



LAURA STARK

Peasants, Pilgrims, and Sacred Promises

Ritual and the Supernatural in Orthodox Karelian Folk Religion

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Contents

Preface and acknowledgments	7
Notes on translation and referencing of texts	9
Introduction	11
Background of this study	11
Source materials and themes	12
Syncretism in Orthodox Karelian folk religion	14
Comparing different modes of ritual activity	15
Structure, agency and voice	16
Remarks on the demarcation of the research focus	17
Folk religion and the sacred	20
The concept of the sacred	20
The nature of ritual	24
Folk religion – some defining characteristics	28
Folk religion in Orthodox Karelia	34
Prior research and historical overview	34
Reciprocity and exchange in Orthodox Karelian folk religion	39
Pre-Christian beliefs: other worlds and <i>väki</i> -force	42
Sacred agents	50
Pilgrimage and monasteries	54
Types of ritual examined in this study	60
The problem of folk religion's fuzzy taxonomies	62
Two ritual complexes: sacred boundaries and sacred centers	70
 I. SACRED BOUNDARIES – NATURE SPIRITS, SAINTS AND THE DEAD IN THE MAINTENANCE OF CULTURAL ORDER	
Boundaries against disorder	75
Illness: disorder in the human body	77
<i>Nenä</i> illness and <i>proškenja</i> rites	77
Moral orientations and the <i>tietäjä</i> 's authority: aggressive versus conciliatory healing rites	81
Divination: the role of the ritual specialist in the production of knowledge	88
<i>Proškenja</i> rituals and the 'open' body	99
Falling down and "standing up straight"	102
The role of 'thinking' in <i>nenä</i> infection	105

Farm versus forest: disorder in the resource zone shared by humans and the forest 111

Cattle and the forest spirit 111

Offerings to saints in the village chapel 117

Summer: a time of temporary truce with the forest 119

Christianized nature spirits and forest saints in boundary maintenance 124

The complex society of the “other side”: forest as mirror for the human community 133

The poor and the dead: communal cohesion and disorder in the margins 138

Incorporating the dead into the community of the living 138

Memorial rites and the maintenance of socio-economic equilibrium 142

The nature/culture dichotomy in communal self-definition 147

II. SACRED CENTERS – CULTURAL IDEALS AND PILGRIMAGE TO MONASTERIES

The pilgrimage vow and sacred ideals 157

A cult of traces 167

Magnificent wealth versus ascetic poverty 169

III. THE DUAL SACRED – COMPARING THE TWO SACRED COMPLEXES

Competition, renunciation and territoriality: two complexes, different ethics 175

Icons, illness and healing 177

Sacred agents and access to strategic information 183

Sacred time, place, and bodily movement 186

Conclusion: the sacred divided 192

Appendix 1: Calendar of most common *praasniekka* festivals in traditional Orthodox Karelia 199

Appendix 2: Map of Historical Comprising Orthodox Karelia 200

Notes 201

Abbreviations for archival source materials 218

Literature cited 218

Index 227

Preface and acknowledgments

This study is the outcome of an ongoing interest in ritual, magic, folk religion, and pilgrimage, and in it I bring together the topics of previous articles (Stark 1994, 1995, 1996; Stark-Arola 1997, 1998c, 1999a, 1999b) within the same framework of analysis. Because I feel that the material dealt with in this book deserves future attention and further study, I have sought to present it in a structured form that may lend itself more fruitfully to further analysis – that is, as a synchronic overview of cultural thought. Any study of the textual materials housed in the Finnish Literature Society Folklore Archives can only account for a small part of the phenomena and concepts depicted therein, no matter how strictly one delimits one's corpus of source texts. In fact, a single study can only begin to scratch the surface of the possible interpretations and theoretical approaches which can be applied to these materials. The present book is the result of an effort to approach a body of source materials which caught my interest some years ago but which for a long time was difficult to come to grips with analytically. The more closely I looked at this material, the more I became convinced that to separate pilgrimage from ritual activities surrounding the dead or nature spirits, or to consider Christian saints separately from nature spirits was to draw an artificial boundary where, at the lowest social levels of the semi-literate rural populace, the existence of such a boundary was questionable.

