

## SOINTULA, BRITISH COLUMBIA:

Aspects of a Folk Music Tradition as a Social Phenomenon

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Folk music is a social phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> It exists within the contexts of certain patterns of human interaction. When we speak of a "tradition," in the sense of "the folk music tradition," we refer to a patterned social phenomenon in which utilization of a class of folkloric items occurs. A tradition is not composed of a repertoire, nor does it reside in individuals. Just as a traffic pattern is not dependent upon specific drivers, a folkloric tradition is social rather than individual.<sup>2</sup> We have a large number of studies of the content of repertoires (item-oriented studies) and a number of studies which focus on the individual performer or repertoire-bearer (person-oriented studies), but we have little information concerning the social nature of a tradition. The following is an attempt to portray in a general sense a vital tradition of folk music in a small fishing community in British Columbia.<sup>3</sup>

Sointula, British Columbia, is a community of approximately five hundred people, about half of them first, second, or third generation Finnish-Canadians. The community is located on Malcolm Island, a small island about twelve miles long by an average of two miles wide, located in the Queen Charlotte Sound, between the northern portion of Vancouver Island and the mainland, about 185 air miles north of Vancouver. Although the earliest group to settle Malcolm Island was an English and Irish religious sect intending to establish a Christian utopian society, the first group to settle the island and remain for a significant length of time was a group of Finnish utopian socialists.<sup>4</sup>

The first substantial Finnish migration to British Columbia was comprised of laborers who arrived with construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway. Like the majority of Finns who migrated to North America, most of these people were farmers whose homeland simply had no room for them.<sup>5</sup> With the completion of the railroad the Finnish laborers were left behind. Many of them found their way to the mining communities of Vancouver Island. Thus, between 1880 and 1900 there were viable Finnish communities at Nanaimo, Extension, North Wellington, and Ladysmith. Conditions in the mining towns were not good, and were especially intolerable to the displaced

<sup>1</sup>I use the term "folk music" to include both folk song and folk instrumental music.

<sup>2</sup>This is a modification of an example used by Dr. Ray L. Birdwhistell in a recent lecture given in his class "Interpersonal Communication Codes" at the University of Pennsylvania.

<sup>3</sup>My fieldwork was made possible by a generous Canadian Folk Music Society Research Grant.

<sup>4</sup>Aili Anderson *History of Sointula* (n.p.: Sointula, B.C., N.d), p. 3. Other sources of information regarding the history of Sointula are: John I. Kolehmainen, "Harmony Island," *The British Columbia Historical Quarterly*, 5 (1941), 111-123 and John Norris, *Strangers Entertained: A History of the Ethnic Groups of British Columbia* (Vancouver: British Columbia Centennial '71 Committee, 1971).

<sup>5</sup>Norris, p. 18

Finnish farmers. By 1900 a group of Finns had decided to leave mining and begin a new life together. Matti Kurikka, a Finnish political refugee living in Australia, who was known as a fiery apostle of socialism, was invited to act as the leader in building a Finnish utopian community in the British Columbian wilderness. Kurikka agreed and arrived in Nanaimo in August of 1900.

A corporation, the Kalevan Kansan Colonization Company, was formed with Kurikka serving as president of the board of directors. After negotiations with the government, Malcolm Island was ceded to the Finns. The first settlers arrived on the island in 1901 and christened the area which they had chosen to settle "Sointula" - harmony. However, the name proved to be little more than a euphemism. The first residents were Finns from Canada, the United States, and directly from Finland. From the beginning they were plagued by problems. It had been intended that the colonizers would support themselves through farming, but this was more difficult than envisioned. Logging operations were begun, in what must have been virgin forest, but due to the settlers' inexperience coupled with the relatively remote location, logging was never sufficiently profitable. A townsite was laid out, giving residents half-acre lots, but, again because of general inexperience, there was a general shortage of housing. In 1903 there were 238 residents, many of them transients. It is estimated that many more people participated in the community than the statistics indicate.

Perhaps it was true that, in the words of A. B. Makela, Kurikka's chief assistant, the colony had "been born a-dying."<sup>6</sup> In 1905, after suffering a number of extreme financial setbacks and social disasters, the Kalevan Kansan Colonization Company was liquidated. The land was returned to the government in exchange for a loan which enabled the people to pay off debts and buy lots. The Finns who chose to remain supported themselves through fishing and logging. Other Finns, often relatives of the pioneers, continued to emigrate to Sointula and gradually non-Finns began to move in. Sointula matured into a pleasant community.

