

Laura Stark. Peasants, Pilgrims, and Sacred Promises: Ritual and the Supernatural in Orthodox Karelian Folk Religion. Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2002 (Studia Fennica Folkloristica 11), 229 pp. ISBN 951-746-366-9. \$29.95 (paper)

Laura Stark's book deals with an interesting albeit complicated topic: the religious culture and everyday ritual practices of Orthodox Karelian peasants living on the borderlands between Northwestern Russia and Finland. Orthodox Karelians are not the only group speaking a Finnish language and inheriting Finno-Ugrian cultural traditions, while at the same time sharing the popular religious practices of the Russian Orthodox. Other groups in the region include the Setu living on the boundary between Russia and Southern Estonia, the Tikhvin and Tver' Karelians and the Veps. Although a number of scholarly works examining the folk religion of these groups have appeared in recent decades, numerous issues have yet to be clarified. The special interest these groups present stems from their popular culture, which appears to result from interrelationship with and dialog between heterogeneous linguistic, cultural and religious communities, that is, between the world of the Finno-Ugrian peoples of the European North and that of the Orthodox Slavic peoples. As Laura Stark points out, "Orthodox Karelia lies across an important boundary running down the middle of Europe, which has historically divided the continent into two different cultural and religious zones" (p. 11). In my opinion, the "boundary position" of Orthodox Karelian culture (as well as the culture of the Veps, Setu et al.) allows for the analysis and discussion of a number of important issues relating to the problem of "folk religion" in general. First of all, the material provides good ground for the comparative analysis of the so-called "pre-Christian" or "archaic" elements in folk religious practices. Scholars in the twentieth century have often argued that the "popular religion" of agrarian communities in Eastern Europe was to a greater or lesser extent based upon the "pre-Christian" cultural heritage. However, this point of view has also been subjected to criticism; it is equally possible that those beliefs and practices labeled as "pre-Christian" and "archaic" might have arisen long after the introduction of Christianity, and we should hence consider them as manifestations of popular Orthodoxy, popular Catholicism or even popular Protestantism. Of course, the analysis of cultural categories or points of view possessed by nineteenth-century peasants does not normally presume any distinction between "Christian" and "pre-Christian" (or "non-Christian") beliefs and practices. However, the opposition is still being discussed by historians and historical anthropologists, and, therefore, we have to pay attention to it – at least, in its diachronic perspective.

Another important point related to the popular religious practices of the Orthodox Karelians refers to the problem of social interaction and conflict as determinants of the very notion of folk religion. It is well known that, usually, popular religious practices are a sphere of constant competition between local communities of believers and religious or state officials of various ranks. Late twentieth-century historians have often used the concept of acculturation to describe the impact of the Reformation, Counter-Reformation and Enlightenment on the popular culture of European peasants. As Robert Muchembled argues, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the patterns of agrarian culture in Western Europe were considerably transformed and even destroyed by legions of devoted missionaries who tried to impose new religious ideas and categories on the so-called

“magic world view” (see Muchembled). However, the Russian case differs. Both the Church reforms of Peter the Great and the various reorganizations of religious life made by his successors resulted in, one may say, the localization rather than the transformation of agrarian religious practices. Thus, relations between local believers and official Church representatives in Orthodox Russia during the “Synod period” (early eighteenth century – 1917) appear more complicated than in Catholic or Protestant countries. Sometimes priests and monks tried to change peasants’ religious practices and customs; sometimes Church officials were themselves influenced by the traditions of their rural flock. In the case of the Orthodox Karelians, the situation is still more complicated, since Karelian rural believers did not speak the same language as their priests. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Karelia was an important center of the Old Belief movement. As Georg Michels points out, “Old Belief preachers provided the first contact with Christianity for many non-Russian peasants” of the region (p. 227). It is also worth noting that the majority of Tikhvin Karelians (the descendants of seventeenth-century migrants from Ladoga Karelia) profess the Old Belief to this day [see Fishman 2003]. Incidentally, Laura Stark’s concept of the Old Believers as “the Russian Orthodox sect” with a strong tendency towards the “conservation of archaic ritual details” and “strict adherence to a standard of authenticity in its customs” (pp. 18–19) is not entirely accurate. At the level of popular religious practice, the Old Belief culture in many respects resembles that of other Orthodox peasants. Be that as it may, both language as well as the confessional boundaries, that separated Karelian peasants from Russian Church officials, served to determine some of the distinctive features of Karelian folk religion. Stark shows that parish priests were less important in the popular religious practices of Orthodox Karelians. At the same time, the local population paid great attention to neighboring monasteries, which were viewed as sacred centers and visited by pilgrims. This specific situation is, naturally, highly productive for a discussion of the role of official and unofficial components in popular religious practice.

Last but not least, the study of Orthodox Karelian folk religion can contribute a great deal to discussion about the scholarly notion of “folk” or “popular” religion as applied to daily practices of rural communities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In fact, folklorists and anthropologists are still discussing the key issues of the topic: which popular concepts, motifs, plots and rituals belong to the sphere of folk religion and which do not? How can we divide religious practice and religious ideology in agrarian society? What functional and cognitive factors determine the peculiar features of folk religious practice? From this perspective, Laura Stark’s monograph presents numerous valuable insights and materials enriching our understanding of popular religion in modern Europe.

Proceeding from a set of influential twentieth-century anthropological theories and explanatory models (the model of reciprocity and exchange between humans and supranormal beings; the idea of purity and impurity as cultural boundaries, as suggested by Mary Douglas; the theory of “limited good” put forward by George Foster and the cognitive approach to the study of religion as formulated by Veikko Anttonen and Pascal Boyer), the author consistently analyses four spheres of Orthodox Karelian popular culture which she considers “folk religious”: rituals and beliefs related to ideas about illness and healing; those connected with relations between human society and the forest spirits; funeral and memorial rites directed at the dead; pilgrimage

customs and cults of sacred places. The reason for this thematic choice is related to Stark's definition of folk religion, which is based on "two primary elements: first, folk religion refers to practices and beliefs in which the sacred is defined by the local community rather than by a religious institution. Second, folk religion is characterized by an emphasis on reciprocity and exchange between humans and divine or sacred agents" (p. 30). In this context, Stark prefers to differentiate the terms "folk religion" and "popular religion," the latter referring "to the religious practices and beliefs of individuals from varied class and social backgrounds in a network of diverse and complex relationships." Although, in my opinion, it is difficult to imagine "pure" folk religious practices preserved by a given local community without any influence from external social structures and religious institutions, Stark's approach is undoubtedly fruitful for the study of the "elementary religious forms" characteristic of the agrarian societies of northeastern Europe. The author's analysis of the data on Orthodox Karelian folk religion permits us to conclude that this cultural system was based upon two different but complementary types of ritual activity, "the sacred boundaries complex and the sacred centers complex," which "addressed different types of crises and offered different solutions to them" (p. 192). The first complex presumed the threat of impurity ("disorder, depletion, danger, and anomaly") from the "other side," that is from the various forest spirits and forces or from the dead. "These threats existing in the local sphere were minimized by setting up symbolic boundaries between the farm or community on the one hand, and the forest or dead by the other ... Such boundaries were not solid walls but rather 'gates' which allowed some traffic between the two spheres, since the forest nature and the dead were still potentially useful for social continuity, if only contact with them could be ritually controlled" (p. 192). The second complex addressed those "types of communal disorder," which "were seen to come from within the community itself rather than from outside it, and this included undiscovered crimes against fellow villagers and unexplained illness. Since they came from the 'inside', these threats could not be dealt with by setting up boundaries. They had to be countered instead through the power of a symbolic center outside the community, which represented purity and the highest ideals of Orthodox Karelian culture. In traversing the distance from periphery (home farm or village) to center (monastery), it was thought that such disorder or impurities could be brought to light and rectified through exclusion or healing" (p. 193). In Stark's opinion, both ritual complexes "involved communication and morally-regulated exchange with sacred agents, that is to say, human-divine relations were manifested as a type of exchange transaction." This "reciprocal" model of folk religion is one of the key points in the interpretative model proposed by Stark. She lays special emphasis on the notion of a 'promise', or vow, which "formalizes" the "reciprocal relations between humans and sacred agents" in Orthodox Karelian folk religion, though in fact, it has to be remarked that this notion is common in the popular religion of most European agrarian societies, whether Orthodox or Catholic.

Although the model elaborated by Stark is obviously reliable and, to some extent, new in traditional European folklore research, it sometimes appears too sketchy. In my opinion, it would have been more interesting to discuss not only the "reciprocal nature" of popular religious practices and ideas, but also their particular social, cultural, and historical backgrounds. Most of the rituals, beliefs, legendary motifs and plots, and so on that Laura Stark describes are widespread in the various traditions of the Orthodox Slavs and other

Christian peoples of Eastern Europe. In fact, the religious practices of Karelian peasants constitute a part of the popular Orthodox culture of the northwestern regions of the former Russian Empire. Therefore, it would have been more appropriate to find out which cultural items discussed by Stark are common to both Russian and Finnish peasants in the Russian North-West and which are unique to the Orthodox Karelians. It does not, however, appear that the author possesses a knowledge of the Russian language and culture sufficient for that. The result is not only an absence of comparative analysis, but also a degree of misunderstanding about the data on Karelian popular religion itself. One example concerns the discussion of “the Autumn George” festival in Karelian villages. The author notes that “in official church tradition there were actually two different saints named George, but in the folk tradition these two were melded into a single figure” (p. 50); “the two St. Georges were Great-martyr George the Victorious (April 23) and Hieromartyr George, Bishop of Armenia (September 30)” (p. 203, note 38). In fact, the Orthodox Church knows more than ten different saints named George. However, the hieromartyr and Armenian bishop whose memory is celebrated on September 30 of the Julian calendar is not George (*Georgii*) but Gregory (*Grigorii*). In East Slavic popular religion, “the Autumn George” (*Egorii Osennii* or *Osennii Iur’ev den’*) is usually celebrated on November 26 in the Julian calendar. A specifically Russian Orthodox festival, it commemorates the consecration of St George’s church in Kiev, built by Iaroslav the Wise in the eleventh century. The festival is also familiar from its distinctive role in the history of Russian serfdom. Using data recorded in Karelia in the 1930s, Stark points out that “on *Autumn-George* the cows were taken into the cowshed and tethered,” and that the “two saints named George became fused into a single St. George who was conveniently associated with the entire period during which the cows would spend their days grazing in the forest pastures” (p. 131). That “Spring-George” is the first day of the summer grazing season for cattle is familiar from various traditions of the Slavic and Finnish peoples of Eastern Europe. However, in Russian folk culture the end of the season is the Feast of the Intercession (*Pokrov*, October 1), a date close to the festival of the hieromartyr Gregory. As for “Autumn George” Day (November 26), the latter was not associated with cattle, but might be celebrated as a local festival in a particular village. The same tradition can be found amongst the Veps, another Orthodox group of Finno-Ugrian origin inhabiting the regions close to Karelia [Vinokurova, 28–32, 35–36]. It would, therefore, be interesting to know whether the Karelian ‘Autumn George’, as reported by Laura Stark, is a peculiar local interpretation of the Orthodox calendar, based upon confusion between the Christian names George and Gregory, or a mistake on the part of a field researcher, or else a personal calendar interpretation on the part of the informant. Unfortunately, Laura Stark does not recognize the question, since she follows the confusion herself. Moreover, this is not the only example of a confusion between saint’s names. It may be that the same problem occurs in respect to St. Basil and St. Blaise (see pp. 199 and 209).

Of course, mixing up saints’ names is not enough to nullify any valuable scholarly findings and insights, especially for an anthropologist who studies living cultures and societies rather than their history. However, from such a perspective, the book by Laura Stark also occasionally seems contradictory. As it turns out, the data used in the study was mainly borrowed, as far as I understand, from archival and published collections and reports by Finnish scholars in the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries (predominantly in the

1930–40s). I do not doubt the professional skills of the collectors (who include well-known scholars such as Martti Haavio), but, at the very least, contemporary methods and strategies of folklore field research differ greatly from those of the early twentieth and, especially, the nineteenth century. It does not even matter who carried out this field research, Finnish scholars or Russian/Soviet folklorists (whose collections and opinions are completely neglected by Stark). In my opinion, every anthropologist who wants “to let the ‘voices’ of the performers and narrators be heard” or “to defer to the folk interpretation” (pp. 16–17) should try to carry out his or her own field research on all possible occasions. My personal experience of field study in the area of popular religion in contemporary Russia suggests that the data collected nowadays is in every respect comparable with that recorded by previous generations of scholars. Furthermore, it seems that, although Stark declares her intention “to decipher the codes used by informants and collectors alike in referring to a past, vanished world view” (p. 17), she does not in fact try to assess or criticize such problematic scholarly notions as the dichotomy of “Christian” and “pre-Christian” beliefs, or the concepts “shamanistic world view” and “religious syncretism.” Sometimes, the lack of field research experience leads her into highly dubious interpretations. I can not agree, for example, that ritual incantations addressed to “an entire kin community of nature spirits, complete with fathers, mothers, grandparents, children, etc., as well as representatives of a class society: judges, priests, kings, servants, slaves” really does represent the peasants’ idea of how “another world” is structured and organized (see pp. 52 and 78). In fact, such ritual formulae are based upon the idea of classification and do not reflect the actual beliefs of their performers.

Certainly, I do not doubt that the monograph reviewed contains numerous valuable insights into the popular culture of the Orthodox Karelians and contributes a great deal to the study of folk religion in general. I share most of the theoretical positions and approaches employed by Laura Stark. However, here we face a general problem in ethnological and folklore research. The question is: should we just apply this or that anthropological theory to our data without special attention to the historical, social and cultural specificity of the material under consideration, or should we analyze and discuss this specificity in the first place. In my opinion, theories, however useful and innovative they may be, do not require their explanatory potential *per se* to be reconfirmed; what is more interesting is to discuss particular situations in which our theories either do or do not apply. For me personally, it would be more interesting to learn about the specific features of Orthodox Karelian folk religion in comparison with analogous cultural practices among neighboring Finnish and Russian groups. Nonetheless, Laura Stark’s book should be regarded as an interesting and important piece of research, which makes its readers think over and discuss a large number of key issues in anthropological research as it relates to folk religion.

Works Cited

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