Bringing all of these spheres of belief and ritual together and looking more closely at their role in social categorization and cultural order was the logical next step, partly because the source materials themselves, as a product of the collection paradigm under which they were recorded, lend themselves more fruitfully to an investigation of social order and consensus than to an analysis of contestation and fragmentation or a diachronic analysis historical process and change. The notion of tradition inherent in the 19th- and early 20th-century collector's task presupposed an interest in collectively-held concepts and values, not to mention continuity and stability through time: collectors and informants tended to focus on the types of information that most people could recognize and agree upon easily, which had been transmitted from generation to generation within the community. Second, the uneven and unsystematic way in which the material was collected, with some periods and localities being over-represented and some not represented at all, makes it difficult if not impossible to trace out processes of change taking place in social behavior and cultural thought over time. My aim has therefore been to organize the material examined here within a framework which highlights its function and meaning from the folk or emic perspective, while at the same time suggesting its potential for the future application of other, possibly more dynamic, process- or practice-oriented theories; these are already touched upon in my discussions of body concepts, agency, the role of the ritual specialist, the interplay between narrative and ritual

movement in pilgrimage, and the cognitive aspects involved in seeing objects and supranormal entities as anthro-pomorphic agents.

A number of persons have assisted me in the writing of this book. I wish to thank Irma-Riitta Järvinen for fruitful discussions on the topic of folk religion, Lauri Harvilahti and Elina Rahimova for their help in the translation of terms in Orthodox Karelian incantations, and Ilkka Pyysiäinen, Jyrki Pöysä, and Anna-Leena Siikala, each of whom read through earlier drafts of this manuscript and offered valuable criticism and advice. Teuvo Laitila and Senni Timonen have provided useful comments to earlier papers on the topics of this study; Senni Timonen also assisted in the translation of difficult terms. My thanks go to Eija Stark for compiling the Index, and I am grateful to the staff at the libraries and Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society, and the Karelian Language Archives of the Research Institute for the Languages of Finland for their assistance in finding source materials. My early interest in pilgrimage was given encouragement at a meeting held by the Valamo research group led by Hannu Kilpeläinen, and my work in progress benefitted greatly from two conferences on folk religion organized by Prof. Ülo Valk and the Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore at the University of Tartu. Satu Apo's work on dynamistic *väki* forces and Veikko Anttonen's work on the nature of the sacred and their support of my research interests have also been instrumental in the completion of this study. The research for this book was funded by the University of Helsinki research project *Ethnic Traditions and Societal Change: Minority Cultures in Northeastern Europe and Siberia* led by Anna-Leena Siikala.

Most anthropologists and folklorists working on the topic of folk religion can express their debt of thanks to living persons, those with whom they have lived in the field, who inspired them in their research or who provided useful information. As a researcher relying on archival material, my gratitude must be expressed, far too late in most cases, to the men and women who believed in the value of Karelian folk culture and dedicated their time and energy to collecting and recording it, often from their own neighbors and family, or even from their own memories. Starting in the latter half of the 19th century and continuing today, literally thousands of tradition enthusiasts in Finland and Karelia from all walks of life participated in one of the greatest folklore collection efforts in history, believing that someday the information they gathered on past lifeways would be of use to researchers. While I do not presume that my own study is worthy of their faith and foresight, I am grateful for their voices speaking across the decades, because what they have to say is far more evocative of a lost world of ritual knowledge than any model a researcher could construct.

Notes on translation and referencing of texts

All translations from the Finnish are mine unless otherwise stated. In the course of translating I have received linguistic assistance from several experts on Finnish language, Finnish and Karelian dialects, and Kalevala metre poetry at the University of Helsinki, the Finnish Literature Society and the Research Institute for the Languages of Finland. All mistakes are naturally my own.

Principles of translation

The translation of the folklore texts cited as examples in this study represents a compromise between preserving as closely as possible the original meaning of the text and making it comprehensible to English-language readers not necessarily familiar with the Finnish or Karelian languages. Grammatical and stylistic structures peculiar to Finnish and Karelian oral speech (mixed tenses, non-standard verbal forms, gaps and ‘missing’ information to be supplied by the listener from context, etc.) have been modified so as to be comprehensible to the English-language reader while still retaining as much of the original meaning as possible.

