

The Content, Poetic Structure and Function of Erzya Mordvin and Seto Laments

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Abstract: Lament is a folklore genre and source of ethnological research in international folklore studies, cultural anthropology, and ethnology.

The Mordvinians are made up of two ethnic sub-groups, the Erzya and the Moksha. This article compares the common and distinct features of the poetic structure of the lament culture of two related peoples, the Erzya and the Seto, and explains the religious and cultural-historical reasons for possible similarities and differences.

I. Smirnov, H. Paasonen, A. Hämäläinen, U. Harva, M. Yevseyev, V. Mokshin, G. Kornishina, and T. Devyatkina have written about earlier Erzya Mordvin laments. They studied the cultural history of the Mordvins (Erzya and Moksha) as well as the customs and beliefs related to laments among the Mordvin and other Finno-Ugric peoples.

In the Estonian context, the topic of lamentation — including Seto lamentation — has been studied in several small-scale projects by theologians, archaeologists, folklorists, and ethnologists (J. Kiivit, M. Kõiva, M. Kõivupuu, M. Lang, A. Lintrop, M. Mikkor, A. Moor, P. Paenurm, T. Paul, V. Sarv, J. Sootak, Ü. Tedre, H. Valk, Ü. Valk, A. Viires).

The poetic language of laments, the range of human emotions they express, and their imaginative imagery allow us to appreciate laments as works of art in which pain has been transformed into art. V. Sarv writes that, in addition to their poetic and musical value, funeral laments also hold

great emotional significance. Here we see both past and present customs, family structure, the nature of family relationships, and religious beliefs. Lamentation is a fully-fledged part of the song repertoire, sad, beautiful, and instructive (Sarv 2000: 5).

This article describes the functions and content of these laments, how they are observed today in Erzya villages: what is traditional, what is urban, which laments have survived over time, which have faded away, and why. A partial comparison is made with Seto laments, as Erzya funeral laments share many common features and motifs with corresponding Seto traditions.

Keywords: lament, tradition, folklore fieldwork, Seto, Erzya

Introduction

Researchers have observed the existence of laments among many peoples around the world. Among other peoples, Finno-Ugric peoples, including the Baltic Finns, also practice laments. Research into Baltic Finnish lament culture began in the 19th century (Porkka 1883; Lönnrot 1836; Paulaharju 1916; Väisänen 1990 and others), with the majority recorded in the 20th century: Niemi 1904; Laiho 1940; Honko 1963 and others (Nenola 2002: 19–23); (Stepanova 2014: 7).

The earliest accounts of Mordvin beliefs and customs come from travelogues and chronicles of the 13th to 17th centuries (the Flemish V. Rubruk, the Hungarian Julianus, the Italian I. Barbaro, the Englishman D. Fletcher, the Swede P. Petrei, the Dutchman N. Witzen, and others). Surveys from the 18th and early 19th centuries, aimed at describing and mapping the peoples of Russia at the time, provide a fragmentary picture of Mordvin rituals, religion, customs, and folklore. Many researchers of the time did not distinguish between the Erzya and the Moksha, but referred to these peoples collectively as Mordvins.

The history of Mordvin funeral rites and lamentations predates the history of the Mordvins and the Mordvin language as a whole. The mass and forced Christianization of the Mordvins took place in the first half of the 18th century. At the same time, the Russian language spread and mixed marriages began to emerge. However, the baptism of the Mordvins was primarily a political act, rather than a requirement of the church. Researchers were also often sent to

Russia's Indigenous peoples to spread Orthodoxy and a new way of life as, even in the 19th century, the Mordvins were predominantly an illiterate peasantry.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, A. Shakhmatov, M. Yevseyev, and T. Markelov contributed to the description and study of Mordvin culture. In 1910, A. Shakhmatov compiled the *Collection of Mordvin Ethnography* in St. Petersburg, which included, among other material, several wedding and funeral songs. At the end of the 19th century, the development of the Mordvin written language began within the framework of the Ilminsky system, and a small group of Mordvin intellectuals emerged who were interested in folk customs and folklore. In the second half of the 20th century, systematic research into Mordvin folklore and its various genres and trends began. Expeditions to collect material were organized by the USSR Academy of Sciences Institute of Ethnography in collaboration with Mordvin scholars in regions inhabited by the Moksha and Erzya: the Mordvin, Tatar, Bashkir, and Chuvash Republics, as well as the Penza, Nizhny Novgorod, Samara, and Orenburg Oblasts.

The first people to transcribe Seto laments were Georg Masing, a pastor from Vastseliina, and V. Stein, an early writer and prolific collector of folklore, as well as Joosep and Johan Hurt, the poet Elise Aun, and Jakob Hurt (Ermakov 2008: 41). Previously, A. Baiburin, N. Tolstoy, J. Lotman, M. Kõiva, M. Kõivupuu, I. Rüütel, V. Sarv, and others have addressed death culture and funeral customs, as well as lamentation, including Erzya Mordvin lamentation and the rites associated with it, and the semantics of lamentation.

