

## FESTIVAL AS COMMUNICATIVE PERFORMANCE AND CELEBRATION OF ETHNICITY

*Kristin Kuutma*

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Ethnicity is an observable and instrumental element of cultural communication. The modern age continues to witness a growing desire for ethnic recognition in individuals and groups, a search for ethnic identity, and a conscious exhibition of distinctive ethnic traits (Dégh 1978:36). The current article attempts to describe festivals and ethnic expressions occurring in that context. A festival prepares a communicative scenery for manifestations of ethnicity and cultural unity with the special objective to demonstrate and experience a particular identity.

Festival is discussed here as a cultural performance which is scheduled, temporally and spatially bounded, programmed, characterized by co-ordinated public occasions and heightened occasions of aesthetic expression (see Stoeltje 1992). A festival provides opportunities to observe the communicative system of the culture, conveyed through semiotically complex performance events. Although a festival enfolds large-scale social units, there obviously occurs small-scale social interactional communication, performance which constitutes face-to-face interaction.

According to Beverly J. Stoeltje, festivals occur at calendrically regulated intervals, are public in nature, participatory in ethos, complex in structure, and multiple in voice, scene, and purpose. Festivals are collective phenomena and serve purposes rooted in group life. Systems of reciprocity and of shared responsibility ensure the continuity of and participation in the festival through the distribution of prestige and production. (Stoeltje 1992:261) A festival performance serves the purpose of the articulation of the group's heritage, it is a communicative situation actively engaging participants, presenting a combination of participation and performance in a public context. Motivation for participation in festivals includes social interaction that allows for the exploration and negotiation of many kinds of relationships. Activities available in a given festival reflect the concerns of the community, thus providing scenery for expressing particular ethnicity while suggesting personal affirmation, political action, social revitalization. Festival facilitates regeneration and enacts social life, it strengthens the identity of the group and its power to act in its own interest, it contributes to the articulation of social issues. The messages of festival concern the shared experience of the group and multiple interpretations of that experience. Festival brings the group together and communicates about the society itself and the role of the individual in it.

In the context of modernity there are two other concepts closely related to festival, these are ritual and spectacle. Ritual is defined as the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not encoded by the performers (Rappaport 1992:249). Ritual is usually regarded as a mode of communication associated with the concerns and practice of religion, but relevant symbolic enactment occur outside religious contexts. Ritual and festival appear in modern cultures and particularly in modern religions as separate events, but older religions integrate the calendrical rites which might be labelled as festival into larger ritual cycle.

Spectacle (see Manning 1992) is a phenomenon characteristic of modern societies, it is a large-scale, extravagant cultural production, a performance with dialogic, polyphonic, and polythematic communication. Spectacle encompasses and frames other genres, situating them in a wider and more general communicative context. Cultural productions commonly described as spectacle include various festivals (i.e. ethnic, regional, and national celebrations), public entertainment extravaganzas, exhibitions, civic and political ceremonies, and special religious events (Manning

1992:292). The metamessage of spectacle has been defined as one of entertainment and detachment. According to John MacAloon (1984) festival is a joyous celebration of unity, co-operation, accomplishment and excellence, while a spectacle is a grandiloquent display of imagery evoking a diffuse sense of wonderment and awe (1992). In the discussion of spectacle as cultural performance, Clifford Geertz (1973) has suggested that such a performance is a collectively authored "text" about the particular society, a story people tell themselves about themselves. Victor Turner (1982) regarded spectacles as one of the many performance genres in which modern peoples playfully but reflexively symbolize the assumptions, norms and conventional roles that govern their ordinary lives. He claimed that these genres are the surrogates of religious ritual in traditional societies but emphasized that they have a greater potential for creativity and change.

In contemporary Estonian culture festivals are expressive instruments of social practice. On the other hand, as communicative forms and practices of societies are cross-culturally and historically variable, it is rather obvious that festival pattern operates differently in the Estonian experience if compared, for example, to the Caribbean or Asian festival tradition. Although the festival paradigm is similar and suggestive of analogues. All four festivals deviate and cognate at the same time, and what's more, the phenomena of festival, spectacle and ritual appear here combined. The studied festivals are by their nature acts of modernity, concurring on the other hand with the general commodification of culture. A classical festival communication actively engages the participants, but in the occasions discussed the particular agents are the performers and the audience. Still, in this context the audience is not merely a passive receiver of messages. As the organizing factors of communication function worded text, music, songs and singing, and therefore an active communicative situation is created. In our tradition singing continues to be a significant mechanism which affects social behaviour. Singing in groups is an observable cultural expression and cultural activity, singing has served as cultural response to particular political processes.