Referencing of folklore texts

The folklore texts presented as numbered examples in the main text are translations of original texts housed in the collections of either the (1) Finnish Literature Society Folklore Archives or the (2) Karelian Language Archives of the Research Institute for the Languages of Finland (KKTK–KKA). The references following the numbered examples contain the following information: first, the parish or locality in which the folklore item was collected; second, the year the folklore item was received by the Folklore Archives or the time period in which the item was recorded. The third item of information shown is the collector’s or sender’s name, sometimes followed by the collection series (KT, VK, KRK), as well as the number under which the folklore item is housed in manuscript form. The final entry, preceded by a dash (–), is the name of the informant, if different from the collector and if known, followed by other relevant information concerning the informant (occupation, marital status, year of birth, etc.). A key to abbreviations for collections is provided at the end of this book in the section *Literature Cited*.

Notes on pronunciation for terms from the original texts

The examples given below are rough approximations of corresponding sounds in English, and do not strive for precise phonetic accuracy.

Vowels

ä like a in cat

ö like German ö or French eu; like English e but with more strongly rounded lips

y like German ü or French u; like English i but with tightly rounded lips

u like oo in ooze (but lips more pursed)

o like ow in slow

e resembles e in set

a like a in father

i like ee in see

Consonants

š like sh in fish

h like h in hen

j like y in yes

g like g in gold

r like Spanish r (slightly rolled)

Diphthongs

ai like ai in aisle

ei like ey in hey

oi like oi in voice

ui like uy in Spanish muy

yi resembles ui in French suis

äi ä followed by a short i in the same syllable

öi ö followed by a short i in the same syllable

au resembles ow in cow

eu e followed by short u in the same syllable

iu i followed by short u in the same syllable

ou like o in so but more rounded

äy ä followed by a short y in the same syllable

öy ö followed by a short y in the same syllable

ie like ie in Spanish bien

uo like uo in Italian buona

yö y followed by a short ö in the same syllable

Word stress is always on the first syllable. Double vowels and double consonants indicate sounds of greater length. The sounds written kk or pp, for example, can be approximated in English by pronouncing the word pairs “black cat” or “top part” (note the pause before the release of breath). Long vowels are enunciated for slightly longer than short vowels, as in the English words (whose spelling does not reflect vowel length): bee (long) versus beetle (short).

Introduction

Background of this study

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. On one side lies Western Europe, with its history of Roman Catholic influence and legacy of Roman legal, administrative, and cultural influence. On the other side lies the cultures of Eastern or Orthodox Europe, heirs to the Byzantine Empire. This lengthy border, which extends from the Barents Sea in the North to the Balkans and Greece in the South, has been the site of intense cultural exchange and development, but also of social and religious tension. The culture and language of the Karelian people, whose area of settlement people straddles this boundary, are no exception, having been shaped by influences from all points of the compass. So too has the folklore scholarship surrounding Karelia been subject to conflicting interpretations regarding the region's significance for Finnish and Russian culture and heritage, and for the Karelians themselves (see Anttonen & Kuusi 1999:256; Anttonen 2000:262). Finnish folklorists have long seen Orthodox Karelia as one of the regions in which Finnic folk traditions were preserved the longest, the place from which answers to questions concerning the prehistory of the Finnish people could be sought. A significant portion of the folklore material that went into the compilation of the Finnish national epic, the *Kalevala*, was collected by Elias Lönnrot from Archangel Karelia. And in the early decades of the 20th century, many of the tradition bearers whose repertoires were seen to represent Finnish traditional song and folk poetry hailed from either Archangel or Ladoga Karelia (Haavio 1943). Particularly Ladoga Karelian singers toured and exhibited their talents at Finnish song festivals and folklore celebrations (e.g. Knuuttila 1986, Asplund 1994).

Yet at the same time that 19th- and early 20th-century Finnish collectors sought to harvest the rich tradition of Kalevala meter¹ folk poetry from Orthodox Karelia, they could not help noticing the presence of traditions and customs which they rightly recognized as influenced by both the Orthodox religion and Russian culture thus distinct from those practiced in

Lutheran Finland. These ritual practices centered on the village chapel and graveyard, and were directed at saints and the dead. Customs and rites directed at supernatural beings, especially nature spirits (forest spirit, water spirit, earth spirit, etc.), also showed strong influences from Orthodox Christianity. Finnish scholars recorded and analyzed these customs and rites because they found them to contain elements of older Finnic pre-Christian beliefs, but in many cases the syncretic nature of this material presented them with problems. In order to make Orthodox Karelian ritual beliefs and practices relevant for research paradigms of the late 19th- and early 20th-centuries, paradigms which included a focus on the origins and development of folklore and folk belief and the reconstruction of a unified Finnish or Balto-Finnic heritage, it was necessary to reduce them to units of ancient Finnic tradition which could be analyzed within the Historic-Geographic framework of the period. This meant first extracting the apparently ancient Balto-Finnic customs from the Orthodox shape and context in which they appeared, and teasing apart the different syncretic strands in order to trace out pre-Christian Finnish thought and its genetic linkages to the folk beliefs and practices of other Finnic and Finno-Ugric groups.