The Erzya and the Seto

The Erzya and Moksha are one of the largest Finno-Ugric peoples living mainly in Russia. According to the population within the Finno-Ugric family, they concede only to the Hungarians, Finns and Estonians. According to data from the 2020 census, 484,450 people of Erzya and Moksha ethnicity live in the Russian Federation (see <https://rosstat.gov.ru>), while according to the 2010 census the total was 744,200 in Russia and 333,100 in Mordovia (Mordva: 148–160). One of the features of the Erzya and Moksha is a large dispersion of settlement. Only one third of the Mordvin population of Russia lives in the Republic of Mordovia. Compact groups of the Erzya and Moksha settled in Samara, Penza, Orenburg, Ulyanovsk, Nizhny Novgorod, Saratov regions and in Bashkorto-

stan, Tatarstan and Chuvashia. A significant number of them live in the Urals, Siberia, the Far East and Sakhalin. Significant groups of the Erzya and Moksha are also located in Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and abroad (Mordva: 7).

Setomaa is a historical region and the homeland of the Setos, located in the Republic of Estonia and the Russian Federation, southwest of Lake Pskov. It encompasses the municipalities of Mikitamäe and Värska in Põlva County, the municipality of Meremäe in Võru County, part of the municipality of Misso, and the villages of the Petseri District in the Pskov Oblast of the Russian Federation that border these areas. Based on archaeological findings, human settlement in Stumaa dates back nearly 8,400 years (<https://et.wikipedia.org/wiki/Setod> 17-02-2026). Approximately 2,000 Setos live in the historical Setomaa region of Estonia, and 15,000–20,000 elsewhere in Estonia (<https://fennougria.ee/rahvad/laanemeresoome-rahvad/eestlased/setod/> 21-02-2026).

From the 10th to the 13th century most Seto territory was under Russian rule, and Christianity arrived there primarily in the form of Orthodoxy, later reinforced by Petseri Monastery. Over the centuries, Setomaa became a border region between Russia, Livonia and Estonia and was often a battleground. With the Treaty of Tartu in 1920, Setomaa was incorporated into the Republic of Estonia, creating Petseri County along with the settlements of Petseri, Irboska, Laura, and others. After World War II, a significant number of the Seto villages remained within Soviet Russia, now part of the Russian Federation, where many villages have since disappeared and the younger generation has partially become Russified. Today, the Estonian side of the historical Setomaa region is predominantly comprised of Setomaa Parish, with the interests of the Seto represented by the Setomaa Liit civic association (<https://et.wikipedia.org/wiki/Setomaa> 17-02-2026; Ermakov 2008: 17).

Choice of Material

My choice of material was based on my background. I come from the village of Luvne in the Ardatovo District of Mordovia, where wailing during funerals and memorial services is still partially practiced and traditional customs are observed. In terms of language and identity, I identify primarily as Erzya, while at the same time being part of the Mordvin people. The situation is analogous, for example, to that of the Estonian Seto, who consider themselves Seto but

also regard themselves as Estonian. Based on this distinction, I use this specific terminology in the present work. My upbringing has given me the opportunity to observe the performance of laments and the continuation of lament-related traditions today. As a child, I encountered various customs and beliefs observed in Erzya villages, including those related to death, weddings, and going to war. The most memorable were the death laments, as they were often performed in my home village. As a child, it was very frightening to listen to them and to try to understand the concepts and meanings. Another thing that left an impression on me is that in Erzya villages, children are given special attention at funerals. They are always invited to eat *pliine* and drink *kissel*, even if they are strangers. It is believed that God sent children, and that this is a good sign for both the living and the deceased. For those who could not attend, food is given to the women at the funeral to take home, so that those at home can commemorate the souls of the deceased.

While eating *pliine* for those who did not attend the funeral, the children and other family members are told whom to remember with kind words. For me and the people of our village, this is natural, but as a researcher, I understand that this tradition holds great emotional value and ensures the continuity of traditions. This tradition is also observed by Erzya and Moksha people in Estonia (AKM 2013).

I collected the empirical material during fieldwork conducted between 1998 and 2024 in the villages of Luvne, Kalasevo, Ketšuševo, Lunga-Maidani, Urusovo, Kanakleika, and Tšukalõ in the Ardatovo District of Mordovia. The collected material has been obtained overwhelmingly from elderly informants, of whom, as of 2026, more than half have already passed away. Among those interviewed were men who were equally well-versed in the customs and beliefs associated with laments. It is quite rare in Mordovia for men to be willing to discuss topics related to laments and customs, as in Mordovia (as, for example, in Setomaa and Kihnu in Estonia), the custodians of traditions related to customs and rites of passage are predominantly women. It is difficult to underestimate the role all of them play in shaping community folklore—women organize traditional events (weddings, funerals, memorial services, and send-offs for those joining the military) and, in doing so, create and shape traditions.

