



## CHAPTER 6

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# Extended Families as Communities of Religious Experience in Late Seventeenth-Century Eastern Finland

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### INTRODUCTION

In the winter of 1681, a young peasant woman named Helga Mielotar stood before the district court of Sulkava, a parish close to the eastern border of the Swedish realm, swearing an oath with her confirmers, 11 men, that she had not practised any witchcraft or superstition. Helga, who had married into an extended family from another parish, had ended up at the bottom of the household hierarchy. As a conflict inside the family escalated after the death of the former master, Helga and her husband separated from the household. After some quarrels over the inheritance from the shared household, Helga's stepdaughter accused her of bewitching another young woman in the family. However, at this point, Helga was already hosting religious festivities in her new neighbourhood, and in the

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end, she was able to get confirmers to swear an oath with her that she had done nothing illegal.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the experience of exclusion in the common household turned into a situation where Helga seems to have had an accepted and even central role in the community. Religious interpretations and practices in an agrarian community were central factors in this process.

This chapter examines religious practices and meaning-making on the grassroots level of social organization in the eastern Finnish province of Savo in the late seventeenth century. The area was characterized by long distances, a harsh climate, and a peripheral position near the eastern border of the Swedish realm. Extended families were common in the eastern areas of the Swedish kingdom in the early modern era.<sup>2</sup> They were often connected to the burn-beat cultivation prevalent in eastern Finland that demanded a large workforce.<sup>3</sup> In eastern Finland, people did not live in densely inhabited villages, and settlements consisted mostly of single farm households that were almost entirely self-sufficient and often located at great distances from each other. This sparse settlement pattern gave the household great importance as a unit of social and economic organization,

<sup>1</sup>District Court Records (Kihlakunnanoikeuksien renovoidut tuomiokirjat, hereafter DCR): Sulkava 16.–17. January 1679, Pien-Savo, KO a: 2: 7–12, The National Archives of Finland, Helsinki (hereafter NAF); DCR Sulkava 14–15. January 1681, Pien-Savo, KO a: 2: 5, NAF. The cases are available at the Digital Archive of the National Archives of Finland, <http://digi.narc.fi/digi/> (Cited 21.10.2020).

<sup>2</sup>Extended families were not only an Eastern Finnish phenomenon, but there was a certain kind of an “eastern family system” that was common in a large area in Eastern Europe. John Hajnal’s theory on western and eastern family models has been complemented by later research. See John Hajnal, “Two kinds on preindustrial household formation system”, in *Family Forms in Historic Europe*, ed. Richard Wall et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Peter Laslett, “Family and household as work group and in group: areas of traditional Europe compared”, in *Family Forms in Historic Europe*, ed. Richard Wall et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Kirsi Sirén, *Suuresta suvusta pieneen perheeseen. Itäsuomalainen perhe 1700-luvulla* (Helsinki: Suomen Historiallinen Seura, 1999), 9–15, 91, 101–104.

<sup>3</sup>Beatrice Moring, “Widowhood options and strategies in preindustrial northern Europe. Socioeconomic differences in household position of the widowed in 18th and 19th century Finland”, *History of the Family* 7 (2002): 80–82. In the province of Savo, the majority of extended families consisted of two married couples, but there were even families of up to five couples. It is not possible to get a complete number or share of all large families through taxation records, because the authorities could document family units separately despite of their at least partial cohabitation. See Kauko Pirinen, *Savon historia II: 1. Rajamaakunta asutusliikkeen aikakautena 1534–1617* (Pieksämäki: Kustannuskiila, 1982), 319–321.

especially in the case of extended families.<sup>4</sup> Extended families usually inhabited the same household, but there were also extended family units formed of separate households and burn-beat partnerships that only worked together in activities related to burn-beat cultivation.<sup>5</sup>

I will approach eastern Finnish rural communities through their religious practices and understandings using the concept of lived religion. Lived religion is understood here as a social process and a part of daily life: it was a way to interact with and participate in one's community.<sup>6</sup> Behind this process, there was an understanding of the world where the realm of the sacred or otherworldly was an integral part. Fundamental ideas about the structure of the cosmos, people's ultimate values, and their efforts to order their reality were expressed in sacred rituals, symbols, and practices.<sup>7</sup> Religion-as-lived is "made up of diverse, complex and ever-changing mixtures of beliefs and practices" that are not necessarily coherent.<sup>8</sup> In the lives of early modern eastern Finnish peasants, the religious ideas and practices taught by the Lutheran church intermingled in varying ways with traits from local religious traditions that reflected the needs of the agrarian society and its ways of explaining and ordering the world.<sup>9</sup>

Using secular lower court records as source material, I will analyse the process of negotiation that led from labelling the young peasant woman Helga Mielotar a malevolent witch to entrusting her with the position of hosting rituals crucial to the success of the agrarian community. Through the case example, I examine how practices of lived religion shaped the

<sup>4</sup>Laura Stark-Arola, *Magic, Body and Social Order. The Construction of Gender through Women's Private Rituals in Traditional Finland* (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 1998), 74–76.

<sup>5</sup>Sirén, *Suuresta suvusta*, 92–93; Elina Waris, *Yksissä leivissä: Ruokolahtelainen perhelaitos ja yhteisöllinen toiminta 1750–1850* (Helsinki: Suomen historiallinen seura, 1999), passim.

<sup>6</sup>Sari Katajala-Peltomaa & Raisa Maria Toivo, "Religion as Experience", in *Lived Religion and the Long Reformation in Northern Europe c. 1300–1700*, eds. Sari Katajala-Peltomaa & Raisa Maria Toivo (Leiden: Brill 2017), 2–3; Sari Katajala-Peltomaa, *Demonic Possession and Lived Religion in Later Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 2.

