

FOREST FAIRIES IN THE VEPSIAN FOLK TRADITION

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*Some say there is no God. But He is!
There is God. And in the forest there are
forest fairies, and in a house the house-
hold fairies. (A 61-year-old Vepsian
woman, summer 1990)*

The contemporary folk beliefs of the majority of European peoples, incl. the Estonians and the Finns of the Baltic-Finns, are quite motley and heterogeneous. With traditional beliefs receding, a few of them, and rather archaic at that, have still persisted. Alongside with them, more and more secondary beliefs, most of them unified, known all over the Western world and spread via the mass media, have been incorporated and intertwined with the old ones. The new layer contains elements from Eastern religions, beliefs of scientific colouring concerning parapsychological phenomena, UFOs, astrology, fragments of esoteric teachings of different origin, new paganism, etc. It should be remembered that in case with different age, educational and religious groups the situation is different. Moreover, conspicuous is the purely individual component: everyone mixes a suitable amalgam of the components offered.

While compared to the Estonians, Vepsian folk beliefs present an evident contrast with its amazing archaic and homogeneous character preserved up to the present. It can be explained by the fact that the informants, questioned at the field work of the recent years, constitute a homogeneous group: the majority of them have been elderly village women with elementary education or no schooling at all, sometimes even illiterate. This demographic group constitutes the majority of the Vepsian village population. Elderly men are few as a result of the Soviet repressions of the 1930s, wars and untimely deaths (accidents during work, traffic accidents, high rate of suicides). Since the 1960s the young have mostly abandoned their home villages after graduating from secondary schools and release from the army.

As to their creed, the Vepsians like the other eastern Balto-Finns, are Orthodox. Vepsians got acquainted with Christianity in the 12th century when first monasteries were built on their territories, but missionaries had frequented their settlements earlier. Their early adoption of Christianity is testified by the fact that the greater part of the corresponding terminology is in their mother

tongue. Sometimes, although not always, the Vepsian term is a translation loan from the Russian language, e.g. *Jumou* 'God', *Sünd*, *Sursünd* 'God, Christ', *valatada* 'to baptise', *äijämpei* 'Easter' (in Modern Russian the common term is *pasha* but the old *velikii den* is also known, they both correspond to the Latvian *lieldiena ristitat* 'Godfather', etc.) Characteristic of the Vepsian way of thinking is the conspicuous fact that *a man* and *a Christian* are words of overlapping meaning: Vepsian *ristit* usually means just *man*, although in certain contexts the equivalent would be namely *Christian*.

Still, the images of ancient folk beliefs are vigorous among Vepsians. Longer preservation of ancient folk religion and laments, a genre relevant in the studies of traditional religion, among the Orthodox Balto-Finns in comparison to the Lutheran ones, has often struck the researchers. The Orthodox church was not persistent enough to root out ancient beliefs and customs. Pagan tradition could be condemned in preaching but in practice their uprooting was substituted by their inclusion into the church tradition. Chapels (Vepsian: *casoun*) were erected on the spots of former worship, priests blessed sacrifices brought there, etc. Vepsians accepted first and foremost Christian ceremonies and outward practices, while the content of the teaching remained obscure. Vepsians have never had liturgy in their mother tongue. And considering that even in the recent past the knowledge of Russian – especially among the women – was poor, it is but natural that the Old Slavic liturgy was not understood. Getting acquainted with the direct source, the Bible, was hindered – in addition to the narrow spread of literacy – by the indifference of the Orthodox church to spread the knowledge of Bible among the people.

On the most general plane the vividness of the ancient folk religion stresses the fact that Vepsians, standing throughout centuries aside from the main currents of culture, which has been caused by their geographic location, have been able to preserve a lot of archaic traits in both material and spiritual culture.

Christian and folk layers of religion have not existed side by side, independent of each other or even stood in conflict, but they have intertwined and merged. This is a genuine world view of compound character. On the one hand God the Creator, Christ, Holy Virgin, saints and angels are worshipped. Due to the concrete character of the orthodox religion, the icons are of central importance.¹ Vepsians called the icons *jumalad*, more often *jumalaizhed* ('gods', with diminutive suffix) and the corner in the room with the icon is called *jumoukod* ('house of god'). As within the last 60 years there has been not a single working church in their territory (in the 1930s, during the period of religious intolerance, all the churches were ravaged and turned later into clubs, shops or warehouses), worshipping has been centred round the home icons. In mornings and evenings people bow in front of the icons, crossing themselves (Vepsian *siimad*

ristta means word-for-word ‘to cross one’s eyes’) and saying a short prayer. Only a few know canonical prayers in Church Slavic or their fragments. Home prayers are at present mostly free as to their wording and a mix of Vepsian and Russian. The structure of the prayers said at home in the icon corner resembles that used while addressing fairies. One can guess that this assimilation reflects the reduced influence of the church.

On the other hand, help and protection is sought from various fairies of nature and cultural spots whose favour is asked for, and any possible annoyance of whom is tried to avoid. Of importance in Vepsian folk religion are the dead ancestors whose influence on the everyday life of the living is thought to be considerable. Prayers addressed to fairies as well as to the dead begin often with an address to God, Christ and the saints, asking for their blessing either in Russian (*Gospodi Bozhe, Blagoslovi Hristos, Mikola milostivyi*) or in Vepsian (*Sursünd söial, Sünduizhem*) or in both languages in whatever order. It is only predictable in case of the dead who were not baptised, but addressing fairies in the name of God seems, at least from the Protestant point of view, to be a superstition and almost blasphemy. The orthodox folk belief, however, does not think so. Fairies are thought to be created by God, because ‘God has created both the visible and the invisible’ as one of my informants explained. The same point has been stressed by the Karelian Old-Believers.² In a way specialised fairies are treated like specialised saints. Unlike the saints, however, the fairies have not always been thought to carry out the will of God. Sometimes they have been viewed as creatures serving the Evil.

