

Article

The Cooperative Spirit of Nature in the *Kalevala* Creation Myth: An Argument for Modern Animism

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Abstract: The Finnish *Kalevala* epic contains a world-creation myth that exemplifies the essential cooperation between humans and the nature spirits that inhabit the land. These stories not only reflect the culture's animistic worldview, they also contain a remarkable awareness of how humans depend on the wisdom of nature to survive and illustrate how that coexistence benefits both humans and nature—a perspective that can be increasingly valuable in the modern era.

Keywords: *Kalevala*; nature; world mythology; creation myth; literature; animism; Finland; folklore; environment; religious naturalism; relational ontology

1. Introduction

Myths are more than mere stories—these ancient tales have held us in their grip for thousands of years. They are part of the human journey, inspiring us to wonder culturally, individually, and as a species about our origins, our present time, and our future [1]. Myths are not only part of the way we tell our story and reflect how we understand it, but they also “convey some significant truth about the relationship between human beings and the source of being” [1]. The creation myth of the *Kalevala* is an example of this type of enduring relevance, especially regarding our relationship with the natural world. When we speak of viewing nature as divine or sacred, it is often in the context of primitive beliefs of ancient peoples or dismissed as something supernatural, but an animistic worldview can be complementary with modern science as well as a path toward greater environmental awareness and protective efforts.

The approach in this article is two-fold. In an effort to draw attention to a piece of mythic literature that is often overlooked, I first sought to analyze the creation aspects of this myth to highlight the connections portrayed between humans and nature. The second goal emerged during the research process as it became clear that not only is there evidence in this myth of a cooperation between humans and the natural world, but this connection can be used to further the argument that an animistic worldview fosters a perspective that is more inclusive of the natural world. After offering some brief context about the *Kalevala* and some of the debates surrounding it, I will analyze the two creation episodes and then discuss how these stories remind us that our connection with and attention to nature is essential for our survival and how animism, rather than being primitive, can enhance conservation and preservation efforts.

The *Kalevala* is the national epic of Finland (more accurately, geographically speaking, Finnish-Karelian [2]) and consists of 50 runos (a word synonymous with ‘canto’ or short poem) that tell not only the story of world creation, but detail the exploits of various culture heroes. While technically an epic poem consisting of collected folklore, and not without its controversies, over the past century the *Kalevala* has earned its place among the great myths and epics of the world (although it is often eclipsed by more well-known European myths of the Norse, Greeks, and Romans). Collected by Elias Lönnrot and published in two versions, the second version (published in 1849) is considered canon. In *The Traditional Poetry of the Finns*, Domenico Comparetti describes the *Kalevala* as “a synthesis of traditional



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Finnic poetry from lyric songs” [3]. Much scholarship has been devoted to Lönnrot’s meticulous collection and compilation process so an examination of such is not needed here; his steps can be traced [4]. An examination of Lönnrot’s method supports an argument that the *Kalevala* is based on “authentic folklore” [4]. But it is worth noting that in Lönnrot’s “Homeric role” [4] as a poet, he made changes to some of the poems he used “in order to bring them into a narrative sequence and to achieve thematic coherence”, removing many aspects of Christian influence and changing names of some locations and characters [2]. However, as with all myths, we must avoid the temptation to look for a ‘correct’ version. Lönnrot collected many variations of the poems and the resultant literary work does reflect some of his own contributions, although only about two percent of the epic is believed to be his original creation [4].

One of the most significant claims against the *Kalevala* is that it is not an accurate representation of the ancient folk poetry of the Finns. But while Finnish scholars urge us to remember that the *Kalevala* is Lönnrot’s creation [2], this does not undermine the argument for its status as myth or its effectiveness as literature. Every study of myth as literature must, at some point, be content with the fact that we never have an original story and that the stories we have today changed as they were told and continued to evolve after they were written and translated. Even sacred texts are not immune to change and the existence of variants. What is especially remarkable in this case is that “Finnish folk poetry has “survived until comparatively recently despite successive waves of foreign influence” [2]. It is fortunate that the folk poetry is accessible now and readers can undertake the investigation on their own if they wish¹. And while I do not claim that the *Kalevala* represents the ancient folk poetry of the Finns, it may also be said that the ancient folk poetry is not “pure” myth (by “pure” I mean unaltered by any outside cultural influence or written material unchanged from ancient times); as is the case with the myths of many ancient cultures, the stories were changed as they were performed orally and many reveal the influence of Christianity. Given this, we must employ a certain measure of tolerance in reading both the *Kalevala* as well as the source material. Additionally, this analysis concerns only the creation aspect of the *Kalevala*—portions that do contain many core motifs from the ancient poems. In an effort to remain as thorough and accurate as possible in my analysis, I have consulted the ancient Finnish folk poetry that serves as the source material for the runos being examined here. As long as we maintain an understanding of the *Kalevala*’s source material and its compilation we can appreciate both the ancient folk poetry and the creation of such a masterpiece that attempts to unify it.

The animistic worldview of the ancient Finns is central to this discussion; from this perspective, nature is more than alive—it is ‘animated’ with spirits. “The basic idea in Finnish mythology seems to lie in this: that all objects in nature are governed by invisible deities, termed *haltiat*” (a guardian or helpful spirit [5]). In this context, spirits are associated with specific places as well as natural phenomena or “powers found in natural elements such as earth, water, forest, or fire” [6]; the myth also reveals that trees and water, specifically, were of great significance to the ancient Finns [3].

Every part of the creation myth reveals the divinity of nature—nature is anthropomorphized, not merely personified². There are spirits and deities associated with all aspects of nature and there are cooperative efforts at every turn - between the various elements of nature and between the world co-creators and these elements. There is often an exchange that is mutually beneficial to humans and the natural environment—they work together to create the world and establish civilization; humans directly benefit from the attention given to nature. The characters in the *Kalevala* employ incantations and magic spells to achieve their goals. Upon close examination, these incantations can equally be considered prayers. A deity or nature spirit is called upon in all instances—it can be debated if the words are a command or request but in the context of an animistic worldview, the division between magic, nature, and spirituality is blurred.

