

Some Aspects of UFO-lore

Traditional belief stories and belief accounts, the characters of which are traditional mythological beings are today rare in Estonia. Legends based on a firm belief in the existence of mythological beings and forces are rare. The traditional belief has better survived in some regions of Estonia, in southeastern Estonia, at Saaremaa (a western island), in remote parishes with thick forests. Today the majority of traditional beings have been forgotten. Only revenant folklore circulates actively, these beliefs and experiences are known and have spread among Estonians with different education level.

However, contemporary Estonians still do have experiences, which need to be interpreted. In the recent decades, several mythological beings and phenomena, which were, previously unknown – or not called, as auras, poltergeists, aliens – have appeared. Quite a number of the phenomena known in the earlier folklore have found new explanations (for example, such as the curse, the evil eye, verbal transformation of diseases).

Material

UFO-lore is mainly stored in the Estonian Folklore Archives – it has been recorded and collected during the fieldwork of the few recent years. In 1992 the Estonian Folklore Archives (ERA) and the Finnish Literary Society (SKS) collected children's folklore in both Estonia and Finland. Among other things, children were asked to write about their own and their relative's extraordinary experiences. Among the nearly two thousand stories, several of them could be categorised as UFO stories. Additional material has been found from the reader's column of a magazine dedicated to UFOs – *Universum*.

In the 1970s and 1980s, it was not at all easy to speak about paranormal phenomena and UFOs. Only the most well known cases were commented upon in radio programmes by astrophysicists. The Institute of Astro- and Atmosphere Physics in Tõravere collected information on extraordinary atmosphere phenomena. Some translated articles about UFOs sighted in the USA were published in a popular-scientific magazine Horisont. As “samizdat” (self-made) typewriter copies, translations on UFO encounters in Europe and America circulated. These circulated mainly among circles of friends and people interested in them, but the articles were also orally retold. Strange time and space voyages of both people and animals, the aliens-observers, aliens-healers and other cases were identified with far-away countries but not with Estonia.

UFO-lore advanced noticeably with the first manned space travels, especially with the first man stepping on the Moon. Stories of American astronauts’ encounters with the aliens followed one after another. By nature, these stories belonged among the urban legends. They were inspired by the fear of existence, fear and readiness to meet other civilizations, fear of death, fear being of experimented upon, fear of the unknown.

Influences of Mass Media

Hungarian ethnologist Mihály Hoppál has said that he knows two crazy Hungarians. One of them is Eva Schmidt who, while studying the Khanty, became one herself. The other is Linda Dégh, who studies paranormal phenomena and UFOs.

Linda Dégh has written:

[---] the new technological vehicle of communication helped folklore travel faster and farther accommodating and creatively transforming story plots, motifs and episodes for new audiences, for diverse reformulations by the receiving folk (Dégh 1991).

I have already mentioned the spreading of news via radio broadcasts, but news of such occurrences got there extremely seldom. Quite a phenomenon in the 1970s turned out to be the radio shows by Jüri Lina, a journalist and publicist, broadcast-

ing of which were eventually prohibited by the officials. Copies of it spread around Estonia for many years, though. People listened to it both alone and with friends. Many of these stories have now been published in the magazine *Universum*. The written press was censored more severely, from time to time science fiction stories were published in newspapers.

Paranormal phenomena were broadcast on TV only in the 1990s in Estonia. A popular TV serial, "Encounters with the Unknown" introduced the encounters with the UFOs in Estonia from 1991 to 1992. The serial became popular overnight, it had a vast audience and all the cases were heatedly debated for a long time among the audience. During my fieldwork in 1992 and even later I met several people who retold everything from the serial word for word, and wanted to discuss it. The serial was discussed while waiting for the mobile shop (which for a long time served the village people as a place for meeting and exchanging of information), and while shopping in family circles. The programme incited and provoked people to reveal and display their own experiences, encouraged them to set themselves in relation with supernatural powers, influenced the interest of the narrator and the audience. This programme, more than any other media, made people to interpret their experiences as encounters with the aliens. The first of these cases was the so-called story of Raido, about which his relative writes to the archives a year later as follows:

My relative Raido saw aliens. When he was still awake and watched TV, aliens with big eyes appeared behind the window and disappeared after a moment. Raido went into the kitchen to eat supper and told about it to his grandmother. Grandmother didn't believe Raido. When she had put the children to sleep she wanted to go back into the living room to turn off the TV set, but she somehow constantly walked past the door and couldn't get through. She tried several times but still couldn't.

When everybody else was asleep, the aliens with big eyes reappeared in front of Raido's bed and woke him up. They asked Raido if he wanted to travel to with them on board their UFO ship. Raido said yes, and after they went out through the refrigerator, he saw two UFOs in front of the house. A bearded man called him to come to his ship.

There were four aliens altogether; one of them was a woman with long hair. They wore glittering clothes. One ship was small and the other was bigger. One was smaller and round-shaped and the other was bigger and boat-shaped. [---]

The aliens drew some marks on the boy's body.

A TV film made of Raido's case was recently shown in Latvia. It drew a lot of active attention and according to colleague Guntis Pakalns' opinion, it seemed completely convincing. The cutting of the film was better than average and several novel ideas were used. The TV programme introduced several central motifs of UFO-lore – miraculous healing, obtaining supernatural powers or skills for healing from the aliens.

Vahur Kersna, the director of the show "Encounters with the Unknown" remained true to himself until the end of the serial – he did not question the truthfulness of the cases and accepted the provided interpretations.

The case of Raido was quite classical and contains many motifs known in folklore. The persons abducted by a mythological being travel with it, its marks may remain on the body of the person or it may undergo physical changes. In older Estonian folklore, a story is known of Juuda Maie, who was tugged by the Evil One for a long period. After returning from the journey, her finger remained different. It should be mentioned here that fairy folklore has become almost unknown in Estonia, and that it occurs very seldom that the fairies are replaced by aliens. Mainly the devil motifs have become connected with new mythological beings. With many other nations, the fairies are the ones who are replaced with new mythological beings (aliens); motifs are loaned from their traditions, etc. In legends, there still exists a motif where a person touching a child crying in the forest gets an incurable skin disease. Causing illnesses is one characteristic trait of UFO-lore.

The case of Raido was thoroughly examined by the press. The stories of both Raido and his grandmother were similar which increased the credibility of the story. The boy did however later confess that nothing had happened – it had all been a dream. The grandmother later revoked her words about the marks on his body.

Oral UFO-lore in Estonia

The following classification of UFO-stories is fully preliminary and will certainly change as new, additional material is acquired. I hope it will at least provide an overview of the material collected up to date.

1) In Estonia, most common are the stories about encounters, where the narrator (or the one who experienced it) mediates a visual contact, describes the beings and objects he saw, evaluates the event and adds some opinions. Mostly flying objects with traditional UFO form are seen: a cylinder shaped, cigar shaped, a cylinder with a sphere attached to its prow, round or basket shaped, also plate shaped, light emitting or (well) illuminated. Marks of UFOs are often seen in the forest, or in a forest opening: burnt or strange looking grounding spots. During visual contacts other extraordinary incidents occur – the car motor refuses to work or stops (UFOs are often met while driving at night), the car drives out of the road. The experiences become speechless; they feel as if being inside a sack. An artist, age 53, describes how they saw a long UFO with many illuminators at its bottom to the left of the road. Then the UFO disappeared and was after a moment visible to the right of the road. Their car stopped in a big wall of snow, which the UFO had pushed on the road.

