



ANNIKKI KAIVOLA-BREGENHØJ

# Riddles

*Perspectives on the use, function and change  
in a folklore genre*

Studia Fennica  
Folkloristica

**Studia Fennica**  
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## Foreword and acknowledgements

Riddles are a voyage into the unknown. They are an invitation to embark on an adventure that either brings delight, amusement and gratification at discovering the right answer, or humiliation and vexation at being led astray. Few genres have such a long tradition, both oral and written, as the riddle. The first to record riddles were possibly the Sumerians, who were already noting them down in cuneiform in the fourth millennium BC. On the other hand, few genres have enjoyed such marked shifts in prestige as the riddle. Many celebrated writers and scholars have both invented and drawn inspiration from popular riddles; in the 17th century, they used riddles to produce poetry of distinction. The light contemporary riddle does not, by contrast, enjoy such high esteem, in most cases assuming the form of joking questions both in the oral tradition and in the media. Where the literary riddle produced exalted poetry fit for any occasion and company, the joking question is a witty, jesting, taunting, even vulgar gibe rooted firmly in the present. The riddle (its form, stylistic devices and even its content) has undergone transformation with the passing of time, but one of its primary functions – to entertain while at the same time posing a question requiring an answer – has remained constant.

The riddling tradition is almost too vast a field for a single researcher to explore. I will, in this book, be examining some of its basic characteristics and contexts, but I am only too well aware that many of them will remain beyond my reach. I personally have never been present at any occasion where riddles have been used spontaneously, because traditional riddling contexts have long been a thing of the past in Finland. My material is taken from the extensive archive collections of the Finnish Literature Society (SKS) and articles and publications by numerous colleagues. I am thoroughly familiar with the Finnish material, having worked in the archives of the Finnish Literature Society in the early days of my research career. In the case of the other materials I have trusted the expertise of my colleagues, who have either done fieldwork in cultures to which I have not had access or have drawn on the archive collections of their own countries.

There is a vast volume of research literature on the riddle: enough to occupy the scholar for a lifetime. It may perhaps sound somewhat surprising to write about a vision for the next basic treatise on the riddle in the foreword to a book, but I would nevertheless venture to do so, while at the same time pointing out that the best format for this treatise would, to my mind, be a research anthology in which each scholar would address his or her own particular field. This would do the fullest justice to different language and culture areas in a way no single writer can hope to achieve and at the same time throw light on the numerous subgenres and various dimensions of research.

All the Finnish riddles are given here first in their original language and then in translation. This will allow readers who do not speak Finnish to

note, say, the use of alliteration, a stylistic device borrowed from oral poetry in the archaic Kalevalaic metre. By way of example I sometimes quote riddles from other language areas in their original language only, but also often solely in English if that was the language of the publication I consulted. – I assume responsibility for one problem posed by English: Finnish has only one, gender-neutral pronoun ‘hän’ for the third person singular (English she/he). Any reader who is irritated by the use of the English pronoun ‘he’ should therefore remember that to the Finnish speaker ‘hän’ could just as well be ‘she’ or very often an even wider category of narrators, tradition bearers, riddlers and riddlees: ‘they’.

Now that this book is about to go to press, I would like to thank the many colleagues who have in one way or another assisted me with my work. Not all the good ideas suggested could, unfortunately, be taken up, and the responsibility for the ultimate decisions naturally lies with me. I wish to express my gratitude first and foremost to Professor Alan Dundes, who inspired me to undertake the project. He also encouraged me to carry on when I felt I had come to a dead end. The greatest expert on riddle tradition and research, he was able to give me a number of hints as to where to look in the literature. In 1988–1989, when I began exploring the research literature on riddles, I spent a year at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and there took part in a project entitled “Enigmatic Modes in Culture”. I wish to thank the members of this project team for the fertile atmosphere for discussion. The collection of articles *Untying the Knot* (Hasan-Rokem–Shulman 1996) produced by the team was in many ways connected with my own research. I have received valuable comments on the manuscript from Carsten Bregenhøj, Lee Haring, Bengt af Klintberg, Ulf Palménfelt and Fionnuala Carson Williams, who also placed the contemporary Northern Irish material collected by her at my disposal and helped me to understand its idiosyncrasies. Ulla Lipponen supplied me with both her own joking question collections and her expertise. Terttu Kaivola solved countless source reference problems for me and sought out books I needed. Roger D. Abrahams and Sirkka Saarinen provided answers to my questions, and Aki Arponen, Satu Apo and Arno Survo supplied me with additional material on subjects more familiar to them. To all of you, dear colleagues, I express my warmest thanks for your help. A special word of thanks is also due to Susan Sinisalo, the translator of many of my publications, to the Finnish Literature Society for agreeing to publish the book and to Päivi Vallisaari for her assistance at the printing stage.

