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The Meanings of Names in the Finnish Kalevala Epic

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The recent interest in searching for one's roots has had other manifestations in other times and in other places. Sometimes highly nationalistic persons have even sought the roots of their nation through the study of its oral traditions. Such was the case when Elias Lönnrot traveled the hinterlands of eastern Finland in the early 19th century, collecting the oral poetry which then provided a rich body of literature to support claims of a glorious past, and gave reasons to look forward to an equally glorious future.¹ His people were, after all, not Swedes; they could never be Russians; they insisted on being independent Finns.² Many of his countrymen saw his compiled Kalevala as evidence of their independent greatness. After all, how many nations numbering less than four million inhabitants had produced their own epic which they felt worthy to occupy a place on the world's bookshelf next to those of the Greeks.

The Kalevala still occupies a place on the bookshelves of nearly every Finnish home and in the curriculum of every Finnish school. Translations into English are available, but the names are not translated, even though understanding their meanings often adds substantially to appreciation of the text. This paper, therefore, is simply an attempt to supply for English readers the meanings of the names of the major Kalevala characters.

The dominant figure in the epic is Väinämöinen, an old, steady bard, born of the maiden of the waters already in his advanced years, able to achieve dominion over his adversaries by the power of the word--his recitations, incantations, and singing. His name contains the base váiná, meaning a wide, deep, calmly moving river,³ and a suffix möinen, meaning "like that depicted by the base,"⁴ an apt name for the major hero who is often viewed as stern, aged, steady, and powerful.

In the early part of the Kalevala, Väinämöinen's power is challenged by the youthful Joukahainen who soon finds himself humiliated by being sung into a swamp. To gain his freedom he offers his sister to Väinämöinen for a wife. Later, to avenge this indignity, and the subsequent death of his sister, Joukahainen sets out to shoot Väinämöinen with a bow and arrow. The Finnish term jousi means "bow," so it is tempting to conclude that the name Joukahainen is derived from that root, but there is no good evidence for such an etymology. Some scholars have felt the term to be cognate with a Lappish term meaning snow or ice; others have felt it to be common with the dialect form joukea, meaning "large in stature," but the best evidence points to it coming from joutsen, meaning "swan," a plausible reference to the form of the bird in which Joukahainen existed "primitively."⁵ The hainen suffix has the same meaning as the möinen suffix in the name Väinämöinen. Thus Joukahainen most probably means "swanlike." Although

it is appealing to think of Joukahainen as a bowman (jousimies), we must consider such explanation folk etymology.

Joukahainen's sister, who met death rather than wed Väinämöinen is drowned in the sea, but one day while on the lake, Väinämöinen catches her in the form of a fish. She slips away from him and reveals her true identity, but try as he might, Väinämöinen is unable to retrieve her from the deep. Her name is Aino. In some versions of the poem she is Anni tytti, aino tytti. Lönnrot chose to call her simply Aino, derived from the adjective ainoa, meaning "only," referring possibly to her being Joukahainen's only sister. It is perhaps also an appropriate name for Väinämöinen's lost hope for marriage.

Although he loses in love with Aino, Väinämöinen recovers quickly and sets off to woo the maiden of the North. There he encounters the dominant female figure in the epic, the "Pohjolan Emäntä," or hostess of the North (the title loses in translation). She is the person who places the conditions on marriage to the Maiden of the North. She is also the one who does battle to recover the sampo (talismán) when it is taken by Väinämöinen's group. She is depicted as a witch whose powers rival those of Väinämöinen's. In some poems she also has powers of flight. Her name is Louhi, a word that means a rocky ledge or crag. Her profile in Gallen Kallela's famous painting "Defense of the Sampo" would seem consistent with her name, but it probably has more significance than that. There are many variations of the name which have suggested many meanings to those who have studied them. To some it is associated with the word lovi, meaning not only a gap or chasm in the earth, but also a trance into which a shaman could fall. Others consider the name to be of Scandinavian origin (floghdraki), associated with the idea of a "witch of the wind." Still others see a connection with the notions of lightning and flying fire.⁸ The interpretations of the name Louhi seem to be as enigmatic as the figure herself.

One of the conditions for marriage to the Maiden of the North is that a sampo be forged for Louhi and her north land. Väinämöinen turns to Ilmarinen, the blacksmith who forged the firmament, to accomplish the task. The name Ilmarinen comes from one of the oldest Finno-Ugric names for a god. Cognates of the base, ilma, meaning "air" also appear in the religious vocabularies of other Finno-Ugric languages.⁹ The association of his name with his early task of forging the firmament is clear; in some poetry the name also refers to the god of the wind. The suffix rinen most probably contains two suffixes: ri and nen. The ri¹⁰ is a common nominal suffix meaning agent, or practitioner of a trade. It is commonly used in deriving proper names as well. The final nen is a ubiquitous suffix denoting proper noun or diminutive.

