

Article

The Ordinary Looks behind the Horrifying Screams: The Secrecies of Border Spirits in 20th Century Finnish Belief Narratives

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Abstract: This paper discusses the secrecies of border spirits within 20th century Finnish belief narratives. The aim is to explore how and in which contexts the imaginary aspects of border spirit narratives link to the idea of the “power of storytelling”. The following study touches on areas such as the suspension of the fantasy and sociopolitical aspects within the narratives. The folklore materials focus mainly on the Finnish heartland and partly on the national borders. Especially, narrative research methods were used to analyse what is heard and seen of the border spirits and what contexts these narratives involve. Moreover, the results touch on the dynamics of belief narratives without limiting them to the territorial aspects of borders. Hence, the study also explores interpretative bridges between folklore and border studies.

Keywords: belief narratives; borders; border spirits; border studies; folklore studies

1. Introduction

Border spirits are a noisy bunch of folk belief creatures in Finnish folklore. This is an arresting starting point for discussing the folklore of secrecy, presuming that secrets refer to such knowledge that should not be revealed to everyone (see [OED 2023](#)). My paper focuses on the secrecies in the border folklore in terms of what was heard and seen and when in the contexts of 20th century Finnish border folklore. Thus, border folklore refers here to the folk narratives that deal with the Finnish heartland borders (such as the farm or the forest estate borders) as well as with the national borders (the Finnish–Russo, the Swedish–Russo, and the Finnish–Swedish borders). Border spirits were a subject of scholarly interest especially in the 1930s and 1940s in Finland (see [Harva 1948](#); [Simonsuuri 1947](#); [Wessman 1943](#)). The term “Finnish folklore” in part refers in this article to the folklore that was collected in Finland during the first half of the 20th century. Martti [Haavio](#) (1939, p. 42) pointed out that the border folklore in Finland originates mostly from the south-western part of the country and that it regularly links to land ownership relations. Uno [Harva](#) (1948, pp. 462–63) in turn distinguished a “border spirit” from a “border devil” so that the first compares with a guardian spirit, while the latter appears mostly in those situations when the border is somehow violated. The idea of loudly screaming folklore belief creatures is an inspiring point of start because regularly there is some kind of injustice at the core of border folklore (see [Harva 1948](#), pp. 462–65; [Haavio 1939](#)).

My discussion focuses on 20th century folklore texts sent to the archive by the early 1960s at the latest. The temporal framework for the following folklore analysis reaches from the 19th century to the mid-20th century, roughly speaking. It is worth noticing that land ownership underwent great changes within the same period in Finland (see [Huhtamies 2008](#), pp. 301–52; [Björn 2000](#); [Talve 1997](#), pp. 24–26).

2. Theoretical Background

The Finnish word for border “*raja*” could refer to many kinds of borders if additional idioms (such as the “state”, “national”, “forest”, or “heartland” border) are not mentioned. This is the case regularly where the research material in this study is concerned. Hence,



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when analysing these materials, the reference point of the word “border” must be judged according to the narrative context, if possible. My focus is mostly on farm estate boundaries of the Finnish heartland. However, I do not consider natural borders (such as the seashore or the border rivers here), unless they are specifically mentioned within the analysed text. I do not discuss “borderlands” or “frontiers” either (for the differences of these conceptions, see [Kokkonen 2002](#), pp. 35–37).

My focus, however, is not only on the geographical borderlines. The point of departure is also on such discussions that emphasise the social and cultural dimensions of various bordering processes instead of geographical border lines or fences in situ (see [Scott 2020](#); [Brambilla 2015](#); [Kurki 2014](#)). Furthermore, contemporary border folklore discussions regularly touch on the expressions of border identities (see [Jaago 2018](#); [Kurki 2017](#); [Biederman 2016](#); [Bauman 1993](#)). Of course, borders and boundaries are also discussed within “regional folklore” (see [Ryden 1993](#), pp. 68–73) or place ([Björkman 2021](#)). Relevant scholarly contexts for my discussion could be found also within the study of the vernacular conceptions of place and locality (see [Bronner 2019](#), p. 511), as well as within the study of place-lore (see [Valk and Sävborg 2018](#)).

Consequently, the central issue in this paper is how to take into consideration not only the regional and local aspects, which are apparent in border folklore, but also to think of them in tandem with the political, social, personal, and creative aspects. Therefore, I examine border spirits from the viewpoint of a “belief narrative”. I lean on an approach elaborated by Ülo Valk, who brings out that: “[t]he “belief” in belief narrative says nothing about the truth value of the story; it simply indicates the power of storytelling in engaging life worlds, shaping attitudes, producing knowledge, and questioning what seems doubtful” ([Valk 2021](#), p. 181). Because the emphasis in my paper is on “the power of storytelling”, my analytical interest is in the narrative ways of producing knowledge in different border situations and contexts. Accordingly, the aim of this paper is to explore how and in which contexts the imaginary aspects of the border spirit narratives link to the idea of the “power of storytelling”.

3. Materials and Methods

Interest in border spirits grew in tandem with early 20th century interests in collecting folklore in home districts and local histories in Finland. Eemeli [Vihervaara \(1910, p. 153\)](#), the editor of *Kotiseutu* magazine (*Home district magazine*), asked in 1910 what people knew about border spirits. With these kinds of brief queries, folklore collectors and researchers started to pay more scholarly attention to border folklore. The research material in this paper is based upon folklore collections which followed these early questionnaires. Today, the material is located in the *Finnish Literature Society* (SKS) archives in Helsinki. My focus is on folk story and folk belief materials that are indexed by the archive under the rubric of “border folklore” or “border spirits”. Altogether, 224 lay collectors’ folklore descriptions serve as a premise for the research material.¹ Approximately just under 10% of the cases touch on the national borders; other materials deal with the heartland borders, or the border is not specified.