<sup>7</sup>See Robert A. Orsi, *The Madonna of the 115th Street. Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880–1950*. Third edition (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2010 [1985]), lxi–lxii; Laura Stark, *Peasants, Pilgrims and Sacred Promises. Ritual and the Supernatural in Orthodox Karelian Folk Religion* (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2002), 20–23.

<sup>8</sup>Meredith McGuire, *Lived Religion. Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 185.

<sup>9</sup>Miia Kuha, *Pyhäpäivien vietto varhaismodernin ajan Savossa (vuoteen 1710)* (Jyväskylä: Jyväskylän yliopisto, 2016), 37–39.

relationship of the community and the individual, and how religious interpretations gave meaning to the experiences of the people involved. Within extended families, the individual's social standing in the household—affected by age and gender—played an important role in forming these experiences. The extended family system had special consequences for the position of women, and age and gender hierarchies have been considered to have been stronger in areas where complex family structures were common.<sup>10</sup> According to Raisa Maria Toivo, gender roles were reinforced in religious practice, but religious experiences could also be empowering and allow the negotiation of individual and communal identities.<sup>11</sup> This negotiation is at the centre of this chapter.

Using the term “communities of experience” as an analytical tool, I will consider the nature of eastern Finnish extended families as communities of religious experience. Like “emotional communities”, social communities can be analysed as “communities of experience”, emphasizing that communities are formed around certain shared experiences. People often belong to many communities of experience simultaneously, and these communities can change over time.<sup>12</sup> A community of experience is formed by the shared experiences of people in a certain social situation. On the one hand, when the subjective experiences of each individual are verbalized and interpreted in a given context, these experiences become shared and they create communities of experience.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, the community makes the rules on how to experience for its members, so

<sup>10</sup> On the age and gender hierarchies in extended families, see Sirén, *Suuresta suvusta*, 142–147.

<sup>11</sup> Raisa Maria Toivo, “Gender Performance in Early Modern Religious Life”, in *Revisiting Gender in European History, 1400–1800*, eds. Elise Dermineur, Åsa Karlsson Sjögren & Virginia Langum (New York: Routledge, 2018), 181.

<sup>12</sup> On emotional communities, see Barbara H. Rosenwein, “Worrying about Emotions in History”, *American Historical Review* 107, no. 3 (2002): 842; Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Emotional communities in the early middle ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 23–25. On communities of experience, see Ville Kivimäki, “Reittejä kokemushistoriaan. Menneisyyden kokemus yksilön ja yhteisön vuorovaikutuksena”, in *Eletty historia. Kokemus näkökulmana menneisyyteen*, eds. Johanna Annola, Ville Kivimäki & Antti Malinen (Tampere: Vastapaino, 2019), 25; Sari Katajala-Peltomaa & Raisa Maria Toivo, *Lived Religion and Gender in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), 4–5.

<sup>13</sup> Ella Viitaniemi, “Muurarimestari Kustaa Stenman ja katumaton maailma. Pietismi, kirjoittaminen ja kokemuksen siirtäminen länsisuomalaisella maaseudulla 1700-luvun jälkipuoliskolla”, in *Eletty historia. Kokemus näkökulmana menneisyyteen*, eds. Johanna Annola, Ville Kivimäki & Antti Malinen (Tampere: Vastapaino, 2019), 76–77.

that certain experiences are accepted, while those who will not conform to appropriate experiencing and expression can be excluded.<sup>14</sup> Through the case studied here, it is possible to analyse this process of negotiation that led to both acceptance and exclusion.

As source material, I will use secular lower court records from the province of Savo dating from the late seventeenth century.<sup>15</sup> Especially in the late seventeenth century, secular authorities strove to push through religious uniformity among the populace. Thus, secular court records include the prosecution of religious crimes, such as witchcraft, superstition, blasphemy, and negligence in participating in the official religious practice of the church. Even though the celebration of saints' days and other holy days that had been abolished after the Reformation was considered superstition and idolatry, and the clergy often warned about their celebration from the pulpit, those who carried on celebrating them were not usually prosecuted.<sup>16</sup> However, information regarding the celebration of saints' days sometimes comes up in connection to the examination of other crimes. Then, the accused, the witnesses, the jurors, and the court audience were asked about the nature and prevalence of these festivities. The scribe wrote down the Finnish-speaking rural inhabitants' testimonies in Swedish, and in addition, he translated them from oral culture to be understandable in the learned and legal environment. However, researchers agree that the authorities or the legal culture did not dictate the content of the records; they contain material that the parishioners produced themselves, like how they gave meanings and interpretations to certain events. These explanations also had to be understood and shared by others to be credible.<sup>17</sup> Thus, different kinds of religious practices and patterns of thought and belief can be examined through court records.

<sup>14</sup> See the "Introduction" chapter in this volume.

<sup>15</sup> The cases have been collected as part of the author's PhD study on the observance of holy days in early modern Eastern Finland. See Kuha, *Pyhäpäivien vietto*, 26–29.

<sup>16</sup> Kuha, *Pyhäpäivien vietto*, 133–135. On the reduction of holy days after the Reformation and their continuing celebration, see also Göran Malmstedt, *Helgdagsreduktionen. Övergången från ett medeltida till ett modernt år i Sverige 1500–1800* (Göteborg: Göteborgs universitet, 1994).

<sup>17</sup> On using lower court records as source material, see also Riikka Miettinen, *Suicide in Seventeenth-Century Sweden: The Crime and Legal Practice in the Lower Courts* (Tampere: University of Tampere, 2015), 46–55; Jari Eilola, *Rajapinnoilla. Sallitun ja kielletyn määritteleminen 1600-luvun jälkipuoliskon noituus- ja taikunustapauksissa* (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2003), 41–45; Toivo, "Gender Performance", 170.

