Ancient Finnish mythology and beliefs about death among ancient Finns are fairly well known. Kemppinen (1967) has thoroughly treated this topic in the light of comparative science of religion. Furthermore, plenty of tradition concerning suicide has been recorded and folklore, too, covers information about suicide.

Opinions of soul, body and death

In Finnish, mainly Karelian, mythology man's soul was conceived as a shadow-like being, some kind of a ghost which, in some degree, might even be invested with physical characteristics. Soul was able to escape from the body in sleep or in a state of unconsciousness. The same was the case if a person became frightened or subjected to violence. It was believed that soul could pass over into butterflies and birds. Also other Finnish peoples have had similar beliefs (Harva 1933).

It was primitive man's comprehension that man's soul can move around outside the body entirely free from it and that soul is in no way dependent on body's functions. He supposed that at the moment of death soul gets loose from the body and departs from it through the mouth. Therefore, when a person lay dying in a room it was a general custom to open the windows or the vent in order to let the deceased one's soul go from the house. It was often supposed that soul remained for three days near the body. Another reason for opening the windows was to let the smell of death out of the room. It was believed that soul could hear what was discussed in the dead man's presence and that is why people spoke in a low voice near the corpse and only good things were mentioned about the deceased. Moreover, it was thought that also the dead corpse itself could understand what was talked around it. The deceased was believed to be able to feel and sense in the same way as when he was alive. Therefore, the coffin had to be large enough and the floor of the coffin not too hard. In some places the head portion of the coffin was furnished with a small window and the foot was equipped with an opening. Such roofed graves were found in the eastern border region of Finland until quite recently (Kemppinen 1967).

It was a popular apprehension that a corpse would get moving. For that reason, in Karelia the stockings put on the deceased were sewn together at the ends. This custom has been preserved even to our day in some places. Another custom was to tie the dead body with a belt to the cadaver board (Kemppinen 1967).

Huge tombstones, too, presumably indicate the fear that the deceased would start out from the grave and get haunting.

In order to appease the dead man's soul utensils, often also food and drink as well as liquor, were put into the grave along with the body. Beggars and animals
sometimes dup up the grave and took the food. Since it was well known that the
corpse becomes decayed in a relatively short time, it may be supposed that the
tools and supplies were intended for the soul.

A coin for the ferryman was often placed in the mouth of the dead man as
it was thought that the road to Hades went across a river. In some places, a
boat was mounted upside down on top of the grave so that the deceased could
sail across the river of Hades. The deceased was supplied with some other things,
too, with which the soul could surmount various dangerous obstacles hampering
one’s way to Hades.

Ancient mythical ideas regarded death as a person who sneaked around
hunting for human beings. Death could appear as a nightly rider whose presence
was most lucidly perceived by the one whom death had come for. Personified form
was also ascribed to illness.

Finnish mythology up to the 1400s as well as the Finnish national epic Kalevala
declared that the dead lived in Hades. The gate of Hades was guarded by a dog
which Karelian poems often called the Dog of the Castle. The Castle meant the
nether world, a world isolated by walls, gates of the North and locks (Kemppinen
1967).

Heaven as the abode in life beyond was a vague and uncertain notion and
made its appearance only along with Christianity after the crusades into Finland
in the 1200s. Death and Hades were thought to reside in the north where there
was cold and dark.

Ancient Finns had interesting customs in association with carrying the
deceased into the burial place. The funeral procession made a halt at a lopped-off
memorial tree. In case that the dead man’s soul would still happen to make an
attempt to return back to his own house, various ceremonies were executed on the
way to the burial place before its gates were reached. The funeral procession
always stopped at a big memorial tree where offerings were partaken and the tree
was lopped off and marked with the sign of the deceased. It was thought that his
soul would take up its residence in the tree. Furthermore, the mark provided pro­
tection preventing the dead man from passing the mark and haunting his old
home. Small copses of such memorial trees were in this way gradually created
around inhabited areas.

The belief in resurrection in Finnish mythology reveals a firm conviction that
the body will regain life, which corresponds to the belief expressed in the New
Testament. It was for this reason that the coffin was furnished with a window
in order that the deceased and his immortal soul would envisage when resurrection
is on the point of beginning and would hear when the bells of resurrection are
ringing. For the same reason the dead person’s eyes must not be covered by the
shroud nor by anything else impending visibility.

