

THE YEARBOOK OF  
BALKAN AND BALTIC  
STUDIES

VOLUME 8.2



INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY OF BALKAN AND BALTIC STUDIES

# THE YEARBOOK OF BALKAN AND BALTIC STUDIES

VOLUME 8.2  
CURRENT RESEARCH IN ETHNOLOGY AND  
FOLKLORISTICS

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF  
MILA MAEVA

EDITORS FOR THIS ISSUE  
MARE KÕIVA



ELM SCHOLARLY PRESS  
VILNIUS-TARTU-SOFIA-RIGA 2025

**Editor-in-chief:** Mila Maeva

Editors: Žilvytis Šaknys, Mare Kõiva, Inese Runcē

Editors for this issue: Mare Kõiva, Estonian Literary Museum

**Language editor:** David Edward Allen

**Layout:** Rahel Laura Vesik

**Cover:** Lina Gergova

**Editorial board:**

Nevena Škrbić Alempijević (Croatia), Jurji Fikfak (Slovenia), Evangelos Karamanes (Greece), Zoja Karanović (Serbia), Solveiga Krumina-Konkova (Latvia), Andres Kuperjanov (Estonia), Thede Kahl (Germany), Ermis Lafazanovski (North Macedonia), Tatiana Minniyahmetova (Austria), Alexander Novik (Russia), Rasa Paukštytė-Šaknienė (Lithuania), Irina Sedakova (Russia), Irina Stahl (Romania), Svetoslava Toncheva (Bulgaria), Sergey Troitskiy (Estonia), Piret Voolaid (Estonia), Skaidrė Urbanienė (Lithuania)

Supported by Bulgarian, Lithuanian, Estonian and Latvian Academies of Sciences, Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic Museum, Estonian Literary Museum, Lithuanian Institute of History, Lithuanian Culture Research Institute; Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, University of Latvia and the project EKM 82/20/3

© 2025 by the authors

© International Society of Balkan and Baltic Studies

© Estonian Literary Museum

ISSN 2613-7844 (printed)

ISSN 2613-7852 (pdf)

DOI 10.7592/YBBS8.2

[www.folklore.ee/balkan\\_baltic\\_yearbook](http://www.folklore.ee/balkan_baltic_yearbook)

# Contents

Introduction	
<i>Mare Köiva, Mila Maeva</i>	7
<a href="https://doi.org/10.7592/YBBS8.2.01">https://doi.org/10.7592/YBBS8.2.01</a>	
Highland Festivals in Türkiye's Eastern Black Sea Region: A Cultural Sociological Analysis	
<i>Vildane Özkan</i>	13
<a href="https://doi.org/10.7592/YBBS8.2.01">https://doi.org/10.7592/YBBS8.2.01</a>	
The Laughter in and around Treasure Tales	
<i>Mare Kalda</i>	42
<a href="https://doi.org/10.7592/YBBS8.02">https://doi.org/10.7592/YBBS8.02</a>	
Ostension and Criminal Legends: Contemporary Horror Tales as Part of Online Youth Lore	
<i>Eda Kalmre</i>	66
<a href="https://doi.org/10.7592/YBBS8.2.03">https://doi.org/10.7592/YBBS8.2.03</a>	
The History of a Little-Known Monument by Estonian Sculptor Amandus Adamson	
<i>Vladimir Vaingort</i>	86
<a href="https://doi.org/10.7592/YBBS8.2.04">https://doi.org/10.7592/YBBS8.2.04</a>	
Horticultural Cooperatives in Estonia and Lifestyle Change: The Case of Ihaste	
<i>Maris Kuperjanov, Andres Kuperjanov</i>	100
<a href="https://doi.org/10.7592/YBBS8.2.05">https://doi.org/10.7592/YBBS8.2.05</a>	
Holy Apparition: The birth and development of St Andrew Bobola's cult in Strachocina	
<i>Tomasz Ka lniuk</i>	118
<a href="https://doi.org/10.7592/YBBS8.2.06">https://doi.org/10.7592/YBBS8.2.06</a>	

Bridging Mythology and Science: Lessons from a Mental Mapping  
Workshop on the Perception of Environmental Health Crises

*Reet Hiemäe, Mare Kalda*

135

<https://doi.org/10.7592/YBBS8.2.07>

The Establishment of New Rituality in Ukrainian Amateur and Professional  
Music under Soviet Totalitarian Rule

*Iryna Sikorska, Oksana Letychevska, Inna Lisniak*

158

<https://doi.org/10.7592/YBBS8.2.08>

Child Mortality and Disease in Karlag, 1941: A Comparison of Prisoners'  
and Free Workers' Children