The latter holds ground more with nature fairies than with fairies of cultural spots. As the field work results of recent decades shows, the tradition of forest fairies (beliefs, prayers, religious narratives) is especially alive and divers. The significance of water fairies is smaller, although Vepsian villages are, as to their location, connected with water bodies, and fishing on lakes (practised, by the way, also by women) is common up to the present. Water fairies seem to be more negative than forest fairies.

The importance of cultivated landscape in Vepsian territories is minimal, villages are scattered in large forests. So, the environment is the forest and it is the forest that is of importance in the economy. Hunters are, however, rare, bearing in mind the demographic situation; moreover, hunting is not profitable, while berries and mushrooms play a significant role in their food and income. In the forest whisks are made, willows are barked and the bark sold. A considerable part of the older generation of contemporary Vepsians have earned their living felling forest far from their homes or any settlement. Animals are also now taken to graze in forests. Instead of using the roads built within the last few decades, people use direct forest paths to visit other villages. All this explains

the general familiarity and topicality of forest fairies' lore.

According to the older layer of beliefs, the guardian spirits of forest (incl. those of trees and other plants, wild birds and animals) live in families like people. Their function to maintain and protect as well as rule is expressed by the almost only possible form of address: *mecan izhandaizhed*, *mecan emagaizhed* ('masters of the forest', 'mistresses of the forest'). Alongside with the obligatory pair of a master and a mistress the prayer could also mention grandparents, children and sons-in-law. Although there is no doubt that the idea of fairy families is genuine, the prayer chants use also Russian (*lesnoi hozyain*, *lesnaya hozyaika* or even *lesnoi tsar*, *lesnaya tsaritsa*).

Relations between men and forest are fixed by concrete rules. It is thought that forest has adopted its own laws and men are to obey them. So, one should not curse in the forest, litter it, cut branches of trees without a need. A decent person cleans a forest path from the trash fallen on it and 'saves' a half-broken tree branch hanging down as it is believed to feel pain.

While entering a forest, the master and mistress of it are asked to bless the entrance (frequently the corresponding prayer is at the same time addressed to God). Going to pick berries or mushrooms, people pray in order to find the desired. Permission has to be asked before sitting down for a rest, lighting a cigarette or staying overnight; in the latter case the goodwill of forest fairies is of special importance. After a successful walk in the forest or a good pick of mushrooms or berries the fairies are thanked. Neglecting these rules of behaviour results in a mischief – one might see terrifying apparitions, get lost or fall ill in specific illnesses called *mecanena* ('forest's nose').

Herdsmen, working every day in the forest, depended on the propitious attitude of fairies. That's why there were a number of taboos set up only for them. Accepting the duty to follow certain prohibitions, the herdsman had made a treaty with the forest. It became valid on the day of turning out cattle to grass for the first time in spring (St. George's Day) when the ritual walking-round-the-herd was performed (the Vepsian verb for it being *ümbärta*) and lasted up to the Michaelmas. The natural sign signifying the disappearance of the influence of the treaty was the falling of leaves. Herdsman's behaviour had to be excellent. Like other people he was not to curse, make much noise or harm the forest. In addition the herdsman could neither kill the inhabitants of the forest nor fish. He could not even pick mushrooms or berries. Just one berry eaten could be fatal. The herdsman had to leave forest before sunset. Violation of the treaty was interpreted as an insult to the masters and mistresses of the forest that could be followed by their punishment: beasts of prey could attack the herd, or the cattle could get lost.

In general, beliefs, charms, prayers and religious narratives depict forest

fairies as families living their own lives and taking care of the forest, animals and birds, treating, at that, with respect those who respect them, or even helping people. There are, still, stories depicting forest inhabitants as cruel and dangerous creatures. Sometimes their behaviour reveals devilish traits. In case a forest fairy has been directly hostile, the charms avoid the general terms of forest master or mistress. Instead derivations of words meaning 'forest' are used (*mechiine, korbhiine*) or even words of Russian origin, indicating directly at their devilish character, are chosen (*čort, bes*). It should be said that terms conveying different attitudes can both be used within one and the same narrative. The character of forest fairies is seen as ambiguous and the names are chosen depending on whether the good or the evil and dangerous aspect dominates at the moment. The devilish nature of fairies is expressed – besides their direct attacks on human beings – by their fear of the sign of cross or Christian formulae. Crossing oneself and addressing only God for blessing before going to the forest could indirectly evince the same.

Without having concrete ideas about the appearance or everyday life of forest fairies, Vepsians do not doubt their existence, and pity the folklorist whose questions betray his or her ignorance, 'You think there is none in the forest but there is its own folk, only you don't know it as you don't see'. Direct meetings with the fairies are rare and not desired. According to the general belief it would be a bad omen. Still, some think that fairies appear to both the happy and the unhappy ones but never to an average person.

Most frequently the forest fairies are seen in visions. An unknown person or a person resembling an acquaintance met in the forest is interpreted as a fairy in case he/she greets you not and/or disappears suddenly. If one sees a familiar person from a distance but the later investigation proves that the recognised person was not in the forest at that time, it is a sound proof of a fairy. Fairies can appear as persons of both sexes, old and young, alone or in groups, even in successive groups. Depending on personal experience or the experience of the closest relatives either one or another variant is thought to be the most probable. So, one story-teller who had sat down in forest for a rest, saw first a group of fine ladies and later a group of gentlemen. Both disappeared after God's name was said and the person had crossed himself. Reflecting later on the incident the person guessed that he must have sat on the path of fairies.

Forest fairies can appear in the auditory form, too, although it is rare. The belief that fairies lead a family life like human beings is connected with the conviction that they marry and, so, have wedding parties. One narrative recalls a wedding procession heard in the evening crossing a woody hill. Jingling of bells, calls and concertina music were heard. The hearer's later life was troubled and this was connected with this experience, although the distance in time

between these two periods was quite long. A wedding procession of water fairies moving from one lake to another has also occurred mostly in the auditory form. The only thing seen was the bending of trees in their way.