The idea of my study is to map out the variation in how border spirits and other border belief creatures are seen and heard within this material. The whole corpus served as a background, but in my analysis I selected 19 examples for the discussion according to the research questions in this paper. These questions are: *what is heard and seen of the border spirits, what do they scream, and how they look like according to the narratives? In addition, what kind of sociopolitical or other contexts do these narratives involve?*

Methodically, my study links to narrative research (see [Palmenfelt 2022](#); [Kurki 2021](#); [Cortazzi 2001](#)).² The specific focus is on belief narratives, particularly in terms of the exploration of “the transgeneric dimension of folklore” ([Valk 2021](#), p. 176). The idea of *transgeneric narrative* is familiar in narrative research more generally speaking. For instance, lyric poems can be compared with narrative fiction from this point of view (see [Hühn 2005](#)). However, my emphasis is on belief narratives because:

[t]he concept [of belief narrative] exceeds genre boundaries and leads us to epistemic functions of folklore, its role in transmitting knowledge, shaping world-views and values, and the basic analytical skills of distinguishing fact from fiction and important things from trivial ones. (Valk 2021, p.177)

Accordingly, I deploy the term “transgeneric dimensions of folklore” in this paper in terms of the question of how the visibility and audibility of border spirits links to the imagination concerning borders. Therefore, my analysis is methodically limited to the key elements of the narratives from this perspective. This means, first, that my focus is not on a broad reaching comparison of different folklore genres (other than border folklore). Instead, the background of this study is in contemporary border studies, which means that the methodological choices are considered through such questions as how the sociopolitical complexities of borders are represented and comprehended across different forms of border folklore, and what is heard and seen of border spirits?

The research material covers an illustrative range of the narrative and contextual variety of border folklore. It enables a focused discussion on the imaginary aspects of these narratives. The paper starts with examples that illustrate different aspects of what was heard and seen of the border spirits. In addition, I comment on cases where the appearance of the border spirit is addressed more exhaustively. I analyse the imaginary aspects of these narratives in different socio-political contexts. The last two examples touch on the topic from the national border vantage point. The idea is that this type of collection of examples could illustrate several kinds of border situations and locations.

4. What Is Heard and Seen (and What Is Not) of Border Spirits?

The scope and the length of the folklore texts in this research material vary from brief notes that bring up only the name of the border spirit to long ethnographic descriptions. To illustrate the methodical steps of my analysis, in my first example the border spirit is described only briefly: “My uncle had heard the border shouter in a house called [...] at the border between the Häme and the Uusimaa provinces. It screamed a kind of monotonous shout [for a long time?]”, (SKS KRA. Hautala, Jouko 1813. 1941. Pyhäjärvi. Translation by the author).³

My way of carrying out a narrative analysis started from key notions or schemas such as “shouting” or “screaming”, or the term “monotonous scream”, as above. In this paper, I separate “shouting” and “screaming” so that the former refers to the cases in which the voice includes words, a linguistic element so to speak (eight cases in this corpus). While the term “scream” in turn refers to the cases (four), where the narrative is about a speechless shout, or a “nonlinguistic vocalization” (see Schwartz and Gouzoules 2019). As my focus is on the variation of what is seen and heard of the border spirits, my paper address also such cases (7) that do not include a mention of the voice or the scream. Hence, I examined the “key features” in terms of whether there are narrative details referring to what is seen on these occasions.

After I located these features, my enquiry proceeded to an analysis of the scope of the narrative. I used a narrative analysis method to itemise “causality and chronology” in the text (see Palmenfelt 2022, p. 34). Similar aspects are studied in the narrative research for instance when using the terms such as “mediacy” and “sequentiality” (see Hühn 2005, p. 139). When approached from this direction, the above text does not provide information about the contextual matters such as why the border spirit screamed in that place, nor what the creature looked like. There are just a few brief sentences, and a few contextual details provided. It is mentioned that the narrator was a 70-year-old man (and that the folklore originates from Pyhäjärvi). Additionally, it is mentioned that the folklore collecting was done during a student’s home district excursion. Accordingly, it can be presumed that also other kinds of folklore were collected during the trip.

My attempt to exemplify the transgeneric narrative details included itemising the key notions, such as a “scream” or sentences that describe the looks of the border spirits. Here, my aim is to explore the contexts in which this visibility or the voices occur, not only

in terms of what kinds of political aspects the narrative might bring out, but what kinds of imaginary or fantasy narrative means are used. In the above example, one can notice that the relationship (or the causality) between the geographical or social contexts and the shouting of the border spirit (“a border shouter”) is uncertain. Therefore, my interpretation is that this is an account of the place of a belief narrative, not of the cultural or social meanings of this folk belief.

