Symbols of social identity : with examples from lumberjacks

Snellman, Hanna

1999


http://hdl.handle.net/10224/4556

Downloaded from Helda, University of Helsinki institutional repository.

This is an electronic reprint of the original article.

This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.

Please cite the original version.
SYMBOLS OF SOCIAL IDENTITY -
WITH EXAMPLES FROM LUMBERJACKS

Snellman, Hanna

Helsinki

All communities have regulations on the use of space. In becoming socialised as a member of the family at home, the child automatically absorbs values and attitudes, often gender-specific, in dealings with other people which he or she then renews in adulthood. On moving to a new area or starting in a new job, adults likewise undergo what might be called a cultural apprenticeship so that they can learn how to act in the new environment. The way they act reflects the social relations of the community. The space they occupy is never neutral; it is always a cultural jigsaw puzzle in which the pieces are walls and objects just as much as the people involved.1

A long time has passed since ethnological research first demonstrated the potential of clothing for enhancing group identity. A woman would, for example, cover her head as a sign that she was married. Research into workers' culture has, among other things, examined the clothing typical of a given occupational group, i.e. the way clothes are chosen to suit the job. This research has not been confined to description only, since it has also debated the significance of the way a worker dresses in making the working group distinct from representatives of other occupations and in socialising novices to become members of the working community. Printers, for example, could be recognised from other industrial workers by their white cuffs, making them look like white-collar workers and thus emphasising their status as members of a working elite.2

The Finnish lumberjacks engaged in the felling and floating of timber also had ways of indicating their status in the community: their dress, kit and nicknames provided a clue to their skills and social status, and the work site observed an invisible social "town plan".3 The way people spoke and their use of time and space on the logging and floating work sites of Lapland were governed by many unwritten laws to which the new worker gradually became socialised. Here I wish to concentrate on one aspect of the manifestation of social identity, namely what members of the community could deduce from a person's outward appearance. What did a hat, scarf, trousers or kit bag say about their bearer?

The group chosen for examination consists of loggers and floaters working in Finnish Lapland in the early 20th century. As my source material I have used interviews, oral history recorded in archives, works of literature and photographs. None of the sources give a clear indication of outward appearance; instead the information is hidden in references and clues that are difficult to find, as the social history written into subordinate clauses. My aim is thus to try to put together some overall picture from the details available.

Headgear

Virtually no ethnological research has yet been done in Finland into men’s headgear, so it is impossible here to address the problems surrounding various types of headgear very closely.1 I would, however, venture to make a few observations. According to Ilmar Talve, the peaked cap came into widespread everyday use in around the mid-19th century, while Juhani U. E. Lehtonen reports that the hat with a brim might grace the head of gentleman and logger alike.2 The lumberjacks at the logging camps and on the rivers in spring mostly wore a fur hat, usually of sheepskin with flaps to cover the ears, but the foreman or wealthy farmer might sport a fur hat made of otter. With the coming of summer, some would discard their fur hat in favour of a felt hat with a brim, others a peaked cap.

We can see from photographs that the peaked caps were of two types. In one the peak is made of stiffened cardboard, and in the other the peak is covered with cloth. The former was known, at least among industrial workers, as a vega cap, the latter as a lätää. The vega cap and brimmed felt hat were abandoned by industrial workers in the 1930s with the spread of lätää caps.3

The broad brim of the felt hat protected the wearer from the rain and sun. For this reason, many floaters adamantly refused to wear a peaked cap instead. Oral history reports that the young men wore peaked caps while the old hands preferred their hats with brims. This is not, however, entirely true, because judging from the photographs, children and young men might wear a brimmed hat and old men a peaked one.

One thing we notice on examining the photographs is that not one of the skilled floaters or men high up in the working community hierarchy is wearing a cap of the lätää type. Another thing we observe is that the young men recruited from other parts of Finland to work on the River Kemi in 1946 are wearing peaked caps while the local men of the same age are wearing brimmed hats. It is possible that brimmed hats were worn mainly by the old, skilled floaters and persons wishing to identify with them. It was thus possible to at least try to deduce a man’s background and skill from the type of hat he was wearing.