Previously the spontaneous (either entirely or caused by man's guessed violation of a norm) appearance of fairies was discussed. Invoked fairies – connected with getting lost in the woods, or asking the witches to help the lost ones out of the forest – are totally different in their appearance and behaviour. Hereby mention could be made of an exceptional case in which a sorcerer let a fairy wedding appear to his companion on the toad – probably just to demonstrate his abilities. The companion saw people as tall as trees approaching, singing songs and playing the concertina. On the sorcerer's command ('Diminish! diminish!') they shrank to normal size and disappeared. This had no negative consequences whatsoever.

Beliefs connected with forest fairies become topical every time people or animals get lost in the forest. This happens quite often, because Vepsian villages – as it was mentioned earlier – are situated in large woods that men have to penetrate in order to feed their cattle and complement their diet. Although the herdsmen are skilled professionals and all the cows have bells, often one or even more of the herd could be found missing. Smaller animals (calves, goats, sheep) are nowadays not herded at all but let loose to graze on their own. They feed on meadows in or near the village but sometimes may wander far away and lose their way back. If animals have not returned together with the herd or alone in time, the mistress gets worried. She questions her neighbours, walks to and fro in the village road and goes to look for them in the guessed direction. After the first attempts to find the lost cattle have failed, the suspicion, surprising at first, becomes urgent and one has to answer the question, what had actually happened to the cattle. Perhaps they have not gone too far, but just forgotten themselves on a fine pasture or hidden in the bushes to protect themselves from gadflies? Looking for them is continued under the pressure of doubts, and as time passes, the conviction is formed that it cannot be just an ordinary delay, but the animal(s) have got 'on a bad trace' – *hondole/hubale jälgele*, i.e. they are in the power of forest fairies. The same opinion is adopted if an adult or a child has not returned home on time. An adult could in some cases realise what has happened to him even before his family finds him missing, and take preventive measures.

Explaining missing animals and people with a bad trace presumes an answer to the question why it has happened. Forest never takes anyone just for nothing, without a reason. Forest fairies are, in fact, moralists. All the animals and in most cases also children get on a bad trace after the mistress's or parents' careless expressions or abuse. In case with adults, sometimes also with bigger

children, the cause could be their own improper words or even only thoughts. The one pondering the causes of getting lost recalls most frequently excessive self-confidence. A number of informants have thought the reason to be in expressions like: 'I'll come back soon', 'I won't go far', 'I'll be quick', etc. Although everyone knows that statements of this type should be avoided, the self-confidence characteristic of human beings forces them to repeat those fatal words. In case one remembers that these sayings are inadmissible at the moment they have slipped out, one has to add immediately, 'If God permits', and it would annihilate the feared consequences (fairy tale AT 830 C).

One of the causes for getting lost, as informants have said, is the belief in unfortunate days and moments. Sometimes getting lost could be explained by just going into the forest on an unfortunate moment; more often, still, it is thought that operative is a combination of several causes: so, careless words uttered on an unfortunate moment could result in something bad.

Any violation of the forest's laws mentioned earlier – disrespect, noisy behaviour, etc., – alongside with other negative consequences – could result in getting lost. Of interest is the explanation that people picking berries or mushrooms could communicate with each other only 'nicely', i.e. calling each other melodically. Loud and raucous cries, 'Hey! hey!' are thought to be dangerous as it would invoke forest fairies treated, in this case, clearly as devilish. Unlike the Estonian forest fairies, the Vepsian ones still do not call back just to mislead people.

For decades the main sustainer of a Vepsian family was cow and so its loss was a great misfortune. The responsibility of a herdsman for the cattle owned either privately or by the collective farm was equally great. Fear accompanying a child or an adult member of the family having got lost in the forest need not be mentioned. No wonder that an acute conscience remembers not only real violations of the norm, like leaving with words of anger and abuse instead of blessings, but interprets, in retrospect, the most innocent, neutral or joking utterances as ill omens. So, in one case the mistress gave the master the leash of their cow saying, 'Here it is!' The cow tore itself off almost immediately and escaped into the forest from where they could find it only with the help of a witch. Analysing the incident later, it was concluded that the casual 'here it is' had given fairies the power over their cow. In case even such a negative-in-retrospect cause cannot be found, the conviction still remains that there has been made a mistake. So, the forest fairies are asked to forgive not only the known but also the unknown sins.

What actually happens to those who have got on 'a bad trace' can be learned from outward signs and, in case with people, from their later testimonies. One of the tokens of being in the power of forest fairies is the covering of

long distances within a short period of time. Sometimes the unnaturally long distance is accompanied by crossing natural barriers like water bodies, swamps, thickets, brakes. Animals and people found or redeemed from fairies look exhausted and abused, the clothes of the person are torn. Cows give, after being in the power of the forest, less milk, people fall ill. As a rule, they recover after a few days but in some cases the psychic shock has been too great and the person remains queer for rest of his life.

Weals and torn clothes as well as illness could find a rational explanation but Vepsians would not accept them as unfit for the whole of the case. Everything accompanying getting lost is the result of fairies' actions. The people who have experienced it recall having been pulled forward with an irresistible force. Sometimes, if the lost one has tried to stop and have a rest, he has been pushed with strokes, blows and jabs. In one case a child remembered that she was pushed by a furry paw. Frequent are tactile perceptions whereby the lost one feels that he is supported beneath his armpits and dragged along. One story reports a case of two fairies in the shape of men carrying the lost one on their arms in quite a comfortable way. Traditionally the dragging and pushing is rather careless, even rude. A person is pulled through brush heaps and wind-falls that tear his clothes and cut wounds. These descriptions stress the devilish nature of forest fairies that is also manifest in the terminology used. In those connections the names *mecan izhand*, *mecan emäg* are avoided and replaced by neutral *mechiine* and *korbiine* (*korb* – 'large primeval forest') or, more frequently, by Russian *besad*, *čortad* or *nechistaya sila*.

