

### 3.4 *Making continuities. Agency, presenza and secular life in Finnish North Karelia*

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#### *Introduction*

In my ongoing research in North Karelia<sup>(1)</sup> (HONKASALO M.-L. 2003a, 2003b, HONKASALO M.-L. - HINKKANEN R. 2001), which is an area of endemic heart disease, the uncertainty of life and how to deal with it was central to everyday life theories about disease. An interesting detail in the fieldwork – one that constitutes this article's main point of departure – included an emic notion of uncertainty; when we were talking about heart disease, some of my informants said that they had not gotten it yet (*en ole saanut sitä vielä*). The verb “saada” in Finnish means literally to receive or to obtain, so the sentence has a rather strong meaning. To receive, to obtain, a heart attack? It was something we often laughed about – how was it that we received a heart attack? But the inclusion of yet was something that forced me to reflect further on the issue. Did they see illnesses as something that was part and parcel of life, one of its essential constituents? Did they think that disease and illness were somewhere waiting for them? Or were they like objects, lurking somewhere along the path of life, waiting for people to come along and bump into them?

In the contingency of life, the informants' control and safety systems were often embedded in the endemic morbidity and mortality. So many things in society were unsafe, but there was a pattern of certainty which remained almost unchanged through the years, as long as one could remember. At some phase of life, they knew, people became ill, “got” a heart disease and somehow, after a period of time, died from it. The informants knew well the disease and how it progressed, and they had seen so many people suffering and dying from it, that it was accepted as a part of society. This knowledge contributed to the foundation of a certain trust in a kind of biological certainty within their bodies. People knew that this way of dying might also be theirs, and this constituted certain knowledge, secure like

blood in the veins. In the midst of life's contingency, this knowledge allowed them to see their end, the manner in which they would die. This is how a model of a good death was created, understood and shared in the cultural context, as a death legitimised within the symbolic universe of one's culture (BERGER P.L. - LUCKMANN T. 1966).

In the context of modern life, extensive social and cultural changes such as the impact of increasing globalisation and, more locally, the problem of uncertainty as an aspect of social experience and the fall of the welfare state have assumed an increasing importance. Illness is an area where fragility and the unpredictability of life are of great importance in ontological, experiential, inter-subjective, social and political senses, often conceptualised as suffering in medical anthropology. In this article, my focus is on how people try to find roots and continuity in the contingency of life, and how they make sense of diseases and death in the context of an emptying social and cultural periphery of Finnish North Karelia<sup>(2)</sup>. Within the theoretical context of *la crisi della presenza* (DE MARTINO E. 1958, 1959)<sup>(3)</sup>. I shall focus on especially women's agency, on their micro-level attempts to retain a grip and a hold on a world which seems to be falling apart. This holding on seems to happen through adjustment of concepts of time and space accordingly, by acting in everyday life and by memorising the shared past. De Martino has done his work in the ritual context of folk religious life and I try to rethink his theory in order to understand some problems in modern secular<sup>(4)</sup> life.

### *Suffering, Contingency, and La crisi della presenza*

What has taken place is the fact of losing and losing again ... nobody can really stand this. Last year they took away our post office and now they say they are going to stop the snow ploughing in this area. We get about 80 centimeters of snow every winter, how does one live here (if public services are abandoned)? ... Quite a lot of people die here, every year. Now there are about five houses left, out of tens that used to be inhabited. They die of heart attacks, mostly men. How is it possible? Last Christmas eve a man from the neighborhood died all of a sudden; he suffered from a cerebral hemorrhage. Where do the diseases come from? What are they? Is it so that life is so tight (*ahasta*) here, especially living alone, and if one is forced into that kind of a situation? One perhaps does not have any other way than to pray, and ask whether He allows suffering, or would He give comfort?" (a woman in a distant village in July 2001, the distance from the

village where she lives is 40 kilometers from the municipality's center)

What was this "ahas" (tight/narrow), what did it mean? In the Finnish language, the term has a double meaning. In addition to 'tight/narrow/cramped', in a verb form it has a connotation with anxiety, "ahistaa", to be anxious. I have tried to understand the meaning of "ahas" in relation to its opposite, 'full/rich', 'voluminous', something which is animated, filled with life. Once life was full, indeed, the women<sup>(5)</sup> said, but it was in the past, when all the villagers were working together, "when we used to do things together", when the village was still whole and thus living. Within one's "full life" bloomed vivacity and animation of being-in-the world. But, it was said, this wholeness existed in the past, it was something that had taken place for a long time ago. The opposite of this 'full' would then be empty, deficient and lacking. And this was the way that the women in the village defined their life when it is "ahasta".