To collect empirical data, I conducted oral interviews and surveys in the form of informal conversations on a given topic. As part of participant observation, I repeatedly attended cemetery days, funerals, weddings, and send-offs

for relatives joining the military. I have also used the observations made during participant observation and fieldwork notes as empirical sources in this article. During fieldwork, I recorded the customs related to rites of passage typical of their generation from older people (bridal parties, funeral feasts, sending young men off to the military, etc.) and customs related to today's rites of passage from younger people (weddings today, modern customs for sending people off to the military, etc.). The Seto material is described in a comparative context, and rather generally. I rely largely on the research of Seto lament researchers.

Despite a good grasp of the research environment, material on the intimate and emotionally charged topic of mourning rituals was difficult to access, as laments are not traditionally a genre intended for the public and do not fall under festival practices or routine recording. Consequently, the most personal experiences were not often shared with the researcher, although overall cooperation with informants proved effective. I have also used the observations made during participant observation and fieldwork notes as empirical sources in this article. I also noticed that truly secret thoughts and experiences are not shared with strangers (including researchers). This is certainly related to the nature of personal experiences and emotions, which are sometimes hidden from others (Ermakov 2014: 163).

Lament as a ritual genre of folklore

Laments belong to the ritual genre of folklore; just as with the Mordvins, laments for the dead, brides, and conscripts play a central role in rites of passage in Seto folklore and traditional culture. Laments are primarily a recitative singing improvisation belonging among women's traditions, performed to accompany various rites of passage (funerals, weddings, sending young men off to military service) and crisis rituals (various unexpected misfortunes in the family or community). A lament (in Erzya *лайшема*, *урнема*, *авардема*) is a unique monologue addressed to someone in traditional Erzya culture expressing concern, sorrow, and grief. In Erzya tradition, the term *лайшемат* is used for funeral, conscription, or situational laments; for bridal laments, there is a separate term, *урнемат* or *аварькинемат*. Laments are mainly performed in the second person singular and first person plural, and verbs are used in the imperative mood. Traditional Erzya and Seto laments are characterized solely by

the use of minor modes (“a symbolic sign of sorrow”) and a monologue-based, narrative style of performance. Laments draw on the traditional poetics of Erzya oral folklore (the same similes, metaphors, epithets, symbols, hyperboles, etc., are used). The language of contemporary laments is poorer in terms of metaphorical substitutions, parallels, and alliteration as the Erzya language is used less frequently in everyday communication today. Laments also feature a wealth of rhetorical turns of phrase, question-and-answer constructions, etc. This is due to the fact that lamentations are a collective ritual activity involving all family members and the entire territorial community. Lamenters also always wish for the subject of the lament and the people to whom the lament is directed to be present themselves.

The traditional characteristics of all laments include improvisation, the emotional impact on listeners (psychotherapy), the structure of the lament as a monologue in the form of an address, and the lament’s direct connection to rituals (Pino, Sarv 1981: 6–7).

Lamentation has a distinct traditional structure. A lament is a poetic monologue addressed to the deceased from home or from the world at large. The greatest variety of phrasing arises in laments depending on the diversity of the biographical facts of those involved, also the area where the most improvisation occurs. The proportion of improvisational wording in Erzya funeral laments is quite significant. On the one hand, the lament is an established independent genre in terms of words, melodies, and performance style. On the other hand, it is an organic part of Mordvin folk song as a whole and is closely connected to it.

A distinction is made between customary and situational laments. Customary laments are associated with pivotal events in human life, with the transition from one situation to another. Laments send the dead to an imaginary afterlife (funeral laments), brides from their parents’ home to their husband’s home (wedding laments), and men, grooms, sons, and brothers from a peaceful home life to the battlefield (conscription laments). In the past, people were sent to the army for 25 years; today, however, it is for 1.5 years. All laments express people’s concerns. Lamenters speak of their own or their loved ones’ predominantly sad everyday experiences, which evoke strong emotions in them creating the need to express these through lament songs.

Of all types of lament, the funeral lament is probably the most ancient as it is rooted in folk beliefs and connected to the cult of the ancestors. The ancient purpose of laments is and was magical. A characteristic feature is the combina-

tion of customs accepted by the official Orthodox religion and pre-Christian conceptions of death and the afterlife, the role of the dead, and the activities of the living. Death was imagined as a transition to another world, where the deceased continued a life similar to that on earth: they worked, raised families and enjoyed themselves. The prevailing belief is that the soul's fate in the afterlife depends on the proper observance of customs regarding the deceased's body. People also believed that deceased ancestors care for their living relatives but may punish those who do not treat the departed with respect.