Court records can also be used to study family relations, even though the information they give about a certain family is limited and fragmentary. In the courtroom, the focus was on finding out if a crime had been committed, and thus it was not necessary to go deep into the family history of the accused. Thus, to complement this material, I have studied personal tax records. There are certain deficiencies also in this material, especially in the documentation of women, whose names are often missing, and they are instead merely recorded as someone's wife.<sup>18</sup> However, in some cases, these two series of sources can be combined to gain information on the relationships and the lived experience of individuals within these families.

### WITCHCRAFT ACCUSATIONS IN A DIVIDED FAMILY

A peasant woman named Helga Mielotar was accused of witchcraft in the winter court of 1679 in the parish of Sulkava in southern Savo. One of the witnesses, a young girl named Malin, told the court that in the previous spring of 1678, Helga had baked dark bread and sent her stepdaughter to take it to another peasant woman, Margetta Pellitär. However, Margetta was not at home, and instead, her 12-year-old daughter Anna took a small bite of the bread. Malin, who was then with her, noticed that there was something unusual about the bread, so she broke it and threw it out of the window. However, after tasting the bread, Anna would sometimes get dizzy or confused (*ybr i hufvudet*) and tend to fall over, which the members of the household soon ascribed to Helga and the bread she had baked. After Pellitär's family had made the interpretation of witchcraft, Helga's stepdaughter reported her stepmother to the authorities.<sup>19</sup>

Malin described the bread to the judge, saying that it was made of rye flour as usual, but there was some burned salt in it, and some calf hair. According to Malin, the hair belonged to a calf that Helga had inherited

<sup>18</sup>Women were usually marked in the record with the abbreviation *mb*, short from *med hustru*, with wife. The personal tax was only collected from people between 15 and 63 years of age, and others were often left out from the records, except for household masters over the age of 63. In addition, extended families were not always recorded as individual units but scribes might have unified their records by documenting them as nuclear family units. See Moring, "Widowhood options", 81; Veijo Saloheimo, *Savon historia II:2. Savo suurvallan valjaissa 1617–1721* (Kuopio: Kustannuskiila, 1990), 153; Waris, *Ruokolahdelainen perhelaitos*, 17.

<sup>19</sup>DCR Sulkava 16.–17. January 1679, KO a: 2: 7–8, NAF.

from the shared household with Margetta Pellitär's family after she and her husband had separated from it two years earlier.<sup>20</sup> When a family member separated from the farm, he or she was usually given movable property. Women's property mainly consisted of clothes, jewellery, and especially cattle.<sup>21</sup> Malin suspected that Margetta Pellitär had bewitched the calf, which indicates that she was aware of a disagreement between Helga and Margetta. Helga defended herself, saying that she had made the bread for her own children. However, she had given a piece to her stepdaughter to take along when she went to help her father carry the turnips that they were going to plant in the spring. Helga denied having sent anything to Marketta. She said that Anna's dizziness or confusion could be explained by her aunt's insanity, which made the woman run from one village to another. However, nobody knew of Anna having been unhealthy before eating the bread.<sup>22</sup>

The court testimonies reveal how young girls had ended up in the middle of a conflict between the adults of an extended family that was now divided, and how they tried to make sense of the events and their position in the changed situation of the household. Anna's experience of the threatening situation was very corporeal. In early modern culture, difficult emotions could be expressed through symptoms of the body, and social conflicts could be made visible by bodily signs of misfortune. The early modern self was closely interlinked with the community, and the boundaries of the body were understood as permeable, so it was believed that the somatic states of an individual could be influenced by others.<sup>23</sup> When Anna's bodily experience was discussed and shared with the other members of the household, it was interpreted and thus experienced as witchcraft. This experience led to Helga's exclusion and being seen as potentially dangerous to her former community.

What had happened in the extended household that was now split? Both Helga Mielotar and Margetta Pellitär had lived as wives at the Paunola household in the parish of Sulkava in the early 1670s. Before that, the household consisted of two married couples, the master Mats Matsson

<sup>20</sup> DCR Sulkava 16.–17. January 1679, KO a: 2: 7–8, NAF.

<sup>21</sup> Waris, *Ruokolahtelainen perhelaitos*, 105; Anu Pylkkänen, *Puoli vuodetta, lukot ja avaimet. Nainen ja maalaistalous oikeuskäytännön valossa 1660–1710* (Helsinki: Lakimiesliiton kustannus, 1990), 196.

<sup>22</sup> DCR Sulkava 16.–17. January 1679, KO a: 2: 8, NAF.

<sup>23</sup> Jacqueline Van Gent, *Magic, Body and the Self in Eighteenth-Century Sweden* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 8, 89, 165–166, Ebook Central.

with his wife, and his brother Grels—Helga’s husband-to-be—with his former wife. By 1673, Mats had died, as had Grels’ wife. The new master, Mats Bertilson, lived in the main household with his two brothers, one of whom was married. There were also children in the household, but they were not included in the records. At this point, Grels Panain is recorded as a lodger (*inhyyses*) in a separate house, and it is not clear how he was related to the master.<sup>24</sup> Thus, the situation in the farm had gone through a major change in the space of four years. Grels was now in an inferior position, probably living in his own cottage on the farm.<sup>25</sup> At about this time, he decided to remarry and Helga moved to Paunola, to the lowermost position in the household, as the lodger’s second wife. In the records of 1675, Grels and Helga had already disappeared from the farm, but instead Grels’ name pops up in the village of Partala, where he is recorded as being a crofter living on the lands of a manor with his wife.<sup>26</sup> Thus, the separation had occurred three years before the accusations of witchcraft took place (Fig. 6.1).

