder wood about six inches long, and a bundle of alder twigs wrapped in the red string usually used for working magic.



That forked piece of alder wood in the whisk was naturally meant to be the person whom the “dog” was sent back to bite. It was at that piece of alder that the sorcerer had aimed the thrust of his knife at the same time that he had chanted the incantation and glared and distorted his face in such a horrible manner.

I still remember the words of the incantation:

“Go, dog, to your home / to your master by supper / to your mistress by breakfast / to the rest of your family by mealtime / to bite, to gnaw / to cause extreme pain / Go far from the blameless / skirt ’round the innocent / go past the decent people (pp. 52–59).”<sup>18</sup>

The credibility of this narrative, which provides an unusually detailed account of counter-sorcery carried out by a *tietäjä*, is supported by the fact that the *tietäjä*’s aggressive demeanour and dramatic ritual actions adhere closely to numerous other portrayals of *tietäjäs* going all the way back to the eighteenth century (Siikala 2002:242–244). The purpose and meaning of the rite described in this narrative could be analysed using explanatory models related to social conflict, psychological strain, and phenomenological crisis, among others.<sup>19</sup> The question of how Vauhkonen himself understood the events depicted in this story, however, is not easy to answer. Vauhkonen’s text as a whole is carefully – and I would say deliberately – crafted so as to prevent the reader from drawing any firm conclusions regarding the author’s interpretation of his own recollections, and it is to this aspect of his text that I turn next.

### Ambivalence, Humour, and Open-ended Interpretation

The instructions given by the staff at the FLS Folklore Archives to lay folklore collectors in the late nineteenth century make it clear that the Archives never intended for lay collectors in the countryside to send stories related to magic that they or others considered to be “true”. Instead, the Archives were explicit in seeking to collect traditional, fictive “tales” with crystallized belief legend motifs (Virtanen 1982:183). The *Taikanuotta* (Magic Net) collector’s guide, reprinted three times between 1885 and 1936, suggested that lay collectors of magic should tell the elderly persons they interviewed that it was no longer necessary to keep their magic knowledge a secret because no one in modern times believed in it:

... But pointing out to magic informants that they don’t need the magic anymore and that people today, or so they say, neither believe nor adhere to it, but rather let it be recorded as a memory left over from the old days, may be a good introduction, a way to get started among strangers and those who are shy (Mustonen 1894:3–4).

In defiance of the Archives’ stance on the truth value of magic-related narratives, however, many rural inhabitants who sent folklore to the Archives wrote of their own personal encounters with the supernatural as “absolutely true”, and sought to convince the archival staff that the events described in their stories had, in fact, actually happened (Stark 2006:107–108). Vauhko-

nen's approach, by contrast, was to steer between these two extremes and resist a final designation of his narrative as either fact or fiction. He did this by presenting open-ended mysteries, characters with ambivalent attitudes, and ridiculous or tragicomic situations. This is true not only of the many sub-narratives within Vauhkonen's recollected narrative, but also of Vauhkonen's expressed attitude towards his narrative as a whole. On the one hand, Vauhkonen claimed to be a disbeliever who laughed at magic. At one point, when describing a magic rite for curing warts that he recommended as a joke to his friend, he writes: "I had never tried that magic myself, I had only heard it talked about, and of course I didn't believe it any more than I believe in the usefulness of any other sort of magic, I just advised my friend to try it in jest, purely as a joke" (p. 50). Yet he also qualified his scepticism at several points. For example, after depicting a situation in which a sorcerer's magic led to the finding of a small boy lost in the forest, Vauhkonen wrote: "As to the curiousness of that event, even the person who does not believe in magic, nor is blinded too much by any other delusions, must admit that there was something remarkably mysterious, incomprehensible even to the great wisdom of the modern age, in that occurrence" (p. 32).