Erzya funeral rites share many common features and motifs with corresponding Seto traditions while Mordvin folk songs share several common features with Seto folk songs. Observations to this effect have been made, for example, by Ingrid Rüütel in her studies of the similarities in polyphony between Seto and Mordvin folk songs (Rüütel: 1980). Today, the Seto are considered Estonian, but much that is archaic and distinctive has been preserved in their culture; certain cultural traits link them to the Mordvins (see Rüütel 2009: 63). It is likely that lament traditions were known to certain groups of Estonians in the past, something that is indicated by isolated references in early written sources (from the 13th and 17th centuries) and the fact that individual laments have also been recorded outside the Seto settlement areas in Estonia (see Pino, Sarv 1981). The disappearance of laments from the daily lives of most Estonians is explained by several factors, one of which was their prohibition by the Protestant church.

Mordvin laments can first be heard at funerals. Mordvin cemeteries – *kalmolangõd*, *kalmazõrj'id* – differ somewhat from Estonian and Seto cemeteries in that they were established in forest clearings, near bodies of water, or on riverbanks, places that are revered. Among the Mordvins, belief in *Kalmolangoava* and *Kalmazõrjava* as protectors and guardians of the cemetery persisted for a long time. Their dwelling place was believed to be near the cemetery gates. Even today, when visiting the cemetery, Mordvin women both young and old pray at the gates. Men also pray or simply pause for a moment in front of the gates.

The cemetery is a sacred place where one must behave according to custom. Children are not allowed to run, shout, speak loudly, or eat berries or apples growing in the cemetery grounds. First, people place their food offerings at a specific grave and then go to greet their relatives. The greeting involves first kissing the cross or the portrait, if there is one, three times, and then placing sweets, biscuits, apples, or pies there so the soul can eat. Many speak to the deceased or weep. Sometimes they also ask for something or seek advice.

At ten o'clock, people begin singing Christian hymns just as they are sung in church (usually sung by elderly women, about 30–35 people or fewer, depending on the size of the village and the number of people). These women are called *moravtyzja* (singers). Their singing lasts 40 minutes, with short breaks every 7–10 minutes. During this time, others sit beside the graves of their deceased relatives, usually on benches. Those without benches sit on the ground. Each family has a table set. After the singing ends, they begin to eat. They start eating with a spoonful for the men. After the meal, they go to visit other relatives and acquaintances who are at the cemetery. They exchange food with one another; the tastiest dishes are given to the children. Before returning home, they bid farewell to the deceased (with a cross-shaped kiss) and pour water or beer onto the grave so the soul can drink. Sweets, pies, kringles, or whatever the deceased enjoyed are also placed on the cross.

Erzya funeral laments and memorials, and Seto traditions share many common features and motifs. In the wording of the laments, we can distinguish between a more constant and a more variable part. The more constant part is generally characteristic of the lament in general. This includes motifs such as questions expressing astonishment, for example why did this person die; expressions of mourning, for example saying it is a pity to lay this person in the grave, I cannot bring myself to forget; a plea, for example, speak a word to us, come home to visit your loved ones, come as a fly, fly as a butterfly.

The lament for the dead is a call across the border, a search for contact with the otherworld. To avoid endangering oneself while communicating with the otherworld, caution is required. In Mordva, certain prohibitions also have to be observed when mourning. One could mourn early in the morning or during the day, but not in the evening after sunset or late at night.

The Structure and Function of Mourning

Weeping has several functions: psychological, magical, social, and as an integral part of ritual. Erzya weeping is characterized by improvisation, the emotional influence on listeners (psychotherapy), the structure of the lament as a monologue in the form of an address, and the connection of the lament to rituals. It takes the form of a monologue that is usually presented in the second person singular and the first person plural, and verbs are used in the imperative mood. The la-

ment is constructed using traditional formulas and fixed phrases. Poetic devices are used extensively: similes and metaphors (*ятноень коронь кирдеме* 'to live according to the enemies' mood', *чужоень мельтне мелекишевт* 'strangers have a changeable mood', *ятноень кортнэ корокиовт* 'enemies' customs are different', *мазый цеця лацо сезимик* 'they crushed me like a flower', *ниже тикше ладсо костимек* 'they dried me like hay'); epithets (*pizhinet_mazy duginet* 'beautiful green friends', *pizhe tyaka* 'green child', *pizhe narmun* 'green bird'); hyperbole (*siañ jaroks keverëz* 'spinning like a silver ball', *shölkön' lentaks kaladoz* 'unravelling like a silk ribbon'). The traditions and roots of lamentation stretch a long way back in time expressing accumulated wisdom and people's strong connection to nature, as well as reflecting pivotal changes in human life. Laments are a ritual genre that remains quite well known to this day among the Erzya and other Finno-Ugric peoples (Ermakov 2014: 318–319).