Mustasaari, summer 2001

# 1 Introduction

The riddle is an astonishing genre: both dead and alive at the same time. Many ‘true riddles’ (such as “Kattila kiehuu kankaalla ilman puitta, tervaksitta. – Muurahaispesä.”/“A kettle is boiling out on the heath, without wood, without fuel. – An Anthill.” FR 284) are fast becoming no more than archive records of interest only to the researcher. Yet an old image may suddenly prove to be so viable that it is once again back in circulation on being attached to a topical answer (“Mikä se on kun ulkomailla höylätään ja lastut Suomeen lentelee? – Visa-kortti.”/“What is it that is planed abroad and the shavings fly to Finland? – A Visa card.”). Meanwhile wave upon wave of verbal wit flourishes in the tradition cultivated by children and young people (“Why did the elephant paint his toenails red? – To hide in the strawberry patch.” Or: “Why did God create blondes? – Because apes never learnt to fetch beer from the fridge.”). The joking question is another medium both for analysing a catastrophe (“Where did Christa McAuliffe take a vacation? – All over Florida.”) or for acknowledging a tense political situation (“What is the difference between youghurt and Loyalists? – Youghurt has a culture.”). The riddle confuses and amuses, it is a means of embarrassing anyone who does not know the answer or of winning the battle between life and death; of teaching norms or of commenting, with a twinkle in the eye, on a serious matter.

Riddles are known to have existed since way back in time, for the first documents date from thousands and hundreds of years ago and such countries as India, Palestine, Mesopotamia and ancient Greece. Most languages also have a word for riddles because as a genre riddles belong in all cultures to the archaic stratum of folklore. Sirkka Saarinen (2000) points out that these words “represent the emic category, i.e. tradition bearers’ own classification”.

The following may be proposed as a working definition of a riddle (for a discussion of riddle definitions see Chapter 2):

A riddle is a traditional, fix-phrased verbal expression containing an image and a seeming contradiction. It consists of two parts: an image and an answer, for example,

A house full, a yard full.  
Couldn't catch a bowl full. – Smoke. (ER 1643 a)

Riddles clearly say something about the material culture of the community in which they are used. Nonmaterial phenomena are less frequently dealt with, though they are not unknown. The range of concepts occurring in riddles is rather limited, and the image and answer both have their own favourite motifs. According to the observations of Archer Taylor (1951:45) the motifs of European riddles are almost solely in the vicinity of the farmhouse and deal with the objects in a woman's world or a world as seen from the windows of a house. "Earthworms, chickens, milk and eggs, as well as household tools, are characteristic and popular themes. Yet even here the choice is extremely limited: dogs and horses are not often the answer to riddles, although often used as means of comparison. Cats or mice are virtually never used in either sense. European riddlers rarely allude to wild animals. It would be hard to find riddles for a stork, a bear, a fox, or a wolf, frequent as these creatures are in the folk story. Only a few fruits or vegetables occur as the themes of riddles."

Themes common and important in a culture may, on the other hand, be missing entirely from the answers to riddles. There is, for example, little mention in their riddles of the rice so important to the Filipinos, and Filipino riddles appear to be unaware of all major socio-political conflicts in the area (Hart 1964:66). Similarly, there is among Cheremis riddles not a single one about fishing and fishing tackle, even though fishing has been common in the Cheremis region. And although lime trees and oaks are common species in the Cheremis forests, they never appear as the answers to riddles. They are, however, to be found in riddle images. Sirkka Saarinen points out in her doctoral dissertation that some scholars reckon the reason for this is that limes and oaks were used as sacrificial trees in sacred groves. Their use as answers to riddles would, therefore, have been taboo. The more likely answer is, she feels, that a growing tree is not as a whole a sufficiently clear referent, even though parts of it may be popular answers. (Saarinen 1991:30–31.)

In the communities where the use of true riddles is a living tradition, new objects and methods are quickly taken up in riddles. Elli Kōngäs Maranda made notes on the way the Lau of Malaita in the British Solomon Islands handled, by means of riddles, new commodities introduced by an alien culture (such as a truck, sugar, matches, aeroplane or axe). These riddles were by no means content to give a neutral description of the novelties and incorporated admiration implying that "Western technology is effective" (for example, "A small child carries a big man. – A chair."). But the riddles also indicated fear – "Western things are perishable" (for example, "A big men's house, very many men live in it. If they come out, they die. – Matches.") and direct criticism – "Western things are hard to acquire, lose their attractiveness or are dangerous" (for example, "A thing, when it hits a man, he dies. – A truck.") (Kōngäs Maranda 1978:207–218.) In many parts of the Western world views such as this on the way of the world are nowadays presented by means of joking questions. Being easy to use, this genre has

Riddles are a journey into a fascinating world rich in delightful metaphors and ambiguity. This book is based on material drawn from all over the world and analyses both traditional true riddles and contemporary joking questions. It introduces the reader to different riddling situations and the many functions of riddles, which vary from education to teasing, and from defusing a heated situation to entertainment. In addition to providing a survey of international riddle scholarship, the book has a comprehensive bibliography with suggestions for further reading. Annikki Kaivola-Bregenhøj is Professor Emerita of Folkloristics at the University of Turku.



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