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## **Finnish Folkloristic Research on Children's Lore**

I will present an overview of current Finnish folkloristic research on children's lore, based on a recently published research anthology, "From the Playgrounds: Studies on Children's Lore from the 2000s" (Saarikoski, ed. 2005). The book consists of eleven newly written substantive research articles by folklorists, plus one musicologist, and it represents the majority of areas covered by present folkloristic research on children's cultures in Finland.

Studies on children's lore were introduced in Finnish folkloristics in the 1970s by Professor Leea Virtanen as part of the groundbreaking direction of folkloristic research toward the investigation of contemporary culture and living traditions in the field. The basic perspective and research questions set by Leea Virtanen are still valid in today's research: folklorists do not study the influence of adults on children, but the influence that children exert upon each other and the importance of peer groups and their autonomous activities.

An adult should not, perhaps, approach this tradition on his own terms, asking "how can one influence it?" or "how does it prepare them for adulthood?" This particular children's world exists here and now, with all its peculiarities. One could just as well ask "what have we to learn from this world?. What is it like, being a child in our day? How does the traditional world of childhood differ from that of adults?" (Virtanen 1978: 9).

In the anthology, two trends emerge as having consistently gained in importance since the 1970s: the child-centred and the ethnographic perspectives.

Since the "ethnographic approach" is something of a trend in all branches within the study of man, I shall specify what is meant by it in these studies. First, the studies reveal a wide variety of ethnographic field methods, ranging from different applications of participant observation to thematic and in-depth interviews and the textual analysis of materials written by children. A multi-dimensional description of children's activities is achieved by using a variety of research materials. In the first place, the ethnographic perspective refers to materials produced in interaction with the people studied, or the act of listening to and engaging in dialogue with children, whose knowledge about their life-world is considered accountable and worth investigating (see also Ekrem 2001). Secondly, ethnography means a detailed description of particular children's activities, interpreted as their life experiences in culture; and thirdly, it means the awareness of the researcher of her (his) own position in dialogues with children and in discussions about children.

Children's cultures are granted autonomy through the recognition of their cultural and social otherness vis-à-vis the researcher's own (academic, adult) culture, while sharing and understanding are sought through the consciousness that the researcher has been a

child in another time and place, and that this affects her (his) view on childhood. For example, Anna Anttila (2005) gives a fascinating description of her own experiences of rock music as a child, and of going to the so-called teen-discos in Helsinki in the 1970s, in her study of today's preadolescents' discos, and bases her understanding of the research subject on her own carefully charted, vivid memories, in addition to her multi-type ethnographic field material, videotaped observations, and interviews with children in the discos. Generally held notions of childhood, e.g. the so-called myth of innocence and the "good old times" of childhood, are put in a critical perspective by the researchers.

In studies based on oral history interview methods childhood is seen in a historical context, and, more generally speaking, as a collection of historically bound unique events in the lives of individual children in the particularistic, ethnographic approach. Elina Makkonen, in her local historical study of an industrial community in North-Eastern Finland called Kaltimo, investigates the childhoods of her older interviewees in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as past experiences constructed in present-day narration, and the discourses of "childhood past and present" are formed in her interviews as a dialogue with the researcher, who represents younger generations to the interviewees (Makkonen 2005b; see also Makkonen 2004). Kari Huuskonen (2005) studies childhood in a boarding school for blind and weak-sighted children in Helsinki in the 1950s through the recollections of one especially gifted female narrator. He shows how the idea of the school for the blind on the one hand was formed according to the general upbringing ideals of the time, and on the other hand, how it reflected contemporary normative ideas on abnormality and disability. Through these narratives, Huuskonen studies the experiences of the child as an object of these general ideas, as well as her own construction of subjectivity within these frames.

A constant concern in public discussions about childhood is the "end of childhood", or the pollution of an innocent childhood and the death of children's carefree games, conceived of today as the threat that mass media and information technologies pose to childhood (for discussions of this phenomenon in Finland, see e.g. Virtanen 1981 and various articles in Anttila (ed.) 2004). In empirical studies, however, children's games are shown to be alive and well, and even widening their scope, in today's culture. In particular, imaginary plays (as opposed to rule-based games) and verbal plays, such as the genres of children's riddles and jokes, are described as representative of living traditions in full blossom in studies by Reeli Karimäki (2005; see also Karimäki 2004; Riihelä & Karimäki & al. 2001) and Annikki Kaivola-Bregenhøj (2005).