Helga Mielotar had not been born in the parish of Sulkava, but in the neighbouring parish of Puumala, where she had lived until marrying into the household.<sup>27</sup> Thus, she was an outsider who had come from another parish, and the conflict in her relationship with the other members of the extended family had probably emerged already at the beginning of her married life. Immediately after the accusation of witchcraft had been reported to the authorities, Helga fled back to Puumala, probably to her father’s house.<sup>28</sup> Since Helga had been married for six years and women usually married young in this area, she was probably younger than thirty,

<sup>24</sup> Records of personal tax 1669, 1670, and 1673, in receipt books 8663, 8664, and 8671. Provincial collection of accounts (*Läänintilit*): province of Vyborg and Savonlinna, NAF. According to Sirén, lodgers formed a very heterogeneous group in large families and their position was especially tied to their ability to work. They were needed as temporary workforce in burn-beat cultivation. See Sirén, *Suuresta suvusta*, 67–72.

<sup>25</sup> The patronym indicates that the new master was not the old master’s son and it remains unclear how he was related to Grels and his deceased brother. Sometimes there were two different family lines in a household, and that could be the case here too.

<sup>26</sup> Records of personal tax 1675 (8678). Provincial collection of accounts: province of Vyborg and Savonlinna, NAF. There is also a court case from the autumn 1675 that mentions Grels Paunonen as the nobleman Abraham Pistolekors’ crofter, which means that the separation probably took place already then and not in 1676–1677, which the court records refer to. DCR Sulkava 8.–10. November 1675, KO a: 2: 65, NAF.

<sup>27</sup> DCR Sulkava 16.–17. January 1679, KO a: 2: 7, NAF.

<sup>28</sup> DCR Sulkava 16.–17. January 1679, KO a: 2: 7, NAF.





**Fig. 6.1** The Paunola house is marked with letter A in the left page of the land taxation map drawn in the 1640s. Helga Mielotar lived in the house in the beginning of her married life. NAF, Maanmittaushallitus, Maanmittaushallituksen uudistusarkisto, Maakirjakartat (Land taxation maps), Lille Saffwolax Heradh Sulkava Sochn, MHA C 1: 223–224. The map is available at the Digital Archive of the National Archives of Finland, <http://digi.narc.fi/digi/view.ka?kuid=23740356> (Cited 6.5.2021)

and thus it is likely that her parents were still alive.<sup>29</sup> She might have felt more secure in her father's home than in her new household, but it was also common for people to flee to another locality when they were suspected of a crime. However, she was brought back to Sulkava to be tried.

Those present in court were asked if anyone knew of any previous quarrelling having taken place between the two women, but nobody could tell. However, their husbands had argued over the inheritance when they

<sup>29</sup> In the eighteenth century, women in Eastern Finland usually married at the age of 20 or 21, whereas in Western and Southern Finland the common age at marriage was 24 or 25. Sirén, *Suuresta suvusta*, 117.

separated from the common household.<sup>30</sup> According to Elina Waris, a separation from the extended family was only conducted in extreme circumstances, even though male members did have the formal right to separate themselves.<sup>31</sup> Witchcraft accusations also usually arose only after a conflict had lasted for a long time.<sup>32</sup> Thus, there seems to have been a serious and long-term conflict in the shared household before the separation of Grels and Helga. Households with indirect relationships, such as new spouses and stepchildren, were more likely to fall into crisis. Crises were also more likely to be caused when there was a change in the head of the family.<sup>33</sup>

The experience of young women upon entering marriage was very different in extended families when compared to nuclear family households. In extended families, households were not formed through marriage, but through dividing and merging.<sup>34</sup> According to the patrilineal family structure, women were still considered members of their original kin, and kept their former surnames.<sup>35</sup> Upon entering the household, the bride could be seen as a threat, a potentially dangerous “other”, since she represented a different household from that of the groom’s relatives.<sup>36</sup> Thus, it seems that Helga’s position in the household was experienced as problematic by both her and the other members of the household right from the start, and it is possible that she did not conform to her inferior role. The young daughter-in-law who married into the household was subordinate not only to her husband but also to her parents-in-law and her brothers-in-law and their wives. Thus, younger women did not have the authority of the mistress of the house when entering the household, but they gained more authority with age, and a widow was able to govern the household.<sup>37</sup> Even if the position of the newly wed young wife was inferior, the position of women in general was not poor. Instead, the work effort and experience

<sup>30</sup> There is one very briefly recorded court case from 1675 where Grels demands money from the household. DCR Sulkava 8.–10. November 1675, KO a: 2: 65, NAF. The court records have not survived from the years 1676–1678 when the alleged argument probably took place.

<sup>31</sup> Waris, *Ruokolabtalainen perhelaitos*, 52.

<sup>32</sup> Eilola, *Rajapinnoilla*, 272, 309–310.

<sup>33</sup> Waris, *Ruokolabtalainen perhelaitos*, 51, 184.

<sup>34</sup> Pylkkänen, *Puoli vuodetta*, 194–196; Sirén, *Suuresta suvusta*, 103, 133–134, 141–143.

<sup>35</sup> Olli Matikainen, *Verenperijät. Väkivalta ja yhteisön murros itäisessä Suomessa 1500–1600-luvulla* (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura 2002), 57.

<sup>36</sup> Stark-Arola, *Magic, Body and Social Order*, 156–158.

