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Bees in folk belief and practices before and now

Mare Kõiva
PhD, Leading research fellow, Department of Folkloristics, Tartu, Estonia
email: mare@folklore.ee

Abstract: The article traces changes in human cognitive and social development using the example of the domesticated insect, the bee. From the 13th to the 20th century, forest beekeeping spread, using live trees as beehives, and later also log hives on the ground. The ways of keeping bees changed fundamentally in the 19th century with the introduction of new types of hive that went alongside a consolidation of beliefs about bees. Bees had numerous names, and euphemisms were used when talking about them and in incantations. For example, bees were called men or workers, or kinship terms were used; they were also called the domestic animals of the guardian fairies. The article presents beliefs about bees as soul animals, various legends that were associated with the journey of the soul, and the popular belief in the connection between the death of the beekeeper and his or her bees. While honey was traditionally associated with abundance and an ideal life, the bee represented a hardworking, loyal person.

Key words: bee, forest bee-keeping, soul animal, legends.

Bees (*Apis mellifera*) have held a prominent place in world cultures for thousands of years (see Antiigileksikon 1983; Ivanov, Toporov 1992: 354; Viveiros de Castro 2013). Likewise, beekeeping in Estonia is also estimated to be around 2,000 to 2,500 years old. Today, we have a deeper understanding of the life of bees, and people are more considerate of them in beekeeping practice. Even medical indications differ from those of 50 years ago when fevers and sore

throats were treated with hot milk and honey or tea and honey, although modern medicine considers this to be contraindicated because heat destroys the beneficial properties of honey. Honey is also a source of certain allergies and is contraindicated for those with diabetes (Jänes & Kahn et al. 2013). Today, beekeeping is a little more systematic than it used to be, for example, the beekeeper must register the apiary (or designate an area as such) in the PRIA register of farmed animals1, although many people keep three to five colonies both in the countryside and in the suburbs, providing honey on a family scale.

The material in the article comes from the Estonian Literary Museum's Department of Folkloristics' EFITA archive, the Estonian Folklore Archive, and the corpus of Estonian language calendars. The relationship between bees and humans is explored when it occurs in religious types of folklore using the methods of folkloristics. The focus of this article is on bee names, euphemisms and incantations, the bee as a hypostasis of the soul, its links with mythology, and also vernacular categorisation. Changes in ethnomedicine and new directions in beekeeping are briefly described. The appearance of the bee in proverbs (i.e. in poetic-practical folklore) is briefly characterised and changes in the uses of honey and bee stings in ethnomedicine are highlighted. Human relations with bees (and presumably many religious phenomena), including that various names for them, were also influenced by the way bees were kept. These themes serve to reveal some aspects of the meaning of bees in Estonian culture, the layers of religion and the long history of mutual relations (cf. also Hiiemäe 2022: 152–153).

Living trees as honey trees

From the 12th through to the 20th century, beekeeping primarily utilised trees growing in the countryside near farms. Cavities in trees were enlarged, for example supports were inserted in the interests of higher honey yields. Once autumn came and these cavities were emptied of honey, the honeycombs, which people could not reach, were left as winter food for animals. The attitude towards bees was utilitarian, meaning that the habitats of colonies in these tree hives, and the honey from them, were more important than the bees themselves. People believed that a new bee colony would replace the one that was destroyed during the extraction of honey. The use of living trees as beehives began to fall out of favour in the 18th century, and began to disappear entirely in the middle of the 19th century.

Trees that were home to wild beehives were called *mesipuu* ('honey tree'), *mehiste puu* (men's tree), *tarupuu* ('house tree'), *perepuu* ('family tree') or *linnupuu* ('bird tree') and were usually marked with a family crest, indicating to whom the tree and yield belonged.

Tree hives were most commonly found in pines (in south Estonia tarupettäi), although other trees were used, in fact virtually every species of tree in Estonia, including linden trees and even apple trees (Linnus 1939: 69). Hives in Estonia were located at a low height (1.5–2.7 m), and were generally accessed with the aid of a ladder or by rope. This differs, for example, from the practices of the Finno-Ugric Udmurt peoples to the east and their Turkic-speaking neighbours the Bashkirs, where hives were placed at a height of 12 metres above the ground (Linnus 1939: 217, 235; 1940), beekeeping there required great skill and special techniques to reach the hive. In Estonia, the colony was protected from birds and the elements by a simple board and spruce branches, no special barriers were constructed against bears or to prevent insect attacks.

Beekeeping was already taxed and regulated by law in the 13th century. At that time cities had their own common land on which living trees with beehives were located. For example, in 1226 Bishop William of Modena laid out the boundaries for the lands of the City of Riga, reserving for common use on city land among other things "*[item] in arboribus, quae šunt inmiricis fodiendis ad apes et ad omnem aliam utilitatem commune*" ('[also] within trees that are used for keeping bees and for any other common purpose', Linnus 1939: 135; LGU 1908). In 1257, Saxo, chief of Tallinn, established procedures for using beehives at Padise Cloister and surrounding villages (Linnus 1939: 140, LUB I: 299). One farm was allowed to own several beehives, and based on medieval tax documents there up to 100 beehives were allowed in the forest. From the 12th to 16th centuries, wild beehives were inheritable and were passed on to the new owner along with other property. In the 16th century, the log hive – a top-opening hollowed out log – was introduced. These were initially placed in the forest at the tops of trees, but at the end of the 18th century beehives were brought from the forest to farm or the home.

During the great reform of the 19th century, there was the top-opening moveable-frame hive, the introduction of which led to people learning more about life in the beehive. Yields grew, the hive was insulated for the winter, and practice changed so that the contents of the hive was left in place for the winter.

Beekeeping practices have changed several times: wild-hive beekeeping generally disappeared in the 19th century, along with log hives. In the 1920s, Ferdinand Linnus, a historical researcher of wild-hive beekeeping in Estonia, discovered that beehives were being kept in forest trees in southern Estonia (Linnus 1939), something that he was both proud and surprised to discover. It seemed incredible that something so outdated was found in use, although we now know that in several villages forest beekeeping remained in use during the second half of the 20th century and even into the 21st century, indicating the practice of preserving these long-standing customs.

Beekeeping was influenced by changes in religious confession. With the spread of Protestantism in the 16th century, the demand for church candles disappeared, with the period between the 16th and 18th centuries being regarded as a time of decline in local beekeeping. Conversely, the introduction of the Orthodox Church in the second half of the 19th century was a time of increasing demand, as well as the advent of honey receiving church blessings at Passover, for example. Many other factors were influential, such as climate fluctuations, wars and changes in economic practices, especially serfdom which didn't allow the peasants to own anything.

Although technological changes, from hollowed out logs to modern hives, had a big impact the changes did not affect the names, with old names being carried over to new forms of hive, for example *mesipuu, mehiste puu,* and *linnupuu* were all retained in the language. *Taru (=tare*, 'house', cf ETÜ 2012) became a popular collective name.

Bee names, euphemisms and the use of euphemism in incantations and everyday practices

Period-specific bee names reflect vernacular categorisations that were favoured by those living on and around farms. The basis for different names was way of life, habitat, and the most common activities under which the distinctions were made, for example giant bees, bumblebees, domestic bees, foraging bees, wild bees, carpenter bees, honey bees, hive bees, worker bees, forager bees, leaf-cutting bees, burrowing bees. The bumblebee and wild bee refer to their habitat and/or the solitary lives these bees lead, as with the burrowing bee. The common name *mesilane* has spread across Estonia, having previously spread

across north Estonia with the terms *mehiläne (mihiläne, mehilene*) and *mehine,* used in south Estonia. The north Estonian name *mesilane* indicates, by means of the *lane* suffix, that it belongs to the group of living creatures and an makes an association with honey, while the south Estonian *mehine* indicates belonging to the group of men or small men. The name *mesilind*, which defines the bee as a bird, is another obsolete term, while *murukärbläne* (*murukärbes*) classifies the bee in the same class as fly-like winged insects. *Mumm* means 'bumblebee', 'bee', 'large hairy insect'. *Mumm* has an equivalent in the Votic language, where *mummukas* means 'the larvae of the caddis fly'. The name has other meanings in Votic, for example, a characteristic vocalisation or mumbling (ETÜ 2012, VMS 1982–1989). At the beginning of the 20th century, *mumm* was a character common in children's nightmares who dragged children into a well (when they refused to comb their hair). In modern Estonian, *mumm* and *mummuke* are terms of endearment for something that is small and cute. *Mumm* is also a bee name in the Udmurt language (Vladykina 2023).

A cultural distinction was commonly made between *mesilasema* ('mother bee', *kuninganna* 'queen', and among the Slavic people *tsarinna* (Dal' 1980)) and *isamesilased* ('father bee',) *haudujad*, 'incubator'), and *truutna (drutsenn* (VMR 2002), as it was known in Setomaa, a loan from Slavic). There were further distinctions between *tarumesilased* ('house bees') and *töömesilased* ('working bees'), words that show the focus on habitat and activity. Located at the top of the hierarchy are is queen, with drones and worker bees below.

Alongside honeybees were the *maamesilane* ('earth bee'), *kimalane* ('hairy bumblebee') and *bombus*, which builds its nest in the ground or in moss. Bee names in Baltic-Finnic languages are similar, for example the Votian *tšimo, tšimolain* is akin to the dialectic Finnish *kimalainen,* 'bee', which is akin to the Izhorian *kimalain* 'bee' and the Karelian *kimaleh,* 'bee', 'bumblebee' (ETÜ 2012). In Karelia the bumblebee's size and the sound it makes still cause fear to this day and it tends to be killed as the most dangerous and poisonous of all bees.

Creation stories for bees place them among the creatures created by God. To the Slavic people, the bee is a symbol of the Mother of God (Gura 2003: 101; Gura 1997: 450 et seq.). These links are not found among Estonians, but see the comparison between bees and people above. We also find matches in church literature, for example the Book of Enoch describes the river of honey flowing from beneath the tree of life in paradise (Badalanova-Geller 2010; 2017). The sixth verse of Paul Gerhardt's 17th century hymn "Su sõime juures

seisan ma" ('I Stand Beside Thy Manger Here'), he talks about a kiss from Jesus "Suukest, mis oma väe poolest ületab magusa veini, piima- ja meejõe" 'A mouth that, by its very power, transcends the rivers of sweet wine, milk and honey' (Must 2022). Honey and milk flow from the land in the Old and New Testaments (for example in the books of Moses, Exodus 3:7-8, etc.) and in the Apocrypha (for example Federov 2023). At the same time, cultural comparisons are interesting because for Estonians, there were extraordinary mountains of porridge and rivers of milk (common sayings, cf. Justkui 1998–2005), which attracted the local prophet Maltsvet to his idea of emigration (Kõiva 2018, the Last Days of Our World).

The widespread ban around the world on counting people, livestock and birds, also applied in Estonia and extended to bee colonies, beehives in forest trees, and hives. This was mainly during the 19th century, when hives and smaller apiaries were located on farms while larger apiaries were found on manors.

> Bee hives in yards do not have to be counted. H II 42, 125 (39) < Vändra, 1893

No strangers were allowed in the apiary, no swearing was allowed, the beekeeper had to put on clean clothes before visiting the hives, and he was not allowed to consume alcohol, the smell of which was said to be intolerable to bees:

> One cannot curse in front of the bees, doing so will agitate them. ERA II 28, 364 (3) Lüganuse, 1930; A bad word shall not be spoken to the bees, if it be spoken, they shall be destroyed. E 18813 (11) < Tartu–Maarja, 1895

Bees were also subject to other archaic prohibitions on words and actions, for example their fragility and defencelessness in the face and words of evil was always emphasised. In addition they were spoken of using euphemisms (Kõiva 2022). In the following sample text, bees are fumigated against harm damage with smoke created by burning the fur of the suspected pest, or pieces of clothing:

> [b]ees were supposedly such gentle creatures that one was never allowed to use their proper name when speaking about them; instead, they had to be called little men, labourers or food carriers, and if they failed, it

> was always the fault of some evil neighbour, with whose fur or hair they had to be fumigated. H II 17, 165/6 (9) < Märjamaa, 1889

The reasons given for the prohibitions vary. According to religious belief, swearing caused direct harm to and failure of bees, or it made them angry. Also prohibited was being amazed by or praising the number of bees or their work ethic. It was a common explanatory model for many types of misfortune. Harm could be caused by anyone, not just someone with powers of witchcraft. In southern Estonia, women were not permitted to visit a hive as beekeeping had been solely the work of men for a long time. Today, this prohibition has disappeared and women are successful beekeepers, although the prohibition is still mentioned from time to time.

> …one must not express surprise or speak poorly beside a beehive, otherwise the bees will no longer prosper. Women are prohibited from visiting the hive. RKM II 67, 87/9 (3a) < Räpina, 1956)

Euphemisms were used more often in speech than in incantations. Incantations were chosen because older forms with a religious background are preserved within them. Incantations were used to promote beekeeping, protect and cure bees and cure people of bee stings. Incantations were also added to healing words, such as spells, in order to heal wounds. Prayers were used in beekeeping alongside verse-form incantations (the Lord's Prayer, or reading the Lord's Prayer backwards) and, among the older internationally known protective incantations, for example the SATOR palindrome (see Davies 2009; Kõiva 1999).

The incantations addressed the bees as bird/birds/honey bee-bird, men, labourers. Special relationships are referenced by the use of terms associated with humans in the bee words 'small men', 'workers', with gender being highlighted by calling them 'mother', 'brothers', 'sisters'. Bee words are similar to the words used to address wolves, which are also addressed respectfully using kinship terms. The specialness of the address is indicated by the diminutive and endearing use of suffixes, for example the suffixes -u and -ke, as well as the word mesimamm 'honey berry'. Mamm is an interesting double endearment - 'a small berry' + honey'.

In incantations treating bee stings (17 texts), bees are addressed with four verses containing euphemism, with the verses followed by a request not to sting (argumentation). There is minimum variation in the addresses (plural

is exchanged for the singular), terms of kinship are used, and only the fourth address is variable, where 'piglets' is replaced with 'friends' in the fifth variant. Obviously, an attempt was made to find a more suitable semantic meaning, and 'piglets', which refers to the connection with deities and guardian fairies, whose animals were called by the names of domestic animals (piglet, cattle, horse, see Loorits 1939; Kõiva 2022), had already been forgotten. The variation in the addresses is as follows:

Linnu isake, linnu emake (17 värsis),
linnu vahvad vennakesed (16 värsis) / linnu lendajad vennakesed (1 värsis).
linnu lendajad õekesed (14 värsis) / linnu helde õeke (1 värsis)
linnu põue põrsakesed (10 värsis) / linnu põrsakesed (1 värsis) / linnu põue sõbraksed (5 värsis).
Jätke minda märkimata,
minu nahka näkkimata,
vere alla käppimata!

Father of the bird, mother of the bird (verse 17),
the bird's wonderful brothers (verse 16) / the bird's flying brothers (verse 1).
the bird's flying sisters (verse 14) / the bird's generous sister (verse 1)
the piglets in the belly of the bird (verse 10) / the bird's piglets (verse 1) / friends in the bird's belly (verse 5)
Leave me unmarked,
my skin uninfected,
my blood untouched!
ERA II 303, 313 (17) Häädemeeste, 1942

In the healing words, the bee brings the medicinal product and honey from a location associated with the Bible (the Book of Enoch) or from a more distant place. In the following example, a bee is sent to Sweden to bring medicine to place on a wound made with iron (a sword or knife). It is possible that the word Rootsi is used because of the alliteration rohi Rootsist ('medicine from Sweden'):

Kui mingisugune haigus on, siis tarvitatagu järgnevat ütelust:
Mesilane, linnukene,
too sa metta muilta mailta,
rohtu too sa Rootsimaalta,

[too] raud(a)haava paranda!

If there is any kind of illness, the following utterance should be used:
Bee, little bird,
bring me honey from other countries,
bring me medicine from Sweden,
bring me iron to heal the wound! E, StK 41, 203 (117) Vändra, 1927

There is a connection between the healing words for bee stings and biblical motifs. As below, a swelling is told to subside and recede, as did the waters of the Jordan River. Reference is made to the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan (2Ms 14, Matt 3:17; Kõiva 2020: 20, 28–29 ff.), the mention of the Jordan being sufficiently authoritative in this sample text:

Mesilaste nõelamine. (Kolm korda lugeda).
Mesilane on nõelanud, Jeesus on kõnelenud, paiste, jää vait nagu vesi Jordanis on vait jäänud. Aamen. XXX.

Bee stings (To be read three times).
The bee has stung, Jesus has spoken, the swelling, be as still as the waters of the Jordan are still. Amen. XXX. ERA II 115, 287 (41) Luke 1935.

In words related to practical beekeeping, the mini ritual is at the forefront, with the accompanying short and specific verbal request indicating action and conveying the main message.

Mesilasepidaja kunts

Kui mesilaste pere ära tahab minna, siis võtta oma müts ehk kübar piast [peast] ja keeruta seda möödapääva ümmer oma pia nii kaua, kunni mesilaste pere ennast maha heidab ja ise lausu neid sõnu oma mütsi keerutates:

"Tagasi mehed! Tagasi mehed! Tagasi mehed!" – Siis ei lähä mesilasepere ära.

The Art of Beekeeping

When the colony of bees wants to go away, remove your hat or cap from your head and twirl it clockwise around your head beehive until the colony of bees cast themselves down, and yourself say these words as you twirl your hat:

'Back, men! Back, men! Back, men!' – Then you colony of bees will not leave. H II 67, 46/7 (1807) Koeru, 1894

A report from 1909 says that at night on Good Friday the owners of the hives went around the apiary and placed rowan and juniper twigs in the fence, so that the bees would leave their family but not fly away, and also so that they would very painfully sting anyone who attacked the honey tree (E 46885 < Palamuse, 1909).

Bee words avoid dysphemism, cursing and swearing. The same behaviour can be found in the traditions of many peoples (Kotšurova 2023; for Belorusia see Boganeva 2023: 286; for Udmurta see Vladykina 2016; 2023; for the Ersa see Ermakov 2023). Jealous people and potential pests were a major problem for village society, as reflected in a humorous piece written in 1903 in Setomaa, in south-eastern Estonia, in which a farmer runs after a strange villager and accuses him of stealing bees, demanding them back:

> The master of the bees was a strong man with big bones; fortunately, his opponent was a small withered little man, whom he grabbed by the breast, began to shake, and bellowed at him:
>
> 'Tell me, you rascal, where did you hide my bees?'
>
> Soon the son caught up with his father, and the old man was already raising his hands to beat the strange rider.
>
> 'Speak, or your skin will soon be as hot as a bead,' the bee-keeper bellowed, and at last the stranger spoke at length:
>
> 'Dear people, let me go. I don't know anything.'
>
> The stranger was forcibly led back to the garden, where, after much prompting with threats, he pointed to a single fir tree in the woods and said:
>
> 'Look now, there are all the bees in a clump together, let me go!' – 'No, no, my friend, you can't go so easily. Bring my bees back from there! If you know how to enchant them there, you can enchant them back.'
>
> What choice did the strange reader of words have?' – He had to bring back the bees, which was easy for him to do. Three times he looked at the tree and said:
>
> 'Return as easily as you have gone.'
>
> Witness the miracle! Right then, the whole swarm of bees began to move steadily towards home, where they each found their own hive, and began to work as before. H II 70, 150/1 (d) Seto, 1903

In a text that begins with an unexpected accusation, the farmer is persistent and finally forces the stranger to call back the bees.

Warning legends form a separate group, with breaching of general rules tabooed and warned against. It was understood that a thief would face public corporal punishment in village society. Cautionary legends are terrifying fictional stories in which any transgression ends in a gruesome, painful and shameful death. In legends prescribing punishment for a honey thief, the thief's intestines are nailed to a tree and they are forced to run around the tree until they fall to the ground dead.

The human soul and the bee

The bee was one of the manifestations of the soul for the Finno-Ugric people. In dreams, the beekeeper sees places visited by the soul (Vladykina 1998; Paulson 1958; Loorits 1949, Kulmar 1997), these stories contain the individual and the stereotypical, the soul visits nearby places on its journey, but may also travel to distant places. It was forbidden to move the body of the sleeper, otherwise the soul would not know how to return to the body, and the person would lie lifeless and soon die. The same belief was probably associated with changing the position of a seriously ill or dying person, turning their bed to ease their suffering and to encourage the soul to leave the body.

In legends, a witness observes the flight of a bee as it leaves a man's body and finds hidden treasure. In a variation, the man wakes and talks about visiting a money cellar filled with silver and gold coins, but he does not know its location. His servant takes him to the sod where the bee that had left the man's mouth flew, under which they find a large horse's skull filled with gold and silver coins, enough for both of them to live carefree lives (E 16889/92 (2)< Võnnu, 1895).

More often, this motif is associated with the tradition of the treasure bringing, Spirit, or a breeze or whirlwind in which the soul leaves to steal grain. A random observer saves the man: "It was then clear to the man why his soul would never again rise, and so he went and turned the body of the man back the way it had been before. The bee flew into the man, and the man's soul rose (E 43471/3 (135) < Rõuge, 1902).

The visions of another world form a cycle of their own, which we find alongside the narratives in the older song strata, the metrical verse form of the

alliterative Kalevala. The indescribable hardships and humiliations of earthly life are described by a large group of songs about slavery, the content and messages of which are far away from us. The life of a serf was difficult, and the life of a slave was worth nothing. The other world is portrayed quite differently in folk belief (Loorits 1952: 152; Kõiva 2023a), but the runic songs with their Christian layers are based on contrasts, and the suffering of earthly life is replaced by the abundant life of heaven with Mary and God. By combining motifs, the singers create unique images of life. For example, the life of a slave who is not allowed to visit his home and who sinks in the snow on his way there is depicted (H, Ostrov 102/4 (43) < Laiuse, 1887). A star takes him to heaven, and leaves behind a mark on the ground, which his master follows, seeing how:

Alla toodi orja tooli,
orjal on hõbedatooli.
Jo toodi peremehe tooli,
peremehel tuline tooli.

The slave's chair was brought down,
the slave has a silver chair.
The master's chair was also brought,
the master had a fiery chair.

Similar contrasts, where the slave sits upon the throne and the master endures conditions comparable to hell, continue as the song develops. The slave is brought a silver table and a silver pot with honey and vodka. The master, on the other hand, is brought a fiery table and a fiery pot containing fire and tar. The master asks the slave why they have different lives in heaven and receives the following answer:

[m]iks ei maksnud orja vaeva,
tasunud vaeselapse vaeva.

[w]hy did he not pay the slave for his trouble,
or pay for the orphan's trouble.

The master promises to pay everything in heaven, he already has his cloth and yardstick ready, but the slave suddenly reveals his will and refuses to accept payment in heaven, indicating that he does not wish to receive payment in the presence of Mary, but that it should have taken place on earth and shall remain the master's debt:

Ei ma taha taeva'assa,
maksu ei Maria ees.
Miks ei maksnud seal maal,
kus meid vaeseid vaevati,
pisukesi piinati.

No, I don't want to go to heaven,
not to pay in front of Mary.
Why didn't you pay on earth,
where we poor were afflicted,
the littlest ones were tormented.

In essence, the slave's decision means that his master cannot enter heaven, as also indicated by his seat and food, including the tar and fire stereotypically associated with hell.

In this song and others, honey is a symbol of a desirable life, which we also find in other types of folklore. Interesting folkloric views of one's home as a symbol of abundance and prosperity are offered by wedding songs, in which both families praise the place where they live, while the maiden's relatives characterise her life in her parents' home as a carefree place of growth, with honey as an important feature:

Olid taadile tugiksa,
eidel paremaks käeksa,
võisid võtta võida-leiba,
maitsta mett magusat

You were a pillar of strength to father,
a right hand to the mother,
you could have taken bread and butter,
tasted the sweet honey (Põlva, Runic Song database)

To this day, the belief that bees leave or die at the same time as their master is a widely held belief in northern Europe. Recently, John Dingwall (2022) wrote about how the Royal beekeeper John Chappleh informed the Queen's bees of the death of their owner, saying that King Charles was their new master. The whole process was to reconcile the bees with their new owner and remind the public of old beliefs. The wife of a woodsman and an expert student of folklore recalled how the bees disappeared from the hives before the man's death, but

came back a year later, flying in the sunlight as if the man's soul was with them, taking up residence in the hives (EFITA 2018).

Medicine and rituals

From the above, it is evident that ethnographic and social practices change faster than human experiences, beliefs and language. The description of heaven and hell in the songs of slaves, and the motif of taking responsibility for one's actions, is a theme of the past. However, in the case of honey and bees, we can also speak of a recurring return to, and reintroduction of, earlier ideas and practices. One of these was a ritual drink called mead, a low alcohol ritual beverage made from honey and water that was one of the most common alcoholic beverages in Estonia before the 13th century, displaced by beer during the Crusades (Moora 1980; 1991; Tedre 1996). Details of how ancient Estonians made mead are not known, but homemade mead was still served in the 20th century as a festive drink, to which fruit or spices could be added. In recent years, mead has reappeared on the market, but with new qualities: it can be carbonated, dry, semi-sweet or sweet, according to the brewer's recipe.

The integration of honey into new preventive measures and its toleration by official medicine can be seen in several areas. In the case of bee stings the first treatment is humid soil and cool water, while the use of honey as a preventive and homeopathic treatment is encouraged by its availability and low cost (example based on EFITA). Ethnomedical recipes recommend honey of different colours collected from different plants, and modern favourite mixes such as ginger or chili. Dark honey is recommended against allergies and anaemia, honey water helps with lack of appetite and conjunctivitis, a spoonful of honey in a glass of warm water helps against fatigue and exhaustion, two teaspoons of honey in half a glass of water helps against headaches and migraines, drinking warm milk and a teaspoon of honey before sleep helps against insomnia. In addition to which honey can be used to lower cholesterol for those with heart disease. This is particularly recommended for elderly people suffering from diabetes, heart disease or high blood pressure (mainstream medicine does not allow honey for those with diabetes). Many recipes require preparation at home. For high blood pressure, a teaspoonful of honey is mixed with a teaspoonful of ginger juice and a teaspoonful of ground cumin seeds; for digestive

problems, mix one part of honey with another part of apple cider vinegar and drink diluted with water. What's new are the instructions on precise dosages, as well as water temperature, quantity, and frequency. It seems that in the past, dosages were based on need, with quantities not strictly enforced. The recipes and origins of these complex mixtures have remained outside the interest of folklorists and doctors. The wider use of honey is now being encouraged, for example, as an ingredient in cosmetic products that offer honey as a skin moisturiser or acne treatment.

A variety of products can also be bought at the pharmacy: bee venom, beebread, and beeswax which arrived in shops in the 1980s on the back of the success of home remedies. Beekeepers began to collect beeswax, and at home they made infusions with spirits and vodka for both exterior application and ingestion. For nearly a decade, beeswax was considered almost a panacea for chronic inflammation and pain.

In the 20th century, those with an allergy to bee stings were recommended to immunise themselves with increasing quantities of bee venom, which was also considered effective in treating rheumatism, starting with one and working up to about 20 bee stings. A new trend is apitherapy (Meie mesilased 2020; Honey Wolf 2021; PPA 2021; Olustvere 2022; Koppelmaa 2022), in which the patient is placed on a wooden bed with holes drilled in it, allowing them to hear the sounds of a bee colony and smell the scent of the bees, which is said to be effective against various types of psychological stress and illness. Apitherapy also uses stinging, the number of which is slowly increased. In the 21st century apitherapy is being promoted as a solution for all ailments.

Urban beekeeping and proverbs

In the 1960s, there was a beekeeper who lived on my street. He had a lot of beehives in his garden and you could buy different kinds of honey, such as heather honey, in the autumn. The beekeeper's honey was considered to be better than that which was sold in the shops because it was fresh, not stale, and harvested from nearby meadows and pastures. One was also able to stock up on pieces of honeycomb, which were nice treats. One of the differences between domestic and industrial honey was considered to be its crystallisation or fluidity, as well as the difference in flavour, which was attributed to the taste

of different honey plants. Industrial honey was produced in my home town by the Estonian Consumer Cooperatives Republican Union (ETKVL2), which had its own apiary. Beehives were transported by car to the collection areas in the spring and back to the city in the autumn, the same was done with the beehives on collective farms. The large producer ETKVL also bought honey from private beekeepers and collective farms. Today, alongside the big beekeepers, there are families who enjoy the hobby of beekeeping as part of their lifestyle, with five or more hives for their family and friends. The latest trend is to keep bees in the city, not just in garden cities but between high-rise buildings (Vill 2018; PPA 2021; Solba 2018). In Tallinn, for example, beehives can be found on the roofs of garages, hotels, and police stations. Beehives are collectively owned in the green areas and parks that have been created in towns. Behind these movements is the need to restore the relationship between humans and other creatures, to draw attention to the rights of bees (Holsting 2019), in which at least the extension of the minimum programme for animal rights to bees is considered essential. More important than providing a way of life for the species in the wild, is ensuring good health, adequate food and water, and avoiding pain, suffering and a painful death.

Beekeeping has undergone profound development and ground-breaking innovations, especially in recent centuries. Some hive types could be insulated with cloth for the winter, covered with branches and protected from various dangers. Winter supplies were left in the hives and the bees were given extra food, and beekeepers learned how to treat and heal them. The question here is how much of that knowledge was disseminated through family lore and folklore, and to quite a considerable extent how much was learned from publications and training. Beekeeping know-how was guided through the articles found in Estonian-language calendars (the publication of which began in the 18th century, with housekeeping advice and health advice beginning to appear only at the beginning of the 19th century alongside and instead of biblical texts), and in the 20th century through an Estonian-language beekeeping magazine (Mesindus 1935 et seq.), and through beekeeping associations (the Central Beekeeping Association was founded in 1927, by 1938 uniting 33 gardening and beekeeping associations (EE 2003: 44)). After a forced hiatus in 1940, the work continued in 1949 as the Horticultural and Beekeeping Society of the Estonian SSR). In 1990, the old name of the the Central Gardening and Beekeeping Association

was restored, and in 1994 the Eesti Meetootjate Ühendus (the Estonian Honey Producers Association) started as a branch of the association.

The Estonian Gardening and Beekeeping Association has issued a number of publications, for example a magazine from 1989 to 1994 that included children's stories about the life of bees (for example Valdemar Bonsel's *Mesilane Maaja*, published in 1923). Notwithstanding these developments, a reason to return to folklore remains, one that highlights and compares animals with humans, often in unexpected ways.

Let's consider another folklore type with a more formal structure. Only 23 types of proverb, which have no connection to religion but are related to formalities, permanent word compounds, and depictions (EV = Krikmann et al. 1980), have been recorded throughout more than one hundred years of collecting. Some of these proverbs are variants which are close to each other, with the total number of texts in any variant not exceeding ten.

Common messages found in proverbs are:

(a) proverbs that enshrine divisions and hierarchies: *Mehilde mesi, naisilde võsi* ('men bring honey, women make butter', i.e. a person is known by their work);

(b) the superior is right: *Kelle käsi, selle mesi* (the master has the right, he who has the power, has the right)

(c) comparisons of two values, for example if there is a deficit in both, then the provider of mental balance is more important: *Uni on magusam kui mesi* (sleep is sweeter than honey) (8 texts); that which is of vital importance is equivalent to the extraordinary: *Ku' juvva tahat, om vesi ka mesi* (if you are thirsty, even water tastes like honey) (EV 2409);

d) generalisations on a topic that from a distance may seem appealing, but can be deceptive or end with a decline in welfare: *Mesileib minna, saiakoorik saia, saa manu – ei midagi* (the bride/groom is kind and hardworking before the marriage, but mean and lazy afterwards) (EV 6752); E*i ole kõik mesi, mis tilgub, ega kõik tuli, mis välgub* (not everything that drips is honey, not everything that flashes is light, i.e. all that glitters is not gold) (EV 6736); *Kõik on minnes mesised, võttes võised* (everyone is sweet before marriage but sour/mean after getting married); *Nii kaua on minia hea, kui mesileiba on* (a daughter-in-law is kind [to her in-laws] as long as there is cake (i.e. money, food, etc.);

e) what you have is better than what others have: *Oma mesi kõige magusam, oma kali kõige kangem* (your own honey is the sweetest, your own kvass is the strongest);

e) warnings of insidious and duplicitous behaviour: *Linnumesi keele peal, ussiviha keele all* (honey on the tongue, snake venom under the tongue), EV 5972; *Mesi suus, sapp südames* (honey in the mouth, bile in the heart) 6747; *Suu ees mesi, selja taga vesi/ saksa väits* (honey in front of you, water/a German knife behind your back, i.e. talks sweetly in front of you, says bad things behind your back); *Kõik ei ole mesi, mis magus on* (all that is sweet is not honey, i.e. all that glitters is not gold) (EV 6739)

(f) assessments and warnings against squandering: *Mesilane korjab ühe päeva, elab üheksa päeva, laisk ja pillaja teenib üheksa päeva, elab ühe päeva* (the bee works for one day, lives on the outcome for nine days, the lazy person and the squanderer work for nine days and spends the proceeds in one day).

Summary

Founder of ecosophy and deep ecologist Arne Naess wrote in the spirit of deep ecology in the 1960s that we need to care more widely for those other than human beings, and to care more deeply for people (Næss 2023: 233). To this day, bees are considered the epitome of diligence, industriousness, austerity, and kindness. However, reality is more complex and quite diverse, especially since a new stage in the interpretation of human–animal relations is just beginning.

Northern European countries are suitable For beekeeping, but it is more difficult. The European Union is considered the largest producer of honey in the world, with the countries of Central and Southern Europe being the main honey countries. This is why the use of honey has become a symbol of abundance in life. Interestingly, in proverbs, which are a poetic and practical type of folklore, honey and bees are represented with few texts, the functions of which are limited.

Over the millennia, the types of bee hive have changed. Presumably, some beliefs about bees are primordial; other layers, for example the use of euphemisms and the system of prohibitions and commandments, are more recent and have evolved rapidly since beehives came from the forest to the farm or home. Since the 19th century, skills related to beekeeping have expanded under

the influence of the printed word. In the 20th century, Estonia established its own apiculture societies and started to disseminate professional information and literature, which has further shaped both knowledge and the ability to keep bees successfully. We see how climate fluctuations affected beekeeping, and how religious denomination was also a factor.

Vernacular knowledge forms a complex, elements of which come from different layers and segments of culture, combining professional and folk. We see how in the 20th century the use of honey expanded in catering and gourmet foods, as well as in medicine. The development of sophisticated drugs represents a new symbiotic layer of folk medicine and media knowledge.

On the practical and economic side of beekeeping, we see a slow change in the ethnographic side, with reforms in beekeeping beginning in the 18th century (log hives), gaining momentum in the 19th century (hives that open from the top). Innovations are appearing at an accelerated pace, although there is also a certain pattern of inertia and convenience present: old forms persist through the centuries, such as the use of natural beehives, which are not driven by the idea of economic efficiency but rather possess their own emotional qualities.

Forms of ownership have also changed: common trees on collective land gave way to large apiaries and hives with a small number of bees, which persisted for centuries, although today they compete with cheap imported honey and honey products.

Traditional classifications and attitudes have been replaced in many ways by knowledge learned in the classroom, although some beliefs and ritual behaviours have survived, some beliefs have been adapted, and some have found a new output. The views of vernacular religion are more freely and clearly expressed, and are supported by dark green ecology (Taylor 2021), deep green ecology (Næss 2023), and new forms of esotericism. Urban beekeeping and the demands of animal rights activists might seem to be alien, but are part of adapting to mega-urbanisation. New recipes and food products are part of creative food and health development and are not new phenomena at all.

Language in the form of adages, sayings, utterances, allow for many comparisons. In the case of adages, the database contains nearly a hundred different expressions (the Justkui database of Estonian bywords and phraseology, 2012), and there are still presumed to be more of them in the language (for example the Rehepapp database of folk mythology and folktales). However, many poetic names that suggest exceptional properties or value have disappeared from ac-

tive use. Church hymns and the imagery thereof, and poetry where bees were the epitome of the motherland (Juhan Liiv, Paul-Eerik Rummo), expressing national identity, influenced the cultural meaning of bees. In Estonian folk philosophy and speech, rivers of milk and mountains of porridge are spoken of as a source of paradisiacal abundance, which is noticeably more mundane, but still a dream of the good life and of being protected from conditions of hunger and crisis. This same dream led Estonian peasants to wait for the White Ship and to wander to the land of dreams.

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Abbreaviation

[1] PRIA – Agricultural Registers and Information Agency

[2] ETKVL – Estonian Consumer Cooperatives Republican Union, established 1941, to replace the previous (operating from the beginning of the 20th century) consumer cooperatives; currently COOP.

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E – manuscripts of M. J. Eisen, 1880–1934
EKS – manuscripts of the Estonian Literary Society, 1872–1924;
ERA – Estonian Folklore Archives, 1927–1944
E, StK – manuscripts of stipendiaat of Eisen, 1921–1927

H – manuscripts of Jakob Hurt, 1860–1906;
KKI – manuscripts of the Institute of Estonian Language, 1941–1984;
RKM – folklore manuscripts of the Estonian State Literary Museum, 1945–1996.

Department of folkloristics, ELM
Eesti Kalendrid [Estonian calendars] – digital archives:
EFITA – Digital archives of the DF, ELM
Justkui – Database of Estonian sayings
Rehepapp – Database of belief narratives

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Mare Kõiva (PhD) is Leading Research Fellow at the Department of Folkloristics of the Estonian Literary Museum, whose main research areas cover belief narratives and mythology, and recently also relations between humans and animals, multilocal ways of living, and small nations' ways of self-expression.

mare@folklore.ee