To travel to Sointula from Vancouver, it is necessary to take the car ferry from Vancouver to Vancouver Island. The ferry lands at Nanaimo and from there one drives north over good roads to Kelsey Bay, a small community located about halfway up the east shore of the island. Another car ferry, the *Island Princess*, leaves once a day from Kelsey Bay for points north, landing at Beaver Cove, a logging camp in the northern part of Vancouver Island, Alert Bay, a fishing community and Indian reserve on Cormorant Island, several miles south of Malcolm Island, and Sointula. If the ferry has not broken down, an all too frequent occurrence last summer, the journey takes twelve hours to cover a distance of 185 miles. One has the alternative of driving to Beaver Cove over approximately 100 miles of restricted dirt logging roads, roads so rough that few travel on them, and then taking the *Island Princess*. The northern portion of Vancouver Island is largely wilderness owned by logging and mining companies. There are two towns: Port McNeill and Port Hardy, both contemporary frontier towns populated largely by loggers and miners. There is emergency seaplane service to and from Sointula, but any trip to either Vancouver Island or the mainland is a slow, relatively

<sup>6</sup>Kolehmainen, p. 120.

complicated procedure.

Sointula is the only town on Malcolm Island. Located midway on the shoreline, on a sort of a bay, it immediately contrasts with Port McNeill, four miles across the strait, and Port Hardy to the north. While Port McNeill and Port Hardy have rough, unsettled appearances, as if carved into the wilderness, Sointula presents the visage of a well-established small community. The ferry ties up at the government wharf. Immediately opposite is the cooperative store, known as the Co-op, located on the main street which parallels the beach.<sup>7</sup> The town is laid out in a grid pattern several streets deep. Because the terrain slopes upward from the beach, virtually every house has a view of the water.

Sointula is isolated in ways other than geographic. While the island has daily mail service, electricity, and telephones, the channels by which information and entertainment are received are, by comparison with the mainland, restricted. One television station (broadcasts originating in Vancouver) is received. Radio reception is poor — radios are infrequently used. During the days of the pioneers there was a printing press and a newspaper was published, but today the only newspaper to reach the island regularly is a weekly published in Port Hardy and sent by mail to subscribers. The community hall, an important feature of many Finnish communities in North America, was once the scene of films, plays, talent shows, and other artistic activities, but today it is used only for occasional dances and an annual talent show. The residents blame television for the decline in use of the hall. A water taxi, a thirty-foot boat, travels several times a day to Alert Bay, which has a liquor store and other expanded shopping facilities, and to Port McNeill, but generally the people of Sointula leave the island for specific shopping needs, vacations, or, during the winter, to work in logging camps on Vancouver Island. Many of the Finns vacation in Finland and many subscribe to Finnish publications.

Sointula is a bilingual community. The official language, taught in school and used at official functions such as meetings of the shareholders of the Co-op (which includes virtually all adult residents), is English, but the Finns frequently speak Finnish among themselves. Among the first generation immigrants, Finnish is usually spoken at home and a sufficient number of residents speak only Finnish to make it a requirement that clerks in the store be bilingual. Few, if any, of the non-Finns (who are called either “outsiders” or “English” by the Finns) speak Finnish.

Fishing for salmon is the primary source of income on the island. The fishing is closely regulated by the government: the fishermen are told both when and where they may fish. Therefore the men have little advance knowledge as to where they will be the following week, or for how long they will be gone. During the summer, which is the height of the season, fishing is a significant force in determining the rhythm of the community. The boats are usually owned by a family and are frequently worked by father and son. When the fish are running the men are usually away from home for a minimum of four days, sometimes for a week or more. When the men are out

<sup>7</sup>Co-ops are significant features of Finnish communities in North America. For a discussion of their significance see: Elli-Kaija Kongas Maranda. *Finnish-American Folklore: Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis* (Diss. Indiana Univ., 1963), p. 19.

fishing they have little time for sleep – when they return they rest, work on the nets, and several days later they go back out again. There is no guarantee that a man will catch any fish – those who are unsuccessful generally work in the logging industry during the winter. The fish are iced and sent to Vancouver.

The Finns in Sointula have a strong sense of community. One cannot understand the nature of the folk music tradition amongst the Finns without taking this into account. Folk music is a social phenomenon: in Sointula it exists as an aspect of certain contextually-bound social situation. Folk music performance is meaningful within the shared cultural milieu of the Finns in the community sketched above. The tradition cannot be taken out of this community context unless it is transferred to a similar cultural milieu, as in the example of my informants who would involve themselves in folk music performance situations only in Sointula or when vacationing with relatives and friends in Finland.

If we were to classify the happenings in which folk music occurs in Sointula, we would find two major classes: social happenings in peoples' homes and social happenings shared by the community at large. The first class involves a relatively small number of participants, resulting in shared group identity, relative privacy in terms of location, and music and song as an important centre of attention. The second class is more public in nature, frequently serving as a celebration, and is structured so as to place the music in a different performer-audience relationship. Examples of the latter class are weddings, dances, and talent shows. During the time I spent in Sointula I was unable to observe situations belonging to the second class, and can therefore speak of them only in light of testimonials from informants. Folk music, as I observed it in Sointula, was found in the first situation.