<sup>37</sup> Sirén, *Suuresta suvusta*, 133–134; Pylkkänen, *Puoli vuodetta*, 194.

of women were valued, and as they got older, women were able to gain positions of authority within the household.<sup>38</sup>

After Malin, the next witness—Bertil, the nephew of Helga’s husband, who was also from the same Paunola household—stepped forward and presented a piece of cloth that had been wrapped around some material that seemed like mash, rye grains, and a piece of green and black bread. He claimed that Helga had left the wrap behind when she left the farm. In addition, she had threatened him with words that implied that he would suffer from hunger in the future.<sup>39</sup> Helga replied that she had not cursed him but wanted to punish him with her words for being so hard on her and making her leave the household with such a small inheritance. Helga also explained that there was only natural medicine for healing illnesses in the cloth wrap. The mash was a mixture of spruce tips and lard, and it was meant for healing dysentery (*blodsot*). There was a cake baked with meze-reon berries that she called *näsänisi* and hoary cinquefoil that she knew as *riisiruoho*, “rickets grass”, for healing rickets (*rijs*). The members of the jury were able to explain that the berries would first make the patient dizzy and nauseous, but then better.<sup>40</sup>

Helga seems to have had some expertise in using medicinal herbs and knowledge of diseases, which makes the case even more interesting. In light of this information, it is also easier to understand why the interpretation of witchcraft was made in the first place. Everyone learned some basic rituals to deal with different situations in everyday life, but Helga’s knowledge of medicinal herbs seems to exceed the everyday level and imply that she had special skills in this area, since other people could not recognize the cakes and mixtures that Helga had prepared. When accused in court, experts in healing often claimed that they used only herbs and no other means, like verbal magic, to avoid punishment. Still, they often knew and used other rituals to cure different kinds of wounds and illnesses, such as incantations. It was also common knowledge that someone who could use

<sup>38</sup> Waris, *Ruokolabtelainen perhelaitos*, 107–110, 187.

<sup>39</sup> “*Wielä sinun sydämes tuima*”. DCR Sulkava 16.–17. January 1679, KO a: 2: 9, NAF. I have translated the meaning of the sentence, which does not easily translate to English as such, according to a Finnish lexicon from the eighteenth century: “*tuimaa sydäntä* i.e. *hju-kaa, ra-axi menee sydän nälkä tulee – blir hungrig*”. Christfrid Ganander, *Nytt Finskt Lexicon* (1787). *Christfrid Gananderin Uusi suomen sanakirja III S–Ö* (Porvoo & Helsinki: Werner Söderström Osakeyhtiö, 1940), f. 176v.

<sup>40</sup> DCR Sulkava 16.–17. January 1679, KO a: 2: 10, NAF.

magical means for good purposes could also use them for ill.<sup>41</sup> It was the shared experience of the situation and context that determined how the skill was interpreted by others.

### THE ST GEORGE'S DAY FEAST "AT HELGA'S"

After examining the witchcraft accusations, the focus of the trial turned to a feast that had taken place the previous spring. Helga was asked about "the toast (*wako*) they had drunk in the woods". Helga said that they—the participants were not named—had not been in the woods but at her home. One peasant woman, who had apparently participated in the feast, was now ill and had to stay at home, but her husband assured the court that she had not been involved in any superstition. When the judge inquired about the event, Helga explained that they prayed to God for their cattle's well-being and protection from wild animals in the summer pastures. When Helga, the witnesses, and the court audience were scolded for not having a better way to pray than in "such drunkenness that would rather make it abuse of God's name", they answered that their ancestors had done the same at sowing time, when it was also time to let the cattle out for the summer season. The jurors, who were farmers in a trusted position, explained that some people would still do this in the countryside, but most had ceased with it, and even those who held on to the custom would now sing godly hymns instead of pagan songs. The local clergymen added that since something like this was forbidden, it was done secretly, and thus it was not possible to know anything more of it.<sup>42</sup>

For eastern Finnish peasant households, religious practice was inherently connected to the agricultural year, and annual celebrations formed an important part of religious life, with local variations between parishes and even smaller units within them. These calendar celebrations, situated at important turning points of the agricultural year, gave people the chance to rest from work and concentrate on maintaining their relationship with the sacred or divine, which was done by bodily and tangible practices, eating, drinking, and performing rituals usually related to livestock and crops. Christian prayers and hymns were a central part of the celebrations, and the same people who took part in them also regarded themselves as good Christians, learned their Catechism—at least to a certain extent—and

<sup>41</sup> For the ambiguity of magic, see Van Gent, *Magic, Body, and the Self*, 159–161.

<sup>42</sup> DCR Sulkava 16.–17. January 1679, KO a: 2: 8–9, NAF.

attended church on many Sundays and holy days of the year. During one of these feasts, a participant claimed that he had come to the feast “to give thanks to God and eat served food”.<sup>43</sup> These celebrations, with their shared rituals and eating and drinking together, strengthened the cohesion of the participating community, and the celebration provided a chance for active religious participation. The meal and the ale carried multiple and multi-layered symbolic meanings that had accumulated over centuries but were also constantly changing. As Raisa Maria Toivo has suggested, the social element that was retained in the Lutheran Communion can also have served as a model for the meal as a means of religious integration between men and the divine, as well as among the members of the community.<sup>44</sup>