The *Kalevala* is worthy of study and enjoyment, and deserves attention for its unique depiction of the interaction between humans and nature. It is an epic of enchantment

featuring “nature folk” who “swam beneath the waters, and walked upon the shores of air” [7]. Above all, the poems of the *Kalevala* are the songs of a people “at home amongst the animals of the wilderness, beasts and birds, winds, and woods, and waters, falling snows, and flying sands, and rolling rocks . . . nature and nature-worship form the center” of their worldview [5]. What is especially noteworthy about these particular creation stories is the suggestion of a keen awareness of the connection between humans and the natural world and the importance of preservation of natural resources. John Muir famously wrote: “When we try to pick out anything by itself we find that it is bound by innumerable unbreakable cords to everything else in the universe” [8]. Science has proven this to be true. We are bound in a web of connectedness that links all life forms on earth. In “Myths as Multivalent Poetry”, Anna-Leena Siikala discusses myths as “being the “fundamental forms of human knowledge” [9]. While we may view the animistic worldview as primitive, embracing a less human-centered perspective is a lesson the *Kalevala* creation myth teaches.

In my analysis I will point out distinct places where the interaction between elements of nature is featured and how this cooperation reflects a perspective that benefits all beings. Of course, this is not the only creation myth where this occurs. In his comparison between the creation story from Genesis with “The Woman Who Fell From the Sky”, an Indigenous creation story of the Iroquois nation, Thomas King notes that while the story in Genesis “celebrate[s] law, order, and good government”, in the native story, “the universe is governed by a series of co-operations” [10]. The goal of the native creation story is not the “ascendancy of good over evil” but the achievement of balance [10]. In this case, the act of creation is shared rather than being the command of one solitary figure; it consists of cooperation instead of competition [10]. This is the same cooperative spirit found in the *Kalevala*.

The first two runos (consisting of approximately 380 lines) tell the myth of creation, with elements of the natural world being of primary importance. Runo One is titled “The Birth of Väinämöinen”—a title that is somewhat misleading since this character, Väinämöinen, co-creator of the world, isn’t born until the end of the poem. Runo Two is called “The Sowing” and is actually a compilation of several agricultural songs and continues the process of creation through establishing agriculture. I will examine the interactions that initiate and complete the creation process, noting the cooperative relationship between the various aspects of nature and how Väinämöinen, co-creator of the world, observes and learns from interacting with the various spirits of nature.

2. Runo One: “The Birth of Väinämöinen”

It should be pointed out that the creation portion of the story did undergo significant changes from the old to the new versions of the *Kalevala*, but those changes do not undermine the issue at hand—the role of nature in creation of the world. In fact, an examination of the folklore poems reveals that the creation story appears to be a central component in all versions of the myth [4] and that this piece “was one of the most powerful and compelling mythic songs of the tradition” [11].

To initiate creation, the primordial elements of air and water combine. The myth begins with the daughter of air. Depending on the translation³ she is “air girl” and “nature daughter” [12,13], “divine Creatrix” and “daughter of creation” [14], a “maiden” and “Daughter of the Ether” [5], “virgin of the air” [15] or “a virgin, maiden of the air . . . a spirit of nature” [12]. In a prose translation by Johnson she is “daughter of the wind” [7]. This maiden becomes restless and decides to descend to the sea. She is then impregnated by a combination of air and water: “The wind blew her pregnant, the sea made her thick through” [12]. “By the wind the maid was rocked, /On a wave the maid was driven . . . Where her womb the wind awakened/And the sea-foam impregnated” [15]. The prose translation by Johnson presents it concisely: “wind and wave had wakened life within her womb” [7]. Hereafter she is referred to as the Water Mother; in some translations she is named Ilmatar.

It should not be surprising that air and water are present at creation; these elements serve as catalysts in myths throughout the world. Mircea Eliade calls water the symbol, the source, the potential that upholds all creation [16]. At this point in creation air and water are the only elements present. According to Comparetii, “the air, *ilma*, is like the spirit (*henki*) of the world, and the productive power resides in it [3]. Water is often the “initial element” [4] of creation. This is the first example of the cooperative effort of world creation in the myth—the interaction between air and water. As will be illustrated throughout these two runos, “water is the element held most in reverence by the Finns”, second only to air.

2.1. *The Bird and the Cosmic Egg*

The Water Mother is pregnant, but she is not giving birth to humanity or the world but, rather, to another creator—the character Väinämöinen. As seen in Runo Two, the character of Väinämöinen, described as hero and bard, recognized to be a shamanic figure, is also co-creator of the world; in some contexts perhaps the first human. But first, we must acknowledge another integral motif in the story: the cosmic egg.

The Water Mother pleads to Ukko⁴, a sky god, to deliver her from pain; the unborn Väinämöinen remains in her womb for more than 700 years. She pleads: “O Ukko, god on high, supporter of the whole sky! Come here, since there is need, come here since you are summoned. Deliver the maiden from her predicament . . . come soon . . . without delay” [12]. But Ukko does not answer her prayer; at least, not in the way we would expect, or the way that the Water Mother hopes—at least, not yet. Instead, the next lines of the poem are: “A little time passed, a little bit passed quickly. A goldeneye⁵ came, a straight-flying bird; it fluttered about seeking a place for its nest, considering a place to live” [12]. While the text does not explicitly say this is the answer to her prayer, the sequence of events could suggest it. The bird, too, is anthropomorphized, described as “considering”, pondering, and reflecting [12]. Considering the associations with air, it is possible that this bird is either a messenger or an avatar of Ukko himself.

The Water Mother then raises her knee to offer the bird a place to rest, and the bird builds her nest there, laying six gold eggs and one of iron. After a time, the heat of the nesting bird causes her leg to twitch in pain, as though burned. The eggs roll into the water and break apart, becoming pieces of the world. The lower half of one egg becomes the earth and the top of another the sky, the sun is formed from a yolk and the moon from one of the white parts. “Any mottled things on an egg, those become stars in heaven, anything black on an egg, those indeed become clouds in the sky” [12].