Scarfes

With their smocks the young floaters of Southern Finland wore a coloured square scarf called a hurjan silkki (dashing silk).4 Pentti Haanpää the writer wore a red scarf round his neck when he wanted to appear as a lumberjack.5 The interviewees could not recall scarves being worn in the River Kemi region, and nor are there any mentions of them in the other oral history. But in a novel set in the 1910s Jussi Hagberg, a member of a timber-floating community, mentions the colourful scarves swathed round floaters’ necks and Bought from the market on pay day.6 The photographs also show scarves in use: in one photo taken on the River Kemi in the 1910s the floater is wearing a rectangular scarf.

Just what these silk scarves were meant to communicate is not sure. At least they kept their wearers warm while working on the freezing-cold streams. They also provided protection against the sun and the mosquitoes. The fact that the scarf was...
known as a "hurjan silkkö" or "dashing silk" suggests that it was also worn as a flamboyant gesture. Maybe the custom was borrowed from seamen; many of the floaters were general labourers who had also been to sea at some time during their lives. The colour red might also indicate the wearer’s political sympathies. A humorous boyant gesture. Maybe the custom was borrowed from seamen.

The atmosphere in the camp was described. How the lumberjack migrating from one work site to another in Eastern Finland could be recognised by his kit bag; if there was a nail for his kit bag, that was the man’s home. Bells are not actually mentioned in the material. The travelling man with a sack on his back might be looked upon as a threat, but if his jingle bell announced his coming, people knew he was on honest business. The horseman could be heard from afar from the tinkling of the sleigh bell. And a sleigh was named according to their location. The local people had also been handling knowledge was useful to them in, for example, positioning the guide booms, which were named according to their location. The local people had also been handling boats and balancing on longs ever since they were children. The Northern Finns’ pride at being allowed to take part in the demanding floating jobs when they were still only very young is in fact marked in the oral history material and in this respect they considered themselves superior to their southern counterparts.

Kit bags

Workers also fell into distinct groups according to what they used to carry their belongings in, but this time the division was not, according to the interviewees, one of political opinions or occupational identity but of wealth. The most affluent men would carry a leather bag on their backs with a broad strap passed over the head and attached round the chest to narrow straps from the bottom of the bag so that it snugly fit the body. Instead of a leather bag, men from Southern and Eastern Finland might carry a satchel made of birchbark. Some even carried a suitcase. Meanwhile the poorest would carry on their backs a lammas (sheep) or passi (bag) made from a fifty-kilo hemp sack with rope straps made from string and possibly a little bell sewn on the bottom.

Similar kit bags were also reported in other parts of Finland. Life at the Voikkaa paper mill was said to have changed with the coming of the "sack backs" from Mantyharju. Meanwhile there are reports from the Deaalinen region that floaters in the 1890s began to use bags called passi (rams) made from cloth or old sacks in which to carry their belongings. The lumberjack migrating from one work site to another in Eastern Finland could be recognised by his kit bag, if there was a nail for his kit bag, that was the man's home. Bells are not actually mentioned in the material.

Just why the lumberjacks of the River Kemi region sewed a little bell onto their kit bags is still a matter of conjecture. It may have been the sign of a migrant worker, the Finnish name kulkumen meaning both a travelling man and a jingle bell. But assuming that it was a sign of social identity demanded by the community, many reasons can be put forward for its use.

The travelling man with a sack on his back might be looked upon as a threat, but if his jingle bell announced his coming, people knew he was on honest business. The horseman could be heard from afar from the tinkling of the sleigh bell. And a sleigh was named according to their location. The local people had also been handling knowledge was useful to them in, for example, positioning the guide booms, which were named according to their location. The local people had also been handling boats and balancing on longs ever since they were children. The Northern Finns’ pride at being allowed to take part in the demanding floating jobs when they were still only very young is in fact marked in the oral history material and in this respect they considered themselves superior to their southern counterparts.

