

The Legacy of Lauri Honko

Contemporary Conversations

This issue of *Approaching Religion* is dedicated to the late Professor Lauri Honko. We are very grateful for this opportunity to publish papers written by his followers in the next generation of folklorists and scholars of religion.

LAURI HONKO (6.3.1932–15.7.2002) was one of the most influential Finnish folklorists. In his doctoral dissertation, entitled *Krankheitsprojekte. Untersuchung über eine urtümliche Krankheitserklärung* (Helsinki 1959), he challenged the historical-geographical research method that was formulated in Finland by Julius and Kaarle Krohn during the nineteenth century. Honko's idea was that merely a systematic organisation of large amounts of folklore material in order to reconstruct the original wording, to pinpoint the time and place of origination and the means of distribution was not enough as an outcome of scholarly research. He was very interested in theoretical issues. He maintained the necessity of a broad cultural perspective on ethno-medicine and medical aetiologies. In this investigation he combined classical thinking along historical-geographical lines with ideas from psychology and functionalism. In fact, Lauri Honko was the person who really introduced functionalism into Finnish folkloristics and comparative religion; not only by means of his empirical studies, but also his theoretical writings.

Later on, in his book *Geisterglaube in Ingermanland* (Helsinki 1962), Lauri Honko introduced to the study of folklore even more methods from psychology, social psychology and, to some extent, from anthropology. For this investigation he had dropped the historical-geographical method altogether, for he limited his research material to folklore from Finland. The concept of genre was central to Honko in

this context. He tried to determine the meaning and function of the genre known as 'memorate', that is, personal narratives of supernormal experiences. He related memorate to other kinds of folklore genres when he deemed it to be a source of knowledge about belief. He even succeeded in mapping a schema of how a supernormal experience might come into being, taking into consideration the cultural prerequisites offered by a tradition. He also demonstrated how this kind of experience generated new folklore.

Honko developed the genre theory of folklore by systematising the positioning of various categories of oral prose genres in relation to each other, and, inspired by the writings of Max Weber and some Finnish sociologists, he launched a theory of the ideal type of a folkloric genre. He discussed this topic actively from the 1960s until 1990s, debating, for instance, with Dan Ben-Amos.

During the 1960s and 1970s Honko brought folkloristic research closer to cultural anthropology by shifting the topic gradually from texts to fieldwork and the performers and performances of folklore.

Lauri Honko had had an underlying interest in the *Kalevala* and epic traditions since the 1950s. In 1985 when the Finnish epic *Kalevala*, which had been compiled by Elias Lönnrot one hundred and fifty years earlier, celebrated its anniversary Lauri Honko was the director of the Nordic Institute of Folklore in Turku. During this jubilee year he arranged an international conference on epics, which was attended by a great number of international scholars. At that time Honko was interested in performance studies within folkloristics. The eternal, never-ending variation of folklore items was a central topic.

Honko was deeply involved in international cooperation on folkloristics and had a leading role in

many international organisations. One of his great achievements has been the Folklore Fellows' Summer School, an institution which he launched at the beginning of the 1990s. Interest in the study of epic traditions took Honko to various countries, and finally he encountered his last piece of fieldwork in South India where he was involved in an extensive, joint project with regional colleagues on documenting performances of an epic tradition during its actualizations in religious rituals. The outcome of the combination of epics and performance was the magnum opus *Textualising the Siri Epic* (Helsinki 1998). It was based on meticulous and detailed fieldwork in Kerala, India, where epics are still performed. During this course of study Honko concentrated on how an epic is presided over, used, and performed in real life.

Honko was actively involved in UNESCO activities, particularly in the work of defining the complicated issue of collective authority and the safeguarding of folklore. The result was a recommendation made by UNESCO regarding the safeguarding of traditional culture and folklore. A by-product of this process has been the definition of 'intangible cultural heritage' by UNESCO. Another central topic within Honko's research was the creation of cultural identity, which of course was connected to his interest in national and other epics.

The conference in Turku in 2013 was arranged in order to investigate to what extent the work of Lauri Honko is still relevant. An open call for papers was published and quite a number of abstracts were submitted. From the articles published here we can see that most of the contributions dealt with some problems connected with epics. This folklore genre still raises questions which demand scholarly answers. The scope of the papers submitted here which were related to the study of epics varied from theoretical and research-historical surveys to concrete empirical cases.

However, Honko's research into matters of folk belief is also still influential. It is understandable from the point of view of Honko's dual competence in folkloristics and comparative religion that some of the papers dealt with issues related to folk religion. The scholarly demand for organising research material has even resuscitated an interest in genres. We can see that Honko's influence in folkloristics and comparative religion is still discernible in the current research. His thoughts have been scrutinised and criticised, but they have also been elaborated and refined. This is the way in which scholarship advances. ■

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Guest Editors of *Approaching Religion*

Tommi Laitinen



Conference guests enjoying sights, weather and conversation at the stairs of Turku Cathedral in August 2013.