The egg is, of course, a common creation motif and symbol of fertility found in many parts of the world [16]. While water is the “initial element”, the egg is “used to create the ‘cosmic elements’” [4]. It begs the question: would the eggs have created the world if they had not been broken? According to Frog, “the breaking of the egg is always attributed to an agent—either to a ‘natural’ phenomenon”, such as the wind, waves, or a storm, or the “wind of God” [11]. Additionally, the heat produced by the incubation of the eggs could be considered an agent. Whichever agent is responsible it would seem that some interaction, in this case between the Water Mother and the bird is essential for creation to begin. Additionally, the egg is laid by a bird—it is not, as in some cosmic egg motifs, present at the beginning of time. It, too, must come into being from elsewhere. Air and water are the primordial elements, but the egg, since it comes from a bird, can also be associated with air.

More time passes as the pregnant Water Mother waits. Eventually, she continues the process of creation by forming islands and bays; she smoothes out the coasts and hollows out “deep spots for fish” and produces “hidden reefs” [12]. The initial process of creation is a cooperative effort combining the elements of air and water; the next step is the birth of Väinämöinen.

2.2. Birth of Väinämöinen

It takes another thirty years before the Water Mother finally gives birth to Väinämöinen who, in this version, is the co-creator of the world. Why the delay of his birth? I would argue that the Water Mother couldn't give birth until she had participated in the creation of the world, assisting the bird; it was only after the world was formed from the eggs that she had material with which to fashion places for the people and animals to live.

Väinämöinen is aware in the womb and wants to be born. He states: "Moon, free me; sun, release me; Great Bear, ever guide the man out of the strange doors, the alien gates" [12]. Before the creation of the world, he would have had no sun or moon to ask. Also note that his request is made to elements of nature—moon, sun, the Great Bear (constellation *Ursa major*; the bear is the totem animal of many northern peoples, a worshipped animal, a cult object, the symbol of tribe and family" [4]). He eventually frees himself and continues the process of creation; he is born as a grown man. In most places in the epic he is described with the epithet of "old" or "steadfast old" Väinämöinen.

We must pause for a moment to consider Väinämöinen, who is one of the most significant characters throughout the epic and will be the one to complete the act of creation. It is possible that in the oral tradition Väinämöinen was deity of sorts, but in the literature he is mainly regarded as culture hero. He brings agriculture to the people (as will be discussed in Runo Two); he is a sage, prophet, and bard (in many translations he is described as singing when he uses a magic spell or charm). Described as the "eternal seer" [15], arguably his most important role is that of the shaman. According to Ronald Hutton, a blanket definition of shamanism is problematic; however, one key aspect is that they "negotiate and mediate with a spirit world rather than act as passive vessels or mouthpieces for its inhabitants" [17]. The shaman may engage in acts of healing, divination, and other rituals, by entering a state of altered consciousness. Chanting and drumming are among the ways this is accomplished, in addition to other means. "In the nineteenth century the farming people of south-eastern Finland still had a variety of magician called the *tietaja*, who was a healer, visionary, diviner and worker of protective magic" similar to the cunning folk of Europe but who went into trances or "sang incantations" [17]. Animism and the practices of shamanism are based on the culture's relationship to the environment and typically rooted in hunter-gatherer societies but not limited to them [17]. We see Väinämöinen cooperating and communicating with the natural world, acting as a shaman would, as an intermediary. In addition, in the creation myth, he serves as representation of humanity, and can symbolize the first human being on earth.

Väinämöinen has further significance if we consider that in Lönnrot's old *Kalevala*, it is Väinämöinen's knee on which the bird builds her nest. Lönnrot decided this seemed unreasonable and inconsistent so in the second edition he made the change to have the Water Mother give birth to Väinämöinen⁶. Again, variants exist. "There is no mention of Väinämöinen in the version of the 'creation rune' sung in Estonia and Ingria; in the White Sea Karelian variants, however, Väinämöinen holds a central place" [4]. According to Frog, "evidence for Väinämöinen is only preserved in North Finnic traditions, where he is the most central positive mythic figure" [11]. Lönnrot seems to have "followed most closely a variant proper to Finnic [K]arelia" [3]. Many of the folk poems leave out Väinämöinen and the Water Mother altogether and creation begins with the bird (in one instance an eagle battles with a pike during creation [2,3]).

In addition, it is thought that Lönnrot based part of his change on the etymology of Väinämöinen's name. According to Juha Pentikäinen, *vein emoinen* means 'mother of waters', or guardian spirit of the water [4]. In this case, Väinämöinen can be further associated with not only water, but the divine feminine power of creation [4]. Another explanation is that "Väinämöinen's name is probably derived from archaic *vaina* 'slow-flowing river'" [13]. In either case, there is still the association with the element of water.

Ultimately, this first stage of creation is possible only by the relationship and cooperation between the elements of nature—mainly air and water. The Daughter of Air initiates creation by descending to the water where she is impregnated by a combination of water

and wind. The bird (air) lays eggs on her knee; this combination of air, water, and heat results in the birth of the world. The world is not created *ex nihilo* by a single deity; it is a cooperative effort, an interaction between multiple agents. And the same scenario with the bird plays out in all versions of the myth. Creation continues with the actions of Väinämöinen, offspring of the union of air and water.

3. Runo Two: “The Sowing”

Väinämöinen now assumes the role of “perfecting” [3] creation. Runo Two of the *Kalevala* is a compilation of three poems that were most likely sung independently [3]. It begins with Väinämöinen living for many years on the “silent, uninhabited land, the tree-less land”. He then “ponders, he reflects . . . Who is to sow the lands, sow crops thickly? . . . The Spirit of Arable, lad of the field, Sampsa, tiny lad, he indeed will sow the lands, sow crops thickly” [12]. This particular nature spirit, Sampsa Pellervoinen, is often described as an agricultural spirit or vegetation divinity [3]. In some translations Sampsa Pellervoinen is called the “planter of trees” [7]. According to Matti Kuusi, “in Finnish folk poetry Sampsa’s role is that of the sower. One of the first forage plants of the year in the Finnish area, the forest-rush (*scirpus silvaticus*), is named after him and it is possible that at one time this plant was regarded as the personification of the fertility spirit” [2]. Depending on the variant, this nature spirit plants a tree, multiple trees, or grain. In some of the folk poetry there are stories about this character that involve illicit sexual encounters—possibly as part of a fertility rite. The character flees and must be found in order for the vegetation cycle to continue. In one of the folk poems a “winter-boy” and a “summer-boy” take turns trying to wake him [2]. In most versions someone is needed to persuade Sampsa to “make the land fertile” [2]. In the new *Kalevala*, it is Väinämöinen who requests this service.