The main artistic devices organising the text in Seto laments, as in other song genres, are parallelism and alliteration. Their occurrence is widespread. In a natural setting, a lament is performed in a state of high emotional tension (Sarv 1981: 23).

Among the Seto, as well as the Erzyas and other Baltic Sea peoples, the mourner covers his or her eyes and mouth with a scarf (see Photo 1). The ancient



Photo: 1. A mourner at the cemetery in the city of Saran. The mourner is Nadezhda Rodionova. Mordovia, 2012. Photo by the author.

purpose of funeral laments was magical. People believed that the attitude of a deceased relative toward the living can become either benevolent or malevolent.

Therefore, people tried to behave in a way that would incline the dead to be benevolent toward the living. In their weeping, they especially implored the deceased father and mother to preserve the fortune of crops and livestock for those left behind; in return, they promised to honour their memory with dignity by organising feasts at their graves.

Mourning is also an indicator and expression of deep grief. Weeping adds dignity and emotion to the funeral. Heartfelt weeping moves all those present. At a funeral, however, there are many attendees. Relatives and villagers gather together, coming – as old custom dictates – without invitation to see the funeral procession off. Weeping thus affects a fairly large group of people, yet at the same time is itself subject to the group's collective control. The listeners note whether, how, and how much people are crying, and draw conclusions from this as to whether the mourners are grieving for the deceased or not. Once the funeral procession begins to move, the collective weeping starts at the prompting of the deceased's sister. Thus, a direct connection is assumed between the intensity of crying and the depth of grief (Sarv 1981: 23).

A daughter's lament for her deceased mother in the Erzya language

<i>Ушко молян малазот,</i>	Wait, I'm coming to you,
<i>Энь, (ух), шикинем, тиринь авинем</i>	Dear mother, my dearest mother.
<i>Энь, (ох), стака (ды) ежом (ух).</i>	How hard it is for me.
<i>Энь, рек ванынь, ванынь лангозот</i>	I look, I look at you,
<i>Энь, жальне монень маряват.</i>	I feel so, so sorry for you.
<i>Энь, (ух), авакай – тириянкинем</i>	Mother, my nurturer
<i>Энь, монь кода тирымек – ванымек?</i>	How did you give birth to me, raise me?
<i>Энь, остатка сускомнестэ тирымек</i>	You gave me the last piece of bread,

<i>Энь, тетявтомо кастымек!</i>	You raised me without a father!
<i>Энь, (ух) а.. авакай, авакай,</i>	Dear mother, dearest mother,
<i>Энь, тон лембе седейсэ кастымик</i>	You raised me with a warm heart
<i>Энь, ки лангс тон монь кадсамак?</i>	To whom are you leaving me?
<i>Энь, (ух) ольной светсэ арасят</i>	In this world there is no one
<i>Энь, тон жалициям, журныциям,</i>	You who pity me, you who scold me
<i>Энь, тон туят ольной светстэ</i>	You are leaving this world
<i>Энь, явить ольной светстэ,</i>	You will no longer be by our side
<i>Энь, мезть те.. (энь).. ян, авай?</i>	What shall I do, dear mother?
<i>Энь, монь тиринем- авинем,</i>	My dearest, my sweetest mother
<i>милойнем,</i>	Seeker of soft bread,
<i>Энь, чевте сускомнэ добовиця</i>	Maker of good food
<i>Энь, паро писчиянь (ань) теиця</i>	Mother, dear mother
<i>Энь, (ох) авинем, милыйнем</i>	Wearer of a soft skirt
<i>Ох, (ай) чевте (э) паляня дугиннем</i>	Giver of the white shirt...
<i>Ашо паляня максынем...</i>	

(This lament was sung by E. P. Karčaganaova, Luvne village, 2007)

In many improvised funeral laments, one may find more extensive references to the lamenter's own life story. Laments have been part of life's tragic events. They were not meant to be performed without cause, outside of customary contexts. Lamenters hold the belief that crying without cause is a forbidden act (a sin) and may lead to dire consequences.

The laments address the soul of departed or deceased relatives. People believed that weeping helped the soul of the departed on its journey to a new resting place. It was also important to affirm one's good will toward the deceased, as beliefs held that the souls of departed relatives influenced the lives of people

on earth. It is believed that one can communicate with the dead and ancestors through laments and dreams. Through laments, information is conveyed about what kind of person the deceased was, who their descendants are, what they liked, what they left undone, etc. These elements are reflected in the laments of both the Seto and the Erzya.