I found the existence of a folk music tradition to be a part of a particular social network in Sointula.<sup>8</sup> A certain number of people shared a class of interactional patterns in which folk music played a significant part. The core members of this network were my major informants. They are:

1. *Mr. and Mrs. P., who were the first people to whom I was directed in response to my inquiries as whom to speak to about "old-time" song and music. Mrs. P. emigrated to Sointula as a young woman. Mr. P. had been born in a Finnish community in North Dakota. His parents were among the original Sointula pioneers – thus, he had been brought to Sointula at an early age. Mr. P. plays the button accordion and has a repertoire of tunes learned predominantly by ear from local musicians and to a lesser extent from phonograph records. His style of playing is perhaps the oldest encountered amongst my informants: it is sufficiently different from the styles of the other musicians to make it difficult for him to play along with them. A further complication is the fact that his repertoire differs from the shared repertoire of the other musicians. Although Mrs. P. is not a solo performer of either song or music, she is an important force in the establishment of social happenings in which performances occur. Both Mr. and Mrs. P. are in their seventies.*

<sup>8</sup>Other similar networks exist in the community, but this particular one was considered to be the prime example.

2. Mr. and Mrs. B. married and emigrated together from Finland in 1930. A retired carpenter, Mr. B. plays the mandolin and within the group is generally considered to be the leader of the musicians. In Finland he taught himself to read music and played with a local group of musicians, which he variously describes as a "band" or "orchestra". They would play for local dances, weddings, and at local plays. He recalls playing for one wedding which lasted for three days. Mrs. B., while not considered by the group to be a solo singer or musician, knows most of the songs and tunes, and by means of requests, and sometimes demands, has significant influence upon the selections made by performers in specific performance situations. Both take great interest in the music.

3. Mr. and Mrs. E. are not Finns. Mr. E. emigrated from Sweden to Canada, and Mrs. E. is of Swedish-American background. They have lived in various parts of British Columbia. Mr. E. has been a fisherman and a logger – during the summer I met him he allowed his son to operate their boat while he worked at a new job as manager of the hardware annex of the Co-op, a small store which is primarily intended to serve the needs of the fishermen. Mr. E. plays the modern piano accordion and has learned his music aurally. He does not read music. Mr. E. also plays the fiddle, but only in his own home, since he does not consider himself to be competent enough to play in public (a sentiment which is shared by his friends). The majority of Mr. E.'s accordion repertoire consists of tunes learned from other local musicians, especially Mr. B. He has contributed to the shared repertoire a number of tunes remembered from his youth in Sweden and his fiddle repertoire consists almost exclusively of tunes recalled from Sweden. While neither Mr. E. nor Mrs. E. speaks Finnish, they are both familiar enough with the shared tune repertoire to be able to identify the tunes by their Finnish titles.

These three couples are generally considered within the community to form the core of a musical group of friends. In addition to Mr. and Mrs. P., B., and E. there are a number of others who participate, although not as intensely, in the musical network. They are:

4. Mr. C. who is Mr. B.'s younger brother. Mr. C. emigrated from Finland directly to Sointula during the 1950's. Although he is married and has a teenaged daughter, his immediate family does not seem to participate actively in the musical network. A carpenter for the logging camps on Vancouver Island, Mr. C. is often away from home, but the periods in which he is away do not coincide with the schedules of the fishermen. He plays a four-stringed banjo, usually plucking the melody with a plectrum in much the same way as his brother plays the mandolin.

5. Mr. and Mrs. T. own a small variety store, one of the few commercial establishments other than the Co-op on the island. Mr. T. was born in the same North Dakota community as Mr. P. and his parents settled in Sointula at the same time as did Mr. P.'s. Unlike the P.s, the T.s have lived in Finnish-Canadian communities other than Sointula, notably in Ontario and Vancouver. Mrs. T., who emigrated from Finland, is said to be the most highly respected singer in Sointula. During the time I spent in Sointula she was recuperating from an illness – I was unable to meet her and observe her singing in a natural context until late in the fieldwork period.

6. Mr. and Mrs. K. are good friends with all the people listed above. A successful fisherman, Mr. K. is also a respected singer. However, during the time I spent in Sointula, he and his wife did not actively participate in the network as often as did most of the other members.