Vauhkonen did not only express his own ambivalence towards the efficacy of magic, but also described his sorcerer-uncle as both *believing and disbelieving* in the magic that he himself performed. In describing the *lempi*-raising magic<sup>20</sup> performed in the sauna by Vauhkonen's uncle to make unmarried girls more attractive in the eyes of potential suitors, Vauhkonen explained:

...there were more than a few girls for whom Uncle Pekka raised their *lempi*, chanted marriage-luck over them and bathed them. Many daughters in neighbouring parishes who were approaching twenty years of age and had not yet been married used Uncle Pekka's *lempi* magic and felt the slap of the bathing whisk. Many bundles of pasties and fatty pork pies, and many sorts of other good things came to Uncle as payment for finding a husband, chanting *lempi* incantations and *lempi*-bathing. It suited Uncle to eat and laugh under his breath at people's craziness even though he himself – at least to some extent – believed in the efficacy of his magic, the powers of his incantations, as sensible a man as Pekka was otherwise. He was, you see, still a child of his time. How much Uncle Pekka believed in wizardry, I will demonstrate by mentioning the following account... (pp. 1–2).

On the one hand, Vauhkonen expressed an interest in folk beliefs and sought to demonstrate to his readers that there was a causal connection between magic rites and their tangible consequences, even if this connection was inexplicable from a modern perspective. For example, the Vauhkonen family's ox had been lost in the forest for three days before a neighbouring farm master was fetched to "bind" the forest (typically done by tying two saplings together), which was believed to force the forest to release the ox. Vauhkonen describes what happened next:

You see, I remember that event precisely as it happened. The person who bound the forest barely had time to return to the farmyard after working his magic – and he was not away on that trip for more than twenty minutes – when my mother, who had left the farmyard later than the “binder” to search for her ox, came back in tears and announced that, her eyes having been opened, she had found the ox [dead] (pp. 38–39).

Vauhkonen also describes how the large group of people who had been searching for the ox for several days reacted to this event: “When the ox was found, the whole group of us stood around hesitantly, talked about and wondered at it, and there was a lot to wonder about, for as ridiculous and absurd as it seems, in that episode there was an oddly mysterious coincidence between the closing of the forest and the finding of the ox” (p. 38). Vauhkonen relates a similar attitude of open-minded wonder in his account of how his parents worked magic to cure him of painful boils which had suddenly appeared on his stomach as a child:

In such a way I was cured of my boils. And each person can either believe, or disbelieve, in the efficacy of that magic. But nevertheless I must, in the name of all truth and without mocking the faith of my parents, say that my pain ceased and the abscesses slowly diminished with no discharge at all. And perhaps it is no miracle after all if our magic worked. For there we were, the whole trinity of father, mother, and son believing in the efficacy of our magic and as we know it is precisely faith which moves mountains, let alone makes those sorts of little boils to recede (pp. 44–45).

By contrast, in some places Vauhkonen also dismissed and ridiculed magic rites, and argued that modern rationality and enlightenment represented positive progress. In his “Closing Words”, he explained:

This way of life, in which darkness and the powers of evil were feared, was still lived at the end of the nineteenth century and is still lived today in many places in the Finnish backwoods. Of course, modern education (*sivistys*) has to a great extent shoved aside the useless tricks of the era of magic (*taikailu*), but many ploughmen of the light of enlightenment and sowers of the seeds of enlightenment (*valistus*) are still needed, before our people are everywhere weaned away from belief in magic, from fear of the magical harm (*rikkomisest*) of others and all sorts of other magic-doings (*taikailu*) (p. 78).

Unlike Leivo, who merely reported a series of everyday conversations about magic without inserting himself into the narrative or taking a stance regarding its truth value, Vauhkonen’s narrative can be seen as steering a careful path through the ideological struggle fought between the FLS staff and rural respondents regarding the truth status of magic narratives. One of the key devices used by Vauhkonen to express his ambivalence towards belief in magic and to resist his narratives being typecast as either truth or fiction was *humour*. Vauhkonen’s manuscript contains one narrative clearly composed for comic effect (17) as well as two personal experience narratives in which Vauhkonen tells how the events struck him as humorous (15, 19). Vauhkonen suggests, for instance, that he heard many stories of *lempi*-raising rites designed to interest suitors in a girl, and recounts one of these in his manu-