Seto Lament for an Aunt

Give me, dear aunt, your hand from the pillow,
Give me, dear aunt, your fingers from the pillow,
Come, dear aunt, let's talk,
Come, dear aunt, let's have a chat.
Come, dear aunt, I'm here to tell you,
Come, auntie, I want to hold you close.
Don't leave me, auntie, before I'm buried,
Don't leave me, auntie, before I'm laid to rest,
When you rise from the sand, auntie, move away,
When you rise from the grave, auntie, don't come near!
Come, my dear, to your home,
come, my dear, to your house!

(S 79556/78 (1), verses 6–1, 24–29), (Pino 2000: 52)

The most common motif in lamentations on the grave is the stereotypical plea for contact: reach out a hand from the grave, a finger from your hand. Also characteristic are various motifs of calling home, lamentations about one's hard life, grief, and feelings of loss.

Conservative funeral and mourning customs have been preserved in villages because they are upheld by the elderly, who value traditions. The elderly usually ask to be buried in the manner of their ancestors, "according to the law" (AKM 2014). To this day, the deceased are presented only before the end of the ritual, and they continue to have a fixed place in rituals: departure of

the deceased from home, burial, the celebration of various Orthodox holidays at the cemetery. The persistence of funeral and memorial rituals points to the Erzya people's shared spiritual values, which are supported and reinforced by various rituals and religious beliefs. Similarly, older people do not want young people to wail, which is why they sometimes weep secretly themselves beside the deceased or at the cemetery. On the other hand, wailing at funerals is becoming increasingly secondary in Erzya funeral customs, increasingly making way for Orthodox funeral hymns.

Wedding Lamentations

A comparison of traditional and modern weddings also shows that changes have taken place here as well, primarily related to the tradition of lamentation. An analysis of wedding-related material indicates that the ritual activities associated with a traditional Erzya wedding had been preserved at the beginning of the 21st century, though without the accompaniment of wailing. Since World War II, wedding customs have been performed in a simplified form, and the duration of weddings has also shortened. This was primarily due to economic hardship, the breakdown of large families, and contact with the cultures of other peoples. In the Ardatov region, the following customs from the traditional peasant wedding remained: *чиямо* (courtship), *баславамо* (blessing), *кузонь наряжамо* (decorating the fir tree), *той* (payment of the bride price), *симема* ('drinking the bride's wine' or 'drinking the courtship wine').

Wedding songs can only be heard on a concert stage or by interviewing elderly people who remember their own or their relatives' weddings, including the wedding songs that were performed.

There are several reasons for the decline in wedding songs: first, traditional weddings are no longer held, and the bride no longer has to cry for two weeks as was once the custom. However, some wedding customs are still observed and followed very strictly, such as the blessing of the young couple by their parents using icons, during which certain phrases are recited in the Erzya language that are undoubtedly linked to the cult of the ancestors. Another reason is that many women are modest, and if something has been forgotten or gone wrong, they do not perform a particular lament because they believe that an incomplete work is not a work at all. The content of wedding laments

reveals how one should honour one's parents and ancestors, how one should treat strangers, how one should be patient and believe in nature and God: the laments symbolise a humble attitude toward life. In my opinion, a measure of resignation, acceptance of one's fate, and compromise are also required. We can observe this in the lament below, where we see belief in both the Christian God and pagan gods (the wind and the sun). Here we see the syncretism of the laments.

This wedding lament was performed by Vera Sergeyevna Anoškina (1936–2016) in Luvne village, 2010. By watching and listening to this lament, we can observe these conclusions.

<i>Пасиба- а- Пазнэнь пароень,</i>	I thank God for His goodness,
<i>Пасиба-а- лиси Чипазнень,</i>	I thank the God of the rising Sun,
<i>Пасиба-а- пуви вармаень.</i>	I also thank the blowing wind.
<i>Ешито пасиба авакай.</i>	I also thank you, mother.
<i>Баславамак- идимак!</i>	Show mercy and save me!
<i>Паро часияс путомак!</i>	Guide me to happiness!
<i>Чужоень мелень ванома</i>	Watch over the minds of strangers,
<i>Ятноень коронь кирдеме.</i>	Follow the rules of enemies.
<i>Ух - а- ней мон ешито евтан</i>	Uh, now I'll say more
<i>Тетяень - дириень</i>	To my dear father
<i>Баславамак, тетяй, монь тон</i>	Show mercy, dear father
<i>Паро часияс путомак</i>	Lead me to happiness
<i>Ятноень мелень ванома,</i>	Look after the enemies' interests,
<i>Чужоень коронь кирдеме</i>	Uphold the traditions of strangers.

“Enemies” and “strangers” are the groom's relatives (people of Erzya, Mokshan, Russian, or Tatar ethnicity).