The fate of the suicide

Ancient Finnish mythology included various fancies about the fate of the one
who has committed suicide. Stories about suicides committed earlier in different
places were passed, as tradition and several versions, from one generation to
another until quite recently. Old beliefs have tinged suicides even up to the last
few decades. Suicides have been involved in guilt and dread, in some places even
in public horror. It was a general belief that various strange incidents might anti­
cipate suicide and that at the moment of suicide various supernatural phenomena
occurred. It was thought that the soul of the suicide kept wandering restlessly at
the scene of the suicide and harassed people for a long time, perhaps forever.

Furthermore, in many places tradition tells how people had succeeded in
getting rid of the soul of a suicide which had been haunting around.
Omens

A great many, mostly supernatural omens were believed to anticipate suicide. Anybody could behold the omen, including the one who was bound to commit the very suicide in question. Foretokens of death could also make their appearance in dreams.

Finnish folklore and tradition comprise descriptions according to which the sight of a human-shaped being, ghost or apparition could foretell, not only murder or manslaughter but also suicide. Quite often some supernatural animal served as an omen. Furthermore, suicide could be anticipated if rare birds or wild animals came into dwelling houses or near them. For example, a big black dog, a white hairy rabbit, a white cat, some red beast, a red dog or squirrel had been seen moving around before a suicide was committed. Great black woodpecker and raven were birds of death whose coming to the yard announced that death was approaching. Preceding suicide one could fairly often hear chattering laughter, loud noise, a dog howling or doors slamming. The devil might show up before suicide and make its appearance for instance as a big black dog.

Events in the very moment of suicide

It was supposed that the devil might show up in the moment of suicide and advise, for example, how to hang oneself. Tradition holds plenty of descriptions about the Old Reaper coming to fetch the one about to commit suicide. Riding a horse with a carriage, the devil could come for the one who had led an evil life and make a big noise at the scene of the suicide. Often a horse, or even a whole herd of them, was heard galloping by or coming to a stop in the yard and yet, when looked for, it had vanished without leaving one trace of itself. People could tell that earth had been shaking, the house trembling and things had moved aside at the moment of suicide. Sometimes powerful roar was heard, just as if the whole world would go to pieces.

«In the 1880s a timber agent locked himself in his room after he had got a letter from his fiance in which she declared that she would break off her engagement with him. The man shot himself in the room. That very evening a man had driven a horse very fast all the way to the yard of the house. The people of the house sitting in the living room had heard the sleigh bells on this horse jingling exceptionally loud. The driver had pulled up his horse in front of the stairs of the farm house. When people went to receive the one who had come, nobody was seen outside and not a slightest sound was heard of the man who had arrived with such a loud jingling.

At the very moment that people stood wondering at the queer occurrence, a shot was heard in the room of the timber agent mentioned in the beginning. When they broke into his room they found his dead at his writing desk. On the desk there lay a latter addressed to his fiancee. This incident created a great sensation in the neighbourhood. It was a general opinion that the strange horse-driver who called on the house one moment before the suicide was committed was the Man with the Scythe who had come for the timber agent.»

Burying the suicide

In Karelia it was the custom to pay a farewell visit to the one who was about to die. On this occasion, all vices and breaches were settled and peace was made
with the dying. Seizing the dying by the hand indicated a symbol of reconcilia-
tion and farewell. If, even after this, the survivor did not feel calm and composed
he had to go to the grave to redeem his feelings of guilt (Kemppinen, 1967). In
ancient Finnish culture it was very important that there was some relative
watching by the one who lay dying and she had to wake up other relatives as
well as the people of the house to witness the patient's departure from this world.
If there was nobody to envisage the actual moment of death, the soul of the
deceased was bound to roam about restlessly and haunting could be expected, too.

The one who had committed suicide had died unexpectedly and thus there
had been no opportunity to make peace with him. Therefore, the soul of the
suicide was particularly restless and spooky, bringing about great terror in people.
The deceased was washed as soon as possible after the death and clad in
graweclothes. The male deceased were washed by men while the female ones by
women. Epileptics, lunatics and suicides were not washed ; on the contrary, they
were buried prone on their stomach in the clothes they wore when they died.
They were lifted into the coffin with pokers, never with bare hands, since it was
feared that diseases and curse would catch hold of the family.