More generally speaking, the idea of play as a communal realisation of imaginary contents, and of the construction and reconstruction of cultural themes in form of action taken by a play (Caillois 1958; Hirn 1916; Huizinga 1945/1939; Kalliala 1999; Riihelä 2004), can be seen as a more or less pronounced interpretative frame in various studies, ranging from the role-playing games of young adults (Leppälahti 2005; see also Leppälahti 2003) and the discos of preadolescents (Anttila 2005) to constructing gender in the musical cultures of the smallest children (Leppänen 2005) and in stablegirls talking about their hobby (Ojanen 2005), and to negotiating childhood in the readers' column of a children's magazine (Ekrem 2005). The anthropological notion of culture as a communal process of meaning creation, and that of the aesthetics of culture as arts, can

be seen to meet in the notion of play as an interpretative frame for an aesthetically articulated form of meaning creation.

Studies of popular culture proper were initiated in folkloristics in Helsinki in the 1960s, when the products of mass mediated pop culture, or pop lore, began to be considered equal to folklore products in shaping the mindscapes of modern man. Research at that time largely consisted of analyses of the forms and structures of pop cultural products (e.g., Kuusi 1994/1973). The products of culture were divided into three classes: folk culture, popular culture, and high culture, according to the source of the tradition. In generally held notions, this classification also bears a clear value hierarchy, to the extent that low esteem became a part of the definition of popular culture, along with its popularity (Ganetz 1997). Folklorists used to value “pure” folklore over the “unauthentic” contaminated forms. Elsa Enäjärvi-Haavio defined the research subject of her doctoral dissertation in 1932: “By traditional games I mean games that, like popular customs and beliefs, folk-songs and folk-tales, form a spiritual attribute of the people; games that have not been learned from any printed source” (Enäjärvi-Haavio 1932: 7). Traces of this quest for authenticity can be found in studies of children’s lore well into the 1970s, e.g. in Leea Virtanen’s enigmatic description of children as a wild tribe whose ability to isolate themselves from the surrounding adults is the prerequisite for the birth of a specific children’s tradition (Virtanen 1978: 11; see also Virtanen 1981; Makkonen 2005a).

From the 1980s onwards, the change in emphasis from texts to performance and the performance paradigm in folkloristics gave rise to a media-ethnographic approach (e.g., Löfgren 1981; see Drotner 1993), where it is not the products of culture, but the uses and meanings given to them by people in the culture that are in focus. For example, Eero Julkunen (1989) has described the phenomenon of borrowing and transforming media materials in children’s play, which he defined as medialore.

As another example I can mention my own study on the fandom of the Spice Girls (Saarikoski 2005; forthcoming 2006), a phenomenon that broke through into preadolescent girls’ cultures in Finland in the latter part of the 1990s, and which I describe as providing materials for girls in their construction of various aspects of their identities. I present some details from an interview with two girls aged 9 and 7, which was videotaped and stored in the Sound Archive of the Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society in 1998 by researcher Ulla Lipponen. The narrator in the two quotes is the 9-year old girl. In the interview, the girls talk about two rather traditional practices that relate to the fandom of pop idols, collecting items and playing games inspired by the media narrative.

Girl: Autographed photos are the most popular and there’s not an awful lot of them. This one especially was really rare in the beginning... Then when Nea and me, a girl called Nea, got it, then almost everybody started to have it then. I bought one packet and got it again from that, and then a friend of mine didn’t have it, and I traded it for everything she had up for trade and then I exchanged almost all of that with another girl and got it back.

U.L.: You can get many pictures in exchange for one?

Girl: If you’ve got a good one for trading.

An active “I” narrator discusses collecting as a hobby. The hobby, with its components of gathering an individual collection, comparing it with those of others, and consumption and exchange, builds up the subject position of an individual “I” and provide girls with an individualistic identity as consumers and acting citizens of the consuming society. In the second quote, a narrating “we” produces the playgroup, a societal subject and group identity, as well as the pride in all of that, the feeling of “us girls”. The girls’ play with Barbies is based on a scene from the film *Spice Girls – the Movie*.

It was quite funny because hardly anything in our game seemed to go right, in a funny way, even right at the beginning, at the beginning of this book [*Spice Girls – the Movie*], here, we never sang this, we only moved them and then, ‘bye bye’. Then, well, here [in a picture], because Geri’s wearing Mel B’s shoes, her ‘bootsies’ or whatever they are, Mel B jumped on Geri, but we just ‘ha ha ha ha ha ha’ [claps her hands rhythmically on top of each other]. It didn’t like go right. That game was kind of funny.

The film narration is translated into play narration, and further into the verbal narration in the interview. In the translation process, the story has been localized and made personally meaningful by transforming the borrowed characters, motives, and events to suit the girls’ own use. The fun value of the game seems to be created just by the fact that copying the original story does not “go right”. The media story of the Spice Girls has the role of shared knowledge, of cultural competence that makes shared play possible and offers material for it. The girls apply ingredients of the media story selectively and creatively in their spontaneous games. From this basis grows the characteristic entertaining humour, the fun of play.