For the most part, young people respect and listen to their elders and ancestors, believe in both the Christian God and the gods of nature (water, wind, forest, sauna, etc.), and to some extent adhere to the traditions presented in wedding rituals.

Here, one can conclude that some wedding rituals disappeared, others lost their original meaning and persisted only as part of tradition, while still others were reinterpreted and took on an entertaining and playful character. Changes in Erzya wedding customs are directly or indirectly linked to changes in the surrounding cultural context: the influence of neighbouring peoples and Orthodox Christianity, etc. Instead of traditional ritual songs and laments, weddings today mainly feature songs in Russian and Erzya, and dancing takes place to the accompaniment of international pop music. Laments are no longer performed at Erzya weddings, although some wedding rituals still use incantatory words and expressions intended to ensure a happy life for the young couple.

Recruit laments existed among the Erzya long before Peter I introduced conscription in the 17th century. The scarcity of recorded recruit laments stems from the fact that they had almost completely disappeared by the 20th century. However, Russia's wars in Afghanistan (1979–1989) and Chechnya (1992–1997) led to young men being sent to war and their deaths. The numbers are not large, but in the 1990s, several young men from every district were killed. So due to socio-political events in Russia that affected the Erzya people in one way or another, they have been revived.

It must be noted that there are few such laments, and that they were collected from across Russia, as the Erzya live in a very scattered manner. Some recruit laments became songs with sad content.

Recruit lament

Performed by Yevdokiya Fyodorova (78 years old) in Luvne village, 2010.

*Ох, тякинем Ванякай,
Вай, сардынем Ванякай,
Ильтян кувака службань
служамо*

Oh, my little Vanya,
Oh, my dear Vanya,
I'll send you to serve in the army for
a long time,

<i>Ильтаян мон тонть мелень ваномо,</i>	I'll send you to listen to others' minds,
<i>Стака ружиянь кандомо,</i>	To carry a heavy rifle,
<i>Ламо вачопекень кирдеме.</i>	To go hungry for a long time.
<i>Аштек-ванок Спаситель!</i>	Protect and have mercy, Saviour!
<i>Аштек-ванок Божей Матерь!</i>	Protect and have mercy, Virgin Mary!
<i>Пиже тякань Ванянь кис!</i>	My little bird Vanyan!
<i>Ванстык, пачтык кудов шумбрасто,</i>	Protect him, bring him home safe and sound,
<i>Кода ильтса шумбрасто,</i>	How can I send him,
<i>Истя сазо одов.</i>	So he would come back.

Recruit laments primarily used and continue to use vocabulary associated with blessings and incantations. In times of crisis, people turn – either intuitively or consciously – to traditions and rituals that have been or remain part of their cultural context. The resurgence of recruit laments once again illustrates Yuri Lotman's theory, according to which relevant texts (in this case recruit laments) come to the fore at the necessary moment (for example, a crisis in the community), even though they appear to have faded away and/or been pushed aside (see Lotman 2000: 674).

As a result of the long-term influence of Christianity and its traditional beliefs and rituals, the Erzya and Moksha developed a Mordvin variant of Orthodoxy, adapted to the beliefs and Mordvin customs that predated the adoption of Christianity. In this context, belief in both divine pre-Christian forces and the cult of departed ancestors disappeared almost entirely. Ritual and everyday life became simpler and more monotonous. Orthodoxy and its associated traditions became dominant.

Summary

The Seto and Erzya are closely related Finno-Ugric peoples who belong to the same language group and whose ethnocultural development has been influenced by similar regional political and religious processes. The confessional affiliation of both groups is historically linked to Orthodoxy, although Christianity took root among them relatively late and was superimposed on an earlier layer of folk religion.

The consolidation of the Christianisation of the Mordvins (Erzya and Moksha) in the 18th century has given rise to interpretations that have labelled the Mordvins Europe's last pagans, emphasising the long-term continuity of their folk beliefs and the later superimposition of Christian practices. At the same time, Estonian society has been characterised in religious studies as one of the most secular and least church-affiliated in Europe, creating a unique parallel with the discourse on Europe's last pagans.

Culturally, the Seto and Erzya are united primarily by a rural way of life, the absence of their own independent urban culture, and a strong positioning within the sphere of influence of the surrounding dominant cultures. Christian customs have been integrated into the folk customs of both groups alongside folk-religious practices, so that the Orthodox ritual layer and the older traditional behavioural repertoire function in parallel and form a unified, multi-layered system of customs.

Overall, the decline of Erzya and Seto laments has been influenced primarily by urbanisation and globalisation. Since the 1990s, the population of rural areas has decreased significantly due to emigration, which has directly reduced the number of active bearers of folk tradition. Changing economic and social conditions (including rising living standards) have led to family rituals increasingly being moved from the home environment to public spaces (cafés, restaurants), which are perceived as a prestigious and logistically convenient form of practice.