*Zauresh Saktaganova, Alina Gladysheva, Aimar Ventsel*

192

<https://doi.org/10.7592/YBBS8.2.09>

Spiritual Territoriality: Boundary Setting and Place-Claiming in Burial  
Site Folk Stories — A Qualitative Study

*Kristo Villem*

218

<https://doi.org/10.7592/YBBS8.2.10>

Feast and Community in the Village of Ribnovo, Southwestern Bulgaria,  
between Tradition and Modernity

*Petya Vasileva-Grueva*

237

<https://doi.org/10.7592/YBBS8.2.11>

Meat in the Diet of the Dead (According to Material from the Traditional  
Period of the Bulgarians)

*Maria Markova*

260

<https://doi.org/10.7592/YBBS8.2.12>

Why There Was No Grunge Breakthrough in Estonia

*Aimar Ventsel*

289

<https://doi.org/10.7592/YBBS8.2.13>

From Windowsills to Rooftops: The Cultural History and  
Modern Uses of Domestic Plant Cultivation in Estonia

*Mare Kõiva*

301

<https://doi.org/10.7592/YBBS8.2.14>

# Introduction

*Mare Kõiva, Mila Maeva*

At the end of 2024, and in May 2025, while reviewing manuscripts submitted for the journal *The Yearbook of Balkan and Baltic Studies*, we decided to divide the contributions into two approximately equal parts. The first part focuses on the achievements of Lithuanian folkloristics and ethnology. Under the guidance of Žilvytis Šaknys and Skaidrė Urbanienė, this section has developed into a multifaceted overview of sacred places and phenomena, as well as everyday culture in a contemporary context. The articles seek symbols and patterns characteristic of Lithuanian culture.

The year 2025 marks 500 years since the publication of the first book in Lithuania. Latvian and Estonian scholars are also connected to this cultural milestone, as 2025 likewise represents the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of book culture for them, too.

Fate intervened in our plans. First, through the unexpected passing of E. Anastasova; second, during the evaluation of submitted articles, it became clear that we could also compile a manuscript from the contributions of Estonian scholars. However, the final decision had to await the assessments of two anonymous reviewers. We briefly discussed the need to introduce newer cultural phenomena while simultaneously paying greater attention to theoretical works, a goal that remains part of the editorial team's future plans.

Over the decades, various theoretical schools, methods, and objectives have risen, and been marginalised and questioned, leading to debates on positivism, the Finnish school, structuralism, phenomenology, comparative approaches, criticism and even rejection of folklore catalogues, not to mention disputes about authenticity (Bendix 1997). At the same time, some regions continue to employ these methods. Questions have been raised about whether anthropology or folkloristics still have a place in contemporary research.

Several comprehensive reviews of the development of folkloristics have been produced, an excellent example being Diarmuid Ó Giolláin's 2013 work, *Locating Irish Folklore: Tradition, Modernity, Identity*, which highlighted factors that enabled or hindered the discipline's growth. The book offers explanations for why, in some smaller countries, folkloristics developed and expanded through the convergence of natural, social, and other factors.

Such overviews are necessary, especially considering that even in closely situated countries like Latvia, Finland, Estonia, and Sweden, folkloristics (and ethnology) have developed differently.

In discussions, the fragmentary nature of the present era repeatedly emerged: many articles are published in English in various journals, not to mention collections that are not even offered for open access. In the worst case, their print run is only 50 copies. Such research results are often unknown within local scholarly and linguistic contexts. Would more compact overviews – covering one country (including minorities) – be more practical? Probably so, especially if interpretations strive for objectivity, are well-argued and free from everyday perspectives.

In recent decades, regional developments in folkloristics and ethnography/ethnology in smaller countries have been revisited, with new opportunities provided (at least partly) by the digitisation of diaries and life stories revealing the personal dimension of some scholars, as highlighted by M. Metslaid's article on Gustav Ränk (Metslaid & Jääts 2023; Ränk 2010, Ränk 2017). Thus, alongside theoretical influences, other aspects of personal development have recently come into focus.

It is evident that using a large number of sources deepens knowledge of religious and folklore phenomena and makes the picture more diverse. This expansion is supported by open folklore corpora and the interpretations clustered around them. A vivid example is the large genre corpora of Estonian fairy tales, legends, contemporary folklore, humour, short forms, charms, witchcraft, and mythical characters, among others. The number of written sources available to study the individual has also grown immensely to include autograph albums, handwritten songbooks, joke collections, maxims, sayings, oral local history accounts, meteorological observations, economic records (income and expenses), calendars of work activities, as well as photographs, videos and audio recordings. Many of these reflect individual values, choices, and practices, yet their integration into a cohesive whole is rare, given the high levels of digitisation overall (e.g., Kikas 2024).