However, this is a good example to start with precisely because the analysis illustrates the challenges of approaching the sociocultural context. Moreover, this is an interesting example to start with, as the scream was described as “monotonous”. Accordingly, the emphasis is on the “calm side of the spectrum” of how the voices sounded according to the narratives. Next, I continue my analysis of how to consider the narrative variety (spectrum) in terms of how the screams, shouts, or other voices are described elsewhere within the materials. Besides the fact that the border spirit’s voice was monotonous, as described above, regularly the dreadfulness of the voice is also emphasised. In one case, a woman (born in 1865) told about a married couple who had stayed overnight in the meadow hay barn, where they had heard “a horrifying spine-chilling” shouting:

[. . .] in the midnight hour, they heard a horrible shout many times: —Open the border!—open the border! Starting from the border of Kaloinen, along with the Renko border towards the cliff of Tukkinummi. The shout was spine-chilling, and it did not have an echo either. (SKS KRA. Kivinen, Sulo KT 48:4. 1938. Janakkala)

Even though now the route of the border is described in the text, however, the causality between the border spirit’s shouting and its surroundings is not addressed in detail. One could presume that the belief narrative links to the local regional borders. However, the reason for the terribleness of the voice is not explained. Therefore, it is challenging to consider the socio-political contextual analysis in this case. The next narrative is about “a raspy voice” of the border spirit: “Once, a shepherd was gathering the cows from the bogland. She/he took a rod from the fence to move across the bog. Then, the border spirit shouted with a raspy voice: “You stole that border rod!”” (SKS KRA. Huttunen, Anja 36. 1947. Pyhäjärvi). Even though the narrator emphasises that the border spirit shouting was “raspy”, the personal impact of the voice is not exemplified. When the imaginary aspects of the narration are concerned, the tone is more neutral than in the earlier example. The narrative causality of the border spirit shouting, and its socio-political surrounding, are apparent in this case in the sense that the shout seems to be a consequence of stealing the border fence rod. There is moral in the narrative that one should not touch the border fences. It would be tempting to think that there is also a social aspect in this, especially as the protagonist of the narrative is a “shepherd”, who were regularly not in the position of defining or changing the land borders. The narrative refers to the agrarian society, and it was collected in the 1940s. Especially “the differentiation of rural society” is especially worth noticing here (Talve 1997, p. 26). If interpreted against this background, one possible socio-political context for the narrative is that of who owns the land. However, it is also worth pointing out that the contextual references are sparse: this belief narrative was told by a woman (47 years) and the text, which is categorised under the title “Folk Tales”, was collected during yet another student’s home district excursion (to Pyhäjärvi in 1946).

In the following examples, besides how the border spirit yelling affected people, the socio-political contexts are also addressed in more detail than in the above. The next analysis is based on a part of a text which is a collection of the variations of belief narratives of border spirits and their screams. The terrible effect of the screams is highlighted illustratively when the text states that the yell “[. . .] chafed the skin very much! Oh, dear, it truly did. I felt a shiver over my body when I heard that noise”, (SKS KRA. Oulasmaa, Siiri KT 8640. 1963. Pyhäjärvi). This is just to illustrate how the personal aspect is emphasised sometimes. From the contextual standpoint, more illustrative is another sample from the same document as above, in which neighbour relations are discussed. The text states: “The border devil has messed up the neighbour relations. That is its job. This is what the elderly people said in the old days when there was a quarrel between the neighbours” (SKS KRA.

Oulasmaa, Siiri KT 8640. 1963. Pyhäjärvi). Here, the narrative analysis brings out at least two contextual levels worth mentioning. Firstly, the narrative causality is manifested, as it is pointed out that border spirits cause quarrels between neighbours. The other contextual level is with the use of the belief narratives: the text reveals the specific situation (a quarrel between the neighbours) in which this narrative was told. It is plausible to think that this folk custom belongs to the past. It is not necessarily in use anymore, even though the folklore is remembered. Especially, the uses of the past tense and the categorisation “the elderly” support such interpretation.

When the “imaginary” or “fantastic” features of the looks of the border spirits are concerned, the first thing to note is that in the above examples (where the terrifying sounds are emphasised), the texts do not portray the looks of the creature in detail. This is an interesting notion also when concerning such cases where the actions of the border spirits are addressed. For instance, in one case, the text reads:

A border devil lived at such borders where the land surveyors had taken a bribe and accordingly set the borders wrongly. The border devil imitated the land surveyor by occasionally climbing on top of the border stone. From there, it observed the direction of the border. Every now and then it screamed, until it moved with hasty steps to the next border mark along the border line. (SKS KRA. Stenroth, Artur. 76. 1937. Valkeala)

This narrative, told by a man born in 1891, describes the activities of the border spirit in detail. The narrative causality is brought up at the beginning in terms that the border spirit inhabits namely those borders which were set wrongly. However, there is no explanation of why the spirit imitates the land surveyor. This is an interesting observation in terms of the transgenic dimensions of belief narratives and folklore that I mentioned at the beginning of the article (see [Valk 2021](#), p. 176). I would like to emphasise here how the visibility and audibility of border spirits link to the imagination, knowledge, and politics of borders more generally. If the behaviour of the border spirit that imitates the land surveyor is considered from this perspective, it is plausible to consider that this is an example of a transgeneric dimension of folklore.

In addition, the institutional side of land-owning is apparent because the figure of the land surveyor is central. Moreover, the wrongly set borders are mentioned explicitly as well. The narrative causality is brought up at the beginning in terms that the border spirit inhabits those borders which were set wrongly. However, there is no explanation of why the spirit imitates the land surveyor and not the person who offered the bribes, for instance. This is an interesting observation in terms of the transgeneric dimension of folklore because, according to my analysis, the imaginary aspect of the narrative now links to the behaviour of the border spirit, to the notion that it imitates especially the land surveyor. Thus, the border spirit above is not just some ambiguous belief creature, but it possesses an identifiable professional feature.