But could not full life also be tight, "ahas", in the meaning of being cramped when there were too many people around, too many children, relatives, too much work and worries? It really was so, the women said, but "ahas" which makes them anxious now is different. Somehow the living space has now diminished, the borders of life are closer to each other, and everything is more limited and strict in that sense. It is precisely this kind of "ahas" which makes them anxious. And now, when half of the population has moved away, the area is emptier and life is more fragile, and thus the possibilities to hold on to one's world are scantier.

### *Suffering, Passion and Agency*

The emic notion "ahas" can be conceptually opened up through the concept of suffering. In the discussions of medical anthropology, suffering is defined by the limits of meaning giving ability, as a situation of enduring something which is unbearable (KLEINMAN A. 1995). It is the dark side of the experience of living at the edge of significance, it is «the result of processes of resistance [...] to the lived flow of experience» (*ibidem*: 174). In the Anglo-Saxon anthropological literature, the concept of suffering has two meanings. It is 1) the phenomenological content of an unbearable situation in local moral worlds and 2) a cultural category that brings into a single space an assemblage of human problems that have their origins and consequences in the devastating social circumstances (KLEINMAN A. - DAS V. - LOCK M. 1996). In the core of suffering is uncertainty of life. Uncertainty is regarded as a more or less ontological content of suffering (KLEINMAN A.

1995: 125-126). Kleinman thinks that people meet uncertainty as “a dark side of experience” in situations with distress, afflictions, and when they are living at the edge of their abilities for social action and defence.

The perspectives which are opened up by the notion of suffering, illuminate the question of the boundaries and ties between the world and the self. In order to avoid the threat of contingency, human beings create bonds with the world and each other in inter-subjective interactions, or in “the works of culture” (OBEYESEKEYRE G. 1985). They can be social structures, such as institutions, but also ties and bundles which human beings create in their everyday interactions. What Kleinman means with suffering, echoes the phenomenological thought of a relationship between the bodily subject and the world as being constituted by intentional threads. We are attached to the world by bundles of threads and so is the world to us (MERLEAU-PONTY M. 1962: XIII). In this article, I focus on the ties and bundles which human beings create.

In the Anglo-Saxon way of understanding suffering, enduring, almost passion are much at issue. I would go further in the theorizing of suffering and think about how are the bundles and ties inter-subjectively shaped and re-shaped in the social situations? How do people act in order to create the ties? Precisely here comes also the question of agency that has to be taken seriously in the context of suffering. People act in order to shape the ties, the grip on the world, and in the situations of threatening uncertainty, make inter-subjective efforts to hold on.

The contribution of Ernesto de Martino’s theory of the *crisi della presenza* (DE MARTINO E. 1958, 1959) and human agency is crucial here. According to de Martino, some natural and structural circumstances may render life extremely precarious and threatening, and in this kind of situation the individual may be in a constant danger of losing her or his presence, *la presenza*, her or his ability to be an active agent in the world and in history. With the term *la crisi della presenza* he means a situation which is characterized through a threatening loss of historical agency<sup>(6)</sup>, a risk of not being in the world, or not being here<sup>(7)</sup>. I interpret de Martino and his thinking of agency as having a grip on the world. The grip is not something already there but is made and re-made continuously in the intersubjective interaction in the human world. For de Martino, in a world where one’s *presenza* is not decided and guaranteed once and for all, one is always in the process of constituting and maintaining oneself as such, while the world itself is entangled with the drama.