Probably the disappearing of the old traditional folklore is also noted in the fact that even quite old people interpreted various events as UFO-lore, without even trying to find any other explanations. It happens even with cases where the old folklore is known well enough. Thus, a Setu singer of 80 years describe, how a gigantic greyish object resembling a window frame had approached her on the road. She had at once thought it to be an UFO. When the object was some metres away from her, she remembered that one could get free from all evil beings by reading the Lords prayer. The prayer caused the window-frame to turn and leave without any traces. Therefore, the narrator instinctively used an old method of protective magic, which worked just as well as in traditional crises. She did not connect this vision with any mythological beings known to her from her parents talk.

2) In addition to passive sightings, there are stories about observers and pursuers. Strange looking aliens are usually short,

although there are accounts of very tall ones; in the case of humanoids their gender, either male or female is also identified. There are also accounts of shadowlike, black or grey beings – these are the traditional forms of appearance typical to spiritual beings. More often the aliens are glittering, shining and in many cases, they have been identified with light or energy beings whose appearance in bodily form is occasional. There are also quite many classical accounts of small green beings, or accounts of beings in otherwise fantastic forms of body that, like mythological beings, may suddenly disappear.

It must be noted that glittering forms of appearance and fantastic forms of appearance are not typical to folklore. In ghost stories and in the case of several mythological beings it is a rare form of appearance. For example, among the forms of appearance of the devil, the fantastic form is the most rare (Valk 1995). Fantastic details are more typical to the stories of young children. In those details, from animals and other beings are added to the description of otherwise more realistic human-oid, as it was told by quite young children and their older acquaintance.

[---] Many say that they must have seen a vision or hallucination or thought it out themselves. But I think that children so small couldn't think it out themselves and that all three couldn't have seen a hallucination at once. For one thing, it isn't that easy to think out a description like that. And how could these footmarks have got there if they thought it out? The little man had been about one metre tall. I don't know which of them had got the horns. Those girls told about it.

Sometimes smoke or colourful liquid is left over from the disappeared being, which is typical to traditional stories about the devil and the revenant. People may be pursued by an UFO, the aliens visit houses at night to observe people, they may be heard talking to each other.

With me myself, nothing extraordinary has happened. A friend of a friend's (a woman) once told such a story. It was in the night when suddenly two bronze-coloured ufonauts flew in through the (closed) window and started to explore the items in the room, and to talk, but her husband who was sleeping heard nothing. They asked about all the items

in the room. When they touched a flower in the room, it became burnt. When they wanted to take the woman with them, she bit one of them in the arm and felt the taste of metal in her mouth. Before they went away, they promised to come back. Two days later several people saw one or two (I can't recall exactly) shining UFOs (RKM, KP 9, 706/7 (2) < Tallinn (1992)).

Different kinds of beings appearing in dreams, which talk, invite to come with them or make suggestions, are quite ordinary occurrences. Therefore, there is nothing extraordinary in interpreting the strangers seen in a dream as aliens. Taking such dreams as real contacts with aliens has undoubtedly been influenced by the mass media and stories published there.

3) Longer, widespread narratives speak about forced abductions (of people, above all). Such a story happened, for example, to a man of 45 who during the third encounter with the aliens was abducted. As he refused to stay with them, lung cancer was transplanted in him.

His own and his family's interpretations of the story differed greatly. His mother, father and wife were convinced that the devil was behind the incidence. His mother believed that the devil must be involved, and she added, that if such strange things happened then perhaps ancient Estonians had been right. The concept of the devil being behind the whole thing was agreeable also for his wife, who was a member of the Free Church and believed that the devil could take any form he wished.

A folklorist may find in his stories a number of old motifs: the travelling of the free soul, a prophesying dream, a space travel with an evil being, meeting a giant being or visiting him – either a guardian spirit of forest, a mythological being met on the cemetery, the devil, etc.

4) Besides the extraordinary time-travel, motifs about the enforcement of different sanctions (setting illnesses on the person, change of physical or mental state, marks made on one's body, foretelling of death or future, experiments), or

5) being given presents (healing, acquiring miraculous powers, etc.) are attached to such stories. The protagonist may come across a gathering of aliens, he may follow the aliens voluntarily.