Conclusion

In her study of the printing profession, Susanne Lundin deals with the significance of cultural capital in occupational culture. By symbolic capital she means the capital affording a boy the easiest entry into a profession because his father or some other close relative is already engaged in this profession and learning the job is easy because the family backing has been socialising him to the profession ever since childhood. Lundin divides symbolic capital into family capital and professional capital.

When a boy from the River Kemi region set off in search of work at the nearby floating site, he had the advantage of both family and professional capital. He was often accompanied by his father, grandfather, a brother or neighbour, and he already knew something about the job either from watching from the river bank at home or even from joining in, partly as a game. Many had already accompanied a relative on his travels before actually seeking work themselves. A boy might already know the foreman from whom he was seeking his first job. The foreman might be from the same village, a relative, or someone who stayed at the boy’s home while travelling in the wilds. Many a boy had gained experience of the logging camps and floating streams while trading wares or taking coffee out to the floaters. ID the process he got to know the foremen and workers, and this later proved useful in seeking work.

The local people usually worked near their home villages, and they had a mental picture, a sort of cognitive map, of the local terrain and conditions. This local knowledge was useful to them in, for example, positioning the guide booms, which were named according to their location. The local people had also been handling boats and balancing on longs ever since they were children. The Northern Finns’ pride at being allowed to take part in the demanding floating jobs when they were still only very young is in fact marked in the oral history material and in this respect they considered themselves superior to their southern counterparts.
Floaters other than second-generation ones may also be examined from the perspective of symbolic capital or its absence. Symbolic capital classified the members of a working community according to their origins and skills. Family capital could only be acquired by being born into a certain family, extended family or village, but professional capital could be amassed by others and could be added to over the years. Thus workers from outside the River Kemi region tried to demonstrate their professional skills and thus to safeguard their place in the working community. And in a community where written testimonials were unknown, dress and other accessories provided some kind of indication of a newcomer. The foreman could judge an applicant's background and skill from the way he looked.

Dress was also a means of enhancing group identity: it could be a sign of political sympathies. One indication of this is the fact that the lumberjack with left-wing tendencies did not wear breeches in the Finland torn by the Civil War of 1918, but that he might, even under threat of losing his job, tie a red scarf round his neck to show where his sympathies lay. Dress was a silent statement, even a protest.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BORDA, Beatriz & LUNDIN, Susanne

BRUCK, Ulla

CONNERTON, Paul

EENILA, Jukka

EHN, Billy & LOFGREN, Orvar

FRYKMAN, Jonas
1993 Horan i bondesamhallet (2nd ed.). Malmo.

GJESDAL-CHRISTENSEN, Anne-Louise

GUDEMAN, Stephen

HAATTANEN, Pekka
1968 Suomen maalaiskyläkirjallisuuden tutkimus ja kaunokirjallisuuden valossa. Porvoo.

HAGBERG, Jussi
1976 Jatkan kirous. (2nd ed.). Kemijärvi

HELSPONG, Mats

HUMPHREY, Caroline

IMMONEN, Kari

JACOBSON, Maja

KARONEN, Vesla

KILPI, Volter

KORHONEN, Teppo

KUUSANMAKI, Lauri

LAINIO, Jussi

LEHTONEN, Juhani U.E.

LEIMU, Tuula

LUNDIN, Susanne
1991 Bokstaverna som skapar varlden. Håften for kritiske studier 1991/1

LÖFGREN, Orvar

LÖNNQVIST, Bo

NURMI, Virpi

NYLEN, Anna-Maja

PETERTSON, Gunilla
1993 Föremål och språk som symboler i en arbetarkultur. Rig 4/1993

PÄLSI, Sakari
1923 Tukkimetsistä ja uittopuroilta.
PÖYSÄ, Jyrki

RAPPOPORT, Amos

ROUDASMAA, Stig

SITVONEN, Katriina

SNELLMAN, Hanna

SORLJN, Sverker

TALVE, Ilmar

VALONEN, Niilo

WATERSON, Roxana