De Martino is especially interested in the healing rituals and magic. Instead of sliding into a mere passivity, magic gives vehicles for agency, to

intervention, and translation of passivity into activity, thus introducing the shaping power of culture (DE MARTINO E. 1958). I think that for ethnographic research in modern secular society, and for the study of human suffering, the importance of de Martino lies here. For him, to act in the human world, is the core of human existence, its *essere-agito-da* (DE MARTINO E. 1959: 98). I let him speak for himself: «Esserci nel mondo, cioè mantenersi come presenza individuale nella società e nella storia, significa agire come potenza di decisione e di scelta secondo valori, operando e rioperando sempre di nuovo il mai definitivo distacco dalla immediatezza della mera vitalità naturale e innalzandosi alla vita culturale: lo smarrirsi di questa potenza, il venir meno alla stessa interiore possibilità di esercitarla, costituisce un rischio radicale che rispetto alla presenza impegnata a resistere senza successo all'attentato si configura come esperienza di essere-agito-da, dove l'esser-agito coinvolge la totalità della personalità e delle potenze operative che la fondano e la mantengono» (*ibidem*: 98).

Having conducted ethnographical studies in post-war Southern Italy, and as a historian of religion, de Martino has been interested in understanding folk religion and magic as cultural techniques <sup>(8)</sup> as a series of means whereby people try to hold on to their fragile world which is falling in to pieces because of adversities of subalternity: poverty, distress, continuous losses and the power of all negative. Trained in the Gramscian way of thinking about culture, de Martino's main interests have been in people's "molecular" ways of maintaining a grip on the world, i.e. of various minimal everyday practices that they invented when the situation seemed hopeless. Some of them were present in the healing or bereavement rituals of the rural countryside; some in magic. The notion of ritual – and magic – includes the task of reconstituting and consolidating the jeopardized *presenza*; as cultural acts, magic intervenes and reintroduces the shaping power of culture. For de Martino, culture is practicing, doing and acting, and attributing shape and meaning to the flux of life, creating value out of what passes away despite or against us, so that we "risk passing with what passes", «ed invece di far passare ciò che passa [...] noi rischiamo di passare con ciò che passa» (DE MARTINO E. 1958: 18).

### *La Crisi and Agency in Secular Modern Culture*

To apply de Martino's thoughts into a study of contemporary culture in the North opens up important conceptual insights into experiences of life

at its margins, or into social conditions where the individuals' grip on their world is loosening. When I have tried to think *la crisi della presenza* and the ways of having a hold on one's everyday life world, I have needed conceptual widening in terms of intersubjectivity and agency.

In the focus of this article is "minimal agency" of the women in my ethnography. With the term I mean a kind of everyday agency which is ethnographically seemingly small and "minimal" but has intentions of holding on a world in place and ascertaining the grip on it. Women's practical repetitive agency was minimal only in relation to its immense ends – which I think are to keep the own and the family's hold on the world. This reminds the aims of ritual practice which situates the individual in an imagined place and spans historical time.

Women's agency was characterized by repetition, practical quotidian acting, without a visible aim to change anything, rather to maintain the living situation, to hold it as it were. This kind of agency was realized in everyday life, in women's repetitive activities: women were cooking, cleaning, baking, knitting, they were doing something all the time. I have called tentatively "minimal" this kind of agency because it was minimal as perceived ethnographically and in relation to the symbolic ends of the activity. How can this kind of agency be conceptualized as agency at all? In social theory, there is a heavy Weberian burden with an idea of rational agency and choice. The question of agency has been approached mainly as a kind of rational acting aiming at a change of social situation. In my research, the North Karelian mothers had earlier taken part in various social activities within the area, they had build the Finnish civil society together with the men, and they had been engaged in abundant and splendid handicraft in various settings. Now they – the most of my informants were elderly women, mothers in grandmother years – regarded political activity as something that was no longer important in their life, "*muttei ollu ennee niihe aika*". In their research of everyday routines and actions, some authors have a conceptual perspective of resistance, some call a corresponding agency as "culture of contest" (LOMBARDI SATRIANI L. 1974, SCOTT J. 1985). In my study this kind of conceptualization did not fit because it was difficult for me to find in it contents or themes against authority and other power systems. I can not open up women's agency in my ethnography with any theory of rational choice – nor with its dichotomous opposite, habitual agency with its boring task to maintain the present situation (see e.g. ALEXANDER J. 1982). I insist that there is something more than maintaining that is at issue. Or perhaps to maintain would be better understood in a different, not conservative, meaning.