This, then, is the social network in which folk music is recognized by the Finns of Sointula to have the most vitality. It should be understood that other members of the community are known as performers and many others are what Von Sydow has termed "passive bearers" of the tradition – that is, they are familiar with the repertoire but are not recognized as performers.<sup>9</sup>

Within this network folk music is generally performed within the specific context of a social gathering at a member's house. Members of the network often distinguish these gatherings from others by calling them "musical evenings", a term used by other members of the community when referring to the gatherings. The use of an English term indicates that the language used at these gatherings is English - this is for the benefit of the non-Finns who are inevitably present.<sup>10</sup>

During the summer of 1972 musical evenings occurred approximately once a week. Their exact scheduling was not fixed and was dependent upon, among other things, whether or not the fishermen were home. Because Mr. E. is a key member of the group, musical evenings would not occur when he was out fishing. Typically, an evening would commence around 8 p.m. and would last for the duration of the evening. The three core couples would be present as well as other members. Visiting friends or relatives not from Sointula would often be present, and sometimes other residents would be invited. As Mr. E., Mr. B., and Mr. C. (occasionally Mr. P.) would arrive, the musical instruments would be unpacked from their cases and tuned up. When the instruments were deemed to be sufficiently in tune, the musicians would begin playing. Usually the first tune played collectively would be cued by a suggestion from either Mr. E., Mrs. B., or Mrs. P. Fifteen to twenty tunes would be played during the course of an evening. While the musicians played, the others present would talk, frequently forming two groups, male and female. Sporadic dancing of polkas, schottisches, mazurkas, and waltzes would take place, frequently in an adjoining room due to spatial limitations. Generally women dance with each other – it is unusual to see a man dance, unless the party becomes exceptionally festive. Approximately halfway through the evening there would be a break for refreshments consisting of the omnipresent coffee along with homemade cakes, breads, smoked salmon, and other delicacies.

Singing is not as common as instrumental music, but it too occurs in the context of the musical evening. Much of the music played by the musicians has words and a number of the Finns within the network are familiar with most of the words. Because of this, it is not unusual for certain people to sing along softly. This type of singing seems to happen outside of what the participants recognize as structured performing context. It is considered to be analogous to whistling or humming along with a familiar tune. Two people

<sup>9</sup>C. W. von Sydow, "On the Spread of Tradition," in *Selected Papers on Folklore*, ed. Laurits Bodker (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1948), p. 15.

<sup>10</sup>In contexts in which there are no outsiders present, first and second generation Finns usually speak Finnish.

within the network are recognized to be the major singers in the group. Mrs. T., who formerly sang with a Finnish choir in an Ontario community and has sung on the radio, is generally considered to be the best singer. When she sings at a party the attention of the audience is focused on her to a greater degree than it is upon the musicians during the course of the evening. She sings either unaccompanied or with the accompaniment of the mandolin and banjo. Songs which are recognized to "belong to her" are sung by her alone — those within the general repertoire are frequently accompanied by the singing of other group members. Even in the latter case, Mrs. T. remains the center of attention. Mr. K. is also considered to be an important singer, but he does not usually act as a solo singer — instead he generally leads people in song.

I have not carried out an extensive study of repertoire, but a sampling of both tunes and songs reveals that repertoires are composed of items from diverse sources. Old popular tunes and songs are mixed with traditional items. All have become traditional within the contexts of performance in Sointula. A common factor which tends to explain and unify the repertoire is the fact that virtually all the items are remembered from the performers' youth in either Finland or Finnish communities in North America. New tunes and songs tend to come from either Finnish phonograph records or books. The role of books is significant — they are used only as reinforcement. The only items learned from books are songs which were once known to the person using the book — the book is used to refresh the person's memory, and a "new" tune gradually enters the repertoire common to the network. Books are bought by mail and are brought back in person from Finland. While all the members of the network speak English and the language spoken most frequently at the musical evenings is English, all songs are sung in Finnish. The only exception noted was one rendition of "You Are My Sunshine." Several Swedish tunes have entered the repertoire through Mr. E. who remembered them from his youth.

In summary, there seem to be a number of conditions which are of significance to the social nature of folk music in Sointula. These are:

1. The predominance of an ethnic group which anywhere else within the dominant culture would be a minority group, with the attendant historical and social background which lead to this condition.
2. The isolation of this group both in terms of geography and accessibility to the mass media inputs which have elsewhere drastically affected folk music.
3. The existence of patterns of social interaction in which small group interactions ostensibly for the purpose of entertainment frequently occur.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup>A number of people were extremely helpful at various stages in this project. I would like to offer my gratitude to Kenneth S. Goldstein, Dan Ben-Amos, Elli Kongas Maranda, Carole Henderson, Terry and Shirley Whyte, and my wife Maxene. Most of all, I would like to express my appreciation to my informants.

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Résumé: *M. Burt Feintuch décrit une tradition vivante de musique folklorique d'un petit village de pêche en Colombie Britannique établi par des colons finlandais.*