A boy who was ill once walked on the street. Suddenly something shined in front of the boy. However, from somewhere came a man who was about two metres tall and said that he won't be ill for a year and then fall ill again. In addition, the boy was well for a year and then fell ill again (RK, KP 14, 114 (1) < Haapsalu (1992)).

Once two men went to the photographer to have a photo taken of them. Having got the photo they saw on it a humanoid creature lying in front of them on the photo. A friend of mine told me this story.

More often, the aliens are met late in the evening, at night, at the verge of falling to sleep or while asleep, which was typical to the (evil) mythological beings. UFO-lore activates anew many themes and beliefs known already in the traditional heritage. Formerly, similar stories were associated with fairies, the devil, treasure bearers, ghosts, foretellers of death, and other supernatural beings. UFO-lore exchanges motifs also with urban legends, poltergeists, auras and other recent religious phenomena.

Recurring Encounters with Aliens

It is often so with mythological experiences and belief accounts that one person has more than one experience or encounter with a mythological being during his life. He may have experienced several prophesizing omens. Even narrators who have not had supernatural experiences themselves and are retelling stories heard from others know more than one analogous case. The experience leaves different traces to different narrators, which seem to depend on how emotional the person is, of which type of emotionality he is, and to a certain extent on the shock, which he got. In traditional legends, the descriptions of emotional state are usually briefer non-existent, but in newer recordings, such descriptions can be quite vivid. Often the narrator argues and tries to explain the case in many different ways. Sometimes he defends his interpretation against others.

Even in UFO-lore cases where the narration is quite assertive and emotionless, which is also evident in the story, the narrator may still have experienced a real shock. A distinctive group

is formed by stories of recurring encounters with aliens. Often there may be long periods between different occurrences.

In some of the cases, I would refer to the situation as becoming dependent on one's own beliefs, which is partially accompanied also by dependency on one's own interpretation. The first situation is often related to just mere sighting of a UFO (or several sightings), which may be followed by so called "observer's cases" – attempts of contact, later on invitations to follow, abduction, various presents or harming. Usually a person, who notices aliens' interest towards him, is surprised. In cases, where he over-
lies a time and space travel or physical attack by the aliens he is often filled with panic, distaste or other similar emotions.

If the cases connected with rather unpleasant experiences are found in the oral tradition, then, on the other hand, cases where the aliens and their series of experiments are described with awe and sympathy (for example the description by Sünter from Saaremaa in magazine *Universum*) are published in the press.

Encounters and Their Interpretations

Characteristic to the UFO-lore is its large volume. Often every participant of the event tells his own version. Affirmatively most of the UFO experiences are collective - there are usually several people in the car, family members often see and experience the same things, also dogs react to the supernatural meeting. In contrary to the people, the dogs' reactions have not changed – they bark just as they used to in the case of traditional beings. In the family circle the interpretation is often corrected – a single interpretation is selected. Still, every member may stick to his/her own interpretation as in the case of the following auditive encounter

*[---] As fear has big eyes, we thought of the worst things –
my friend thought that these were spirits; my sister thought
that these were revenants, I for myself that these were aliens.*

Traditional folklore with its system of mythological beings is quite distant; still there are descriptions of the traditional beings – treasure bearers, revenants and ghosts, who would nowadays be

interpreted as aliens or UFOs. In 1981, in central Estonia big colourful spheres landed in front of a farmer, but rolled away when he approached them. He considered these to have been the treasure bearers. He added that both he and his neighbours had seen a big sphere moving over the forest towards a well-off farm. The last is the typical visualisation of the treasure bearer in traditional folklore. He had heard of UFOs but found the traditional explanation to be more agreeable. Although in the above-mentioned story of disease transplantation the experiencer could interpret it only as the doing of the aliens, even quite young carriers of tradition may still propose traditional ways of interpretation, though.