At Helga’s trial, one of the jurors testified that another farmer, who was already deceased, had been “at Helga’s” (*hoos Hellga*) at the feast on St George’s day drinking ale in 1677. The juror claimed that this man had gone out of his mind after drinking there, but this did not seem to be of much interest to the judge.<sup>45</sup> Thus, it seems that Helga hosted the festivities at least twice, in the springs of 1677 and 1678. In popular culture, St George’s day was the traditional occasion for letting the cattle out for the summer.<sup>46</sup> From the parish of Ruokolahti, 70 kilometres south of Sulkava, a court case survives where the celebration of St George’s day is described in more detail. There, a witness told the court that the cattle were let out through a gate to which a Rowan tree was tied with red wool yarn. This was done particularly by children and shepherds who watched the cattle, so that the cattle would keep together better. On the same day, in the morning, ale, bread, butter, and other foods were set on the table, but eating was not allowed before putting a part of each course on a separate dish to make offerings. After eating, people would drink all day and rest from work.<sup>47</sup> Thus, St George’s day was a feast day that included drinking, eating, resting from work, making offerings, praying and singing, and performing certain rituals that aimed at the protection of cattle. Men, women, and children were all involved in the festivities, but in this particular feast,

<sup>43</sup>DCR Visulahti 15. July 1648, KO a: 2: 788v–791v, NAF.

<sup>44</sup>Toivo, *Faith and Magic*, 92–100; Kuha, *Pyhäpäivien vietto*, 135, 145–149, 163.

<sup>45</sup>DCR Sulkava 16.–17. January 1679, KO a: 2: 9, NAF.

<sup>46</sup>Kustaa Vilkkuna, *Vuotuinen ajantieto. Vanhoista merkkipäivistä sekä kansanomaisesta talous- ja sääkalenterista enteiseen* (10th edition, Helsinki: Otava, 1983 [1950]), 106–112. See also Kuha, *Pyhäpäivien vietto*, 142–144.

<sup>47</sup>DCR Ruokolahti 1.–3.6.1685. Jääski, Ranta & Äyräpää, II KOa3: 310–314, NAF.

the focus seems to have been on women and perhaps also children.<sup>48</sup> The celebration was a shared social and religious experience that included many tangible, sensory, and bodily elements.<sup>49</sup>

Calendar celebrations in the eastern parts of the Swedish kingdom were often male events, even though women did take part in them. In these celebrations, both men and women performed their religious duty as household masters or mistresses.<sup>50</sup> It seems that women took the leading role in the religious feasts that were connected to their areas of work in the household, especially those related to tending to the cattle. The gender-specific tasks were associated with certain calendar celebrations. The feast day of St Catherine on 25 November is one example of a celebration that centred around female duties in the household, the tending of cattle in particular. Women were also the ones who performed the central rituals of the day, eating porridge and praying together in the cowshed.<sup>51</sup> The evidence of St George's and St Catherine's feasts shows that even in the area of extended families and a strong gender hierarchy, women could have a central role in the religious tasks that were connected to certain areas of agricultural work.

Thus, the communities of experience that were created by the celebrations seem to have been gendered according to the nature of the particular celebration. The community participated as a whole, but the focus on either men or women depended on the focus of the feast, creating gendered sub-communities of religious experience. For example, the feast of St Stephen in December was a particularly male celebration.<sup>52</sup> The role of women in the celebration of St George's day was probably strengthened by the beliefs of an inherent dynamistic force (*väki*) in the woman's body. The protective power of female sexual organs could be used to protect men, children, and cattle in critical border-crossing situations by stepping over those being protected. There are references in the Finnish folklore collected in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that on St George's

<sup>48</sup> See also Toivo, *Faith and Magic*, 98–99.

<sup>49</sup> See also Raisa Maria Toivo's contribution in this volume.

<sup>50</sup> Toivo, "Gender Performance", 175.

<sup>51</sup> Kati Kallio et al., *Laulut ja kirjoitukset. Suullinen ja kirjallinen kulttuuri uuden ajan alun Suomessa* (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2017), 202–203; Kuha, *Pyhäpäivien vietto*, 138, 140–141.

<sup>52</sup> Miia Kuha, "A Parody of the Church Service in Seventeenth-Century Finland. Reconstructing Popular Religion on the Basis of Court Records", *Frühneuzeit-Info* 23: 1–2 (2012); Kallio et al., *Laulut ja kirjoitukset*, 153–155, 184.

day, the mistress of the house stood above the cowshed door with her legs spread as the cattle were let out. The purpose of the ritual was to protect the cattle from predators and getting lost in the forest.<sup>53</sup> This kind of ritual is not mentioned in the seventeenth-century cases studied here, but it is still possible that it was used, and the rowan gate can be understood as a similar symbol. Rowan is a sacred tree in the Finnish popular tradition, where it was seen as particularly feminine and believed to have protective power. Both women's genitalia and the rowan were seen as liminal: something that was situated between the inner and outer worlds, the worlds of control and chaos. It was important to protect the cattle ritually when they were crossing the border between the household and the wilderness.<sup>54</sup> The division between the inside and the dangerous outside was an important element in how early modern people experienced the world around them. The boundaries of the body, household, and community were permeable and needed to be protected in certain situations. According to Laura Stark, rituals performed by women in eastern Finland were especially aimed at protecting the boundaries of the household against the forest, other farm households, and the village.<sup>55</sup>

Regarding the celebration of St George's day with all its different rituals and activities, preparing and doing everything in a proper manner must have required knowledge and earlier experience of what was supposed to happen and how it was done. Those who participated had certain expectations based on their earlier experiences, most likely since their childhood. Thus, the person who hosted the celebration among a certain community needed to know how to prepare the food and ale, how to put the offerings aside, what rituals to use to see the cattle off to the pastures, what to sing, and how to pray. Even if something gradually changed with the

<sup>53</sup> Laura Stark, "Gender, Sexuality and the Supranormal. Finnish Oral-Traditional Sources", in *More than Mythology. Narratives, Ritual Practices and Regional Distribution in Pre-Christian Scandinavian Religions*, eds. Catharina Raudvere & Jens Peter Schjødt (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2012), 164–169, 173.