Such a separation of syncretically interwoven elements was not an easy task. Because belief proved easier than ritual to distill from its Orthodox influences, most holistic, systematic and theoretical approaches to popular religious phenomena tended to focus on *folk beliefs* (regarding the dead, nature spirits, etc.) rather than on ritual performances or ritual customs – although descriptive articles on individual rites (such as sacrificial festivals) did appear in the Finnish folkloristic literature from the 1890s onwards.

It is the aim of this book to attempt to supplement our knowledge of Orthodox Karelian rituals by focusing on popular religious ritual in the regions of Archangel (*Viena*) Karelia, Olonets (*Aunus*) Karelia, and Ladoga Karelia. This topic is approached through a holistic, systematic and meaning-oriented perspective, utilizing the linguistic expressions of cultural concepts recorded in textual descriptions of ritual activity from the late 19th- and early 20th-centuries.

Source materials and themes

The data for this study comes from over 1,000 texts covering a wide range of ritual-related themes, a lengthy time span of 140 years, and a broad regional perspective, encompassing material recorded from Ladoga Karelia, Olonets Karelia, and Archangel Karelia (see Map). These texts were recorded by Finnish and Karelian folklore collectors as well as ‘writing folk informants’² during the period 1825–1966, and are currently housed in the Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society, located in Helsinki. They represent a world view linked to rituals practiced over a broad geographical area during the 19th century and, to some extent (particularly in outlying areas), into the early decades of the 20th century as well. For this study I have brought together folklore materials hitherto considered to represent separate, even unrelated

genres, and have analyzed them as a single corpus. The geographic breakdown of the texts is as follows: 518 texts from Ladoga Karelia, 301 from Archangel Karelia, and 249 from Olonets Karelia. In order to provide the reader with an overview of the topics addressed in this study, these texts have been loosely divided into thirteen categories on the basis of ritual purpose and the identity of the supernatural agent involved. As will be seen later on, however, a strict taxonomy of supranormal agents and ritual types is not possible nor even desirable when the aim of the study is to uncover the function and meaning of ritual activity, as is the case in this book.

The thirteen categories are as follows: rituals performed when letting cattle out to pasture in spring (287 texts); water-*nenä* and *proškenja* rituals directed at the water or water spirit(s) (148 texts); forest-*nenä* and *proškenja* rituals directed at the forest or forest spirit(s) (105 texts); Christian saints (95 texts); pilgrimage and monasteries (86 texts); ritual communication with the dead (61 texts); the forest-cover (*metsänpeitto*) and rituals to release farm animals trapped in it (56 texts); cemetery-*nenä* and *proškenja* rituals directed at the dead, graves or the cemetery (51 texts); divination and dreams (44 texts); specific references to vows using the term (*jeäksie/jeäksitteä*) (35 texts); earth-*nenä* and *proškenja* rituals directed at the earth or earth spirit(s) (35 texts); wind-*nenä* and *proškenja* rituals directed at the wind or wind spirit(s) (20 texts); and other *nenä*-illnesses, including those caused by holy icons (13), trees (3) and churches/chapels (9). These materials were selected because they all share a common denominator: they depict ritual relationships between humans and supranormal beings which were based on *reciprocity* and a *shared moral orientation*. The present book thus represents the first comprehensive study of traditional Orthodox Karelian materials dealing with exchange relations between humans and supranormal agents.