In Finland, the sociologist Eeva Jokinen (JOKINEN E. 1996) has studied mothers' writing and diary keeping as agency of meaning-making, of significative agency. By writing their diaries, the mothers at home with small children were continuously acting in order to set up their world and simultaneously keeping themselves there. In this article, I am interested in both practical acting and meaning-making, and I would ask which kind of agency is possible when the life situation is defined more or less by enduring the unendurable?

In their phenomenological theory of agency Berger and Luckmann (BERGER P.L. - LUCKMANN T. 1966) write of habitual agency and in somewhat other tradition Giddens (GIDDENS A. 1984) of agency as a stream of actual or contemplated causal interventions of corporeal beings in the on-going process of events-in-the-world. Agency for Giddens is a continuous flow of conduct (GIDDENS A. 1979: 55). Close to this kind of theorizing comes also Bourdieu with his concept of habitus and his purpose to join social structure and individual agency, the bodily and the mental in human action. Also Hannah Arendt's (ARENDT H. 1958) phenomenological theory of agency would offer a possibility for rethinking "minimal agency" as a human agency. Arendt thinks of human agency as something that includes in its core the ability to begin new processes – the kinds of processes that end up with unexpected end products and results. For Arendt, agency is surprising in several ways, it is more grand and immense than the actor her/himself is able to plan. The capacity of human action means that s/he is able to do something which is not planned in advance, something improbable. Arendt refers to intersubjectivity as something that is a precondition and product for agency. In the intersubjective space between human beings arise their specific and worldly interests.

I think that women's agency in North Karelia is to be understood in the context of *ahas*, in the contested site between remaining, enduring, and attempting to hold on. With the help of de Martino's and Arendt's phenomenological thoughts of agency, my aim is to ask what type of an agency is possible in a fragile world, in a social situation where the society does not hold on its people.

### *"Minimal Agency". Retaining Grips, Making Continuities*

What was "minimally" acted upon? In addition to household activities at home or in groups, such as the type of activities women did when they were picking berries or mushrooms in autumn, or washing carpets during early

summers, I would like to call “minimal agency” also the activities within meaning making. Women were memorizing the shared past in the village, they were taking care of the ancestors by carefully cherishing the family pictures on the drawers.

### *Building Continuities*

Attachment to place is central in forming and maintaining coherence of self and identity. According to de Martino, what characterizes la crisi della presenza, are the social circumstances under which the self is not given but must fight tenaciously to establish a presence (see DI NOLA A. 1998). To have a hold on one's self means attempting to retain attachments to both places and persons and to balance the two. A central place and symbol in this meaning is home. It lies in the border area, containing both place and family; it is “a localizable idea”, as Mary Douglas (DOUGLAS M. 1991) puts it. According to her, «home is a kind of place, which acquires meaning through practice; and as such, it forms part of the everyday process of the creation of the self». Metaphorically, when women in my field work characterized their self, they talked about their home. And, ethnographically, I observed their homes and listened to their stories in search for what was at issue with the problem of the self and identity. The home was a meaningful symbol of a good life, a whole self, which essentially meant the whole life with one's family. But, the tension aroused in the present situation because of the diasporic situation. The children were no longer living in North Karelia but in Southern Finland, and the mothers had the home in the village without possibilities to move.

In women's stories in the village, their self was not, however, a notion referring to an autonomous entity – as it is conceptualized in the contemporary western literature – bounded with one's skin, but something that extended from the narrator towards her family – with the children now living in southern Finland. Rather, the “maternal” self could be understood as something perceived as constituted by the contextual features of social interactions in diverse situations. It included the bonds with the family, now fragmented and scattered around in other, far-away areas of Finland.

Generally, they used to talk in a plural form and referred to themselves as a core person of the family. The family was an unit which gathered up everything and from which everything begun. Sometimes the pronoun we did not extend to include all the children living in Southern Finland or in Sweden and it made the mothers worry, kept them waking during the nights.



The diaspora, tearing apart of the family, also made the home and the motherhood different, somehow strange, anomalous, longing, and lacking, diminished.

The more uncertainty, the more important became the relationships between the relatives and within the families. The villagers had various ways of maintaining ties with their families – with phone calls, holiday visits, photographs, continuous gift-making, memorizing etc. – but there was a threat of loss which was present at all moments. Through these acts, relatives and neighbors were symbolically present, but they were not there. The threat of losing the ties that bound them together was a threat to the unraveling of the self.

The women, especially mothers, also remember in a plural form (PASSERINI L. 1996: 1). I used to sit with the women and look at the family albums, talking and listening to the remembrances. It was a way how families remember (HALBWACHS M. 1981) but it seemed to me that in my field, within the families, the mothers were the actors.

The albums usually contained photos of the common past of the family and the village. The photos touchingly described and in-einander the two bases of identity - the family was mainly pictured in the village landscape, in the home yard. But in addition to the multiple albums, there were, in almost every home, photos of relatives on the armadios, chests of drawers. There were wedding photos of the children, multi-colored school photos of the grandchildren and several black and white photos of the deceased family members, of those men who were killed in the wars. They were there to look at, to be remembered, but they were also taking part in the social life of the family. The persons in the photos were lively present in the discussions, the mothers often referred to their activities. The pictures extended and empowered the family relations and kinship at two levels. The wedding photos, as well as photos of the baptismal ceremonies and of grandchildren more generally, tied together the family members. But the pictures of the deceased relatives bound the living members to those in the other world, *tuonpuoleinen*. For the Greek Orthodox people, the Holy Icon on the home wall is not only a picture but also represents a window to eternity. Only a part of the villagers were Orthodox but I think that in every home the pictures on the walls and on the chests were used to twine ties between the two worlds.

It seems that what described as the ways of acting today, compared to those that are held in their memories, constitutes a difference that opens up a gap for grief.

In the accounts, the older informants turned their intentionality toward the past, toward the time when everything was better because everybody was there. From the perspective of social bonds, I think that what actually took place in remembering, was a process of re-membering. Missing the sons, daughters and grandchildren as well as neighbors was an imaginary re-membering of the social institution of kinship and the social groups that once were there in the village and in the once lively Karelian area.

### *Making Sense of Illnesses*

Within an endemic area, heart disease seems to be something almost structural. It was not unusual to describe the family and the relatives in terms of heart diseases. Almost every one had some kind of personal experience of heart disease, in the form of one's own, or of the older or younger generation. The heart disease was something that was signified as joining the family members together.

It was usual that the informants presented themselves by family photographs. When I came in, we talked about who was who in the photos on the shelf of the drawer. There were often two kinds of photos, the older ones framed with decorated frames, the oldest being from the 40's of 50's; and the new ones, the color pictures of the grandchildren. Both past, present and future of the family was portrayed, as was the position of the informant in the midst.

Some of the persons in the older photos were killed in the war. Some had heart diseases, some something else. The deaths were not necessarily violent, not connected to the war, the diseases made the deaths more commonplace. Once I made an interview with a woman who introduced herself by a photo of her daughter. The woman starts to talk of her own heart disease, then of her daughter's, who died more than twenty years ago. "We have the same disease", she says. They share also the reasons of the disease. They are tied with each other by the disease, it is something that still binds them together. And separates.

The heart diseases run in families, it was often said. Not seldom I heard stories where disease was related to values, especially to hard-working as a core value of Finnish masculinity. The ability to work hard was related to the strength and power of the body - and a consequent heart disease. Thus the way of dying of heart disease was a sign of a good citizenship. In one family the ways of dying shaped a pattern. They were associated with the hot-tempered, strong and sometimes, if boozed, violent men.

“A big man dies in a big way,” it was said, and an informant counted several relatives from different generations, all of whom had died of heart attack. All of them in the midst of hard agricultural work, the only exception was an uncle who had died on a Sunday morning when he was helping his wife in the household work, hanging up the curtains on the window. The disease contributed to a shaping of an identity which in this case was a continuation of strength.