<sup>54</sup> Satu Apo, *Naisen väki. Tutkimuksia suomalaisten kansanomaisesta kulttuurista ja ajattelusta* (Helsinki: Hanki ja jää, 1995), 22–25; Veikko Anttonen, "Pihlaja, nainen kiima ja kasvuvoiman pyhä locus", *Elektroloristi* 4, no. 1 (1997), <https://doi.org/10.30666/elope.78213>; Stark-Arola, *Magic, Body and Social Order*, 224–227.

<sup>55</sup> Stark-Arola, *Magic, Body and Social Order*, 166. See also R. W. Scribner, "Symbolising Boundaries. Defining Social Space in the Daily Life of Early Modern Germany", in *Religion and Culture in Germany*, R. W. Scribner, ed. Lyndal Roper (Leiden: Brill, 2001); Eilola, *Rajapinnoilla*, 133–139; Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger. An analysis of the concepts of pollution and taboo* (London & New York: Routledge, 1996 [1966]).

festivities—for example, the replacement of traditional songs by Christian hymns—it was probably important that enough of the celebration stayed the same from one year to the next. Tradition linked the experience to those of past generations, giving it more validity.

It is apparent that Helga had the knowledge and experience to host the festivities of St George's day, which explains her prominent role in the celebration. The feast had taken place "at Helga's", which directly refers to her and not her husband's or family's household. She also seems to have hosted this celebration more than once and invited her neighbours, both men and women, to participate. Unlike some other calendar celebrations that seem to have been organized in a different household every year,<sup>56</sup> this feast was organized by Helga at least twice in a row. It was written in the record that Helga spoke ambiguously about the drinking of the toast, because first she said that they had drunk in the forest and then that they had done so in the house. It implies that at least some of the rituals had been performed in the forest, and probably the meal had been served in the house. The toast drunk in the forest was also more suspicious in the eyes of the judge, which might be the reason for emphasizing the celebration inside the house.

Finally, the jury and the court audience were asked about Helga's circumstances before these events, and no one knew of any ill rumours about her. Helga presented a letter written by the mistress of Ahola manor, which stated that Helga had conducted herself honestly while staying at the manor. Apparently, she had served as a maidservant there for some time. She also showed the court a wooden stick with carved signature marks (*bomerke*) from peasants in the parish of Puumala where she was originally from. Thus, the process of negotiation regarding Helga's respectability had also taken place in the neighbouring parish. The support probably affected the sentence, which also reflects the uncertainty of the court and the lack of evidence. The judge stated that the "*wako*" (toast) always counted as a superstition, and even though people said that they would pray to God in heaven, there could be some other superstition involved. The act of witchcraft seemed possible, but the main witness was an under-aged girl and the cake could not be demonstrated to have caused any harm. Thus, Helga was sentenced to free herself with an oath of

<sup>56</sup> Kuha, *Pyhäpäivien vietto*, 149.



purification with “herself as the twelfth” (*sielf tolfte*).<sup>57</sup> She was to swear, together with her confirmers, that she had not used any witchcraft connected to the cake or the wrap, and that she had not practised any superstition (*widskepelse*) during the feast. Thus, there was no need to deny that the feast had taken place altogether, but only that there was superstition involved. The case was then handed over to the Court of Appeal, and it took quite a long time before the oath of purification could take place: it was conducted two years later, at the winter court of Sulkava in 1681. It was plain and simple: Helga had her confirmers; she swore the oath first herself, then the 11 men took the oath for her, and she was discharged and free to go on with her life.<sup>58</sup>

### THE MEANING OF RELIGIOUS EXPERTISE: FROM A THREAT TO AN ASSET OF THE COMMUNITY?

The case examined above indicates that even a young woman who came from outside the parish could assume a certain amount of religious authority in the community. Helga Mielotar seems to have had better than average skills in making medicines out of herbs, which could in specific circumstances be interpreted as the forbidden use of magic, but which could also be useful for the community, since there was no access to any professional healthcare. She also knew the right way of celebrating St George’s day, since she was able to host the feast. It is likely that she came from a house where traditional skills and festivities had a more central role than in some other households in the area. It is a possible interpretation that these skills were considered a threat in the Paunola household, perhaps more ascribed to religious rituals and interpretations of the church, but that the subsequent neighbourhood gave them more value.

Helga’s earlier experience of living in an extended family household was probably one of exclusion and marginality. It was affected by her age, gender, and position in the household, and the fact that she came from

<sup>57</sup>The oath was commonly used in court processes throughout the seventeenth century until it was forbidden in 1695. Pylkkänen, *Puoli vuodetta*, 111. The confirmers of the oath, usually either six or twelve men, could not be relatives or friends of the accused, but they were expected to be well aware of the case and person in question. It was possible to order women as confirmers if the matter was closely related to feminine matters, such as in child homicide cases. Olli Matikainen, *Verenperijät. Väkivalta ja yhteisön murros itäisessä Suomessa 1500–1600-luvulla* (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2002), 123–125.

<sup>58</sup>DCR Sulkava 14.–15. January 1681, KO a: 2: 5, NAF.

outside the parish, but also by her healing skills. After the separation, every time Helga visited Paunola, she was considered an outsider who posed a threat to the integrity of the household. When Helga left the household and the conflict remained, material items that she brought or sent to her former household were easily interpreted as violations of the integrity of household boundaries.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, she expressed anger towards her former household's members, an emotion that was disruptive to order and could be associated with witchcraft.<sup>60</sup> These events and the negotiation of their interpretation led to the shared experience of the household being the target of witchcraft. Grels and Helga's separation from the Paunola household also caused a crisis in the life of the young stepdaughter, who now found herself in a difficult situation between the two households. Having lost her mother earlier, she now also lost her former extended family and finally reacted by accusing her stepmother of witchcraft. However, it should be emphasized that it was not only her individual interpretation that led to the accusation—it was a process of negotiation that included the whole household.