The above analysis illustrates already how the land-owning politics could serve as a source of the imaginary aspects of the border folklore. In addition, the analysis shows how elements as the looks of the creature and the character of its screaming could remain ambivalent. In addition, the research material only seldom reveal in detail how these narratives really affected the people. Accordingly, one could wonder where the power of storytelling comes from? Are there some secrets here? Why are the vocal matters so central in the border folklore if their reference points are as ambiguous, as the above examples illustrate? Partly, this is so because we do not know whether the spirit yelled, shouted, cried, or screeched.

Consequently, the following analysis is based on an argument that, notwithstanding the slender contextual information, both in the narrative and in the socio-political sense, these narratives do, however, entail some imaginative potential. This potential is analysed in the following through the scholarly discussions regarding “human fantasy” and “wishful thinking” against “the common environmental and social factors” ([Tangherlini 1990](#), p. 381), as well as regarding “the power of storytelling in engaging life

worlds" (Valk 2021, p. 181). Considered from these viewpoints, my presumption is that perhaps what is gained with the transgeneric dimension (in terms of the power of storytelling) is lost in terms of the specificity of the land-owning issue or other socio-political contexts.

Border spirit folklore is regularly politicised, as above, in the cases where the action of the border spirit resembles with the land authorities. Hence, my interpretation is that the violation of the border is a violation against the everyday order and its institutional settings (e.g., the land surveying). Is this the secrecy of the scream in this case? What is behind the secretcies of these border violations? These questions could be considered for example from the psychological point of view, in terms of communication or anxiety (see Schwartz and Gouzoules 2019). Also the discussions about the motif of the "scream" in the fine arts discussions context interestingly link to the psychological issues. The motif of "shouting", for instance, bears a resemblance to the screaming that is considered in the contexts of the works of Edvard Munch and Francis Bacon, as well elsewhere in the arts (see Prata et al. 2018; Siopsi 2017; Schwenger 2014). I mention these viewpoints only briefly, as the focus in this paper is also on the visibility of the border spirits and how it links to the folklore of secrecy. Therefore, in the next part, I focus on cases where the external appearance of the border spirits is explicated more specifically.

5. The Appearances of the Border Spirits

I start with a brief overview of the appearances of the border spirits to lay some foundations for proceeding to the issue of the sociopolitical aspects of the seen and unseen in border folklore. For example, in several cases of the "Old Border Geezer" (*rajavaari*), the narratives regularly inform that many people had seen a border spirit. According to these narratives, the creature could have worn "a brownish coat and a helmet or a beat-up hat" (SKS KRA. Karhisto, E.N. 193. 1936. Viljakkala), or the clothes could have been also grey (SKS KRA. Vihervaara, Eemeli. b) 568. 1910. Hämeenkyrö). Sometimes, the character had also "a red knitted cap on" together with grey clothes (SKS KRA. Österberg, Mathilda. 167. 1899. Lohja. See Simonsuuri 1947, pp. 143–44). These examples illustrate that the descriptions of the appearances of the border spirits refer to a variety of details of ordinary everyday garments. Regularly, however, the connection between the garment details and the event in the narrative is not closely explained. For instance, one story talks about a border spirit that was seen in the late evening at the border between two houses:

I saw a spirit around eleven o'clock in the evening at the border between two houses in Somerniemi. It was blueberry time. I was picking berries and when I wandered along the boundary fence, a woman came across me. She wore a blue dress and a white apron in front, and she had a birch-bark basket in her hand. She picked berries along the border. I greeted her, but she did not answer. When I turned to look behind, she had vanished already. (SKS KRA. Huttunen, Anja 137. 1947. Pyhäjärvi)

This example illustrates my observations that the appearances of the border spirits regularly link to the everyday lifeworld, and how the contextual references are minor. The boundary between two houses indicates that the narrative concerns the heartland borders. However, it is not specified whether the story addresses the neighbour relations in general, or some other land-owning, or house estate issue. Furthermore, there is a feature of politeness (greeting) in this narrative. My interpretation is that now a socio-cultural context is emphasised instead of familiarity because the narrator does not seem to recognise the female spirit character. Moreover, there is no mention of the schema of the wrongly set border either. Consequently, one might wonder whether the border had been violated at all this time. I arrived at this question especially as the encounter with the spirit seems so peaceful.

The everyday looks of the border spirits and the calm encounters with the spirits are emphasised also in the next example:

Border spirit.

A border spirit was once seen in Pyhäjärvi. At least, a man called [...] claimed so. He described this occasion as follows: “I was returning from my [dating] on my journey home one dusky summer night. I took a shortcut along a track running across the forest owned by two houses. I did so because this track notably shortened my way home. Suddenly, in the thickest part of the forest, a gentleman slunk in front of me. He wore a dark suit, had a straw hat on his head and a stick in his hand. However, he did not pay any attention to me, to the nocturnal wanderer. Instead, he seemed to be absorbed in his thought when he turned off into the forest.