The active wish of a strange and evil power to keep lost animals or persons in his possession manifests in numerous ways. One of them is to fool the eyes of seekers who could pass the lost one quite near without noticing anything. The misled ones are as if behind a magic veil. One of the preventive measures against the forest is the springtime rite accompanying the first turning out of cattle to grass. Vepsians confirm that if it is conducted properly, wolves and bears will not notice the cattle in the forest, should they even walk through the herd. Sometimes it has been specified that cows seem to them to be stones and stumps. On the other hand, the inhabitants of forests hinder every possibility of the lost ones to make themselves audible. The latter are not able to utter a sound in answer to the calls of seekers or draw the attention of someone passing by. Unusual silence is conspicuous already with animals because as a rule they respond to the human voice, especially that of their mistress; with people it is explained only by the interference of supernatural powers. The lost ones affirm that they have tried to answer calls but have not been able to: their voice was 'shut' or taken from them. Like other details of getting lost, so the inability to speak is never tried to explain rationally. Vepsians are sure that this

is just the will of the forest fairies who are reluctant to give back those in their possession. Although all the explanations of the lost voice are mythological, there are a few stories of special interest concerning those who have lost their way in the forest in childhood. (In order to characterise the used material, I should say that I have not had a chance to interview a child having got lost recently. The stories depict happenings that took place decades ago or have been heard from previous story-tellers.) For a child the situation is, naturally, more terrifying and horrible, their imagination is, no doubt, more vivid. So, it is not surprising that these have been children who have stressed that they were directly forbidden to utter a sound. The one forbidding and warning could be either invisible, so that the child could only hear it, but in some cases the forest fairy has appeared in the form of a human being forbidding the child to open its mouth. It should be also mentioned that children have been basically the ones who have seen their misleaders. In the majority of cases the misled person sees none, although knows that he is in the power of fairies. Also in case of blows, dragging or even carrying the victim, the perception has been predominantly tactile. The few cases of visible appearance of fairies like men or animals (dogs, hares) are mostly connected with children.

In comparison it could be mentioned that last voice is met also in Estonian folklore. So, a person loses his voice while meeting a wolf if the wolf is the first one to notice the person. In the opposite case the person's voice is preserved and he can threaten the wolf off. The power of song (i.e. singing voice), frequent in Estonian folk songs, is related to this belief in song types 'Voice Taken Away'³ and 'Voice Lost'⁴ which treat the voice as something material.

While an animal's possession by alien powers can be seen only from outward behaviour, the child, like an adult, can describe his/her subjective emotions and evaluate them departing from the knowledge of tradition. The difference is in the fact that the grown-up has mastered the tradition better and can classify his experience more quickly according to the patterns presented by the tradition without being subject to terrifying fear. Grown-ups, accepting their state as that of the misled one, are usually active to take measures in order to get out. The widely familiar magic act is to turn over one's headgear. This could be interpreted as the symbolic reversal of the reversed world or one's reversed senses. Quite common is undressing, after which every single article of clothing is beaten out of the alien power treated as fine matter. The same is the meaning of combing one's hair.

A generally adopted measure is crossing oneself together with saying God's name and/or a short formula of blessing. This could be combined with undressing and combing. The lost one could also address the masters and mistresses of the forest asking them to let him go home. At that they ask for forgiveness for

all their misconduct, improper words and deeds, be these known or only guessed. ('Perhaps I have said something wrong.') Those prayers, as a rule, include God's name and asking for His blessings as well as the final 'Amen'. The prayer can be said kneeling or bowing in the direction of all the four quarters of the horizon.

If after that the way 'opens' again, the spell is over and the person recognises the place or finds a path, hears human voices or other sounds (cock's crow, dogs barking, noise of machines) that indicate the village, God is thanked for it. This is also done while 'crossing one's eyes', kneeling and bowing. In thanks-giving the fairies are not mentioned, as a rule. So, it seems that God is thought to be the saviour from evil or even devilish forces, although just some minutes ago the help of both has been asked for and the powers have been viewed as complementary. (The analogical contradiction in the behaviour of a person in trouble and saved can be found in the fairy tale AT 846 which serves as the basis for its comic: God is thanked anyhow while the devil is only accused.) As soon as an animal or a person, either a helpless child or an adult, was found missing, saving operations were initiated also at home. Mistresses looked for their animals from places they had been seen lately or where they probably could have gone. People kept calling children who had left home or their companions in the forest and former fellows of berry or mushroom-picking who were not in sight any more. While looking for a person everyone met was asked to join in. After a longer period of search with no results or someone's recalling of a significant incident that hinted at the possible intervention of fairies, new tactics were adopted. Simple search in the forest was abandoned as useless and the efforts were concentrated on asking the forest fairies to let the person out. If the mistress or mother remembered her careless words to her children or cattle (or she was made to recall them by someone who had religious authority), she was to ask for forgiveness. The one at home, like the misled one, could ask for forgiveness also for those deeds she/he could not remember try as he might. Elderly women in Vepsian villages, the bearers of religious tradition, share a firm conviction that people may forget a lot while fairies hear everything and miss nothing.

The prayers said at home combine addresses to both God (sometimes also Holy Mary and the saints) and forest fairies (primarily masters and mistresses, seldom other members of the fairy family like grandfathers and grandmothers, sons-in-law and kids). Like the misled one, so the seekers bow in the direction of all the four quarters of the horizon and kneel. Crossing oneself is general, which is but natural while addressing God. However, there are records mentioning crossing oneself, although the prayer is addressed to forest fairies only.

One could pray for getting back one's lost cattle or kinsmen in whatever

place in the forest or at home. There are numerous records about praying on the cross-roads or just on the place where two roads diverge. Branches of a road leading to the distance, branching every now and then, may symbolise the unknown outside human comprehension and need not be connected with forest fairies only. So, according to a record a mother, whose son had left home for work in Far East and had not sent a single letter afterwards, was lamenting asking her son to be returned on the cross-roads near the bus stop in the middle of the village at night.

On the cross-roads a special magic act to save the misled ones can be performed: the branches of the road are closed, i.e. crosses are put one very branch. Some informants have not specified the crosses themselves, saying only that for that either twigs or pegs were crossed. But in some cases the material as well as the way of how the crosses should be made has been rigidly specified. One of the restrictions, for example, was that the crosses should be made of rowan twigs. Rowan tree is the internationally known holy tree as there is a cross on its berry. Another restriction obeyed was that the twigs were not cut with an edged tool but broken by hand. Having closed all the branches identified as wrong paths, the main road, that is the way home, was left open. It was believed that forest fairies as well as cattle and people in their possession cannot pass the sign of a cross. It means that forest fairies are once again treated as God's antagonists. Crosses dosed either all the road forks in the area or just three (magic figure!) of them or only one symbolising all the possible branches.