The theories which were in use in order to make sense with the heart diseases, were shaped of the elements and discourses of five wide domains. Firstly, a crucial etiology among the informants was uttered as social and historical circumstances, notably the *jälkeenjääneisyys*, being behind of development, of the North Karelian area. People said that the factors causing the almost endemic morbidity and mortality were past and current social conditions, recurrent wars which had decreased the resistance towards diseases; the life in the border area, “being lotless” (*osaton*), shortly the themes which described various losses. These reasons for illnesses (generally, because people did not “know” heart diseases) were also uttered in the old folk poems and incantations which were gathered from the area in early 1900<sup>th</sup> century (HONKASALO M.-L. 2003). 2) one’s fate, destiny, was another theme at issue. People told that the destiny of the North Karelians was to get heart disease and die of it. Interestingly, the current rise of the results in genetic research which an emphasis on genes as an important causal factor behind (every) disease, were translated in the area into discourses of destiny.

Even though continuities were an important theme in the theories, emphasis on alterity was not unknown. Among people who were evacuated from Karelia after the Second World War, I heard an “ethnic” theory. One Russian Orthodox informant who was born in the “Eastern villages” of the municipality and evacuated from there to North Karelia with his family after The Second World War, said to me that “the heart diseases are “diseases of the Finns”. Even though he and his family had always been Finns, he made a sharp ethnic distinction here between the Karelians and the Finnish. “We did not know them (heart diseases) there in Porajärvi (the name of the village where he was born and grown). In addition to this “ethnicity” issue he used religion as his theoretical background. According to several Orthodox informants, their religion had three impacts on their proposed lower heart disease morbidity. People I talked to, were not active in the parish but their religiosity was in several ways embedded in their everyday life. One importance of Orthodox religion was the meaning of hope and trust, which they thought was more prominent among them. The

second was a more intense social interaction and networking among Orthodox people; this made them healthier. The lively interaction really was the case – in addition to religiosity, it had to do with the social minority position of people. The third was diet. Among orthodox people, fish was used more than among the Lutherans. Previously, every Friday and Wednesday were fasting days; fish was also served on the days of some saints. Currently, this was not the case, perhaps only among the elderly.

#### *de Martino and Modern Society*

Back to my starting point of the meanings of certainty and a good death within an endemic area, to the vignette my field research in North Karelia, the de Martinian idea of the meaning-making of illnesses reveals domains of suffering, where the issue is having a hold on one's world. My question has been, is it possible to study modern complex secular society and culture with theoretical instruments that were once developed for research of rural and religious life in Southern Europe? In order to understand the possibilities of secular agency, I started to conceptualize my ethnographic data in terms of de Martino's theory, i.e. by focusing my view on people's micro-level attempts to retain their grip on the world. They seemed to do this by adjusting their concepts of time and space accordingly, by acting in everyday life, by memorizing the shared past, and by creating continuity and rootedness.

According to de Martino (DE MARTINO E. 1955: 21) religion renders politics and techniques for *presenza*. They do not originate from the Other world but from society and people's historical and social presence within it. With the help of political and technical aims people construct cultural forms and weave their suffering into their history. The aims are dependent on cultural rules which the society recognize and apply. The myths give possibility for fantasy for example in the situations where one is in danger of losing her/his presence. In order to make the myths purposeful, people add to these parts of other myths and rites that perhaps are losing their original religious meaning or that currently, possibly draw their power from totally other institutions, such as work, or, regarding interpretations of illnesses, from biomedicine. The de Martinian concept of agency is loosely rooted in society and tightly in religion and this is the reason why the application of the de Martinian theory into interpretation of current society does not succeed without difficulties.

In social theory, the concept of agency is dichotomous; it refers either to rational agency or, as its opposite, the residual category of habitual agency.