For Helga, the result of the separation was more positive. In her new position in the divided household after the separation, and through the experience of hosting the religious festivities, Helga moved from the margins to the centre of her new community through another process of negotiation. Helga's later community had not shared the experience of witchcraft and thus had no reason to mark her as dangerous. The celebration probably provided Helga with an empowering experience of regaining a connection with the community. From her point of view, the feast of St George's day was both a shared religious experience as well as an individual experience that was strengthened by the connection to the sacred created by the means of the rituals. The fact that Helga was able to get 11 men to confirm her oath reflects Helga's reputation and acceptance in the community. However, the sources fail to reveal if it was easy to get the confirmers or if the process of negotiation lasted for the whole two years that it took from the sentence to the occasion of swearing the oath.

In the former extended household, Helga's husband Grels seems to have represented an older generation that might have considered the annual religious festivities of the agrarian community more important than his younger family members. The popular education of the Catechism

<sup>59</sup> Eilola, *Rajapainnoilla*, 192.

<sup>60</sup> See Van Gent, *Magic, Body and the Self*, 61.

was intensified in the later seventeenth century and it especially focused on children and youths.<sup>61</sup> Thus, there might have been a generational difference in the religious way of life as the younger generation in the family achieved adulthood and control of the farm. Moving away from the farm, the couple found a religious community that better provided to their needs and could also make use of Helga's special skills. Helga's religious expertise gave her a certain authority in the area of religion, which could also explain why the festivities were precisely said to have taken place "at Helga's". Her skills and expertise became the core around which the particular local religious community of experience on St George's day was formed.

## CONCLUSIONS

In a peripheral region close to the eastern border of the Swedish realm, the peasant population experienced religion not only in churches, but also within the households spread around large parishes covered with forests. Practices, meanings, and experiences of lived religion played an important part in forming, shaping, and consolidating communities on the local level. The inhabitants of the parish formed one community of experience through church practice and the liturgical year, but unofficial celebrations and other religious practices in smaller localities around the parish divided the parish into several partially overlapping communities of religious experience. In eastern Finland, extended families and work partnerships can be seen as communities of experience, sharing the daily experience of work, and it seems that they cannot be separated from religious communities when defining communities of experience. The communal nature of the work and divine protection were crucial to the success of the work. Thus, it seems obvious that the same group that did the work would also organize the ritual protection of their livelihood. Through religious rituals and celebrations, the community could also re-organize itself and negotiate its internal roles.<sup>62</sup> This was crucially important in an area where people needed to build trust between both family members and non-kin partners for the success of their work. It also helped create flexibility in crises and

<sup>61</sup> See Tuija Laine, *Aapisen ja katekismuksen tavaamisesta itsenäiseen lukemiseen: Rahvaan lukukulttuurin kehitys varhaismodernina aikana* (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2017); Kuha, *Pyhäpäivien vietto*, 106–107.

<sup>62</sup> See Katajala-Peltomaa & Toivo, *Lived Religion and Gender*, 145.

provided a way of restoring community harmony in a changed situation. In crises, the community could negotiate and interpret the experiences of its members in such a way that provided the possibility of regaining harmony, even if by excluding those who could or would not conform. Thus, approaching a group of people as a community of experience seems to offer a chance to understand better its fluidity and direct attention to the breaches of harmony within the community.

In the lives of early modern people, religious practices provided an important way of creating order both in this world and in the otherworldly sphere as well as in social relationships.<sup>63</sup> Religious practices were inextricably connected to the creation and shaping of communities, whereas religious interpretations gave meaning to events and experiences. Through negotiation, an individual experience of infirmity could become a shared experience of witchcraft. The case examined here illustrates the importance of protecting the integrity of the self, household, and community. Within annual celebrations, constructing and experiencing the sacred together enhanced the cohesion of the community. The religious celebrations that were unofficially celebrated in eastern Finland also constructed gender relations, but not in a way that would exclusively have enforced male superiority. Instead, in certain celebrations, women performed the central rituals, providing the experience of creating order in the world for both the male and female members of their communities.

In the rural localities of eastern Finland, both social and religious life were inextricably connected to the household. Young men often stayed on at their father's farm, whereas young women moved from their father's farm straight to the farm of their husband's family when they got married. For many people, there was no middle phase between childhood and adulthood—for example, working in different houses as maidservants and farmhands, such as in most western areas. Thus, the lived experience of both men and women was tied to the family and as such was profoundly local. The world was experienced from within the household, from the "inside", whereas the outside was always seen as potentially dangerous. For the extended families of eastern Finland, the sharing of limited resources could prove difficult, which led to separations from the family farm. In these situations, the household temporarily lost its integrity and

<sup>63</sup>R. W. Scribner, "Cosmic Order and Daily Life. Sacred and Secular in Pre-Industrial German Society", in *Popular Culture and Popular Movements in Reformation Germany*, ed. R. W. Scribner (London & Ronceverte: The Hambledon Press, 1987).

became vulnerable to influences from the outside. The conflicts in these situations of separation could result in accusations of witchcraft that reflect early modern understandings of the interconnectedness of the body, the social community, and the household. The communication and interpretation of these experiences among the community made them understandable and meaningful to its members, and sometimes it led to the exclusion of individuals for the sake of the community.

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