

Anna-Leena Siikala

* 1/1/1943 † 27/2/2016



ANNA-LEENA SIIKALA (née Aarnisalo) was born on 1 January 1943. Her family background was partly in Helsinki, partly in Pori and partly in the countryside of eastern Finland, so that as a small child she heard *Kalevala*-metre lullabies from her grandmother. She went to school in Helsinki and studied at the University of Helsinki with Matti Kuusi as her professor, finally gaining her doctorate there in 1978 on the topic of the rite techniques of the Siberian shamans. Apart from Kuusi's supervision, she was also guided by Martti Haavio and Lauri Honko. Folk beliefs, *tietäjät* (seers) and shamans had already fascinated her from an early age. In her later work on mythology she related how she had met a genuine, ecstatic *tietäjä* in the course of her student fieldwork in eastern Finland in the early 1960s, but admitted that the true nature of the dramatic encounter had dawned on her only later.

Siikala worked in many universities in Finland and had been acting professor in Turku and Helsinki before being appointed professor of folkloristics at Joensuu University in Eastern Finland in 1988. From there she was invited to become pro-

fessor of folkloristics at the University of Helsinki in 1995. In the early 2000s she held an Academy of Finland professorship for a five-year period, devoting herself primarily to her research projects. As a young researcher she had become familiar with academic life in the USA on visits, and later she worked as visiting professor at Hamburg University in Germany. The collecting of material for her doctoral thesis on the rite techniques of Siberia shamans led her to work in the archives and libraries of Leningrad, USSR, in the mid-1970s and opened up lasting contacts with Russian colleagues.

The project 'Mythology of the Uralic Peoples' that Siikala led had a long history. In the 1970s she had lectured on the folk religion of the Finno-Ugric peoples, and at that time she was of the opinion that the ancient folk religion had sunk into history. The opening up of the Soviet Union from the 1980s radically changed many things.

In the spring of 1990 Siikala heard from a colleague in Tartu that the ancient folk religion still thrived in places in Udmurtia in the form of communal village sacrificial rites. This led her to travel to

Udmurtia with an Estonian research group in the summer of 1991, through the collapsing Soviet Union, and to witness and document a sacrificial night festival arranged in honour of the god Inmar. From this began a lively collaboration with the Finno-Ugric world in connection with her project, and her research interest took her on demanding field trips to the Khanty areas of Siberia.

Anna-Leena Siikala also made long research trips to the Polynesian Cook Islands with her husband Jukka. This gave rise to a contextual investigation of the Maori narrative tradition, which meant that she was well positioned to investigate cultural processes on a global scale at the turn of the millennium.

Siikala was perhaps above all a student of Lauri Honko, in that she was interested in living culture and tradition in its context. Nonetheless, her most important output has been a weighty monograph on the relationships between Finnish mythology and the epic tradition, *Mythic Images and Shamanism. A Perspective on Kalevala Poetry* (2003), and a broad synthesis of her previous works, the Finnish-language *Itämerensuomalainen mytologia* (Baltic-Finnic mythology), which she tenaciously completed in 2012 as her strength was already failing. Thus her interest in the historical tradition of Finnish study on mythology and epics linked her with her old teachers Kuusi and Haavio.

Another field in which Siikala made a marked contribution is the study of storytelling and oral narratives. She took part in a field trip to Kauhajoki, Ostrobothnia arranged by the Finnish Literature Society's folklore archives in 1970, on which, apart from gathering folklore, the re-

searchers were interested in the narrators and even carried out socio-psychological tests on them. The resulting material lay untouched for many years, but after completing her thesis Siikala applied herself to investigating prose narration. The result was first a Finnish-language work in 1984, and, developed from this, the English-language *Interpreting Oral Narrative* (1990). Siikala introduced the cognitive perspective into the study of folklore, first in the context of oral narratives and later in the context of epic poetry, incantations and folk healing.

Siikala was elected to membership of the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters in 1984 and became an honorary member in 2008. In 2009 Siikala was granted the title of Academician, which is the highest recognition an academic can gain in Finland. She thus became the third academician in the history of Finnish folklore studies, after Martti Haavio and Matti Kuusi.

Siikala was pivotal as an organiser of research and various forms of research collaboration, both in Finland and internationally, and she had wide network of colleagues around the world. Along with Lauri Honko, she developed the international Folklore Fellows' Summer School research courses, and, succeeding Honko, she worked as editor of the FFC publications series from 2002 to 2009. Her own research projects, too, were widely international. At the same time she was a friendly and caring senior colleague, who was easy to approach, and was known to most people not as 'Professor Siikala' but as 'Anna-Leena'. To many Finnish folklorists she was like a big sister who listened and sorted out problems, and helped to forward

the careers of younger colleagues. For students and young researchers she was an inspiring and dedicated mentor.

Siikala completed many important monographs and brought many research projects to a successful conclusion. She

was also the main organiser of many international academic gatherings. In the case of her other projects she has left younger colleagues with a rich heritage to carry forward and complete. *Ars longa, vita brevis.*

*Obituary by
Pekka Hakamies and Lotte Tarkka*