The dichotomy is value-laden, because only the rational acts constitute genuine agency, referring to social change. Also in feminist research, habitual agency is, for the most, portrayed as something repressive with conservative inertia, not having to do with social or cultural innovations. Women are linked with repetition in a broad area of social studies and this is something the feminist studies have tried to problematize (see e.g. FELSKE R. 2000). Behind this link lie several factors, such as the supposed closer connection of women with “biological nature” with its rhythms, with pre-industrial time or, as in Marxist studies of everyday life – with consumption. However, there are scholars in the field of everyday life studies who regard repetitive, habitual acts as creative, having an aim to hold the world in place (see SMITH D. 1987, GARDINER M. 2000). According to Felski, it is a mistake to see habitual acts solely as intrinsically reactionary; repetitions and habitual acts in everyday life constitute an essential part of our embeddedness in everyday life and our existence as social beings. This comes close to Giddens’ (GIDDENS A. 1991: 39-40) way of thinking of routine. I think that the point which is closest to de Martino’s way of conceptualizing agency is in the following thought of Giddens. Routine, according to Giddens (*ibidem*: 39), helps to «constitute a formed framework for existence by cultivating a sense of ‘being’, and its separation from non-being, which is elemental to ontological security». Might the relationship of “minimal agency” to ritual be expressed in the parallel symbolic aims and powers?

By habitual acts Berger and Luckmann (BERGER P.L. - LUCKMANN T. 1966: 66-67) point to the grounds of all human activity. By habitualization it is possible to create the first ingredients of new structures, sites and possibilities. Habitualization precedes thus any institutionalization. This is precisely what their predecessors have been thinking; William James (JAMES W. 1950 [1890]: I, 121) has called habit as a source of power of society. According to him: «Habit is the enormous fly-wheel of society, it is the most precarious conservative agent. It alone is what keeps us all within the bounds of ordinance [...]. It alone prevents the hardest and most repulsive walks of life from being deserted by those brought up to tread therein». In the pragmatist tradition, C. S. Peirce takes the furthest step and regards habit as «the logical development of your germinal nature», as a requisite of thinking and learning. Peirce emphasizes that habit and thought shall not be put asunder because they are the two sides of human action. Agency is not some discrete individual actions but a pattern where habit plays the most significant role. (PEIRCE C. S. 1982: 5, 487; see KILPINEN E. 2000).

In all above ways of conceptualizing routine or repetitive agency one thing is missing which is clearly thematized in Arendt’s thoughts of agency. Even

though pragmatists, such as Peirce and James, write of reflexivity of habitual agency, they do not explicate the content of innovative content of human agency, as does Arendt. For her, natality is the metaphor of this unexpectedness. As in birth, also in agency something which is new comes up like a miracle: "Action has the closest connection with the human condition of natality; the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, for acting" (ARENDT H. 1958: 9).

The ingredients which the mothers used for the grounds of their minimal agency, originated from their immediate life and world view. The means of holding on to the world were powerful because their significance originated in a well-known, shared and a together interpreted world. In this sense they remind of de Martino's ideas of shared symbols and myths with which people construct new wholes in the threatening situation of crisis della presenza. I think that natality lies in the mothers capacity to shape firm grips of these ingredients of their everyday life. And that social order is coming along also tomorrow, is precisely the unexpected and miracle-like thing for my ethnographer's mind.

## Notes

<sup>(1)</sup> The research project "Expressions of Suffering – Ethnographies of Illness Experience in Contemporary Finnish Contexts" (funded by The Academy of Finland 1999-2004) studies illness experiences and their representations as cultural questions. This interdisciplinary research project that I am in charge of is based on cooperation of altogether nine scholars (see our web page <http://medanthro.kaapeli.fi> and for more details also HONKASALO M.-L. - UTRIAINEN T. - LEPPÖ A. eds. 2004).

<sup>(2)</sup> I conducted my ethnographic field work in North Karelia, in the easternmost part of Finland. It is a social and cultural periphery, constructed by historical layers of political acts. It has always differed from the more affluent parts of the country in terms of non-wealth, unemployment rate etc. – and also morbidity and mortality rates of various illnesses, notably heart diseases and depression but also of violent death. According to some historians (e.g. TURPEINEN O. 1986) and health researchers (KANNISTO V. 1947), people in North Karelia have died earlier than in other parts of the country, as long as there are available reliable statistics. Thus the "eastern excess in mortality" (KOSKINEN S. 1994) – which is about 50% among middle-aged men with respect to mortality in heart diseases, and % in connection with suicide and violent death more generally – is embedded in the "Eastern question" of our country, as I would like to call it. Through centuries, the eastern parts have been more or less influenced by the Russian empire and the western parts have had more intense interaction with Sweden. The numerous repeating wars between the two empires were carried out in the eastern areas of Finland. After the wars, the areas were times ceded to Russia, times to Sweden; in 1809 the whole country was ceded to Russia. Religion was distributed from Russia to the eastern areas in the form of Russian Orthodoxy, and from Sweden to the western areas of Finland first in the form of Roman Catholicism and, later in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in the Lutheran variation. Depending on