The Vepsians tend to turn to the dead in every possible difficulty. So, while looking for the misled ones, people could turn aside to the graveyard to ask for help from their deceased. After a successful search the dead ancestors were remembered to thank for.

Among the Vepsian records of folk beliefs there are a few mentioning prayers into the chimney. An informant who had lost a horse belonging to the collective farm, had done so following the prescriptions of the sage. He shouted, 'Hey!' and was answered with the same all. Remembering the warning mentioned earlier that one should not call out loud in the forest, it could be concluded that in this way a contact with a devilish forest fairy was established. After that the informant was asked what did he want and he had asked for his horse. Soon the horse was back. The other record concerning talking into the chimney is about a person who had consulted a witch in order to get her goat back. As the witch had talked into the chimney in a low voice with his back turned to the client, she could not tell to whom the speech was addressed.

All the mentioned measures could be used by any Vepsian knowing the tradition – and in most cases they were used indeed. Often the self-aid was

sufficient, the misled one was found or turned up himself. In case of people, their later memories revealed that they had found their way immediately after they had been prayed for or after the branches of the road had been closed.

However, frequent are cases when the saving operations of mistresses, other member of the family or helpful relatives and neighbours did not give any positive result. In these cases it was inevitable to turn to a specialist – the witch or the sage (*noid, tedai*). Sometimes, when the person in trouble was not sure of himself, he could turn to the witch at once without trying to magic practices or praying to the supernatural powers independently. The reliance on a witch depended in a way also on how far the witch lived, in case she was nearby she was turned to without a special independent effort. In general, the witch was consulted on the eve the day the person was lost but certainly on the next morning in case independent attempts had failed.

The witch could partly adopt the same measures ordinary persons could use, e.g. close the branches of a road. The difference is that witches do it mostly at night. Magic operations conducted at night have been thought to be more efficient. The required rowan branches have been sometimes brought by the needy person. Some witches, however, have preferred to use kerchiefs instead of ordinary crosses. For this purpose a new kerchief was taken to the cross-roads and knots symbolising diverging branches of the road were tied in its three corners, while the fourth corner, the way home, was left untied. Alongside with the kerchief other offerings were taken along, such as salt. According to some records the kerchief was taken back home on the third day. Manipulations with the kerchief were allowed to be performed by the one in need of help, too, if he/she consulted with the witch. So, the mother of the child lost in forest was asked to tie the kerchief and throw it under the plank bed while the witch performed her preventive measures in the forest.

The most powerful means a witch could use in order to recover the lost persons and cattle was to go the forest at night and talk to the forest (*mecanke pagizhemha*). Unlike ordinary prayers turned to the forest fairies, this was an active attempt to establish a contact with them and enter into a dialogue. Even witches tried to use simpler and less dangerous methods first and consented to talk to the forest only after all else had proved inefficient. Vepsians believe that talking to the forest requires much from a person and only a few are worthy of it. There are records mentioning witches' refusal to pass on their skills to their closest relatives or godchildren. The refusal had been explained by the absence of required personal qualities. For the same reason, some informants have refused to master the knowledge of how one should talk to the forest. This, like any other knowledge concerning witchcraft, could be passed only before the witch's death or abandoning one's role for some reason or another.

It is stressed that the knowledge can be transmitted only orally. Prohibition to write the necessary words down distinguishes the essential difference between witchcraft and profane education. The prohibition cannot be very old as literacy began to spread among the Vepsians only this century. Interpreting new phenomena, in this case literacy, within the framework of old beliefs shows, no doubt, how alive is the fairy tradition.

Conviction that the powers of a witch surpass immensely those of an ordinary person was established by the silence of witches, their promising hints and other devices stressing their mystery. On the other hand, of good effect have been the stories of those who are not witches themselves but have accompanied them on a few occasions or, having not used the help of the professional, have tried to talk to the forest themselves. Knowing that the skills possessed were not sufficient and the psychic qualities demanded of a witch lacking, those people lived through terrifying experiences and, naturally, told the others about them. The prescriptive content of those stories is: an ordinary person should not attempt at anything beyond their powers but has to use the help of professionals.

In the Vepsian villages at the Oyat River there up till now the beginning of 1990s) at least one generally acknowledged witch per village. From recent past numerous names are mentioned. Further field work will probably prolong the list and explain whether their spheres of activities and years of active craftsmanship overlap or not. Present data seem to say that a witch passed her craft on within her own family immediately before her death although the skills were learned during her lifetime. Final handing over could take place only before death after which the follower could start with her practice. Witches working in the same village or nearby villages at one and the same time were estimated differently: some were better, some not so powerful. These evaluations could sometimes vary with persons but there are witches whose skills are recognised unanimously. Firm belief in the powers of witches is in a way related to the ambiguous attitude adopted: on the one hand on the other, they were feared for they could use uncontrollable powers on evil purposes as well. Although not a single witch has accepted accusations in harmful magic, some of them are believed to be guilty of it.

Witches who are able to save the misled ones by talking to the forest practice usually also healing, forecasting, love magic, etc., while not all foretellers and healers are able to demand back lost animals and people from forest fairies. To save a person, the witches say, is more difficult than to save an animal, and it is more dangerous, too. This is the highest level a witch could reach. Demanding the lost ones to be returned she behaves like the arctic shaman who exacts the soul of the deceased or the ill person back from the realm of death.

The majority of witches now and in recent past have been women. It need not be thought, however, that the preference was valid also in more distant past. Probably the present situation just reflects the demographic picture in which women dominate since the repressions of 1930s, the Winter War and the Second World War.