The hero next to Väinämöinen in power of the word is Lemminkäinen, whose name is an old, Baltic, map's name, a diminutive form from the word lempi, meaning love, or favorite.¹¹ The name is fitting, because Lemminkäinen is depicted as a fickle charmer of women. He is also identified with at least two other names: Kaukomieli and Ahti Saarelainen. Such other names apparently come from the compilation of converging variants of poems dealing with the same figure and themes. The name kaukomieli consists of kauko meaning "far away," and mieli, meaning "mind." The resulting connotation suggests one being afflicted with wanderlust, unable to settle

down to the important cares of the moment. As the reader follows the adventures of Kaukomieli, he learns the name is justified. In one of his escapades he offends an old cattle herder who takes revenge by killing him. His body is chopped into pieces and thrown into the river of Tuonela. His mother commissions Ilmarinen to forge a large rake with which to retrieve his body parts, and with supernatural ointments and incantations puts him back together again better than he was before (an image of the resurrection). Once conscious, Lemminkäinen's primary concern is still with girls. His other name, Ahti Saarelainen, refers primarily to his residence on an island: saari(saare) means "island," and lainen means "resident of." The name Ahti is a variant of Ahto, meaning "the god or spirit of the sea,"¹² the Finnish Neptune or Poseidon.

The herder who killed Lemminkäinen was Märkähattu, which means literally "wet hat," (märkä + hattu). He is known by other names in other versions, but in this case the meaning probably derives from the ceremonial sprinkling of a herder as he would leave for the first time in the spring to herd his cattle.¹³

In the beginning of the Kalevala, we read of how Pellervoinen sowed the trees and the grains. His name is derived from pelto, meaning "field;" we also see it related to the term pellava, "flax."¹⁴

Kullervo is the most tragic character in the Epic. Being deprived of a normal childhood, ruining everything he puts his hand to, and finally in ignorance defiling his sister, he commits suicide. In all of this tragedy he captures the reader's sympathies. His name apparently comes from the word kulta meaning gold (sometimes a term of endearment). The analogy with Pellervoinen,¹⁵ or Pellervo, from pelto--thus Kullervo from kulta is quite convincing.

As Väinämöinen builds a boat from the chips of a spinning spindle and hopes to get it into the water without touching it in order to win the hand of the Maiden of the North, he lacks some of the secret words necessary to complete the work. He goes to the one person who can provide them, Antero Vipunen, the great giant who lies in the earth. Väinämöinen enters his mouth, descends to his stomach, and causes substantial distress to the giant in order to persuade him to tell the words. The name Antero probably comes from the Catholic Saint Andreas, who became the patron saint of fishermen. The name Vipunen, meaning "little lever" possibly comes from an early misinterpretation of paintings showing Saint Andreas and the slanting Greek Orthodox cross on which he was crucified. The early Finns are thought to have interpreted the cross as a kind of lever, and Saint Andreas as the saint associated with it--thus, Antero Vipunen.¹⁶ Such interpretation is not final, but it is credible when one considers other early misinterpretations of Christian paintings.

Readers of the Kalevala also encounter the name Untamo, referring to a great sorcerer who lives under the ground and possesses important words for doing great feats. His name derives from the word uni, meaning "sleep,"¹⁷ an appropriate name for the character who gives information as though from the dead. We see the nominal suffix on his name in other words such as kuutamo, meaning "moonlight."

The influence of Christianity on the names in the Kalevala is most clearly shown in the final poem. In it we read a fascinating pagan interpretation of the birth of Christ. Marjatta (Mary) conceives from a lingon berry that speaks to her, climbs her body, enters through her mouth, and descends to her stomach. She can find no one who will let her use a sauna in which to give birth to her child. Among those who deny her a place is Ruotus (Herodes),¹⁸ whose wife assures her that there is no sauna for the likes of her in Saraja (probably from Karelian Jorosalmi, meaning Jerusalem).¹⁹ Accused of being a whore she denies it and proclaims that her son will be greater than Väinämöinen. Sometime after the child is born in a stable, he disappears but is eventually found in a swamp. He is brought to be christened, but the priest wonders if the fatherless child should be allowed to live. Väinämöinen studies the matter and decides that the babe should die, but the babe rebukes him for his bad judgment. The old priest christens the babe King of Karelia, and Väinämöinen, grossly offended, departs with his boat into the sunset, leaving his songs and kantele (the musical instrument he had fashioned from the jawbone of a pike) as an inheritance to the people. He predicts that they will still need him once again to provide a new sampo and a new kantele. His departure symbolically represents the end of the pagan era, and so far as we know, he has not returned.

Notes

1. William A. Wilson, Folklore and Nationalism in Modern Finland (Bloomington, Ind, 1976), pp. 3-66.
2. For further discussion on this attitude and the expression coined from it, Wilson suggests that the reader see Liisa Castrén, Adolf Ivar Arwidsson isänmaallisena herättäjänä, Historiallisia Tutkimuksia, no. 35 (Helsinki, 1951), pp. 160-61.
3. According to Lönnrot, cited by Aimo Turunen, Kalevalan Sanat ja Niiden Taustat (Lappeenranta, 1979), p. 375.
4. Lauri Hakulinen, The Structure and development of the Finnish Language (Bloomington, Ind. 1961), p. 112.
5. Aimo Turunen, Kalevalan Sanat ja Niiden Taustat (Lappeenranta, 1979), p. 75-76.
6. Ibid., pp. 15-16.
7. Ibid., p. 185.
8. Ibid., p. 186.
9. Ibid., p. 65.
10. Hakulinen, p. 141.
11. Turunen, p. 173.
12. Ibid., p. 12.
13. Ibid., p. 215.
14. Ibid., p. 245.
15. Ibid., p. 139.
16. Ibid., p. 22.
17. Ibid., p. 359.
18. Ibid., p. 287.
19. Ibid., p. 296.

Postscript

Practical considerations preclude notes on all primary sources used by Turunen. Such sources are noted, however, in his text on the pages given.