A song festival as cultural performance provides the scenery for manifestations of ethnic identity. In the following are analysed three types of song festivals: (1) the national song festival which is the most conspicuous and massive manifestation of Estonian identity; (2) a village community song festival adopted by the Setu ethnic group; (3) the Slavic song and dance festival adopted by the Russian, Ukraine and Byelorussian communities of Estonia.

The **Estonian national song festival *laulupidu*** is in essence an adopted cultural construct. The ancient preindustrial Estonian singing style generally favoured communal singing. During the 19th century while following the *Liedertafel* singing societies of Baltic Germans ruling in the country, the culturally active intellectuals of Estonian origin initiated quite a massive movement of choral singing and singing societies. That in turn resulted in song festivals, inspired by the Baltic German song festivals, which in their turn had been inspired by the song festivals arranged in Germany proper. Through the adoption of the phenomenon Estonians outlined the objective of national advancement, national unity and cultural independence. The inherited and the borrowed cultural elements resulted in the creation of a new version of the national culture model. (Dégh, 1978:43) The latest, 22nd National Song Festival of 1994 celebrated the 125th anniversary of the tradition.

The national song festival is the most large-scale event arranged every fifth year to celebrate Estonian identity. Besides the national celebration, today regional or local song and dance festivals are arranged annually in all districts of Estonia, often there are additional festivals enfolded one or two villages, or a town. Song festival denotes here traditional gathering of hundreds of amateur choirs to perform popular repertoire while attracting massive audience to the special song festival grounds. The repertoire performed are choral compositions, a few of them arrangements of folk songs, and a number of authorized songs having been popular among the singers and the audience for more than a hundred years. The choral singing tradition has influenced the overall music

perception of Estonians and the historical development of folk music. Singing in choirs is a mass cultural activity in contemporary Estonia, and for an average Estonian the combined concepts of 'folk' and 'singing' associate with 'song festival'. During the song festival a noteworthy phenomenon from the folkloristic aspect is frequent spontaneous singing, occurring outside the official programme. After all, with obvious plausibility those members of the contemporary Estonian society who have inherited the inclination and talent of self-expression through vocal music, have mostly joined choirs active in their village or town. At the song festival especially the choirs from rural regions identify themselves by being clothed in the traditional nineteenth century peasant costumes originating from their local districts, and obviously in many cases the details are self-made.

The national song festival is expected to be a spectator experience. The composed choral pieces are intended for being passively enjoyed as music compositions. But in reality the audience seeks the opportunity to sing along. And evidently the majority of audience identifies themselves with the texts of certain songs that have become national symbols. Not only those performing on stage but also those functioning as audience, expect to experience the positive exaltation of singing the same melodies and words with thousands of others. In addition, the national song festival is for many a major public event, a social occasion which is attended by whole families, with the endeavour of meeting distant friends and relatives, as the audience as well as performers gather from all over the country.

Today a song festival, with the special objective to demonstrate and experience a particular identity has been adopted and adapted by the Setu community and the Russian, or to be more exact, the Slavic community of Estonia.

The **Setu song festival *leelopäev*** is arranged in a three year interval, it is a small community festival adopted in the 1970s by the Setus. The Setus are an ethnic group of the Finno-Ugric origin inhabiting the south-eastern region of Estonia who maintain distinct cultural and ethnic characteristics: a local dialect which is rather different from the standard language; religious traditions following the Greek Catholic (here: Russian) Orthodox church, to the contrary of the prevailing Lutheran traditions in greater parts of the country; adherence to traditional customs; observable authority of community life. They have preserved their traditional singing style which is characterized by text in poetic metre comparable to the syllabic-quantitative Baltic-Finnic verse tradition (i.e. Kalevalaic metre), performed with particular polyphony and rhythm. Traditional style of performing includes the leadsinger and a two- or three-part chorus group.