Again the cooperative aspect of creation is reinforced. Väinämöinen cannot continue the process on his own—he asks for help and nature answers. Sampsa Pellervoinen is a nature spirit and, more precisely, a spirit who can make the land ‘arable’ for farming. This is believed to be a later addition to the myth since “the most ancient condition of the Finns was not agricultural” [3]. The next several lines describe in detail all the various plants that grow due to his effort: he sows fens, clearings, loose-soiled and stony-soiled places, hills; he creates pine groves, knolls of fir, birches, alders, heath and heather, chokecherries and “rowans in holy places, willows on flooded lands, junipers on barren lands, oaks by the sides of a stream” [12]. This detail also reflects close attention and value of each of the species, where they grow, and their function. While the process of agriculture hasn’t formally begun, Sampsa Pellervoinen helps make the land habitable at Väinämöinen’s request.

3.1. The World Tree/Clearing the Land

In the next section of the poem, Väinämöinen observes all the lush growth but notices something is awry—“God’s tree” [12] has not yet taken root. This special tree is clearly more than a merely a giant oak, as will be revealed later in the poem.

The planting of God’s tree is, again, accomplished through a cooperative effort. Väinämöinen sees “five brides of the water” [12] tending to the grasses at the edge of the land, raking what they gathered into rows. A giant called Tursas rises from the sea and thrusts “the hay into a fire” and turns it into a “pile of ashes” [12] into which is planted “the fruit of an oak from which grew a fair shoot” [12]. In some versions, Väinämöinen is described as planting an “acorn” [7].

Here again Väinämöinen interacts with nature spirits, all described as having associations with water. Another point of interest is the specific action that finally causes this tree to grow—we can see that water is, again, an essential component, but we also have the suggestion of fertilization by the ash from the burning grass. There is cooperation between water spirits and Väinämöinen, but note that it is the water giant Tursas who burns the grass. Väinämöinen, it would appear, does not yet have access to fire and must rely on someone else to assist him in the process. Tursas and the brides of the water help God’s tree grow by using the ash of burned grass as fertilizer. This passage illustrates

an understanding of the vegetation cycle and of fertilization, of clearing, burning, and planting to nourish the land. If we are to understand Väinämöinen as the first man, we have humankind learning from nature; if Väinämöinen is not symbolic of humankind but, rather, the spirit of creation, there is still a cooperative element—parts of nature working together, dependent on each other for success.

The poem about the Great Oak is one of the oldest and most interesting of the Finnish mythological stories [4] and there can be myriad interpretations. The ancient poem “The Oak II” refers to it as “an incomparable tree” [2], but in the *Kalevala* it is described as follows: “God’s tree [12], “tree of God” [13], “Tree of heaven” [5], “tree of Jumala” [7] and “Jumala’s Tree” [14]. Jumala seems to have originally meant “powerful or sacred being” and in the *Kalevala* has a range of meaning that also includes “creator”. The significance given to this tree indicates it could represent the archetypal tree of life. Trees were revered in ancient Finland, with the rowan and birch taking a particularly sacred role [5]. Trees are often sacred in the myths of shamanistic peoples as a link between worlds [18,19] and oaks are well-known as strong trees and present in the folklore in many parts of the world. According to Korpela, “the famous huge Oak Tree of *Kalevala* (Runo II) is not an independent artistic composition but most probably a reflection of the universal and old circumpolar shamanistic idea of the world pillar or world tree” [15] especially since the oak only grows naturally in southwestern Finland” [15]. It is well established that trees can serve as symbols of life, fertility, renewal” [16] and “endless regeneration” [20]. Such stories could be “related to the annual rituals of an agrarian society: a celebration of summer’s victory over winter [4]; this could be the reason Lönnrot placed it in “The Sowing” runo.

The twist in the tale is that God’s tree grows so large it blocks the light of the sun and moon and so it must be cut down. At this point in the poem Väinämöinen again “ponders, reflects” whether there would be someone to “break up the oak, to fell the fine tree” for “it is unpleasant for a human being to exist, dreadful for fish to swim with no sun shining, no moon gleaming palely” [12]. Väinämöinen understands what’s best for all beings—humans and animals. And even though this is God’s tree, it has grown beyond its usefulness and has become a hindrance. “Then old Väinämöinen utters these words: “Maiden mother, you who bore me, Nature Spirit, my upbringer! Order indeed some water spirit—in the water are many spirits—to break up this oak” [12]. Then a man comes “up from the sea”—another nature spirit arrives, this time, at Väinämöinen’s specific request.

3.2. *Felling the Tree and the Sowing of Barley*

According to Crawford, this being who chops down the oak tree is called Pikku Mies (the Pigmy), [5] although in other translations he is not named. He is one of the “sea-folk” [7] and he emerges tiny—the size of a thumb. He is clad all in copper and carries a copper axe. Väinämöinen finds this being quite strange and has difficulty believing how this tiny man could be useful. Väinämöinen’s doubt is further evidence of his learning experience; his expression of disbelief in some translations is explicitly insulting: “What manner of man are you, what kind of a person, wretch?/Little better than a dead man, little handsomer than one deceased” [12]. But the little man replies that he is a water spirit, come to fell the tree, and he grows to giant size. In three blows he successfully chops down the tree, scattering the branches. Splinters and other pieces that fell into the sea were carried to a far away land and used to create magical weapons). Now that the tree is gone “... the wilderness began to get beautiful, woods to grow as one would desire ... the birds began to sing ... ” berries and herbs and all sorts of plants emerge [12]. Once again the cooperative elements of nature work together so all can flourish.