When observing and collecting data on new folklore phenomena, the history of different genres varies considerably. The first so-called urban legends were recorded the archives in the 1980s. However, systematic work began only after the 1992 school

folklore collection campaign, when scholars received new narratives. Internationally, research in this field along with theoretical development, attempts to create catalogues and publications, has progressed for over 40 years in collaboration with the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research, of which Eda Kalmre is also a member.

In her article, Eda explores how contemporary horror narratives such as stories about men in white vans, killer clowns, and Slenderman spread among Estonian youth through social media and other online platforms. Using the concept of ostension, the study examines how these legends move from digital spaces to become real-life practices, sometimes triggering moral panic. The article highlights the interplay between oral and digital tradition, participatory culture and media amplification, showing how these tales reflect societal fears and blur the boundaries between fiction and reality.

A new wave of research on legends and related genres began in 1993 with the digitisation of mythological characters (Vesik 2006). These projects have continued to analyse religious narratives and their usage practices, conducting full-corpus studies of mythic tradition (legends, belief reports and related forms) and associated sacred texts (prayers, celestial letters, charms), along with the production of related outputs. Within the framework of these projects, studies have been completed on forest spirits (Laagus 1990), plague lore (Hiiemäe 1997), malaria (Paal 2014) and water spirits (Köiva 2023).

In her article, Mare Kalda offers an important perspective on treasure legends analysing treasure tales that often depict success and failure, with laughter playing a key role in both storytelling and audience response. Humour and laughter demonstrate ambivalent feelings about treasure hunting, revealing the complex social and emotional dimensions of these narratives.

Mythological stories have been examined from an entirely different angle, characterising them as a resource for crisis resolution in contemporary contexts. In October 2025, a mental mapping workshop was convened in Estonia, facilitated by folklorists Reet Hiiemäe and Mare Kalda. The session brought together diverse stakeholders, including members of the general public, local community leaders, and environmental health crisis (EHC) specialists, to interrogate cartographic representations of crises across mythological narratives, contemporary media discourse, and scientific communication. The primary objective was to elucidate epistemic gaps and convergences in spatial prioritisation, narrative structuring, and associated risk assessment frameworks.

Place-lore has been gathered and recorded by Estonian researchers since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, including a host of accounts of interactions with human spirits. Kristo Villem examines place-lore texts relating to burial sites that are stored at the Estonian Folklore Archive. His study highlights recurring motifs relating to entities that

assert territorial ownership or impose spatial restrictions. These patterns are interpreted as reflections of the cultural values and principles embedded in folk tradition.

Petya Vasileva-Grueva analyses data from the village of Ribnovo (Bulgaria), looking at its preserved traditions, which are integral to the identity politics of the Muslim community. Holidays are not just a connection with the past and the ancestors, but also an essential part of modern Muslim identity and the sustainable development of the community.

Vildane Özkan examines the social functions of highland festivals in Türkiye's Eastern Black Sea uplands and their role in sustaining cultural continuity. Interpreted through a cultural sociological framework, the analysis shows how ritual performances operate as symbolic practices that reinforce identity, embody shared habitus, and mediate the tension between tradition and modernity.

Maria Markova investigates the identification of righteous and sinful souls and the belief that the consumption of particular Bulgarian food is as especially necessary for the dead. By preparing and feeding the dead, the living ensure that the dead maintain the 'correct' direction on their journey in the afterlife, guaranteeing the soul's place among the righteous.

Tomasz Kalniuk's article places significant emphasis on contemporary movements, particularly the formation of modern saint cults. The article explores the origins and development of St Andrew Bobola's cult in Strachocina, Poland. The cult began in 1987 after an apparition appeared to a local priest, leading to the establishment of a sanctuary and regular pilgrimages. Bobola's veneration revitalised the village's religious and social life, transforming it into a recognised pilgrimage site. The case chosen by Kalniuk demonstrates that the sacred and supernatural remain vibrant in contemporary Polish religiosity.

The article by Maris and Andres Kuperjanov examines the current values, human-plant relationships and balanced urban development in the tracing the evolution of horticultural cooperatives in Estonia through the example of Ihaste near Tartu. Established during the Soviet era to combat food shortages, these plots later became sites for summer houses and, after independence, permanent homes. Drawing on archive sources and interviews, the study highlights the socio-cultural role of this area from food security and autonomy under political oppression to leisure gardening today, while also addressing current land rights challenges, environmental risks and urban development.