The witches I have met have been intelligent people impressing with their personality in some way or another. They all stress that they save people and animals from the power of the forest out of will to help. Asking for a concrete payment is denied by them all, although they can accept presents and the thankful client naturally refuses them not. The question is not whether the witch is kind and selfless. It was believed that fairies who know everything, find out the payment asked for and received anyhow and witches are afraid of spoiling their future contacts. Most of the witches are masters of either one or several folklore genres. Their readiness to share their knowledge has been usually limited to songs, laments and stories. Their witchcraft has been either denied altogether or, in case admitted, they have refused to explain the details of talking to the forest. It seems that since the end of 1980s witches are more willing to admit their practices and it could be a consequence of political and religious freedom. Denials typical some years ago were at least partially caused by fear of official repressions.

However, modesty in explaining what actually happens in the forest – even after the ability to talk to the forest has been confessed – could have other reasons: too much talk could spoil witch's contacts with fairies; witches would not want mystery associated with their personas and activities to evaporate. So the few facts have been obtained from the profane who, in their turn, have been trusted by their relative or friend who is a witch or they have experienced something themselves accompanying a client on his visit to a witch. People who have talked to the forest themselves, using their minimum knowledge of how it should be done, have been the most open ones. Those self-made witches have always agreed to have friends witnessing their practices and those people have always been ready to comment, too.

Real witches go to the forest alone. They ground their decision on the fact that an ignorant companion could violate one or another norm and create dangerous situations (leading even to death) for themselves and the witch. Only in exceptional cases when they, because of their age or poor health, have needed physical support, they have asked someone whom they trust to accompany them. The companion had to promise to keep everything seen and experienced in secret. It was also forbidden to look back. It was generally believed that the profane companion could perceive only part of the proceedings. But even those has perceptions could be vivid. Talking to the forest was conducted at

night, in some records, at midnight. There are records, however, which testify that any time after sunset was suitable. As it has been said, the herdsman was not allowed to enter forest after sunset, and so they themselves could not possibly ask their lost cattle back. There is a record concerning a herdsman who, violating his treaty, went to forest after sunset. Forest fairies beat him savagely as a punishment. A relative taken along could hear only sticks swishing through the air and herdsman's cries for help and see the poor man wriggling in pain.

Rules regulate the way the witch has to go to the forest. So she could not greet people whom she met on her way – the same prohibition, by the way, concerned also the person returning from a witch's home. The silent passing-by differs dramatically from the usual communicative life-style in Vepsian villages. In order to mark the reversed order of the world, the witch stepped out of his house backwards. If the ordinary hairdo of elderly Vepsian women demands plaits and kerchief on them, then the witch let her hair loose before she entered the forest. Another hint to different rules of a different world. It could be said that culture and nature have been opposed – on the one hand the loose, 'naturally' tangled hair, on the other established norms how hair should be arranged.

The former prescriptions regulate outward behaviour. Decisive, however, is the inward mentality. Even if the motives of the witch were proper, and she had obeyed all the laws of the forest, was experienced in communicating with the fairies and could, thus, confidently enter the forest, it could never be performed as a routine task. A witch had to work on the limit of her powers, fairies remained even for her, ultimately unknown, alien and dangerous. Some informants describe the witch going to or returning from the forest as a lunatic. One can guess that they try to achieve an ecstatic state that helps to conquer inner fears. By which means the state was created, how conscious it was, cannot be said as yet, as there are no direct data so far. Bearing in mind other description of Vepsian witches, one could just say that their 'maddened' ecstatic behaviour resembles again that of the arctic shaman. Numerous witches, however, have stressed their Christian beliefs and say that their work is grounded on firm faith and love for God.

Let us have a look at the proceedings conducted in the forest. As it has been said, the material is derived from secondary sources and therefore imperfect. There are no data concerning how the fairies were invoked. Some say there were special charms for it, from other accounts it could be guessed that some magic was performed. At the same time some descriptions of how forest was talked to say that it was started with a prayer addressed to the masters and mistresses of the forest similar to the one the mistresses of the lost animal or the relatives of the lost person or the lost one himself could have used at daytime after the character of the situation had been realised.

The appearance of forest fairies, by they invoked with special means or not, was, no doubt, the most impressive moment of the nocturnal event. It could be said that as they appeared at night, they were called again mostly *besad*, *čortad* or *nechistaya sila*. Their appearance was accompanied or preceded by strong wind sweeping through the forest. In order to give an idea about the strongest of the wind, the story-tellers have used the following motifs: trees were bent to the earth (repeated often), the fence was about to break, the witch herself finds it difficult to stand and is forced to sit down. According to the present data Vepsian fairies appear at night only in the form of human beings, zoomorphic or combined creatures are not met. That's why alongside with the names mentioned before – which hinted at the devilish nature of the creatures – they have been called just *men – ristitud*. The nocturnal guests have been mostly male (or, as it has been stressed sometimes – old men), although the possibility of women has been never excluded. Numbers given characterising the size of the group vary. So, the tradition considers both a single fairy as well as a large of group of them possible.

Not all the descriptions characterise the size of the fairies. In these cases it is probable that it has been unmarked, i.e. similar to the height of human beings. But mostly it is just the height that makes a difference between a human being and a fairy looking like a human being. Numerous records emphasise their extraordinary tallness. Frequently the simile 'tall as trees' has been adopted although there are also estimations of vaguer character like 'big', 'very big', 'real jumbos', etc. There are also records saying that the fairies were extraordinary small. Other details characterising their appearance are: black furry clothes, big sticks in their hands. Extremely interesting is a description from an initial source characterising the fairy's voice: all the forest had been full of them and they were as if singing although it sounded like wolves howling. This is another juxtaposition of a wolf and a fairy like the one mentioned earlier where they both could 'steal' person's voice. In the Balto-Finnic tradition, incl. the Estonian one, there can be met expressive comparisons of physical parameters of a witch (witch-shepherd) and a wolf.⁵

Sometimes a witch visiting fairies at night has not seen them at all. One of the witches preferred namely this. Dialogue, however, was possible, even if the partner was invisible. This is namely the dialogue that makes difference between 'talking to forest' and a simple prayer, the latter can be answered audibly only in rare cases.

In a few records the dialogue can be opened by fairies who ask why the sage has come. Whoever is the first, these are the first words of the witch that are important. Numerous records stress the importance of remembering these words, because they have to be the last ones, too. Repeated in the end, they

mark separation and fairies leave. Naturally, these are only the bravest people with perfect memory who can manage with the task. However, there some records which evince as if it were possible to tell the fairies straight that it is time for them to leave.

A witch entering into a dialogue with the fairies had to be well prepared in every respect. Among other things, she had to be sure about what exactly was her prayer. So the client had to give her all the necessary details. In case the witch makes a mistake, asking for animals or people not in the possession of fairies, she will be scolded in the least, but she could be also beaten or taken along by the fairies. In case with an animal the witch has to know its colour and name, with a person the name and a descriptive word (*raba bozhija, prihaine*). Shortened forms of Russian names used by Vepsians do not indicate always whether its bearer is male or female. One record tells us of parents who did not mention the sex of their children who had been lost and so the witch guessed by their names that these were two boys. This way she also addressed the fairies. Actually, one of them, called Valya, was a girl. Naturally, this 'talking to the forest' gave no results. Fairies denied having a boy of this name, blamed and threatened the witch. The latter sent her relative to interview the parents once again and after the mistake had been discovered, she could repeat her prayer next night. There is another detail of interest in this story, although the narrator could not explain it. Namely, the relative of the witch, before leaving, touched a joist. It probably had to be an act of contact magic.

As it was said, the forest blamed the witch when she presented false data about the misled person. The same was the reaction in case the data were correct but fairies were not to be blamed for the disappearance. In order to avoid upsetting the fairies and getting into a dangerous situation, the witch tried to find out beforehand whether the lost person had got on a bad trace at all. Before going to the forest, witches have often practised magic to get to know whether the taken course of action is sensible at all. The common way of diving in the situation is that with the help of 40 stones. In most of the cases, however, the witch discovered only in the forest whether the lost one had got on a bad trace or just lost his way, whether the saving operation was timely or late already.

If the fairies agree that they possess the person or animal asked for, they need not always return it, irrespective of all the prayers. One of the counter-arguments used is that the misled one in question has been promised to them, meaning by it the careless and self-confident expression uttered before entering the forest. In these cases there developed an argument between the fairies and the witch: after the first refusal the witch repeated her prayer in a more urgent way and in case she was lucky, could achieve her goal and the lost one

was released and sent home. In some cases, however, the witch had to return with a negative answer. Still, there was left the possibility to achieve the aim by repeated visits which has been used. According to the belief, one could hope up to the ninth or twelfth day from the day of getting lost. After the deadline the masters of forest were said to stop driving the animal round the forest and give it to wolves and bears. The latter idea is related to the old belief that fairies take care of wild animals and birds. Still, the witch could return from the forest before the deadline and declare the missing animal dead.

When the outcome is positive and fairies consent to deliver the missing person or animal after the first or repeated prayers, the promise is usually modified by time, place and manner. They could announce that the demanded one would return himself at the time indicated. Fairies could also reveal the place where the wanted ones were, so that people could go and fetch them. Or they could point out a place, like a nearby village, which would be the wanted person's final destination. At present people can phone to the village mentioned and the lost person can phone his home village and inform about his location in case he is too shocked or exhausted to return himself. But fairies can also give more obscure estimations about the demanded one's location or time of return. So, the witch from Vidla (Russian *Vinnitsy*) answered the question about a lost girl that she would be present at the party – and a few days later in Nemzh, a village about 10 kilometres from Vidla, at the village feast (*frolampeï*) a woman noticed a bush at the roadside moving and the girl was found from it.

All these incidents strengthen faith in fairies and witches' abilities to communicate with them. Rare are cases where the final result differs from the promises of the witch (or, actually of the fairies she has been mediating). Neither people concerned nor others blame, at that, the witch. These are new violations of the norm conducted after asking for help or the witch's talking to the forest that have made better solutions impossible. Often the person returning home from the consultation has talked to someone on the road. But this, as it has been said, was forbidden like it was forbidden for the witch to talk to someone on her way to the forest. Doubts concerning the powers of witches or fairies can occur only together with some persons. So, it is possible that one person may not have supernatural powers and is boasting in vain, while real witchcraft is never doubted. It should be noted that firm belief in forest fairies and witches as persons who mediate them and human beings characterises not only the majority of informants (and village people) – elderly people with little or no education, illiterate women, but also a few middle-aged or younger people with secondary education. The latter try to give elaborate reasons why some cases should be explained by the intervention of fairies or why the return of an animal or a person is the direct result of acts undertaken by the witch. For the most of

informants these are just the essentials and they find it unnecessary to explain or 'prove' them.

A good example of the vitality of traditional beliefs is the case of getting lost and being saved that took place in summer 1990 – especially as the author was lucky to witness it. The incident gave valuable material of how religious narratives are formed. Of interest are numerous contemporary traits in both the course of events as well as in their presentation.

The boy to get lost was 10-years old; not a Vepsian and didn't live in the territory. He came from St. Petersburg and was a member of a group on a boat trip along the Oyat River. He got lost from the camping place of the hikers near the village on Saturday afternoon, July 14. When the adult members of the group discovered that the boy was missing, they started to look for him on their own but by midnight they had not succeeded. Next day the leader of the group informed the village council of the incident and the people of the village joined in. But even the larger coup of seeker could not find the boy on Sunday. Monday morning a helicopter was called but before it arrived the boy was found at noon. He was taken to the Vidla hospital because two chilly and rainy nights in the forest together with hunger and fear had exhausted him thoroughly. The company left the village.

Within a week the inhabitants of the three nearby villages (Yärved, Shondoil, Nemzh) preferred to discuss the incident. My informants took it up after a few words of greeting without special guiding questions. Women visiting their neighbours talked solely about it. The information began to spread on Monday morning after the village shop, closed during the weekend, was opened. In modern Vepsian villages the shop is important as the place of communication and exchange of information.

Although the story spread almost like a rumour its content was shaped largely departing from the tradition. Different storytellers treated the news like a framework complementing it with motifs from earlier stories of similar character while some of the motifs were repeated, others exploited just once. Different versions emerged. So, several informants told me that before the boy went out, his step-father had scolded him. Sending someone out with bad words is, according to the Vepsian tradition, one of the major causes for getting lost. But another informant confirmed that these were the words uttered by the boy himself that had caused the misfortune. Namely, before leaving the camping spot, he had said, 'I'll return soon.' As we see, the explanation is traditional.

Interesting moments concerning the boy's stay in the forest occurred. So, several informants used the motif of his seekers passing him in the forest without noticing him. The boy, in his turn, could not – or as some informants stressed -was not allowed to utter a sound in order to draw attention. The fact

that the boy was found far away from the place he originally stayed at was explained traditionally, too. People were convinced that with his own strength he would not have been able to cover the distance and so he was taken there by *besad*. A couple of informants were impressed by the fact that the boy spent two rainy cold days in the forest. It was said as if the boy had professed having felt no cold at all. The statement departs from the tradition that the misled one feels no cold or hunger as forest fairies create in him a deceptive feeling of comforts. Extremely interesting is the motif mentioned that at night the boy was guarded by two hares. Internationally as well as in Vepsian tradition hares are associated with evil forces and seeing them is an ill omen.

Of major importance is the fact that informants agreed on one thing: the boy was not just found, he was saved due to the help of the famous Shondyala witch. It was said that someone from the village had phoned her Sunday afternoon after the large group of seekers had returned with no results and explained her the details. Using a telephone shows how vigorous the old beliefs are, as people don't hesitate to use modern means in order to solve their problems in a traditional way.

Luckily the Shondyala witch agreed to comment the case. She confirmed that she was called up and asked to help the boy. And she had agreed, as her principle was to help always those in need. Then she had divined with her stones and got to know that the boy was alive (considering that the boy got lost at riverside, drowning was probable). At night she had gone to talk to the forest. She was reluctant to unveil details of the talk and mentioned only that she had done everything necessary. She had been given a promise that the boy would be found next day. Approximate spot where the boy would be found had been also indicated. In case the promise had not been fulfilled the witch would have gone – according to her own words – to repeat her prayer.

The incident was discussed by a number of people from Shondyala. They all departed from firm belief in the power of their witch. The story was begun not with details of how the boy got lost but with the assessment, 'Yes, she is the one who can everything! Just now she saved a boy.' In other villages the story was presented in chronological order. Especially in the village of Yärved where it all had happened; there people were most elaborate on the boy, his family, relations within the family, they had more facts about how he actually had disappeared and where had wandered. The third village, Nemzh, which is the most distant, presented the vaguest and most general course of events.

Next summer in the field work in the same villages the case was not topical any more. Several informants did not touch upon it at all although I asked them questions about forest fairies and witches as saviours of the misled ones. Then people recalled only those cases that had concerned themselves, members of their family or acquaintances. A boy from St. Petersburg, a stranger to them,

had gone and was forgotten. But for a moment he had been the one to strengthen their belief in their traditional religion and forest fairies and witches who are there to help people.

Traditional Vepsian narratives about forest fairies arise the question of their relations with the traditions of other Balto-Finnic peoples and Russians who have been the neighbours of Vepsians for centuries. The preliminary remark, without detailed investigation of those traditions, could be: there are common features to be observed. The latter could be based on the common origin but also on borrowings. One should remember that North Russian folk culture contains, no doubt, Finno-Ugric components, remnants of assimilated indigenous population. As to other Balto-Finns, conspicuous is the closer similarity of the Vepsian tradition to the that of Finnish and Karelian one than to the Estonian tradition. It could be explained by the fact that in the northern part of the territory settled by Balto-Finns the importance of natural landscape, if compared to the cultivated one has been considerably greater than in the southern part. Hereby differences in natural environment seem to be of greater importance than confessional ones. Although the Setus, like the Vepsians, are Orthodox, their tradition of forest fairies is different and less dominant. While the traditions of Lutheran Finns and Orthodox Karelians correspond to each other quite closely and, as it has been said, they both can be compared to the Vepsian one. Common motifs in the content are used in narratives of different genres. In the Vepsian territory most of them are memorates. In Karelia the tales have a more fixed form and higher artistic qualities and in Finland there dominate legends.

There is no doubt the time for a thorough study of the Vepsian tradition of forest fairies is ahead. At the moment it is of major importance to collect the archaic tradition, still alive, with all its variations.

To stress the fidelity of contemporary Vepsians to the tradition and experience of their ancestors the Vepsians themselves always bring out I would like to finish with the words of a Vepsian woman. When asked, 'What is done to save the person who has got lost in the forest?' (note that the question concerns the present) she answered without a doubt, 'We do what we've always done.'

Translated by Anne Allpere

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THE COMPLICATED ROLE OF A SOVIET SHAMAN

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We are the children of the crisis era. Most of the population in the present-day Estonia has never seen peace, because World War II is not yet over for the Baltic countries. The state government has officially acknowledged the political and economic crisis as well as the unexpectedly severe moral crisis. Actually, the situation is quite the opposite: the latter has been rather anticipated to those who have followed the cultural life closely. The artists have long ago realised it and repeatedly called attention to it through their art.

Could folk traditions provide assistance in solving the problems of the present-day Society?

The crisis in the nation's life calls for a solution. Death could be one possibility, especially if we take into consideration the fourth and severest crisis of our life – the ecological one. But every nation preserves the experience of which action to take in order to stay alive. It would be interesting and perhaps vitally important to learn what were the earlier solutions. For this reason we have to look back into the past millennia. The question is **whether we can recognise the familiar content behind the altered form?** In other words, can we pick the now useful tip from a runo verse, a fairy tale or a custom? It is easier for nations whose **own** professional culture has risen from their **own** folk culture. Many, if not most of the nations in the world are now split between (at least) two cultures – the ethnic and the world culture. Our official cultural politics propagated till the latest period the Soviet mass culture. The real folk culture was studied by a discipline called cultural anthropology. During the past one hundred and fifty years folklorists and ethnographers have collected a lot of information about crisis situations of different nations. The common feature for both Eurasia and America as well as for the cultures on other continents turns out to be the **existence of distinct crisis rites in folk tradition**.