who won the war, often one of the consequences would have been the mass re-baptizing of the population (BJÖRN I. 1991, HAMYNEN T. 1993). Sometimes the Lutheran Finns were forced to convert to the Orthodox religion, sometimes they did not find any other possibility than to give their consent to the Lutheran church. Several of them fled, and many died. Through such means, continuous wars caused poverty as well as a loss of homes and identities. Consequently, western Finland has developed more in peace and thus has become wealthier, and it still is partly inhabited by a Swedish-speaking minority. Source of livelihood has differentiated historically between East and West. The eastern parts of the country have established agriculture through *kaskiviljely*... which has not been the case in the western areas. Since centuries, the eastern parts have relied on forest work and agriculture in small farms. Up to the 1960s, Finnish forest industry as well as paper and pulp industry had made use of technology which was based on the semi-manual work of the lumberjacks in the forests. At that time, the North Karelian area was able to support tens of thousands of lumberjacks who were working in the forests during the winter times, and in the small agriculture during the summers. From the beginning of the 1960s, due to technological changes in the machinery of forest work, the economic system, based on a combination of small-scale agriculture and forest work, did not provide enough income for the resident families. A great transforming move was thereby initiated, and from the end of the 1960s, over 40% of the residents of the rural municipalities eventually moved to the town of the local area, or to the cities of the southern and western parts of the country, or to Sweden. Consequently, what followed, can be defined as *diaspora*. This is a term which was introduced already in 1964 by a local teacher and writer, Siiri Mekri, in the local newsletter *Pogostan Sanomat*. She explicitly compares the Jewish diaspora with the present situation of people who "still go on moving to other parts of Finland" (1964: 8). She started to organize a column for people who had moved out of the municipality, collected their writings, poems, and photos from their family reunions and so on. The column became extremely popular. Her way of participating as an active editor of the column was in accordance with how people generally act in diaspora: they maintain memories, images and myths of the original homeland (SAFRAN S. 1991). In the 1960s and 1970s the newsletter contained several stories where North Karelian people living in the southern Finland wrote about their roots and their longing for the "genuine" homeland.

I did my one year-long field work in this emptying area, among people who remained. Their motives were various, some remained because they did not have other alternatives, some had tried work in Southern Finland and had returned. Some wanted to stay. My sample was different from those in the current diaspora studies, where the interest is mainly on (transnational) people who move, are in motion, as refugees, exiles, in search of new identity.

<sup>(3)</sup> HONKASALO M.-L. - UTRIAINEN T. - Leppo A. eds. 2004, HONKASALO M.-L. - HINKKANEN R. 2002, HONKASALO M.-L. 2003. I studied de Martino's philosophy and anthropology at the University of Rome, La Sapienza, 2002-2003 and become acquainted with the Italian contemporary Demartinian school.

<sup>(4)</sup> About secularity, see HERVIER-LEGER D. 2000, BRUCE S. (2002).

<sup>(5)</sup> In this article, I use interviews of elderly villagers, mostly mothers.

<sup>(6)</sup> The concept of historical agency comes from Italian historicism, notably from Benedetto Croce. As a task for anthropology, historical agency means "historicizing the Other", ie. providing the subaltern classes with the possibility for authorship, and of agency.

<sup>(7)</sup> DE MARTINO E. 1975 [1958], 3, *il rischio di non esserci*. The other side of *non-esserci* is the state of nothingness, or non-being. The threat of non-being is an essential content of human suffering.

<sup>(8)</sup> De Martino understands rituals as symbolic practices with the aim to protect people and shelter their *presenza* and agency in the world. Myths are important in this context because with them it is possible to transcend time. For de Martino, religion and magic are the same, *alta e bassa magia*. There are ethnographic grounds for this categorization because Italian rituals in the South are historically layered and contained ingredients from popular religion and Catholicism.

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