The article by Mare Kõiva continues this theme, focusing on outdoor and indoor gardens. It examines in detail the types, functions, and influencing factors of indoor gardens such as balcony gardens, windowsill gardens, and rooftop gardens, as well as

the motivations for growing plants in apartments. Cultivating food, ornamental, and gourmet plants indoors provides satisfaction and privacy, supports the adaptation of people and their pets to the urban environment, fits in with certain worldviews and reveals connections to the tradition of gardening.

Part of articles examine the turbulent times in the Europe and their influence on folklore, art and humans.

The article by renowned architect Vladimir Vaingort explores the creative legacy of Estonian sculptor Amandus Adamson, focusing on his lesser-known two-metre sculpture of Peter I created in 1916. The study traces the statue's turbulent history – its disappearance and relocation three times due to social upheaval – and highlights how the architectural community of Poltava repeatedly preserved this significant work.

The article by Iryna Sikorska, Oksana Letychevska, and Inna Lisniak is focused on the Ukrainian musical culture of the 1930s within the context of Soviet-imposed 'new rituality'. It analyses how folklore traditions were transformed into ideologically regulated artistic forms. Mass musical events and ritualised spectacles, such as music Olympiads, replaced traditional rituals and served as tools of ideological mobilisation, glorifying Soviet leaders and promoting Party unity. Ultimately, musical creativity, both professional and amateur, was subordinated to state propaganda and political indoctrination.

The article by Zauresh Saktaganova, Alina Gladysheva, and Aimar Ventsel analyses conditions in prison camps at the beginning of World War II. Archived statistical data illustrates mortality rates for the children of female prisoners, as well as the children of free laborers in Karlag in 1941. For a comparative view of child mortality in the Gulag, the article uses data from two other camps in the system, Vyatlag and Bureilag. It appears that the number of children in Karlag in 1941 was significantly higher than in forest and railway industry camps, and the overall mortality rate of children of imprisoned mothers was lower on average.

We hope you find ample inspiration and fresh perspectives in this issue!

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the anonymous reviewers, whose advice and comments helped to bring this issue of *The Yearbook of Balkan and Baltic Studies* 2025 (2) to completion. We would like to thank our language editor, Daniel Edward Allen, for his friendly and professional help, and Rahel Laura Vesik for her help checking the manuscript and with finishing of the layout of the manuscript.

## References

Bendix, Regina 1997. *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Ó Giolláin, Diarmuid 2000. *Locating Irish Folklore. Tradition, Modernity, Identity*. Cork: Cork University Press.

Hiiemäe, Reet 1997. *Eesti katkupärimus* (Estonian Plague Legends). *Monumenta Estoniae Antiquae* II. Eesti muistendid. Mütoloolgilised haigused 1. Tartu: Eesti Keele Instituudi rahvausundi töörühm, EKM Eesti Rahvaluule Arhiiv.

Kalmre, Eda 2018. *What a Wonderful World of Legends!*: Articles on Rumours and Legends. Tartu: ELM Scholarly Press.

Kikas, Katre 2024. *Moderniseerumine rahvaliku kirjalikkuse peeglil: 19. sajandi lõpu rahvaluulekogujad arhiivi ja avalikkuse äärealal* (Modernization and Vernacular Literacy: 19<sup>th</sup> Century Folklore Collectors on the Margins of Archive and Publics). University of Tartu, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Institute of Cultural Research.

Kõiva, Mare 2023. *Water Spirits I Pharaoh's Warriors, Mer Cattle, Water Horses, Fish Father, Kotermann*. Eesti muistendid. *Monumenta Estoniae Antiquae* II. Tartu: ELM Scholarly Press.

Laagus, Aino 1990. *Struktura i semantika tekstov predanij ob estonskikh lesnyh duhah* (Structure and Semantics of Estonian Forest Spirit legends). PhD dissertation. Tallinn: KKI.

Metslaid, Marleen & Jääts, Indrek 2023. Keeruliste aegade kiuste. Gustav Ränga päevikud 1939–1948 (Despite Difficult Times. Gustav Ränk's Diaries 1939–1948). Tartu: Eesti Rahva Muuseum.

Paal, Piret 2014. *Halltöbi* (Malaria). *Monumenta Estoniae Antiquae* II. Eesti muistendid. Mütoloolgilised haigused 2. Tartu: ELM Scholarly Press.

Ränk, Gustav 2010. Sest ümmargusest maailmast. Laiemasse maailma (From That Round World. Tallinn: Eesti Päevaleht.