script. In this story, the male protagonist is not intimidated by the love magic directed against him, and moreover, the elderly female performer of the ritual is made the ridiculous butt of humour through her speech impediment and the undignified antics of the ritual itself (pp. 60–63; Stark 1998:273–274). In another anecdote, Vauhkonen describes his reactions on one occasion on which a farm mistress performed a rite to protect her cattle in which she stood over the cowshed doorway with legs spread so that the cows could walk underneath her one by one.<sup>21</sup> When a particularly tall cow almost knocked the mistress off her perch, Vauhkonen reported:

That event made us onlookers grin, even snigger. We did not, you see, approve of this sort of triumphal arch, and for that reason we were so ready to laugh at the tricks played by the cow. You see, it was not any kind of fun to watch a puny little old woman spread her legs and strain to stretch them over the wide doorway, and what's more, those acts of magic already seemed to us young folk, people of the modern age, to be wasted effort, disgraceful nonsense (pp. 69–70).

The humorous depictions of persons and situations in Vauhkonen's narratives may be explained in part by the fact that by the time he reached adulthood, he had internalized a more modern perspective which equated folk belief with ignorance. Another reason for Vauhkonen's humour, however, may have to do with the political nature of magic: one reason why magic was both narrated and listened to was that it conferred social power on the listener through possession of secret knowledge (Luhmann 1989; Stark-Arola 1998:39–43; Stark 2006:206–208). As such, magic was deeply interwoven with everyday forms of power and their contestation, including gendered power relations. I have elsewhere analysed how humorous magic stories were narrated by men to render ridiculous those magic rites that women used for self-empowerment (Stark-Arola 1998:271). Humorous anecdotes told by men about women's magic functioned as a way to dismiss it to the realm of the foolish and inconsequential, as well as condemn women's magic which contravened social values but was secret and therefore difficult to criticize directly.

## Conclusion

Leivo's and Vauhkonen's narratives represent different kinds of key texts, each providing a distinctive perspective on how magic rites and beliefs were contextualized and understood within rural communities and families. In the early history of folklore collection, folkloric knowledge surrounding magic tended to be treated as discrete episodes, objects, or units suitable for comparison by detaching them from experiential reality and the flow of everyday social interaction. Leivo and Vauhkonen, by contrast, offered broader reconstructions of the flow of social practices within which magic rites and beliefs were situated. Both writers attempted to weave narratives which

would introduce the widest possible variety of different types of magic and the crises which motivated them. In Leivo's text, the discursive flow of social interaction is reconstructed from a single healer's point of view, whereas Vauhkonen's text combines personal embodied experience and reflections on magical knowledge to *reconstruct webs of cognitive association* intended to approximate the ways in which late nineteenth-century rural Eastern Finnish inhabitants understood the world of magic themes, rites, and beliefs to be organized into a meaningful whole.

When seen from the vantage point of Leivo's narrative, the tens of thousands of memorates and folk beliefs on magic and witchcraft in the FLS Folklore Archives become more clearly visible for what they are: mere fragments detached from the *everyday flow of conversation* regarding the supernatural. When seen from the vantage point of Vauhkonen's narrative, these same archived texts appear as isolated pieces of a broader, logically connected and culturally shared *mental web of magical knowledge*. Both narratives draw our attention to the fact that magic was seamlessly interwoven with mundane practice and conversation. From their perspective, magic in nineteenth-century rural Finland looks less like the awe-inspiring secrets of a privileged few and more like daily narrated cultural knowledge subjected to collective deliberation, negotiation, and experimentation.

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<sup>1</sup> The terms *commoner* and *common folk* are used in this study to refer to those individuals who had to perform physical labour for a living, either in agriculture or skilled craftsmanship.

<sup>2</sup> In Finnish: *Kansanomainen lääkäri ja taikuri, eli Pekan Kaisan salaisuudet*.

<sup>3</sup> In Finnish: *Muistelmia lapsuusaikani taikauskosta*.