And so, he wandered off along the forest border between the houses. Then, I realised that this was one of those border spirits. In the morning, I told my family to pay attention, and that these two houses are going to face hard border quarrels. So it happened and it did not take long.” (SKS KRA. Ekström, Fanny. TK 9:18. 1961. Vihti)

The narrative has several narrative levels or narrator “positions” (see [Mikkola 2009](#), p. 121). There is the passive voice in the opening phrase of the narrative (“A border spirit was once seen. . .”) which introduces the opening of the story on a general level. However, immediately after this, the narrator relays an eyewitness story, which he had heard from another man, and who is the actual narrator in this case. The narrative causality is manifested in this case, as already in several examples above, in the sense that border spirits cause quarrels. This time this causality or chronology is revealed because the meeting with the spirit now, at the end of the narrative, turns out to be an omen for subsequent quarrels. However, even though the border spirits were seen, they did not say anything, and they then vanished quickly in both cases.

When this last “gentleman” narrative is compared in turn to the “blueberry” example, it is possible to identify several narrative similarities: both texts focus on a nighttime and calm encounter with a border spirit. Hence, the appearances and the behaviour are ordinary. Another common finding is that according to these two last narratives, the belief creatures were recognised as “border spirits”, namely because of their muteness and due to a fact that they appeared and disappeared suddenly without a word at the borders. Where are the imaginary aspects, and where are the secrets now? These are relevant questions because somehow the strangeness is subtle, for instance, in the manner that the spirit did not return a greeting but remained silent instead and eventually vanished without a word.

Above, the focus has been on the screams of the border spirits. In the following, I discuss the looks of these border belief creatures. The first thing to notice is simply that appearances are not described in the research material as regularly as the noises of the creatures. If the appearance of the border spirit is described in the texts in the first place, the verbal description regularly only generally brings out such features as how someone has seen border spirits somewhere. For example, in one case, it is mentioned that:

There exists a unique border spirit. If one secretly moves the boundary marks, the border spirit travels along the correct borderline at night, and shouts: “Here is the border, here is the border.” On Sundays, it is possible that it appears to people when they go to pick berries in the forest. (SKS KRA. Harju, Otto 12:3049. 1946. Rautalampi)

When the temporal perspective of the narrative is considered, it can be noticed that the above text is an account of living folklore (at the time of collection). The scope of the text is here and now. Here too, the narrative causality links to the idea that the border spirit shout follows if border markers are moved to the wrong place. The ending of this narrative (see [Palmenfelt 2022](#), pp. 36–37) is interesting especially when the suspension between the personal and social is concerned. Tim Tangherlini has dealt with this relation, for instance, by suggesting that:

Much of folk narrative is the human fantasy engaging in wishful thinking. Legend, thus, acts as a symbolic representation of collective experiences and be-

liefs, expressing fears and desires associated with the common environmental and social factors affecting both the active and passive tradition bearers. (Tangherlini 1990, p. 381)

The above folklore narrative could be interpreted against this background also. The ending of the narrative brings out the possibility of seeing a border spirit. The emotional, social, and imaginary orientation here is a bit different than the other examples that I discussed above. The aspect of frightfulness is not at the core of the last folklore example. I would even say that the attitude here is more curious than that of subjection (c.f. the shepherd). In the following, I go deeper into the suspensions between the common and personal, fantasy, and sociopolitical environment.

6. Towards the Variety of the Socio-Political Contexts in the Border Spirit Narratives

The starting point for the next part is that there is a variation between the narratives about how the border folklore links to the situations where the borders are violated or wrongly set, and the ones that focus on such situations where this wrong or violation is not apparent. In one case, a 73-year-old man (a farmer) talks about his own experiences of the border spirits. According to the narrative, he had walked close to one farm estate border late one night, when: “[...] there was a sharp and piercing sound: “Correct the border.” The border was measured wrongly, and the border spirit insisted on the correct border”, (SKS KRA. HAKS 5887. 1937. Riihimäki). This narrative includes an explanation of the reason for the border spirit shouting: the narrative causality now refers specifically to the socio-political context of the land ownership. Where my analysis is concerned, one of the most important contextual details is that according to the narrator, the story is based on his own experience. Assuming that this text was collected in the 1930s, when the narrator was 73 years old, the story refers somewhere within the temporal period from the end of the 19th to the beginning of the 20th century. At that time, Finland was still mostly an agrarian country. In this sense, this kind of land-owning belief narrative was understandable. Historically, there was a regular lack of appreciation of land surveyors in Finland (see Huhtamies 2008, pp. 185–89). In addition, the above example does not include similar references to the past times as in the earlier example where the border devil spoiled neighbour relations. Instead of the personal experience of a terrifying shout, the focus is now on the personal understanding of land division principles and practices. Where the transgeneric dimension of folklore is concerned, my interpretation is that there is an absence of explicit references to the emotional or imaginary features of the belief narrative. Interestingly, this situation is accounted almost as it had been “business as usual” amidst the stream of everyday life.

In the next example, the narrative levels are even more complex. The narrative is titled “The souls without a place”. This story was collected in 1920, and the narrator is a woman (born 1875). The text states:

There, in Perniö, once in one night, a brother moved a boundary marker from his brother’s land to another place. Even though the Bible says, do not move the boundary that your ancestor made, this brother in greed moved the boundary anyway. However, a lot of troubles followed. In the nighttime, the border devil screamed with a dreadful sound on top of the boundary stone. They said that shivers of terror went up and down the body when one listened. And it did not stop screaming until they put the boundary stone in the correct place. From that, a saying remained for if someone screams loudly, it is accustomed to say, “Scream like a border devil.” (SKS KRA. Lamminpää, Lempi TK 55:25. 1961. Perniö)

When analysed from the narrative perspective, it is possible to point out that this text has an opening phrase “once in one night” which I would interpret especially from the “dramaturgical” standpoint (see Palménfelt 2022, p. 36). This phrase raises expectations that there is something peculiar in the following sentence where it is explicated that there is a land-owning issue between brothers. It is a family issue, but a bit later, also, the Bible is mentioned as a moral source for these sorts of earthly matters. After this, narrative

causality is brought up when it is mentioned that the border spirit's screaming was caused by moving the boundary stone. The last contextual aspect to point is the ending, which is an account of these occurrences eventually turned into a folk expression, a saying.