Setu *leelopäev* is rather deeply rooted in a traditional community festival, if compared to the two other events discussed here. It is organized by the local villagers, the song repertoire performed is exclusively observing the Setu tradition and in the dialect, the costumes worn are regional and in most cases inherited from preceding generations; traditional dishes are prepared, dances are danced; family members from far gather to celebrate the Setu festival at home. The performing singing groups come together from all over the region, participating are also *leelo* choirs of Setus who have either migrated into towns to other parts of Estonia, or who have roots in Setumaa. All the singing groups who have turned up at the celebration are granted the opportunity to perform during a limited time range at the main event of the festival. Among the performers, the female sex is predominant, but one must admit that, in general, traditional songlore has largely been maintained by women in Estonia. The ritual of the festival includes the festive procession, the opening of the ceremony, the main event, closing ceremony. The main event of the festival is arranged as a stage concert, which continues through nearly half a day. But the audience has not gathered there in order to seek entertainment by an energetic show. The relations between the performers and the audience are interactive. The song texts carry intended messages for the attentive listeners, and the traditional

customs acted on the stage communicate directly to the observers who are expertly familiar with the performed rites. The Setu community festival *leelopäev* is arranged with the special objective to demonstrate and experience particularly the Setu traditions. The occasion is a manifestation of community life and identity, and although it is a rather recently adopted celebration, on the surface following the general Estonian song festival paradigm, in essence it does not deviate from the traditional village community festival, and the Setus themselves appraise both.

The **Slavic song and dance festival *Slavyanskiy venok*** (Slavic wreath) attests to similar aspects of creolization - the Russian, Ukraine and Byelorussian communities of Estonia have adopted that particular festival pattern to celebrate Slavic identity. This festival is a rather recent development, but it is quite significant that the festival carefully regards itself to be the successor of the Russian community song festivals arranged in Estonia before World War 2 (a parallel tradition was unknown in Russia itself). The current Slavic community reinvented this tradition in 1991, after Estonia restored its status as an independent republic, in consequence of which the Russians, Ukrainians and Byelorussians who had in previous decades migrated into just a part of the Soviet Union now started to recontemplate their identity. The former Soviet citizen felt the urge of finding one's roots, exposing and celebrating them, while re-evaluating Estonia as their home. The festival organizers consciously manifest the fact that their community lives in the country famous for its song festival tradition, a magnificent celebration worthwhile adopting for experiencing the Slavic identity in turn. The ritual of the festival likewise includes the festive procession, the opening and closing ceremonies, the festival fire, the use of signal melodies. As the event is representing three different communities, the Byelorussians and especially Ukrainians strive at presenting distinctive colour - they have invited guest groups from Byelorussia and the Ukraine to perform folk songs and dances, seasonal or family customs and rites; they carefully use their native language in the repertoire performed and while communicating with the audience, obviously addressing their own ethnic group; particularly the performers associating themselves with presenting folk heritage wear traditional costumes originating from their native country; while the main concert comprises mostly presentations by separate choirs, then during the closing ceremony of the festival the combined choir of all the participants perform a Russian, Estonian, Ukrainian and Byelorussian traditional song. The Slavic festival is likewise a social event which people attend with their families, and where they expect to meet with friends and next of kin, socialize and enjoy the music of their roots.

The mobilizing mechanism permeating these festivals and co-ordinating the emotions of the participants is mostly singing, but also dance and music, performed here as part of folk tradition or as a social act. Characteristic of these festivals is that while a considerable amount of events are intentionally organized and audience orientated, nevertheless the festival sequence and scenery apparently serve purposes of group life: there occurs constant in-group communication on different levels, both among the performing groups and with and inside the audience. Social interaction reflects the concerns of the community, the shared experience which are enacted as manifestations of ethnic identity. Cultural performances occurring during the festivals are obvious articulations of the group's heritage. One conspicuous celebration of ethnicity is rendered while identifying oneself by costume - the performers and some of the audience wear traditional costumes originating in the majority of cases from their local districts. The event structure of all the festivals include opening ceremony and concluding event, drama and contest has actually been substituted in the cases studied by expressive performance (which tends to comprise both aforementioned elements), the feast occurs only on the small community level, dance and music are the inevitable recreational aspects of such gatherings. The ritual of modern festival tradition includes a festive procession with obligatory regalia and hierarchy, the opening and concluding ceremonies, signal melodies, anthems, and furthermore, each festival strives at working out a characteristic ritual act of its own.

In conclusion, a festival comprises semiotically complex performance events. The discussed festivals rendering Estonian experience present expressive forms of culture where social interaction is instrumental. Those festivals provide the scenery for the interplay of tradition and innovation in communicative social life. The created communicative situation reflects shared experience of the group, promotes social revitalization, and celebrates ethnic identity in the context of cultural expression.

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