<sup>4</sup> All quotations from these texts have been translated from Finnish by me. The archival reference for Leivo's text is SKS KRA Nousiainen. 1930. Frans Leivo 25, and for Vauhkonen's text is SKS KRA Kitee. 1921. Pekka Vauhkonen VK 107:1. I refer to both texts henceforth using the authors' last names. Leivo's text is not paginated and for this reason I do not refer to pages in the manuscript when quoting from it.

<sup>5</sup> For more on the use of rumours of counter-sorcery to intimidate thieves, see Thomas 1973: 260; Stark 2006:190–193.

<sup>6</sup> It was typical in the nineteenth century for cows to be allowed to graze in or at the edges of the forest during the day, after which they came home in the evenings to be milked.

<sup>7</sup> For more on this type of love magic, see Stark-Arola 1998:211–223

<sup>8</sup> It was believed that the forest could intentionally trap a person, cow or horse within it so that the lost person could not find their way back to the "world of people" and searchers could not see the lost person or animal even if they walked right past it. A *tietäjä* could release the trapped person or animal by "binding" or "closing" the forest (see Stark 2006:357–380).

<sup>9</sup> For discussion regarding other sections of Vauhkonen's text, see Stark-Arola 1998:207; Stark 2006:113–114, 174–175, 372–373.

<sup>10</sup> For more on this, see Stark 2006:269–275.

<sup>11</sup> As late as 1916, there was still only one doctor per 13,500 inhabitants in the Finnish countryside (Konttinen 1991:151–152). Folk healers remained highly popular in Finland until at least the 1940s (Stark 2006: 315–356).

<sup>12</sup> This is particularly true of Orthodox Karelia on Finland's eastern border, whereas in Lutheran Finland, magic specialists strove to dominate and subdue supernatural illness agents rather than placate them through apologies and gifts (Stark 2002:81–88).

<sup>13</sup> According to Finnish folk belief, snakes gathered to hold their general assembly in a fixed place where there was a round or egg-shaped stone. It was believed that the person who found and took possession of such a stone would have a powerful tool for magic (see Jauhiainen 1998: 319; Stark 2006:190–191).

<sup>14</sup> For more on infection from entities in the natural environment, see Stark 2002:77–110; 2006: 254–281.

<sup>15</sup> Only *tietäjäs* who still had their teeth were considered to be supernaturally or magically powerful (see Stark 2006:280, 287–288, 306–307).

<sup>16</sup> Bathing of persons in the sauna was a common ritual activity and was intended to cleanse persons of supernatural infection and magical harm. Foaming at the mouth was part of the *tietäjä*'s performance of anger and frenzy, which could also include shouting, spitting, leaping and stamping of feet (Stark 2006:290–291).

<sup>17</sup> The non-gendered Finnish pronoun *hän* here does not indicate whether the supposed perpetrator of the sorcery was male or female.

<sup>18</sup> In Finnish: *Mene koira kotiisi isäntäs iltasella emäntäs aamuselle muun perees murkinalle, puremaan, jäytämään, kipeästi kivistämään. Mene syrjin syyttömistä, vierite viattomista, ohi kunnan ihmisistä.*

<sup>19</sup> See Stark 2006:146–223.

<sup>20</sup> The term *lempi* referred to a girl's attractiveness in the eyes of potential suitors, and if she was of marriageable age but no suitors had come to court her, then it was thought that she did not possess *lempi* in sufficient quantity. This could be remedied by a rite carried out in the sauna or near a natural spring, in which a *tietäjä* or older woman versed in the proper incantations could encourage the girl's *lempi* to "rise" and spread over a wide geographical area in order to signal distant suitors to seek out the girl. See Stark-Arola 1998:124–125, 132–138; Stark 2006: 428–431, 441–441.

<sup>21</sup> It was believed that the supernatural force emanating from a woman's genitals would protect her cattle from harm while they grazed near the forest. Such rites were performed when letting cows out to pasture for the first time in spring (see Stark-Arola 1998:166–168).