Vesik, Liisa (2006). Muistendite digiteerimisest andmebaaside ri (From Digitizing Legends to Databases). Kõiva, Mare (ed.). *Võim ja kultuur* (Power and Culture), 2. Tartu: Eesti Kirjandusmuuseum, pp. 409–418.

# Highland Festivals in Türkiye's Eastern Black Sea Region: A Cultural Sociological Analysis

*Vildane Özkan*

*Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work and Counseling, Vocational School of Social Sciences, Gümüşhane University, Gümüşhane, Türkiye.*

*email: vildaneozkan@gmail.com*

**Abstract:** This article examines the social functions of highland festivals in Türkiye's Eastern Black Sea uplands and their role in sustaining cultural continuity. Drawing on participant observation at major festivals in Gümüşhane, Rize, and Artvin, alongside relevant case studies, the research finds that these rituals generate strong collective effervescence and enact common values. Despite pressures from emigration and tourism, the festivals have adapted practices to maintain social cohesion. Interpreted through a cultural sociological framework, the analysis shows how ritual performances operate as symbolic practices that reinforce identity, embody shared habitus, and mediate the tension between tradition and modernity. The research thus illustrates how highland festivals function as sites of cultural reproduction and collective solidarity under conditions of social change.

**Keywords:** highland communities, highland festivals, rituals, social cohesion, cultural symbolism, collective effervescence, heritage tourism, modernisation, cultural sustainability.

## Introduction

Türkiye's Eastern Black Sea highland culture – known locally as *yaylacılık* or *yayla* – is deeply rooted in centuries-old transhumant pastoralism and kinship networks. Its annual cycle of summer festivals coincides with the seasonal migration of people and livestock to high meadows and provides the most vibrant expression of local tradition. These festive communal rituals – featuring music, dance and collective feasting – serve to enact and reproduce shared values and identities across generations (İstanbul Ticaret Odası 1997; Haberal 2013; Somuncu & Ceylan 2015; Akbaş & Baykal 2022).

In modern times these celebrations have also become sites of negotiation between tradition and modernity. Rural emigration and the rise of heritage tourism have transformed the festivals' functions (Haberal 2013; Akbaş & Baykal 2022). Local authorities now promote events like the annual Kadırga Otçu Festival on the Gümüşhane–Trabzon border and the Kafkasör Highland Festival in Artvin, drawing thousands of visitors each season (Gümüşkoza 2024; Gündem Artvin 2024). Ayder (Rize) similarly blends highland customs with mountain wellness tourism. These processes revive local pride but also risk commodifying tradition, so communities curate the festivals carefully to preserve authenticity and core symbolism (Şışman 2010). Although scholars have noted the cultural importance of highland festivals, there is little analysis of how these rituals function to maintain social cohesion under modern pressures.

This research adopts a symbolic-interpretative cultural sociology framework. It draws on Émile Durkheim's concept of collective effervescence (Durkheim 1995) to explain how ritual gatherings generate intense communal energy and solidarity. Pierre Bourdieu's notion of habitus (Bourdieu 1977) highlights how embodied dispositions reproduce cultural traditions, while Clifford Geertz's interpretative approach (Geertz 1973) frames festivals as systems of meaningful symbols. Erving Goffman's dramaturgical perspective (Goffman 1956) treats festival events as staged social interactions. Together, these lenses illuminate highland festivals as ritual sites of social reproduction and identity affirmation.

The aim of this paper is twofold. First, explore the historical roots and contemporary transformations of *yayla* festival culture in Türkiye's eastern Black Sea uplands. Second, as the main aim, show how an interpretative cultural

sociological lens reveals the role of these evolving rituals in sustaining communal solidarity and cultural continuity under modernising pressures. Based on ethnographic fieldwork at three highland sites – the Kadirga (Gümüşhane), Ayder (Rize) and Kafkasör (Artvin) uplands – the study examines how these summer celebrations continue to function as symbolic performances of community and identity. In doing so, it contributes to literature on ritual and local identity by arguing that even amid globalising forces, these festivals balance tradition and modernity while sustaining regional cohesion.

This article is structured as follows: first, the historical background of transhumance is reviewed; next, the analysis turns to current major highland festivals in Gümüşhane, Rize, and Artvin; and finally, their cultural significance for community cohesion is assessed.

## Historical Context

For centuries, the upland plateaux of Türkiye's Eastern Black Sea region have served as communal summer pastures/highlands (*yaylalar*) for local villages. This transhumant practice – the seasonal migration of people with their livestock to high meadows – was firmly established by the Ottoman era, underscoring the deep historical roots of highland culture. The rugged terrain and temperate summer climate of provinces like Gümüşhane, Rize, and Artvin made these highlands ideal for grazing, and over time communities developed distinctive pastoral economies based on shared management of mountain grazing grounds. Oral histories and folk narratives attest that the highland tradition was crucial for both subsistence and the continuity of local culture, helping sustain remote populations economically while reinforcing communal identity (Şışman 2010). Highland life thus became deeply ingrained in regional culture long before any formal policies intervened.

Under Ottoman rule, imperial authorities took note of these vibrant highland communities and even sought to regulate them. During the Ottoman period, one of the most controversial issues among the public was the highlands. The main reason for these disagreements concerned the right to use the highlands. Archival records show that a special “pasture/highland tax” (*yaylak vergisi*) was levied on those using the high summer pastures (Karaman 2020), signalling the empire's administrative reach into mountain life. At

the same time, the highlands remained a robust vernacular sphere of cultural and spiritual practice. Seasonal gatherings on the *yayla* often coincided with religious holidays and agricultural cycles: villagers would organise festive rituals that included communal prayers, animal sacrifices and the sharing of sacrificial feasts. Such events wove spiritual devotion into pastoral life, merging sacred rites with the rhythms of herding and harvest. This era illustrates how *yayla* culture functioned not only as an economic strategy but also as a rich ritual domain nurturing social cohesion. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, this traditional way of life was confronting the forces of modernisation that followed the end of the empire.

The establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923 brought an ambitious programme of modernisation that reached even the remote highland villages. New roads, schools and clinics were introduced into mountainous areas, gradually linking once-isolated pastures to the lowland towns and urban centres. State-driven agricultural reforms and land registration efforts began to formalise land use, challenging the informality on which transhumant communities had relied. Over the mid-twentieth century, improving education and employment opportunities in the cities accelerated rural emigration from the Eastern Black Sea highlands. Younger generations increasingly left for urban life, and the practical foundations of transhumance were weakened as fewer families tended livestock in the old patterns. Yet modernisation did not mark the end of *yayla* culture. Many highland communities adapted creatively: core social rituals and summer reunions persisted, providing a temporal anchor each year that drew kin networks back to the ancestral highlands. Annual highland festivals became homecoming events for families now scattered between villages and cities, helping to reaffirm a shared sense of place and heritage despite the pressures of change (Şışman 2010). In this way, the highland celebrations acted as resilient cultural touchstones even as daily life was transformed.

By the latter part of the twentieth century, the Black Sea highlands experienced a notable cultural revival under new social and economic conditions. On one hand, Turkey's rapid urbanisation and the rise of mass tourism sparked a renewed public appetite for "authentic" local traditions, including the summer highland festivals. Local authorities and businesses soon recognised the economic potential of these festivities and began to sponsor and promote them as regional attractions, seeing in them a driver for rural development and heritage tourism. Government support and commercial interest gradu-

ally transformed many highland festivals from modest, insular gatherings into larger public spectacles oriented towards outside visitors (Haberal 2013). In some cases, most plateaus were even earmarked as potential tourism hubs on the strength of their festival culture (Sezer 2015), reflecting the reimagining of highland culture as a marketable asset. One outcome of this period was a conscious rebranding of highland celebrations for broader audiences. Organised tour packages, professional sound stages and vigorous marketing campaigns became common, introducing a new standardisation to festival programmes and performances. Indigenous dances, music and costumes were increasingly presented as folkloric shows for spectators, a trend that encouraged “folklorisation” of local culture. This process risked homogenising the distinct practices of each highland, yet it also created opportunities to showcase the region's intangible cultural heritage on national and international stages. In short, the late 20<sup>th</sup>-century revival both commodified and elevated *yayla* traditions, as highland communities negotiated how to share their culture with the world without losing its essence.

Today, the highland festivals of Gümüşhane, Rize and Artvin exemplify the continuing tension – and interplay – between tradition and modernity. On one hand, improved transport links and digital media have made these once-remote celebrations far more accessible to outsiders than ever before. Tourists now travel long distances to attend, and images or live streams of horon dances and bull-wrestling contests can be circulated globally online within moments. On the other hand, local organisers and villagers are keen to preserve the cultural essence of their *yayla* festivals and resist any erosion of meaning. Time-honoured elements remain central. For instance, communities still offer prayers for plentiful harvests and favourable weather, sacrifice animals to feed all attendees, perform exuberant circle dances to the sharp tones of the *kemençe* fiddle or *tulum* bagpipe, and uphold an ethos of open-handed hospitality. All these practices endure as defining features of the highland festivals. (Şışman 2010; Haberal 2013). These practices maintain the spiritual and communal ethos that has characterised the highland gatherings for generations. At the same time, younger community members are finding new ways to engage with and reinterpret their heritage. Ethnographic observations suggest that many youths now see the annual highland festival as both a cherished link to their ancestors and a marker of cultural distinctiveness in an ever-globalising world (Haberal 2013; Akbaş & Baykal 2022). In the age of Instagram and You-

Tube, tech-savvy participants actively document and broadcast the festivities, turning local rituals into hybrid events that are experienced in person but also shared virtually with wider audiences. This blending of customary practice with digital media exposure epitomises the complexity of contemporary highland culture. Some traditions are deliberately revived or accentuated as heritage performances for the benefit of tourists and diaspora audiences, while other aspects evolve organically to meet the changing social needs of the community itself (Zaman 2007). The result is a dynamic cultural field in which old and new continually reshape one another, ensuring that the highland festivals remain both a celebration of the past and a conversation with the present.

Tracing this genealogy – from pastoral subsistence through imperial oversight, Republican reform, heritage tourism and digital-age adaptation – provides essential context for the analysis that follows. It shows how each era's pressures have reshaped but never erased the festival's core role: sustaining communal bonds and collective identity. Understanding this layered history will inform how we interpret the case studies from Gümüşhane, Rize and Artvin. Each locale's celebration can then be seen as a particular instantiation of the broader pattern by which tradition and modernisation intertwine.

## Theoretical Framework

Drawing on an interpretative cultural sociology approach, this study employs insights from classical sociological theorists to illuminate the communal, performative, and symbolic dimensions of highland festivals. Concepts from Émile Durkheim, Pierre Bourdieu, Clifford Geertz, and Erving Goffman are applied to understand these events as rituals that generate social cohesion, arenas of cultural reproduction, meaning-laden texts, and stages for identity performance. These perspectives, complemented by Turkish scholarship on the Black Sea region's highland traditions (Şışman 2010; Yılmaz 2018; Kaya & Yılmaz 2018, 2024), provide a nuanced framework for analysing how highland festivals affirm shared values and adapt to modern influences.

Durkheim's work on religious and ceremonial life provides a valuable starting point. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Durkheim 1995), Durkheim introduces the concept of "collective effervescence" to describe how communal gatherings generate intense emotional energy that fosters a sense

of unity and shared identity. At Black Sea highland festivals, communal music, dance, and rituals similarly reaffirm social bonds. Also Durkheim's notion of "mechanical solidarity" aptly characterises these homogenous communities bound by kinship and tradition.

Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) concept of "habitus" offers another analytical lens to explain how individuals internalise and enact enduring cultural norms. Highland festivals are key sites for reproducing habitus: children witness and participate in dances like the horon, learn local dialects, and adopt communal values integral to highland life. Bourdieu's "forms of capital" (economic, social, cultural) are also at play in these events: economic capital accrues through festival-driven tourism; social capital is reinforced via networks formed at these gatherings; and cultural capital is embodied in local knowledge (expertise in regional music, dance, and cuisine) that distinguishes insiders from outsiders.

Clifford Geertz's (1973) interpretative anthropology emphasises "thick description" to unpack the layered meanings in cultural acts, a method that reveals the multi-vocal nature of Black Sea highland festivals. While these celebrations commemorate pastoral traditions, they also function as stages for complex social relations, negotiations of power, and articulations of identity. A single dance performance might simultaneously signal intergenerational continuity, religious devotion, and an invitation for tourist engagement. Through this interpretative lens, the festivals' gestures, music and rituals emerge not as mere aesthetics but as symbolic vehicles for meaning-making.

Erving Goffman's (1956) dramaturgical perspective – comparing social interaction to theatrical performance – is particularly relevant for understanding how festival participants "perform" cultural identity. The festival stage is set against a mountainous backdrop, and participants assume roles in dances, processions or communal feasts. Goffman's notions of "front stage" and "back stage" illuminate the conscious public presentation of tradition to outsiders versus the backstage realities of identity work. For instance, while organisers outwardly emphasise harmony and cultural authenticity, behind the scenes they focus on practical concerns – sponsorship and debates over how traditions should be enacted.

The synergy of these theoretical frameworks provides a holistic view. Durkheim highlights collective emotional and moral dimensions; Bourdieu emphasises embodied dispositions and power relations; Geertz adds interpretative depth, and Goffman illuminates interactional and performative aspects.