Based on the analysis of this last example, I would suggest that the folklore here marks the ambiguities of the ethical aspects of the family land-owning issues "written in stone". Earlier, I pointed out how the category of the "land engineer" itself refers explicitly to the professional established framework of the land-owning. Naturally, the narrative details vary in how much the focus in each case is on the actual look of the creature and how much it is on the behaviour or the action of the border spirit or the land surveyor figure. In one case, for instance, the character of border spirit just briefly appears before vanishing. It was said to wear "a black frieze suit and had a shiny patch cap on" which "made him look like as he was a land surveyor" (SKS KRA. Säteri, Eelis. KRK 45:29. 1935. Loimaa). I will not analyse this example in more detail because the narrative, similarly to the earlier example, is about an omen that the appearance of the sprits predicts border quarrels. Instead, the next part is based on an attempt to seek more explicit overlapping areas of the folklore and border discussions from the vantage of the imagination.

In the following, I approach the imaginative aspects of the border spirit folklore. I focus on the anomalies of what is heard and seen of the border spirits. The first example consists of two folklore texts narrated by a 70-year-old man:

This story dates to the 19th century when the border between the parishes of Teuva and Närpiö was constructed and ordered. The engineer, for whom this post was given and who led the delimiting of the boundary, against orders made the border approximately 5 km on the Finnish side. The Swedes gave alcohol to the engineer, so they got much more land than they were supposed to get. When the border was ready, the engineer died and returned to haunt the area. At nights, when people from Teuva brought cargoes to Kaskinen, approximately 5 km from the Teuva border in the Närpiö direction, they heard a man's voice from the forest shouting in Swedish: "*Ten rahen!*" and then in Finnish: here is the border.

Once, an uncle (a farmer in Perälä of Swedish origin) brought a cargo load to this aforementioned place, where the sound was heard also earlier. There was a man crosswise on the road. The uncle shouted from the cart, Hey! Rise up, man! But he did not rise. The uncle came down from the cart and went close to the man, and he had stepped over a trouser leg. However, it was empty. The uncle climbed back onto the cart and hit the horse up to its ears. The horse had jumped over the man, but the engineer had stayed there. (SKS KRA. Harjula, Aarne. KRK 176:13–14. Perälä)

The narrative causality, which I have emphasised in my analysis, is apparent in a sense that the border spirit links to wrongdoers in the border context. Here, I would emphasise another focal narrative feature, namely how "[...] narratives are excellent tools for creating dichotomies of a moral nature" (Palmenfelt 2022, p. 44). In the above example, the dichotomy between the Finns and the Swedes is accompanied by the dichotomy between the Teuva and Närpiö parishes. These two narratives also include other references to socio-political contexts. Mikko Huhtamies (2008, p. 214), who has written on the history of the land survey in Finland, notes that the bribing of engineers was a well-known problem. Interpreted against this background, the border folklore narratives that address the bribery seem to use political realities as a source of the imaginary means of narrating. Contrary to my earlier examples, in this last example, also, the context of the cargo drive is emphasised. This adds, I would say, a somewhat modern aspect to this mostly agrarian framework of the Finnish border folklore. Even though the details of this cargo drive context are not explained minutely, this narrative feature refers to the sphere outside the home farm as well as outside of the socio-political setting of family life, which were mentioned already earlier in this paper.

Furthermore, the narrative of the empty-legged border spirit includes a chronological detail worth a closer look. The narrative ends with the words: “but the engineer had stayed there”. According to my interpretation, this suggests that the narrator recognised the engineer only by seeing the surface, the clothes of the border spirit. This is a spooky ending for a story, at least in my opinion. However, the horror of the story is not verbalised alike with the terrible voices that were addressed earlier. For instance, when compared with the cases where the appearances and the behaviour were ordinary, it is possible to observe that there is a variety in how these narratives consider the identification of the spirits.

Earlier, I brought up that these folklore texts include accounts of how the border spirits were seen occasionally. However, sometimes these creatures did not say anything, and sometimes they vanished quickly. Hence, the belief creatures were recognised as “border spirits” at least partly because of their muteness, and due to a fact that they appeared and disappeared suddenly without a word.

How do the horrors of meeting this kind of creature look when the dichotomies “of a moral nature” are considered from this angle? The legacy of the land surveying, the wrongdoer, according to this narrative, is that the testimony lives on as an oral narrative, but the corporeal destiny is buried in the imaginaries of folk narrative. At the root of my interpretation is an idea of the social and emotional side of the moral, which leaves all questions answered, all destinies obscure, contrary to myth for instance. [Palmenfelt \(2022, p. 45\)](#) points out that “[n]arrative as a cultural form lends itself less well to rendering the confusing, contradictory, and difficult-to-interpret pages of human life and social conditions. For this it needs to be supplemented with other forms of expression”. This is an interesting notion in the border folklore context. It is clear, just by looking at a few examples in my article, that border folklore deals with confusions and contradictions. Understood this way, border folklore could be considered as a form of the folklore of secrecy.