Somewhere around May 1 my grandmother, who was 82 years old, died. Her coffin stood in the cellar. Some twenty metres away from it two projectors seemed to rotate. They observed grandmother's coffin for quite some time and then they went away and black circles were left in those places. I couldn't tell whether these were UFO's or my grandmother's soul, but something was out there.

UFO-lore is less frequent than other kinds of paranormal phenomena. If someone has encountered an UFO, then others also tend to interpret their experiences retrospectively as UFOs. One person may have several experiences connected with UFOs, which may form a chain of UFO-experiences. That was the case in the above-mentioned story of disease transplantation. Quite often, such chains also form from memorates about the revenant, haunted houses, nightmares, etc.

As for its form, UFO-lore is on the periphery of the tradition of religious narratives, being mostly represented by memorates and combined with belief in the occurrences and, not infrequently, vivid personal experiences. In addition to mass media, the religious background of the family of the tradition bearer, his inherent tendency to interpret what he has experienced as spiritual and supernatural have some importance. Such interpretation is assisted by the general unbroken local tradition. Often, new supernatural phenomena are located in places that have formerly also given rise to interesting stories, where anomalous phenomena have been observed. The special characteristics of the physical and mental state of the witness are not without importance either.

Thus, UFO-lore contains several old motifs from traditional folklore, offers deep belief experiences, and is, therefore, undoubtedly similar to mythological folklore. UFO-lore realises the yearning for an unfamiliar and exciting supernatural encounter in the traditional form, moreover, it is an expression of the social tensions and subconscious fears of the strange and unknown, fear effacing something dangerous and unfamiliar. As the aliens have found their way to the stories for terrifying children, they may have an opportunity to remain in folklore.

Half of my childhood, I heard horror stories that the UFO would come, take me away, and not bring me back. In addition, my mother and father would search for me until they go crazy. In addition, if I were brought back then I would have a memory blackout, so that I wouldn't remember anything about that or anything else. Due to that story, I was afraid of the UFOs and tried to look out, and keep out their way.

Let us return to the beings considered as aliens. In about half of the cases the beings met do not have a human form, it is fantastic, but according to the most of the lore they are similar. The aliens are not shape shifters, they do not change themselves, sometimes they are beings made of energy or light.

Interpretations of Personal Experiences

To illustrate the changes in the ways of interpretation, I present here in brief the personal experience story of the 45-years-old man, referred to above. The first case has a relatively simple build-up, but it creates a suitable basis for the following experiences and the interpretation of the following belief accounts.

The man and his son were picking potatoes and suddenly noticed a UFO flying towards the house. The son hurried to fetch the camera. The man watched how the UFO approached, turned aside and vanished. There was no film in the camera and by the time the son ran out with a new film in the camera, the UFO had disappeared.

The second event took place some months later. The man was going home with his friend by car. They had been transporting

potatoes to Äksi (a village in northern Tartumaa). His friend was driving and near Puurmani they noticed that they were being followed by an unknown metallic flying machine. The man asked the driver to stop, but the latter refused to – they would take us away, operate and experiment on us. The man tried to persuade the driver to stop, as it was a unique opportunity for the science – perhaps they would be the first to establish a contact, to talk to aliens. The man was sure that they wanted to establish a contact, as they kept flying after them at a constant distance.

The driver refused to take the man home, saying that he had children and that he did not want to be alone in the car so that the aliens might abduct him. Shortly before they reached the driver's home, the UFO vanished.