These categories of source materials give a superficial indication of the highly diverse spectrum of religious rites encompassed by the material in this book. While previously addressed as separate issues in Finnish studies of folk belief, folk medicine, calendrical rituals, etc., the comprehensive treatment of this corpus was delayed due to its tendency to fall through a number of epistemological gaps. First, the Kalevala meter incantations in this material do not speak to subjects which have traditionally been of interest to scholars on Kalevalaic epic, namely mythological and heroic themes and motifs. Second, the fact that this material encompasses a wide range of different rites for the healing of indeterminate illnesses has rendered it cumbersome for use in folk medicine research; and finally, the fact that many of its themes can be traced back to Russian Orthodox culture and religion has reduced its usefulness for Finnish scholars seeking to uncover the essence and roots of older *Finnic* thought from Karelian beliefs and rites. Moreover, the rituals dealt with here are characterized by seemingly random syncretic fusions, combinations of elements and influences deriving from official Orthodoxy, pre-Christian ethnic religion, and popular innovations and interpretations of Orthodox doctrine.

Syncretism in Orthodox Karelian folk religion

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries when these ritual descriptions were collected, the traditional cultures of Archangel, Olonets and Ladoga Karelia had, for nearly a millennium, been in a symbiotic relationship with Russian Orthodox Christianity. The Karelian culture left its mark on religious customs and art, and the legacy of Orthodoxy in turn deeply influenced Karelian traditions.³ It is therefore not surprising that the rituals discussed in this book display numerous syncretic elements, fusions of official Christian teachings and pre-Christian ethnic folk belief.⁴ Following the anthropological tradition of distinguishing between official and unofficial forms of religious belief and practice, I have designated both the religious rituals carried out by ordinary Karelian peasants⁵ and the folk beliefs underlying them *folk religion*. Historically, Orthodox Karelian folk religious customs were seen by observers to be either misconstruals of official religious dogma based on ignorance within the lower stratum of agrarian society, or the ‘corruption’ of a purer form of ancient Finnic-Karelian ethnic belief following the introduction of Christianity to the area. The present study, on the other hand, approaches these syncretic fusions as functional adaptations to the needs of everyday life and social continuity. Admittedly, the seemingly unsystematic nature of these syncretisms does not make it easy for the researcher to identify formal patterns and regularities within it. Using as my basis the cross-cultural observations gleaned by anthropologists over the past decades regarding the ways in which folk or popular religion differs from official religion, I have sought to identify the common denominators which situate varied and seemingly unrelated religious phenomena within the same theoretical framework. These common denominators include: (1) the fact that both involved an ethic of exchange and reciprocity and (2) both were aimed at maintaining the integrity of body, farm, and community rather than seeking the salvation of the individual soul. The recognition of these common denominators shifts the focus away from the forms themselves, in all their colorful and seemingly chaotic variety, and towards the *function* of syncretic forms in social life. I strive to show that within Orthodox Karelian folk religion, Christian and pre-Christian forms of belief and practice were selectively adopted and moulded by social actors to produce a culturally intelligible and, to some degree, systematic whole. The questions raised by this study include: what elements were appropriated from Christianity to this folk religious system, and for what purpose? What social and cultural concerns were dealt with through folk religion at the level of everyday practice? What were the cultural schemas to which forms adopted into this syncretic system were made to conform? And finally, what were the motivating factors or catalysts in the system of reciprocity which maintained the ritual communication between humans and supernatural agents, and drove the system of exchange?

Comparing different modes of ritual activity

The primary aim of this book is the construction of a theoretical framework within which it is possible to analyze the folklore regarding two modes of ritual activity in Orthodox Karelia which have not yet been examined together as parts of a single phenomenon. These two modes of ritual activity are (1) communicative rites directed at nature spirits, the dead and local saints, and (2) pilgrimage to monasteries. Before I enter into a comparison between these two modes of ritual activity, an explanation of why I consider communicative rites directed at nature spirits, the dead and local saints to constitute a single mode of ritual activity in the first place may be in order. Rituals associated with the dead, nature spirits, and the saints represented in the holy icons of local village chapels all shared characteristics in common. Among these was the fact that in certain situations, humans engaged in two-way communication with these supranormal beings. Humans communicated to the dead, saints and nature spirits through symbolic gestures, offerings of gifts and verbal formulas, and these supranormal beings communicated to humans in turn through *dreams*. The most striking shared characteristic, however, was the belief that these entities could become easily “angered” and could cause supernatural illness through the infection of *väki*-force in the human body. Ritual communication was addressed to all of these entities, and gifts were given to them, in order to cure the illness.