In the case of the border spirit with an empty trouser leg, the focus is not so much on the differences of what is seen and heard, as in the earlier part of my analysis, but more on the contradiction of what is seen and unseen. In addition, I emphasised that the empty trouser leg functions as such key narrative feature that underlines the point where the political and imaginary meet. This imaginary aspect of the narrative is apparent because the creature is identified precisely as the land surveyor who took a bribe. However, interpreted against this realistic-historical perspective, the surprising (imaginary) element is that the trouser leg seems to be empty. Consequently, this creature is perhaps not from this world after all when judged on account of its visible and invisible features. Thus, this is an example of a sort of afterlife of the corrupted officials according to the border folklore.

The final part of my analysis focuses on how border and folklore issues in terms of the ways imagination and fantasy in the narratives could link to the sociopolitical aspects of what is seen and unseen. In the above analysis, absurd narratives were linked to the uncertainty of knowledge of the borders. These narratives confused the border knowledge and made the borders appear as uncertain sites. However, there are examples within the research material which bring out political resistance and the border spirits more explicitly. Accordingly, I choose to end my paper on two examples in which case the events narrated take place at the time when Finland was a part of Sweden, and the countries were at war with Russia.

The first text (narrated by a 58-year-old woman) concerns the border spirit, *a son of Ukko-Devil*, who played “a big birch-bark horn” on the hill. According to the story, the border devil had received this horn as a gift for saving a Finn from a Russian attack during the war (SKS KRA. Horttanainen, Erkki. KRK 800. 1931. Karttula). The key narrative element is that, by saving a Finn, the border spirit had been involved in the events of the war. My interpretation is that the spirit was on the Finnish–Swedish side in this matter. This line of thinking is supported also by another place-lore narrative about the Pisa-hill border spirit. Next, I examine this case more closely, as it is also analytically more illustrative than the preceding example. The following story was narrated by a 72-year-old woman:

Because of the wars that were fought in the old days, on and on, the border between Russia and Finland used to run through the Pisa-hill. Although the Russians sometimes won, the border was eventually drawn through the Pisa Mountain anyway. This is so because the border spirit who lived on that mountain refused to move elsewhere. (SKS KRA. Horttanainen, Erkki. KRK 598. 1931. Nilsia)

According to the latter narrative, the border spirit seems to be on the Finnish–Swedish side because it refused to move even though the result of the wars would have been otherwise, which I try to emphasise here. Accordingly, this example summons the notion of a resistant attitude of the border spirits. When the narrative “dichotomies of a moral nature” (Palmenfelt 2022, p. 44) are compared in the last two examples, it can be observed how the dichotomy between Sweden–Finland and Russia is emphasised because of the war. This framework comprises a general context of the events, also partly because there are no other temporal references in the text. For instance, the emotional tone, which was brought up earlier, is not central in the last examples.

Moreover, when the transgeneric dimension of folklore is concerned, I would point at two aspects: the first is that it is plausible to consider that these Pisa-hill narratives seem to link to real historical events. However, instead of “the truth value of the story” the analytical emphasis in my case is more on “the power of storytelling”. When the resistant attitudes of the border spirits are concerned from this perspective, these belief narratives link to “questioning what seems doubtful” (see Valk 2021, p. 181).

Another aspect is the temporal distance between the folklore collection and the “old days” that these narratives refer to. Perhaps it is partly because of this temporal distance that the narratives about site-specific beliefs are somewhat straightforward? In the future, it would be interesting to compare these temporal features and reflect this comparison through Palmenfelt’s (2022, p. 45) argument concerning the powerlessness of narratives in terms of “the confusing, contradictory, and difficult-to-interpret”. The scope of this article, however, has been to analyse the sociopolitical aspects of the (border) imagination in the border folklore.

7. Conclusions

This paper examined a set of border spirit narratives. The analysed texts, now in the SKS archive, were originally written in the first half of the 20th century. The selected 19 narratives consisted of the cases that talk of what was seen and heard of the border spirits. In addition, the emphasis was on the cases where the appearance of the border spirit is described in detail. The materials were explored using a narrative analysis method. I started my discussion from the observation that the horribleness of the border spirit voices did not quite correspond with the sightings of the border spirits. Another finding is that, according to the analysed narratives, the everyday-looking belief creatures were recognised as “border spirits” because, for instance, of their muteness or sudden comings and goings. In addition, I addressed the interweaving of the imaginary and sociopolitical underpinnings of the sightings of the border spirits. The analysis of the anomalies of what was heard and seen in the border folklore illustrated how the historical-realistic and imaginary narrative features intertwine in these belief narratives. This was the case, for example, in the narrative on the land engineer with an empty trouser leg who was recognised (as an identified person) merely based on a hollow figure (imaginary). Hence, the folkloric knowledge here refers away from the everyday events where the sighting was reported to happen. Whether these are understood in terms of imagination, play, storytelling, or misinformation varies also elsewhere in the above cases.

When the transgeneric dimension of folklore is concerned, this paper suggests, also, that there is a “contradiction” between the familiar looks of the border spirits and their horrifying voices. I pointed out, for instance, how the eyewitness accounts of the meetings with these spirits regularly were calm and peaceful, especially when their narrative tone is concerned and when compared with the voices that were discussed at the beginning

of this paper. My discussion regarding the examples of “the border spirit with the straw hat”, of “the border spirit imitating the land surveyor”, and of “the border spirit with an empty trouser leg” illustrates how the socio-political framework could be used as a source of the imaginary aspects of the narrative. This in turn illuminates how these border spirit narratives could involve different kinds of axes of the transgeneric dimension of folklore.