The next problem Väinämöinen notices is that “the precious crop” barley refuses to grow [12]. The oak tree had to be removed for optimal growing conditions, but the planting has not yet occurred. Väinämöinen finds seven seeds and sets out to sow the land. But once again, he’s not acting alone. “From a tree a tomtit twittered” that the barley will not grow “unless the land is tamed, a clearing cut down, and burned over by fire [12]. “The Sowing” runo is clearly from an era in which agriculture had gained significance. But nature is still

recognized as important. Note that the instructions of how to proceed come from a bird; Väinämöinen lacks the knowledge.

As Väinämöinen proceeds to clear the land by felling trees, he leaves “one birch as a resting place for birds, as a tree for a cuckoo to call in. An eagle flew through the heavens” seeing what he had done. The eagle asks “Why indeed has that birch been left unfelled, the pretty tree not cut down” [12]? Väinämöinen replies “ . . . it was left for birds to rest in, just for an eagle to perch on. The eagle said ‘You indeed did very well!’ And so “The bird of the air struck fire, caused flame to flash” then winds blow, the trees burn to ash, and Väinämöinen plants the seeds [12].

Again, note that fire is outside of Väinämöinen’s possession. To germinate the great oak tree, the water spirit kindled the grass and here, again, Väinämöinen must receive fire from nature, this time a bird who is reciprocating Väinämöinen’s preservation of the tree. And it was a bird who instructed him that the land must be cut and burned prior to planting. These examples reinforce the combined efforts of air and water—Väinämöinen represents water and the birds represent air. Animistic cultures often have a story about fire originating with an animal. One of the earlier versions of this story describes “how the spark was struck from three eagle feathers by the ‘bird of the air’” [2]. Many cultures have stories about fire originating in the air, possibly due to witnessing lightning strikes. And since birds are associated with air, and air is also required for fire to burn, having fire associated with birds is a line of reasoning that contains an element of logic.

Now Väinämöinen speaks a sowing charm, again seeking the assistance of nature. He says: “Woman living under the earth, old ruler of the soil, mistress of the earth! Now make the turf grow, the rich soil force up grass. The land will not lack vital strength never, never at all so long as there may be favor from those who gave it, permission from the daughters of Nature” [12]. This is followed by: “O Ukko, god on high . . . make a cloud spring up in the east . . . shed rain gently from the heavens, sprinkle honey from the clouds on the sprouting shoots, on the murmuring crops” [12]. He prays to earth and sky.

The rain comes and the barley grows. After a week, as Väinämöinen observes how well the barley is growing, a cuckoo arrives, sees the birch growing, and says “Why indeed has that birch been left unfelled?” Väinämöinen replies: “This is why the birch has been left growing: as a tree for you to call in . . . Call out . . . for the delightfulness of my skies, for the pleasantness of my untilled lands, for the prosperity of my shores, for the fertility of my districts” [12]. This statement explicitly reveals his understanding that protecting nature ensures the welfare of all beings.

4. Communication and the Cooperative Spirit

Väinämöinen learns by observing, asking, and listening, by communicating with nature. He is rewarded by setting aside a place for nature to exist alongside humans as they cultivate the land. The entire act of creation from the descent of the Daughter of Air to the development of agriculture involves a cooperative effort between humans and the spirits of nature. If Väinämöinen is the first man, he exemplifies humankind coexisting with nature, depending on it. If he is symbolic of the union of air and water, still, the union of the elements illustrates an understanding of the connectedness of everything in the natural world.

The interactions with nature as described in this myth are illustrative of the animistic worldview of the ancient Finns. The very notion of “spirit”, of an “animating principle” [3] is in everything and this is the essential element that demonstrates the cooperative spirit in the creation myth. The ancient Finnish world is entirely “peopled with spirits” [3]—every tree, hill, lake and waterfall [3]. This interaction with nature is a form of communication and it can profoundly affect the way we see the world.

One of the most engaging aspects of the *Kalevala* poems are the incantations and spells contained in the epic, used by characters in an attempt to control or appease nature or accomplish other tasks such as healing or even building a boat. “The power of the word, an integral part of shamanism, is found in all the magic charms mentioned in the epic” and

the most powerful shaman “was he who knew the birth of all things, the ‘magic words of origin’” [7]. This speaks to Väinämöinen’s role as the first human being, a shaman, a hero, and co-creator of the world. But while his power as demonstrated in the poems is immense, he still cannot do everything on his own. He must call on nature for assistance. He must sing, chant, or pray to the nature spirits to achieve his goals; he must communicate with nature.

While the power of the word and song is incredibly potent here, unsurprising for a shamanistic culture, as Crawford acknowledges, “there is a profoundly philosophical trait in the poem, indicative of a deep insight into the workings of the human mind, and into the forces of nature” [5]. The chants and incantations are more than merely magic words to make things happen. They are pleas and requests to nature spirits or deities associated with natural elements and Väinämöinen listens and learns from them. His power consists of speaking to “the wood, the sea, the wind, the fire . . . just as he would to persons able to hear and feel” [3]. Even if Väinämöinen’s words do indeed summon the various spirits, there is still cooperation—Väinämöinen observes or makes requests to nature. As Comparetti reminds us: “What we shall call the *magic word* is . . . no less legitimate, lofty and noble than are the hymn and the prayer in any other religion” [3].

Nurit Bird-David uses the analogy of cutting a tree for its parts versus “talking with trees” as part of a “responsive relatedness”. To “talk with a tree” is to be aware of the relationship and of changes that occur both to the self and the tree. This involves “expecting response and responding, growing into mutual responsiveness and . . . possibly into mutual responsibility” [21,22]. According to the work of Irving Hallowell in his conversation with an Anishinaabe (Ojibwa) elder, living life in the fullest sense (*pīmādāzīwin*) “is achieved in cooperation with others (not all of them human)” [23]. It may not always be a balanced reciprocity but there is acknowledgment of a cooperative existence.

Additionally, recent studies of the Sami must not be overlooked here as they are the indigenous inhabitants of Finland and northern Scandinavia. Elina Helander-Renvall addresses this in “Animism, Personhood and the Nature of Reality: Sami Perspectives”, noting how the Sami interact in a reciprocal relationship with other beings in their environment, a communication she refers to as “mythic discourse” [24] because it “takes place through dreams, rituals, stories, prayers, activities, performance and discussions” [24]. She cites Fienup-Riordan’s conclusions that the similarity between human and non-human persons among the Sami “creates the common ground for this cooperation” [24]. They create “alliances” with other inhabitants of the world [24].

The importance of communication as an avenue toward a new perspective of nature can be significant, drawing attention to not only how we observe nature but how we speak and write about it, and how we ‘listen’ to it—not literally, but by paying attention. “To think of nature as ‘speaking’ to us, although it is an extended sense of the word, has some merit. It urges us to pay attention to what needs deciphering” [25]. It’s about *perception and values* [25]. “When the sacred is recognized, there is a very strong motive to preserve, even defend it” [25].

5. Relationships, Relatedness, and New Ways of Knowing: An Argument for Animism in the Modern World

In recent decades, anthropological studies have begun to more closely examine the relationships among humans and non-humans; there has been an increase in such studies and a “renewed consideration of animism” [23]. While we cannot make blanket statements about animistic cultures, a key element appears to be the awareness of relationships among all beings. Nurit Bird-David explores animism as a concept of “knowing the world by focusing primarily on relatedness” [22]. In her ethnographic analysis of the Nayaka in South India (Fieldwork conducted in 1978–79 and 1989), she describes how by “engaging” with the world and perceiving it as more than merely useful, the Nayaka “are educated to perceive that animals, stones, rocks, etc., are things once can relate with—that they have relational affordances” [22]. This relationship is the key issue of my analysis of

this particular myth and leads us toward a revised definition that animism deserves, at least when applied to our modern world. In her study of the Sami, Helander-Renvall's conclusions differ somewhat from those of Bird-David in her examination of the concept of relatedness. She notes that the animistic perspective is "flexible" [24]. For example, the words the Sami use for the animals change depending on the situation [24]. While the Sami interpretation of personhood extends beyond humans they also distinguish between human and animal and the roles of non-humans can change based on context; there are many "dimensions" to personhood [24]. For example, "[s]ometimes the bear is a family member, other times a beast" [24].

However, we should not romanticize the idea that animistic cultures are always good stewards of the environment; the animistic worldview of ancient cultures doesn't necessarily incite an attitude of preservation. The same could be said for modern animists: "Almost all of Africa, Southeast Asia, rural China, Tibet, Japan, rural Central and South America, indigenous Pacific Islands—pretty much everywhere except Western Europe, the Middle East, and North America—is dominated by animistic beliefs" [26] and yet these places are not immune to environmental concerns. Additionally, it is important to remember that so-called "animists do not think of all objects (natural or artificial), in all circumstances, as living persons" [23]. As Nurit Bird-David explains (of the Nayaka), "they do not misattribute personhood to things, but rather perceive a world of relations instead of one divided into persons and objects" [27]. The animistic definition of personhood is subject to a variety of interpretations. Therefore, it is "the act of relating" [23] that provides the understanding needed to move forward with a "new" animism, a way of knowing and understanding the world that is less defined as the division or separation between subject and object and more about the relationship between all beings.

As Bird-David points out, not all such cultures we might call animistic are concerned with protecting the environment [28]. For example, her study of the Nayaka as an effort to more closely examine how animism and conservation overlap [28,29] revealed that even though the Nayaka are concerned with the avoidance of unnecessary harm to "fellow-beings in the forest", "conservation happens", but not intentionally [29]. And yet, this valuable "mode of knowing" contains an awareness of interactions, "chains of events, and ripple effects" [29]. It is worth noting, however, that this perceived reciprocal relationship can change based on the perception of usefulness.

Unsurprisingly, the study further reveals the effect of agricultural practices on this perspective. Non-human beings previously viewed as "persons" become regarded as "things" or "objects" based on their purpose, creating a distance in the relationship [29]. In this scenario, as is the outlook of most of the modern world, a being is "more likely to be objectified according to its perceived utility" [29]. When viewed from a consumer standpoint, plants and animals are typically treated with less empathy [29].

Thomas Berry is famously known for saying: "the universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects" [30]. In "Animism, Fetishism, and Objectivism as Strategies for Knowing (or not Knowing) the World", Alf Hornborg addresses how "relatedness" concerns the "agency of objects" [31]. Considering that most modern people distinguish our world as made up of subjects and objects, he raises a key question: "How, indeed, shall we be able to reintroduce morality into our dealings with our non-human environment, now that we have invested centuries of training and discourse into convincing ourselves that Nature lies beyond the reach of moral concerns" [31]?

The answer to this question circles back to relationships—cooperation and communication. In fact, "nature . . . is just as much founded on *communication* as the human social realm" [31]. The animistic view holds that this connectedness relates knowledge between both "the knower and the known" and that "beyond objectivism and relativism, there can only be *relationism*" [31].

This is the appeal of creation myths like the *Kalevala*. Interpreting the world as a series of connected relationships that are dependent on one another is a sharp contrast to a worldview of domination and competition, of conquest and control. Väinämöinen is a

powerful being, but he is not above nature and cannot succeed without finding a way to interact with the nature spirits, plants, and animals. And even though the creation poems of the *Kalevala* reflect the development of agriculture, the cooperative effort remains. There is interaction between the creators of the world and the nature spirits, understanding of the environment—cause and effect—and reciprocity between the various elements that participate in every stage of creation. In short, there are relationships.

The beliefs of ancient peoples may be said to lack logic when viewed from a modern perspective, but a new approach to animism would not be a regression to ‘old ways;’ instead, it’s one way to adapt for the future [25]. This does not have to compete with scientific inquiry or one’s existing spiritual outlook. In part, the animistic worldview, updated for a modern era, could mean redefining the sacred and including the natural world as divine⁷. Belief that everything in nature contains a sacred spirit can lead to awareness and understanding of connectedness which, in turn, can lead to the desire to care for and protect that environment. I am not suggesting the abandonment of reason and science or changing one’s current spiritual values, but a perspective that views nature as divine elevates the status of other life forms and elements (while not reducing us). Alternately, an attitude of “animist relationality” [23] can help us move beyond the limited view of personhood that separates us from nature and, “more than that, this animism invites a renewed engagement with nature, culture, religion, and science” [23]. This shift in perspective may be hard to reconcile with the variety of modern belief systems in practice today, but I would argue that we need not choose between science and spirituality.