It is perhaps not surprising that Orthodox Karelian rites directed at nature spirits, the dead, and local saints have never been examined within the same framework of analysis as pilgrimage to monasteries. At first glance, the two spheres of activity would seem to have little to do with each other. The two types of ritual activity were carried out in entirely different milieus, they were undertaken for different reasons, and they involved different types of activities – the former involved prayer and journeys on foot, while the latter utilized the offering of concrete gifts and use of Kalevala meter incantations. It is only when we delve deeper into the accounts of these ritual activities given by Orthodox Karelian informants, and begin from the ‘lowest common denominators’ shared by these two types of ritual activity that we begin to discern a pattern.

For example, both types of ritual activity (1) involved communication with sentient supernatural agents, and (2) were based on reciprocal relations of exchange with these agents. (3) This exchange was guided by collectively shared ethics and moral ‘contracts’, and (4) both types of ritual activity were responses to ‘crisis’ or ‘disorder’ in the life of the individual and/or community.

The recognition of these similarities in my research has led me to a consideration of the *differences* between the two modes of ritual activity, which could be expressed in the form of questions such as: what types of crisis or disorder were addressed within local rites versus pilgrimage? Why were nature spirits, the dead, and saints seen to infect humans with a supernatural illness while the holy men associated with monasteries were not? Similarly, why were holy icons *in local village chapels* seen to be able

to infect with illness while holy icons *in monasteries* were not? Why did the *village chapels themselves* infect with supernatural illness? What does the fact that persons could be infected with this illness by just ‘thinking’ about it tell us about the cultural function of this explanatory illness schema? Why did Christian holy figures such as St. George and the Virgin Mary sometimes play the same role of as nature spirits in annual rites? Why were the spirits of the forest and water referred to as ‘Christians’ in ritual incantations? Why were the poor of the community given food during rituals intended to commemorate the dead? Why were the holy men associated with monasteries seen to be able to look into pilgrims’ hearts and know their innermost secrets while nature spirits and the dead could not? These are just some of the questions that will be explored in the pages of this book.

Structure, agency and voice

In the pages which follow I undertake a structural mapping of two ritual complexes, their functions in social life and the way in which time, space, and cultural ideals were organized and perceived through them. I describe this structure as constituted through the motivated ritual and narrative behavior of individuals actors in everyday life, that is, I pay attention to individual choice in action while striving to explain how its result worked towards sustaining the social order. The present study therefore strives for a theoretical balance between agent and society. Unlike theorists of social structure such as Marcel Mauss and Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose theories saw individual interests and beliefs as largely determined by social forms and human agency thus reduced to a minor role, I argue that knowledgeable individuals acted strategically to serve their own interests (to alleviate disorder), and in doing so were aware of the importance of society’s continuity for their own well-being.

Balancing between a structural model and the experiences of individual agents means that while this study traces out an analytic, etic model constructed by myself, I strive to give equal weight to the emic interpretations of informants, to their ‘situated knowledges’ grounded in experience (Haraway 1992:313) which are much closer to the subject matter at hand than is my own. In the interests of intellectual accountability, I provide numerous examples in order to let the ‘voices’ of the performers and narrators be heard, and to open up my own analysis to the scrutiny of the reader by supplying my source texts in English translation.

The voices of the informants in this study have gone through many levels of decontextualization, from the memory of the narrator, to written notes, a text in an archive, and finally as an example appearing in the context of the present study. The folklore texts used in this study are not, therefore, a direct reflection of cultural or traditional categories, beliefs, or attitudes. The material used in this study has already gone through one stage of ‘interpretation’ and ‘filtering’ by folk informants who selectively ‘remembered’ ritual knowledge, often adding their own commentary and

Lying on the border between eastern and western Christendom, Orthodox Karelia preserved its unique religious culture into the 19th and 20th centuries, when it was described and recorded by Finnish and Karelian folklore collectors. This colorful array of ritulas and beliefs involving nature spirits, saints, the dead, and pilgrimage to monasteries represented a unique fusion of official Church ritual and doctrine and pre-Christian ethnic folk belief. This book undertakes a fascinating exploration into many aspects of Orthodox Karelian ritual life: beliefs in supernatural forces, folk models of illness, body concepts, divination, holy icons, the role of the ritual specialist and healer, the divide between nature and culture, images of forest, the cult of the dead, and the popular image of monasteries and holy hermits. It will appeal to anyone interested in popular religion, the cognitive study of religion, ritual studies, medical anthropology, and the folk traditions and symbolism of the Balto-Finnic peoples.



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