This analysis showed how the key narrative features of “imitating the land surveyor”, “hollowness of the creature”, and “sudden appearing or disappearing of the spirits” bring forward the creativeness from the folklore (see [Bronner 2017](#), p. 46; [Noyes 2016](#), p. 13). It also dealt with the question of how seen and unseen border spirits linked to sociopolitical resistance. The central findings concerning this topic are that the sightings of the border spirits seem to confuse and reach beyond the sphere of everyday knowledge. In addition, I exemplified the narrative “dichotomies of a moral nature” ([Palmenfelt 2022](#), p. 44) from this perspective, for instance, in terms of “Sweden–Finland vs. Russia”. The analysis showed how the scream, and in some cases also the appearance of the border spirit, stood for a resistant attitude against authorities, especially when the latter were corrupted by bribes.

Instead of the place-lore viewpoint, I approached borders in terms of knowledge and processes. This was done to ponder the challenges of territoriality, which is emphasised also within the discussions of borderscapes and bordering processes (see [Brambilla 2015](#), p. 18; see [Scott 2020](#), pp. 6–7, 10–11). The analysis above illustrated how the focus on social relations regularly links to those persons who had given bribes or who were otherwise involved in manipulating the borders. The discussion above also shows how realism and imagination entangle on different narrative levels of folk beliefs. Instead of “the truth value of the story”, the analytical emphasis was more on “the power of storytelling”. I argued that, where the resistant attitudes of the border spirits are concerned, the belief narratives link to “questioning what seems doubtful”, (see [Valk 2021](#), p. 181). Imagination is concerned also in the context of the study of borders and places (see [Krichker 2021](#)). Here, I think of the notion posed by [Palmenfelt \(2022, p. 45\)](#) about the powerlessness of the narrative in terms of “the confusing, contradictory, and difficult-to-interpret”. This could be reflected also through Gloria [Anzaldúa’s \(1987, 2000\)](#) artistic-poetic approach, which emphasises the plurality of borderland experiences also from the poetic point of view. According to [Schaeffer \(2018, p. 1005\)](#), “Her [Anzaldúa’s] writing entreats us to experience the interrelated ontologies or soul shared by humans, animals, objects, and what can’t be seen but is deeply felt”. Consequently, my discussion could be interpreted as an attempt to seek the means of exploring “the interrelated ontologies”. Thus, my reading of the folklore of secrecy could be seen in terms of the ontologies that interrelate within the belief narratives of the border spirits.

Borders, their surroundings, and the narrative means to tell of them are multiple in Finnish border folklore. Therefore, it is thought-provoking to consider how border spirits might have provided thought models formerly. Border folklore, thus, offers thought models not only for local history interpretations and for the study of beliefs, but also for the political critique, and for creativity as well.

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Notes

- ¹ It is possible to locate these materials according to the index cards at the SKS archive: the first, and the largest material part (144 items) is indexed according to *Folk Stories (Uskomustarinakortisto)*, the second (31 items) according to *Folk Beliefs (Kansanuskokortisto)*, and the third (56 items) according to the responses to the folklore-magazine *Kansantieto* inquiry no 22 (Kansantieto-lehden kysely no 22, see [Simonsuuri 1963](#)). According to the guidelines of the SKS archive, the references to these materials include: (the name of the archive (SKS) and the collection (KRA); the collector's name; the archive series; the volume number or/and page numbers; the year of archiving; and the location of the folklore) (see <https://www.finlit.fi/en/node/2499>, accessed on 19 September 2023). All the references to the materials in this article are translated from Finnish to English by the author.
- ² During the work process, I have also explored the possibilities of using the *arts-related research* approach (see [Savin-Baden and Wimpenny 2014](#)), especially in terms of *comics-based research* (see [Kuttner et al. 2018](#)). Earlier, I have pondered, for instance, about the aesthetics of the borders and the question of how borders are seen or not seen in folklore, in which case I also combined my own artistic drawing with the research (see [Korolainen 2020](#)). However, the focus in this paper is on the narrative analysis. Accordingly, my plan is to discuss elsewhere the comics-based approach and my artwork, which were included in the earlier versions of this paper. One future direction for this kind of approach could be in the national border related folklore or in the absurdist side of the narratives. Moreover, from the arts-related and psychological viewpoints, it would be interesting to consider, for example, the discussions about the motif of “the scream” (see [Prata et al. 2018](#); [Schwenger 2014](#)).
- ³ The original text in Finnish: “Minun enoni, se oli siellä Lopella [. . .]-niminen talo, Hämeen- ja Uurenmaan läänin rajalla, niin siellä se kuuli sen rajahuutajan. Se huuti siellä pitkänsä semmosta ykstoikkosta huutoa.” (SKS KRA. Hautala, Jouko 1813. 1941. Pyhäjärvi). All the English translations and editing of the research material quotations in this article are made by the author. The original texts are regularly written down in dialect (spoken Finnish language). Therefore, I have slightly edited my translations. In this case, for instance, the name of the house is removed and the phrase “pitkänsä” is also slightly unclear (for the author). I presume that it refers to a notion: “for a long time”.

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