According to Yuri Lotman's conception of cultural memory, memory is simultaneously a structure that moves with time and one that opposes it. The past constructed in cultural memory is, by its nature, enduring, but each culture determines for itself which fields of meaning must be preserved and protected and which must be consigned to oblivion. Over time, changes occur

in the system of cultural codes, shifting the boundaries of remembering and forgetting: what was previously taken for granted as “existing” may become “as if nonexistent”, and an element that was previously marginal or “absent” may emerge as central and meaningful (see Lotman 2000: 674–675).

Within this framework, laments function as both carriers and mediators of cultural memory, simultaneously conveying past experiences, interpreting the present, and modelling future perspectives. The emergence of new subgenres (for example, laments for conscripts or war laments) or the periodic reactivation of previously marginalised genres during times of crisis points to the continuity and adaptability of the lament tradition. These processes can be explained through the mutual adaptation of archaic and contemporary ritual practices and the transformation of communal mentality. Traditional lament culture is thus still alive, but manifests itself in forms different from earlier practices. Laments that have survived to the present day are based on an archaic symbolic language, the interpretation of which allows for the reconstruction of traditions that tend to be forgotten in the past. The new lamentation tradition, on the one hand, fosters the creation and performance of new and contemporary laments on stage and in theatre, and on the other hand, redefines the understanding of old laments and their performance contexts (intimate ritual weeping at funerals, sending off recruits to the military).

Contemporary Mordvin laments (death and conscription) remain vibrant largely because the wars in Ukraine, Afghanistan, and Chechnya have brought about the deaths of young people during wartime. Consequently, lamentations have a new function today; previously they had been forgotten, but with the onset of war, the lament was reborn.

Wedding laments are also undergoing a retroactive revival. There are several reasons for this: in order to stage a trendy weddings that stand out from others in order to be remembered by guests; many realize that there are so few elderly people left who know how to lament, and they gladly invite them to larger celebrations; some believe that older people can communicate with ancestors through laments and blessings, and thus bless the young on important days.

Lamentations are important in the spiritual culture of the Erzya and Seto peoples, playing a significant role in the construction of ethnicity and serving as an element of self-awareness and identity. The primary bearers and practitioners of ritual and non-ritual lamentation traditions are women living in rural areas. It is they who ensure the preservation of customs and traditions;

men very rarely take on the role of mourner. Lamenters are usually elderly people with life experience who know how to lament. Few are capable of performing a lament; typically, these are those who can put words together beautifully, possess a natural talent, and have a very strong command of their native language. This also depends on the mourner, their competence, and their skill in mourning. Mourners are usually very bold and socially very free people, typically women (AKM 2014). For example, at the funeral of the Estonian president on January 10, 2005, in front of Kadriorg Art Museum, a Seto lament in memory of President Rüütel was performed by the *sootska* Õie Sarve (<https://r2.err.ee/1609572377/riina-aasma-presidendi-kantselei-raagib-kuidas-toimub-arnold-ruutli-arasaatmine>, 27-01-2026).

At the same time, today Erzya laments have lost some of their traditional functions and connections to local customs. Laments exist more at the periphery of folk culture. Laments evolved hand in hand with the development of daily life, language, and thought. Over the course of several centuries, they adopted cultural elements from various peoples and were influenced by different religions. Until the end of the 19th century, laments were an integral part of family customs, accompanied by established rituals, which, according to Mordvin belief, brought prosperity to the family and society, as well as fertility, success, and prosperity for the young.

Among the Seto who live in close proximity to Russians, laments have survived to some extent to the present day. One of the favourite genres of Seto female singers is the wedding lament, performed at traditional weddings as well as concerts and various cultural events. This is also confirmed by P. Hagu's comparative article on Seto wedding laments and Baltic-Finnic laments (see Hagu 2000). In times of modernisation, the fate of fading customs may be their recognition by society as cultural heritage. This trend is also evident in both Erzya and Seto laments, which are performed on stage today, although this was not permitted in the past. Presumably, in the future, laments will be performed by actors in theatres and at concerts, as well as by folk music ensembles, which primarily perform wedding laments as a choir. Performance groups will become mediators of both traditional and contemporary culture.

Through the lament repertoire, one can explore the structure and functions of laments across the entire Erzya and Seto folklore, as well as track trends in the development of laments and clarify their role, significance, and meaning in the traditional and contemporary customs of related peoples. It is noteworthy that

even today, laments remain central structural elements in the rites of passage of both the Erzya and Seto peoples. The reason for the persistence of laments in memorial and funeral customs lies in the close emotional ties to departed ancestors and belief in the afterlife.

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