In their study of ritual behavior, Davy and Quilley found that those who “recognize relationships with other than human persons in relational ontologies maintain awareness of how humans depend on ecosystem relations as part of our survival units, not just the human community” [27]. They further note that these rituals are not supernatural or even necessarily religious, but actions that reinforce relationships [27]. They refer to the study of giving-economies (also called gift economies⁸) and how “relational ontology” refers to how one exists in relationships rather than emphasizing the self as a distinct individual [27]. “These “gift economies” establish a collective awareness that leads to practices that are more “ecologically sustainable” [27].

This brings to mind the recent work of scholars like Robin Wall Kimmerer and Suzanne Simard. In her book *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teaching of Plants*, Kimmerer recalls her Indigenous upbringing in the Potawatomi Nation and notes that “the essence of the gift is that it creates a set of relationships” [32]; she teaches her students “to know the world as a neighborhood of nonhuman residents” [32]. In *Finding the Mother Tree*, Suzanne Simard explains that ecosystems are not very different from “human societies—they’re built on relationships”, constantly adapting and responding to each other. Our collective success is only as strong as our “bonds with other individuals and species” [33]. Simard’s work with the Mother Tree Project is based on this collaborative approach [33]. She reminds us that “the scientific evidence is impossible to ignore: the forest is wired for wisdom, sentience, and healing” [33].

Many modern religious scholars and environmental theorists are addressing the argument that embracing a “shift towards animism is conducive to the success of worldwide conservation and sustainability efforts” [34] and that “an appreciation of non-human others is nothing short of a ‘basic survival project” [35]. Because “animism is highly syncretic”, willing to adopt and include “any and all spiritual beliefs and practices as complementary rather than competing options” [26], perhaps this idea isn’t too far out of reach.

In *Sacred Nature*, Jerome Stone presents several arguments for embracing religious naturalism, “a philosophy of life that points out how to lead a robust religious [or spiritual] life while believing that the natural world, including humans, is all there is” [25]. He and points out that even though this attitude is not a panacea for all environmental dilemmas, that if “discernment of worth can be extended past individual persons and living creatures to communities of living beings and ecosystems” [25] it may lead to an increase in human beings seeing nature as more than a commodity. This is an approach that may be more

palatable than animism to some individuals, but it still involves a respect for nature that is beyond simple appreciation. But like animism, it's inclusive and promotes valuing all life forms.

Further, the concept of panpsychism is gaining renewed interest and could be applicable toward this inclusive approach to nature—one that is compatible with both religion and science. “The word ‘panpsychism’ literally means that everything has a mind” [36], although it should be noted that a literal interpretation of this type of mindfulness is not what's being suggested by the concept being discussed here. While a detailed look at this perspective is beyond the scope of this paper, in short, panpsychism proposes that “consciousness, or experience, or subjectivity of some kind is fundamental to the entire universe” [37]. This theory does not entertain the notion that all things are equally conscious [37] rather, it proposes a way of understanding the connection between mind and matter that allows for the notion that “all material objects have *parts* with mental properties . . . that the intrinsic nature of matter is, at least in part, consciousness [36]. Leidenhag cites theoretical physicist David Bohm's interpretation that “the notion of information [is] something that need not to belong only to human consciousness, but that may indeed be present in some sense, even in inanimate systems of atoms and electrons [37]. One need only look to philosophy to find that this notion is not new. “Spinoza regarded both mind and matter as simply aspects (or attributes) of the eternal, infinite and unique *substance* he identified with God Himself” [36]. In fact, “panpsychism finds some resonance and traction with popular interpretations of quantum physics and some philosophical principles of evolutionary biology” [37]. This is yet another way human beings can embrace a renewed perspective. Panpsychism offers . . . [a] value-laden picture of the cosmos and roots humanity deep within our native universe . . . ” [37] it “promises a satisfying account of the human mind within a unified conception of nature” [36].

Perhaps it is too simple to suggest that adopting an animistic perspective is the solution, yet a way of thinking that invites humans to be more inclusive of “personhood” and give more consideration to relationships is certainly a step in the right direction. “We need re-localized economies, relational ontologies, and rituals that maintain relations with nonhuman others to live sustainably” [27]. Such a worldview could be a bridge to increased environmental awareness and protection efforts. It can give us a new way of relating to other life forms and offer us a way to reflect on “our own humanity, pressing us to articulate what sentience is in the first place and why we relate to others in the ways that we do” [38]. This is one way that stories from the past can impact the future, how ancient myths from around the world can inspire modern readers; this way of thinking “can help move us from . . . domination to negotiation” [35]. This type of literature can help us enter our own ‘mythic discourse’ [33] with our environment and this is what we learn from the *Kalevala* creation myth—that a cooperative spirit, a conversation with nature, is beneficial to all life forms.

6. Conclusions

Myths are literature, they are poetry, they speak to us through a wealth of symbols and metaphor. The *Kalevala* does what all myths do—it seeks to explain and explore “the everlasting mysteries of life” [21]. They are all subject to interpretation, of course, but material that is thousands of years old can still inspire us, still hold meaning, and offer guidance. Mythic narratives are malleable; we can reclaim them again and again. They help us reflect on who we are, as well as our past and our future—where we've been and where we're going. There's a reason the ancient stories still resonate with us on a profound level. We continue to find new layers of meaning with each experience. And while the debate regarding the *Kalevala's* status as myth may continue, it should not preclude us from acknowledging it as a great piece of mythic literature. While we must acknowledge that the *Kalevala* is a compilation and creation of Lönnrot, it is significant to note that the fundamental points discussed here can be found in the folk poetry: the great oak tree, the maidens of the water, the fertility spirit, the birds, the Water Mother/Daughter of Air, the

tiny water hero, and the water spirit Tursas. While they may not have existed in this order and exact context, these key aspects remain intact.

Although the ancient Finns certainly faced challenges to their survival, they could scarcely have conceived of the world at risk as it is today, facing climate change and other environmental concerns. It is not hyperbole to state that our planet is facing dire peril. Human beings may enjoy more modern comforts and conveniences, but we are still at the mercy of nature. But myths create a connection “with the unchanging and foundational events of the past” and “possess a power to unite communities” [39]. Myths can and have been able to reach beyond culturally specific boundaries and establish common ground; perhaps they can unite us in the global environmental issues we now face.

The creation runos of the *Kalevala* do more than acknowledge the human connection with nature and the environment—they specifically remind us that not only can we learn from nature but that preserving natural resources is essential for our well-being and for the well-being of all life on earth. A “new” animistic worldview transcends culture and could provide a new ontological perspective for our future, one with less emphasis on ownership and domination and more focus on a consideration of what’s best for all beings, what’s needed for the land, people, and animals to grow and flourish together.

In the introduction to *The Traditional Poetry of the Finns*, Andrew Lang describes the ancient Finnish poems as being “the expression of early humanity . . . abiding in the solitude of hills and forests, culling its songs ‘from the plumes of the pine-trees’, ‘the winds in the woods’, ‘the music of many waters’” [3]. Nature is more than personified, it is anthropomorphized, given life and spirit, presented as an integral and active participant in creation; it reminds us of our connection with the natural world and the importance of all the relationships that make life possible. From the essential elements of air, water, and fire, to the significance of trees, and the understanding required to responsibly manage the land, in the *Kalevala*, “all nature speaks in human tongues” [5]. It’s up to us to listen, to discover and acknowledge the awe-inspiring experiences of nature, and to take appropriate action. But it’s not enough to simply have an animistic worldview; real change demands widespread lifestyle changes.

The creation myth of the *Kalevala* epic reflects a relationship to the environment that is inextricably linked to development of the world for the good of all living beings. No matter the ordering of the runos or the discrepancies throughout the variations, the core elements reveal the significance and sacredness of nature. Creation is accomplished by cooperation with nature—by observing, listening, requesting, and saving a place for animals. Väinämöinen communicates with nature; he asks for help. He doesn’t have all the knowledge—he must seek the wisdom of nature and the spirits of the elements. His power is in the asking, the realization, the recognition that he can’t do it alone. He needs nature’s wisdom, and so do we.

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Notes

¹ *Suomen Kansan Vanhat Runot (Ancient Songs of the Finnish People)* is a collection of “over 85,000 variants of runic poetry” [4] and is now available online at skvr.fi. *Finnish Folk Poetry—Epic: An Anthology in Finnish and English* (edited and translated by Kuusi et al.) contains English translations of many of these pieces; this is the book I consulted).

² The difference between personification and anthropomorphism may seem subtle, but in the context of myth it is significant. Several of the sources consulted during this research refer to the animistic worldview as a personification of nature. However, if we understand personification to be a figure of speech used in a metaphorical sense, and anthropomorphism as giving human traits to non-human figures or behaving in a human-like fashion, it’s clear that the nature spirits in the *Kalevala* are

anthropomorphic. While they may lack the distinct personalities displayed by deities in pantheons such as the Greeks or Romans, they are described in human-like form and they speak and interact with each other and the other characters in the story.

- 3 There are certain limitations when examining a text in translation; therefore, to achieve the most thorough analysis, I have consulted four verse translations and two prose translations. However, I primarily rely on the Magoun text. Magoun points out that the precise meter of the original text cannot be adequately reproduced in English and that forced use of alliteration (as employed in the original) restricts word use and limits accuracy [12].
- 4 Also called Jumala, Ukko or Ukkonen (“old man”, “old fellow”) is a sky god who resides in the clouds, master of thunder and lightning, wind, rain; also an all-purpose god, possibly influenced by Thor. It is unclear how long he has been a Finnish deity, but prior to the advent of agriculture a sky god would have been unnecessary. In some myths he is described as having the features of a bird, especially an eagle. He may have also been responsible for the origin of fire [6]. It’s important to note that he is not considered superior to other sky deities such as the sun or moon [5]. Jumala preceded Ukko as the name for the sky god. Eventually Jumala became the name used for the Christian God [12].
- 5 Variations of the bird exist in the poems—it’s either a duck, goose, or eagle; in Estonian variants the bird is a swallow; in Russian Karelia it’s a bee or other flying creature, not necessarily a bird [3]. In the creation story found in the folk poetry, the bird is usually a “scaup duck or goose in the Karelian variants and a swallow in those from Ingria; variants in which the bird is an eagle have been collected from both regions and are thought to represent an older version of the myth” [3]. Hereafter I will simply refer to it as a bird in general.
- 6 According to Juha Pentikäinen, there is evidence that Lönnrot was influenced by Hindu philosophy in his change from Väinämöinen as creator in the old *Kalevala*, to Ilmatar in the new edition. In the new *Kalevala*, “the creator became an impersonal primordial force based on Indian mythology [4]”. Ilmatar’s “origin lay in the initial relationship between air (Ukko) and water (Väinämöinen), whom desire united into the principle of timelessness known as Brahman in Hindu philosophy”. The Water Mother could be “the offspring of Ukko, the masculine god of air and thunder, and of Väinämöinen, defined as ‘*vein emonen*’, the feminine element of water . . . in this case, Väinämöinen, born of Ilmatar, turns out to be her reincarnation” [4].
- 7 I have not discussed pantheism here, but that perspective is comparable. As opposed to animism, which identifies everything having its own individual spirit, pantheism is the belief that there is one animating spirit in all things.
- 8 As described by Davy and Quilley, “the gift economy refers to an economy embedded in society such that exchange is primarily mediated by ritual gift giving that entails social obligations . . . they also “have in common the practice of giving offering to nonhuman others, which maintains a wider sense of social ecological obligation than is present in modern individualized ontology and transactional market economies” [27].

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