As to the construction of identity in children’s cultures, the research anthology has a particular focus on gendered and age group identities. In a good half of the articles, the perspectives of women’s studies are applied in various ways (Anttila, Ekrem, Leppänen, Lipponen, Ojanen, Saarikoski 2005). Researchers in women’s studies are keen to listen to and to give voice to girls’ experiences that are typically silenced in hegemonic (male adult) public life, and on the other hand, they pay attention to arenas in which girls occupy a relatively hegemonic position, i.e., those that are in the area of what have been called girlish things, hobbies and activities. The research question here is how ‘girlish’ and ‘boyish’ become defined in culture, or how and what kind of femininities and masculinities are constructed by means of traditions.

Ulla Lipponen (2005/1999) gives a detailed description and an in-depth analysis, based on videotaped and interview materials, of the gender role system that was formed in a complex imaginary role game shared by boys and girls in a schoolyard. This is an exceptional example of a study from the perspective of gender, where it is not just girls that are studied as part of a women’s studies project, but the gender roles of both girls and boys as they are shaped against each other in interaction and in negotiation between the gender groups. Lipponen analyses the gender role system of the play as consisting of two overlapping structures. The formal role hierarchy was based on professional status, where – as a matter of course – boys occupied the highest positions, such as the leader of the hospital and the chief police officer (a double role played by a boy). On the other

hand, there was an informal leadership of girls, based largely on linguistic and social skills; for example, the role of the chief physician-surgeon was played by a girl who was in practice the operational leader of the play hospital.

It can be noted in passing that the game studied by Ulla Lipponen was yet another example of the immersion of pop cultural and folk cultural elements into each other (or the new sensitivity of researchers to this phenomenon), in that the game was modelled after a TV series. There was a specific model series for the hospital game, which was fertilized by a traditional plot of “robbers and police”, while the romantic elements in the TV series were entirely suppressed by the children, in order to create a composition that would suit their own tastes and sense of fun.

If girls are well represented in the recent studies of children’s lore, thanks to the affiliation of many researchers to feminist studies, critical studies of boys’ cultures in the spirit of the emerging new masculinity studies still remain to be seen. Foundational ethnographies of two highly male-dominated subcultures, graffiti painting and break-dance, or b-boying, have, however, been carried out by the folklorist Anne Isomursu, in cooperation with the photographers Tuomas Jääskeläinen and Nina Tuittu. The results were published in two popular picture-books, where the texts consisted largely of the narratives of members of the cultures, edited and written out by the researcher on the basis of her interviews (Isomursu & Jääskeläinen 1998; Isomursu & Tuittu 2005). This kind of narrative and visual ethnography shows subcultures as crafting a local cultural synthesis and forming autonomous schools of artistic creation and evaluation, of thought and action, and ultimately, of lifestyles and world-views.

Of course, some might object that hip hop-based subcultures are youth cultures, and that the study thus belongs to youth research and not to children’s lore. However, many practitioners of these subcultural art forms start the hobby in their early teens or younger. From the viewpoint of cultural research, I can see no point in limiting childhood or youth on the grounds of chronological age. The forms of cultures give no firmer grounds, as cultures of preadolescents (age circa 7 to 13) often in fact show a mixture of forms labelled “childish”, and equally cherished for that, and those both revered and rejected for their being typical for young people and not children. The mixture provides a form of passage between the two more definite life-phases, and the features of both often become most visible in the negotiations of norms and boundaries to be violated or guarded.

Cultural negotiations of age-group orders in various traditions are considered in the studies of children’s lore in the anthology, especially for preadolescents (Anttila, Kaivola-Bregenhøj, Karimäki, Lipponen, Saarikoski 2005). Here, children themselves are engaged in fervent discussion about the norms and boundaries of this somewhat inchoate age-group “betwixt and between”. Carola Ekrem (2005) describes the themes of these discussions in her study of the readers’ column of the Swedish-speaking Finnish children’s magazine *EOS*; these include the many burning questions of love at a young age: should a 9-year-old girl have a boyfriend or not? Can children really fall in love? How should girls and boys behave toward the opposite sex?

The lore and activities of children and preadolescents often show features that are rejected by adults in one way or another. For example, in hegemonic public ideology it is

maintained that children should be asexual, or they should not know about things like sexism, racism or violence. At the same time, children themselves are keen to know about and to discuss all vital aspects of life around them, and to negotiate their own position vis-à-vis this kind of subject matter, as is described in these studies. Researchers into children's lore cannot avoid becoming involved in adult discussions of childhood policies. The position of researchers tends to be that habitually taken by researchers of folk culture, that of defending the autonomy of folk cultures and regarding expressions of culture as valuable in their own right. At the same time, an approach from the viewpoint of women's studies puts traditions in a critical perspective in terms of their capacity to reconstruct and maintain oppressive power structures of culture and the marginalized social positions of those studied. The components of childhood are seen to be defined in a process of cultural and societal negotiation, where children themselves are active, albeit dependent, agents and creators of their own life-worlds.

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