Up to the early 1900s the one who had committed suicide was buried
without any funeral services. The grave was located beyond the fence of the
churchyard, often even far away in the woods.

It was a general opinion that the corpse of the suicide was heavy. Among
the common people there were plenty of stories afloat that the coffin of the
suicide had been too heavy even for a horse to haul. It was possible to make the
coffin lighter by magic and various tricks and in that way get the suicide in the
grave without protesting. Such beliefs prevailed upon people up till the last few
decades.

« In the neighbourhood of the town of Sortavala in Karelia a peasant pro-
prietor shot himself in the 1920s. His body was lifted in a truck. When a short
distance from the dead man's home had been driven, the truck all of a sudden
stopped short on a fully level highway and the driver could not make the engine
run by any means. The driver did not find anything wrong in the truck. An
experienced old mechanic was called in. He inspected the truck and arrived at
the same conclusion ; there was nothing wrong in the truck. He was heard to
say : « By Jove, there's got to be something queer in here. » He climbed up the
truck to see the corpse. He then seized the dead man by the shoulders and lifted
him in a half-sitting posture. To the great surprise of those who were present
the mechanic began to shake heavily the corpse and mumbled to himself some-
thing unintelligible. After this he lowered the corpse back to its supine posture,
stepped into the cab of the truck, started the engine and, to everybody's big
amazement, the engine ran completely normally. The eyewitnesses believed that
the old mechanic was in possession of some magic power.

The suicide goes haunting

It was a general opinion that the soul of the one who had committed suicide
could not get rest but wandered around restively near the scene of the suicide
terrifying and disturbing people. The suicide could make his appearance in his
own figure and even talk briefly with some people. The one who had hanged
himself was often seen at the scene of his hanging as a ghost wearing a white
frock or as a very bright being. On the other hand, the one who had drowned
herself was often seen moving about on the shore and it was believed that her
soul was lodged underwater.

« Near an old manor house there is a park. The centennial trees of the park
conceal a small pond. The tale relates that at stormy autumn nights, when heavy
gray veil of mist envelops the neighbourhood, one may see a small cloud of fog rising from the pond. Gradually it grows bigger and is finally moulded in the shape of a young girl dressed in light colors. A long time ago an insane daughter of the manor had drowned herself in the pond in the park. At gray autumn nights the spirit of the girl ascends from the pond in order to return to her homestead but soon vanishes again in the black depths of the pond."

The suicide could also go haunting in animal shape. For example, a white or red horse, sometimes a black odd bird or a dog had been seen at the scene of the suicide.

The scenes of suicide commonly inspired people with fear. Such scenes were often named after the one who committed suicide there or after the devil. Thus the scene of suicide might be called « Anne's cliff », « Sipri's forest » or « the devil's gate ». The suicide sometimes scared passers-by, often at night time, by crying and racketing. People believed that a horse was able to scent the soul of the suicide, particularly so if he was riding along.

« On the roadside there stood an old pine which horses did not dare to go by at night time except when led by the bridle. A courageous man wanted to know the reason for this. He therefore shouted under the tree: « What do you want, who are you? » A feeble voice then replied : « I hanged myself here. I beg you to pray in behalf of me. » The man read the Lord's Prayer, and since that time horses have never been afraid of that pine.»

In ghost stories the suicides often appear in order to beseech for praying or blessing. People mentioned that a blessing by a priest or even by a mere layman had often brought a longtime haunting to an end. The strict attitude of the church in regard to that the suicides were not buried in blessed earth was not changed before as late as about 1910.

Current beliefs and attitudes

Even nowadays many people relate that they have experienced omens of a suicide, not, however, as supernatural phenomena, but on the contrary as various dreams. Those who have committed suicide are still most often buried in all quietness, probably partly because of the relatives' feelings of guilt and shame. The obituaries are generally written in a conciliatory style. This usage very much resembles the custom of the ancient Finns to make peace with the dying and to shake hands with him for the last time. Ghost stories are still bred, although this is probably rare among educated people. On the other hand, people are afraid of such places, e.g. a room, where a suicide has been committed. Furthermore, some people still stand in fear that the one who commits suicide will fall into damnation.

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