I Observer

II Pursuer

**III Transplantation - travel - argument - magnetisation
- illness**

IV Physical attack

The third event happened in March 1994 when a friend of the man invited him to the birthday of a mutual friend. Sitting at the birthday table, the man suddenly felt that he was floating upwards, that he saw the others sitting around the table from high above as if under the ceiling. After that, he saw the stars flash by. He understood that he was being taken to somewhere but he did not feel afraid. Fear, awful fear struck him only when he found himself standing in a huge hall before giant beings. One giant looked like a man; he had narrow dark moustache and cold eyes. Sitting, the giant was about two or three metres tall. Behind the chief, there were several other beings. The chief said to him, "You will stay with us." However, he cried, being almost mad of fear, "I don't want to stay here. I want to go home!" The beings – he thought them to be ufonauts – did not want to let him go. "You are a fool!" they said. They talked to him but did not use their mouths for that – their voice came from their foreheads or from somewhere else – but he heard a very loud voice. "OK! You will go home, but you shall die, you shall have a lung disease, lung cancer," they said. In addition, he saw another creature nod agreeing. "But I am not a fool. I will take care of myself I will not get cold. I will not fall ill," he thought being sent back.

For a moment, he saw the others sitting around the table from high above and then felt he sitting again at the table. He felt himself being stiff of fear – had the others noticed his having been absent, how to inquire the others about what had happened so that they would not consider him to be mad.

I will omit a passage about the excitement, which was caused by the fact that forks and knives stuck to the hands of the man from over a long distance. (This was also witnessed by his wife and the neighbours.)

The next morning everything was as usual, as it was also the next month. At the beginning of April, he went to a doctor to test his lungs in connection with his driving licence. Everything was all right, but two weeks later he started coughing, went to a doctor and it was discovered that he had lung cancer in the last phase. He told this story at the end of April, being sure that the aliens planted the illness into him. He did not have any clue, why he was chosen particularly.

His own and his family's interpretations of the story differed greatly. His mother, father and wife were convinced that the devil was behind the incidence. His mother believed that the devil must be involved, and she added, that if such strange things happened then perhaps ancient Estonians had been right. The concept of the devil being behind the whole thing was agreeable also for his wife, who was a member of the Free Church and believed that the devil could take any form he wished.

The man himself did not rely on the paranormal evidence in his interpretation of the story – he did not consider either the out-of-the body experience or the precognition to explain what had happened; he did not think the pulling of the knives and forks towards him to be exteriorisation. He thought the illness, his travelling through space and the beings he met were all connected with aliens. The traditional explanations – the travelling of the free soul, a prophesying dream, a space travel with an evil being, meeting a giant being or visiting him – either a guardian spirit of forest, a mythological being met on the cemetery, the devil – were unknown to him.

As a comment, it should be mentioned that neither his father, mother nor wife accepted the existence of any kind of paranormal evidence. His mother and father were almost atheists. The man himself, however, had been interested in the paranormal

since his early youth and had read almost everything published on that subject in Estonia. From traditional beliefs he added to the mythological UFO story only the fact that it had been prophesied to her mother in her youth that one of her sons would die before her. It could also be regarded as making the chain of beliefs stronger. UFO-s has taken over mainly the role of the evil, but also of the good mythological beings. There are not many face-to-face meetings with aliens. Among them most commonplace are a small non-humanoid being and a small green being.

References

- Dégh, Linda 1991. What is the legend after all? *Contemporary Legend*, 1, pp. 11–38.
- Rojcewicz, Peter M. 1991. Between One Eye Blink and the Next: Fairies, UFOs, and Problems of Knowledge. Narváez, Peter (ed.). *The Good People: New Fairylore Essays*. Garland reference library of the humanities, 1376. New York: Garland Pub., pp. 479–514.
- Universum: UFO-ajakiri* [Universum: A magazine dedicated to UFOs], 1992–1994. Viljandi: Sünnimaa.
- Valk, Ülo 1994. *Eesti rahvausu kuradi-kujutelm kristliku demonoloogia ja rahvusvahelise folkloori kontekstis: Ilmumiskujud: Väitekirj filoloogiadoktori teaduskraadi taotlemiseks eesti rahvaluule alal* [The Image of The Devil of Estonian Folk Religion in The Context of Christian Demonology and International Folklore: Manifestations: PhD Paper]. *Dissertationes philologiae estonicae Universitatis Tartuensis*, 3. Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus.