

## TOGETHER AS ONE: EXTENDED FAMILIES AND COLLECTIVE LABOUR IN RUOKOLAHTI, 1750–1850

My study on the extended family in Ruokolahti, in the Finnish Karelia, proceeds from the premises of the analysis methods on family structures as developed by Peter Laslett. Population registers and communion books have helped to distinguish multiple and extended family households from actual nuclear families. This method has successfully identified a mainly kinship-based family chain, but has failed to acknowledge those members of the household not related to one another but nevertheless very much part of the household's workforce.

John Hajnal proposed (1965) that the West European family formation was characterized by late marriage, establishment of family directly after marriage and by work as servant before marriage. On the other hand in Eastern Europe there was a tradition of extended families, which included starting the shared family life in the home of the groom, and later the splitting of the collective household into smaller ones. The border between the western and eastern forms of family structure went, according to Hajnal, east of the line from St Petersburg to Trieste.

Mine is a microhistorical approach. I have investigated the expansive nature of the households, the partnerships. The object of my research, Ruokolahti, is located near the present eastern border of Finland, in southern Karelia, some 80 kilometres north of Viipuri. Since the 14th century, Ruokolahti was part of the borderland between the east and the west, between Russia and Sweden. During the time covered in this study it was in that part of Finland known as "Old Finland", ceded to Russia in the 1721 and 1743 peace treaties and becoming part of Finland again in 1812. Before then, in 1809, the whole of Finland had been annexed to Russia as an autonomous Grand Duchy. Ruokolahti is located clearly east of the so-called Hajnal line.

In the 18th and 19th centuries Ruokolahti, especially its northern parts, was a sparsely populated wilderness, covered with forests and lakes and with few meadows or fields. Its vast forest reserves proved very suitable for expansive burn-beat cultivation.

## The family institution in Ruokolahti as a working community

The focus of my study is the economic basis of the family. In the 18th century, burn-beating was the foundation of agriculture almost throughout Eastern Finland and in large areas of Central Finland. In order to find an explanation for the existence of the Eastern Finnish type of extended families, we must look to the Karelian order of succession. This differed markedly from that applied in the western parts of the country.

Burn-beating was a very labour-intensive form of cultivation: the felling of trees, the supervising of fire and the rolling of logs all required a fairly large number of workers. The same farm may have had several, in some cases even scores of separate burn-beat cultivations at a fair distance from one another. Close to them there might also be hunting and fishing grounds. Trips to burn-beat fields thus provided an additional opportunity to supplement foodstuff with a variety of products from the forests and lakes. Burn-beating, especially when it was employed in spruce forests, was itself a very profitable method of cultivation.

In the areas of burn-beat cultivation, inhabitants remained itinerant for a long time and therefore did not develop similar family rights to those observed by people cultivating permanent fields. The land and the house were never allocated the same value as in Western Finnish regions with permanent villages and fields. They had only a temporary importance for tax-paying farm owners. In Karelia, the share of the inheritance was given once and for all when the children left home. Land was inherited by the remaining sons according to the share of work they put into the farm. Daughters, on the other hand, did not normally inherit any land. Their share was mainly provided for in their dowry, which included, for example, garments, jewellery and cattle.

The extended family in Eastern Finland was in a sense a peculiar institution, as part of these families were in fact essentially partnerships. The burn-beating community was, indeed, based on a system of partnerships. Farms engaged partners, either close relatives or total strangers, who brought along some property to the household, such as horses, cattle and chattels, the goods or their equivalent being returned to them when the partnership was dissolved.

What was important to the households was the workforce brought along by the partner. When starting a partnership the partners entered into a mutual contract, which could also include new relatives by marriage such as brothers-in-law or sons-in-law. Often this could take the form of a written document. In such a partnership people genuinely lived together, worked together and also enjoyed together the fruits of their labour.

## The extended family as an economic unit

In the household management in Ruokolahti, an abundant workforce meant that there was an opportunity to carry on several lines of business simultaneously,

consequently encouraging economic vitality and providing an adequate livelihood. Indeed, households with an abundant number of people available were in general also the most well-to-do.

Various means were thus available to secure an adequate workforce. Especially in those cases where a married couple did not have sons of their own the family might adopt an adult man or a growing boy. In Karelian adoption contracts, particular emphasis was placed on matters relating to pensions. The adopted sons were entitled to inherit from their adoptive parents, and this entitlement was based on the principle that a son who inherited from his father should also be the natural provider for his incapacitated parents. Thus it was possible for an elderly farm-owner with no sons of his own to ensure for himself a secure old age by adopting a son and making a maintenance contract.

In families with only daughters it was very common to take a living-in son-in-law. In the same family there might even be two or even three such sons-in-law. Often, they themselves were the offspring of families with a number of sons so that in their own home farm there was no need for an additional workforce or for a partner entitled to a share of the crops in proportion to the amount of work he had put in.

Managing a large household required the concentration of decision-making in one person, usually the oldest and most experienced man. However, age and experience were considered so important that the farmowner's wife could also act as the leader of the extended family (for some time) after the death of her husband. In spite of the manpower needed (burn-beating and forestry were physically demanding work) women had great authority and a lot of power in the community. This can also be seen in the documents on the amounts of inheritance given to daughters of extended families.

In principle, the households based on partnership allowed adult sons to leave the family. In practice, it was very difficult for the sons to oppose the head of the household in a situation of real strife. It was indeed typical that an extended family based on partnership held together as long as the old head of the household was alive. His death also triggered off the dismantling of the partnership.

## Towards a monetary economy

Within a partnership-based extended family the work carried out and rewards earned from it were now increasingly measured in terms of money, earned by outside activities, such as the haulage of logs and sawn goods to Viipuri or St. Petersburg. Since transporting usually took place in winter, it was possible to use the empty sledges to bring back goods purchased with money. This haulage was an important part of the household economy in Ruokolahti because it helped the farm to support larger numbers of people than by agricultural activities alone.

By the middle of the 19th century one or even several members of the extended families or partnership households might also have been working in Russia. In Ruokolahti, such money-making trips did not, however, create any significant wave of migration to St Petersburg.

At the beginning of the 19th century, money earned by members of the extended family was considered to belong to the whole family and was normally placed in a common purse. However, the attitude to and value of these earnings gradually changed as well as the material objectives within the family.

In summary, partnership families of solid financial base extended their economic activities outside Ruokolahti boundaries. By extra earnings from various sidelines they were able to secure their tax-paying ability and to continue living as partnership families on the farms. But to an increasing extent money also became a measure for evaluating and planning the life of these households.

## The joint family in Ruokolahti and communal work

I have examined in close detail the relations between an individual and the community through the crises in households. Making use of microhistory, I have investigated the processes between the individuals, family members and, on the other hand, between the units, the family groups and different households.

People in Ruokolahti developed different ways of material, social and spiritual life to master their living. The different roles in kinship and partnership in working groups often overlapped. Sometimes a contract of “artificial kinship” was made with a new member in the household, and the master or the matron established agreements with the in-married members of the households, the sons-in-law and the partners. These contracts show the dynamic relations within the households.

The traditional expression “extended family” does not apply to the household system in Ruokolahti in the 18th and the 19th centuries unless we take a closer look at the nature of these households. The inventories of the buildings and farmsteads in the judgement books in Ruokolahti, and the reports on the divisions of partnerships indicate that some of the households were a kind of “partial partnerships”. In these, company life was limited only to a partially shared property and shared farming. There were many variations between communal eating and living together and separate households. Living together cannot always be considered as a joint household, and shared cooking vessels did not necessarily mean a shared family. Housekeeping and working groups lived in extended families, but with different bonds. It was important in the organization that the partners entered a mutual contract. This declared the rights of the partners and the property brought into the company by them, in case of a possible separation. In these contracts one could also define who was responsible for the old and disabled in the community.

In the contracts settled in the courts it is evident in what sense the group family and the partnership was a difficult form of co-operation. Households in which the power and the authority relations were clearly defined operated most successfully. An even distribution of workforce among the different partnership families was important for the function of the extended family.

The order of succession in Eastern Finland was supplemented with a contract system: when the son-in-law had an agreement on the apportionment of the estate, one could secure the inheritance to the daughters of the family also on farms with no sons.

Abandoned farms were recultivated in the 18th century, and partners' workers were needed for settlers. A landless, burn-beating man could end in farming a croft or a separated part of the farm and later achieve a partnership status.

When annexed as part of Finland in the Russian Grand Duchy in 1812, Ruokolahti goes through a decline: both the economy and population growth slow down. There were delays in the parcelling out of farms, which meant that the partnership families continued living together out of necessity.

A household could not, of course, continue to expand if its individual members did not derive sufficient income from the farm. It was thus common for members to leave the working community and to be replaced by newcomers. Normally the departing members sought for a settlement with other partners and were often compensated for their work input with corn and cattle, and even with transportable buildings.

The breaking-up of a working group, on the other hand, was not possible on an arbitrary basis and as it had to be taken up in the local district court it was also a slow process. The partner leaving the original farm was usually allowed to collect his share of the annual crops for some time even after his departure. In cases of the dissolution of a partnership into several separate households, a proportion of household goods, such as tools, hunting and fishing equipment and even kitchen utensils often remained in joint use in the beginning. In the background there were often economic reasons, even when the partners did not feel generally comfortable in the working community.

During the time of "Old Finland" (in the 18th century) the increase of the household members was arranged flexibly by communal work, the partnership system. The splitting of the farms happened, in fact, without authorities. In the 17th and 18th centuries, the partnership system was also a way of expanding the ancestral estate. Come the 18th century, living was based on burn-beating. When timber trade decreased in the 19th century, an important part of the livelihood was earned by haulage. A burn-beating farmer could easily reduce or expand his cultivation even in a short time. The communal way of working – the partnership system – offered flexibility in laborious projects.

The flourishing of the extended and joint families in Ruokolahti until the 19th century is explained by the location near St Petersburg. The partnership families worked simultaneously in farming and haulage of goods to the great city.

Living was based on a plurality of working skills and mostly on intensive shared work. The joint family facilitated the branching of the tasks. The partners of the families and the burn-beating companies applied a principle of an equal amount of work – the part families needed an equal number of adult workforce and horses. The individual had to accommodate his hopes to the working communities.

## The view over family bounds

I have examined the households also through the illegitimate birth rate, through premarital affairs and through the crises originating between the members of the community. The illegitimate birth rate was very low. The inner control of the family community shows that the marriages, too, were aimed at supporting the social structures of the joint family. Unmarried mothers in Ruokolahti who lived alone with their children were mostly landless people.

The judgement books tell us that the legal cases in the middle of the 19th century turned more to matters of personal responsibility. Court cases on strifes within the communities disappear almost completely. This is partly explained by the fact that the amount of communal work decreased, partly by the altering character of the judgement books. The family models in Ruokolahti were linked to the changes in the means of livelihood. The roles linked to kinship and work group overlapped, “artificial kinships” were established with masters and matrons, with sons-in-law and with farming partners. The extended family was under constant change.

According to the methods of Laslett and Hajnal, the analysis on households usually focuses on residences and housing. The family institution in Ruokolahti, however, consisted of a multitude of different constructions of kinship and partnership. This will not be evident if we only use population registers. The Ruokolahti family structure was an eastern form, and the share of complex families was high. The form of the households was patriarchal, with adult sons staying with their families in the household of the father. Power and authority remained in the hands of the old patron as long as possible. Widowed matrons could also be in charge of households.

The woman’s position in a Ruokolahti family could be fairly significant. She had an important role in burn-beating, which needed a lot of work. The women’s role in farming communities in Finland has been too strongly interpreted as dependent on inheritance. If a woman in Ruokolahti belonged to a farm-owning group and she had a wealthy joint family behind her, she could have a full career from a young daughter-in-law to the old widow with an economically and socially strong status.

Family history should advance from the Laslettian structural analysis of living groups towards more detailed descriptions of family and kinship systems. The classification used in describing family structures in England and Middle Europe cannot easily be applied to the Karelian family.

My study of the dynamics of Ruokolahti families has enabled the analysis of Karelian joint families as a working community. The newest family historical research has shown the need to study the groups of relatives over and past a household.

The material used in this study, the judgement books which follow the phases of joint families, has made it possible to analyze the activities between and across family boundaries. This gives answers to essential questions such as what kind of co-operation there was in a household and between the households; what the tensions were in big families and partnerships and how they were solved; how communal life worked in practice; what the role was of an individual in an extended family and how partnerships became parts of family and kinship circle. These issues have led me to look at questions of the quality and intensity of shared living.

All of this is important for another reason, too: in Ruokolahti the group family was vital unexceptionally long. As late as 1879, 40 per cent of Ruokolahti people lived in extended families. The Ruokolahti family institution was directed by the collective ways of thinking and by the values of the burn-beating and hunting period. This approach to life was still in use in the third quarter of the 19th century, when there was a transition from burn-beating to fieldfarming.

Translated by Pekka Waris