Together, these perspectives offer a layered understanding of how highland festivals in Gümüşhane, Rize and Artvin are at once sites of cultural continuity, social negotiation and communal display. Similarly, recent Turkish sociological studies (Sezer 2015; Somuncu & Ceylan 2015; Yilmaz 2018; Kaya & Yilmaz 2018; Akbaş & Baykal 2022; Kaya & Yilmaz 2024) reinforce these insights, showing that global and local forces intersect in the region's cultural practices, echoing Giddens's (1991) observation that tradition is continually reworked in modern conditions.

Overall, integrating these perspectives into a cultural sociological framework provides a theoretical context for understanding and interpreting how highland festivals create collective solidarity in settings of social change and serve as living repositories of cultural heritage.

## Methodology

Between 2023 and 2025, ethnographic fieldwork was conducted at three major annual highland festivals in Türkiye's Eastern Black Sea region: the Kadırğa festival (Gümüşhane), the Ayder summer festival (Rize) and the Kafkasör festival (Artvin). The researcher used immersive participant observation at each event, actively taking part in communal rituals, music and dances to gather qualitative data on local practices beyond surface impressions. No formal interviews or surveys were conducted; instead, multiple visits to the festival sites, their associated city centres, and nearby villages (including outside the festival season to observe off-season usage and atmosphere) allowed for extended observation and informal conversations with festival-goers and local residents. These observations and informal interactions formed the primary data, recorded in detailed fieldnotes and a reflexive field journal. While participant observation provided rich qualitative data, the absence of structured interviews or surveys means the findings rely mainly on fieldnotes and informal accounts. This limitation suggests caution in generalising beyond the observed communities.

In parallel, relevant case studies and ethnographic accounts of Black Sea highland culture (e.g., Şışman 2010; Haberal 2013; Sezer 2015; Somuncu & Ceylan 2015; Yilmaz 2018; Kaya & Yilmaz 2018; Mercan et al. 2020; Akbaş & Baykal 2022; Kaya & Yilmaz 2024) were reviewed. This secondary literature contextualised the field findings within broader cultural and historical patterns.

This immersive approach prioritised “thick description” (Geertz 1973), documenting not only visible activities (such as circle dances, communal prayers and feasts) but also their symbolic meanings and emotional resonance. Throughout the fieldwork, the researcher maintained a reflexive stance, critically considering how their participation might influence interpretations of cultural behaviour. Following Bourdieu’s notion of “participant objectivation” (2003), the researcher positioned themselves as both an insider and an analyst, ensuring that deep immersion did not compromise analytical clarity. This self-aware, embodied engagement aligns with interpretative traditions of insider research (Wacquant 2004).

For data analysis, fieldnotes and journals were systematically coded to identify emergent themes and patterns. Interpretation was guided by an interpretative cultural sociology lens drawing on classical sociological perspectives. For instance, Durkheim’s concept of “collective effervescence” (1995) elucidated the shared emotional energy at peak ritual moments, while Bourdieu’s focus on habitus and embodied practice (2003) explained how ingrained dispositions were reproduced through festival traditions. Similarly, Geertz’s interpretative approach (1973) helped decode the multilayered “web of meanings” in performances, and Goffman’s dramaturgical frame (1956) cast the festivals as social stages for enacting communal identity before insiders and outsiders. Field findings were triangulated with published research on highland festivals and transhumance in the region (e.g., Şışman 2010; Haberal 2013; Fettahoğlu Şahin et al 2013; Somuncu & Ceylan 2015; Mercan et al. 2020; Kaya & Yılmaz 2024) to corroborate observed patterns and situate each case within wider regional trends, thereby strengthening the study’s validity and depth. This combination of immersive observation, findings of other researchers, and theoretical analysis provides in-depth insight into how highland festivals function as sites of community performance, collective effervescence and cultural symbolism in contemporary Türkiye.

## Case Analysis

The highland festivals of Gümüşhane, Rize, and Artvin exemplify how a shared regional tradition is adapted to different local contexts. Focusing on Gümüşhane, Rize, and Artvin allows an examination of highland festival cul-

ture through three distinct yet interrelated examples. Each province has been selected for its prominent *yayla* celebration, and each festival accentuates a different facet of Black Sea highland culture: Gümüşhane's Kadirga festival foregrounds social cohesion and communal ritual; Rize's Ayder festival integrates environmental consciousness into cultural celebration; and Artvin's Kafkasör festival highlights a tradition of harmonious pluralism. By mapping (see Figure 1) these sites and then exploring each case in turn, we can compare how a common regional tradition is expressed and negotiated under varying social and ecological conditions. This approach accords with our cultural-sociological framework, illustrating how cultural performances are simultaneously anchored in particular places and reflective of broader historical currents.

The thematic cartographic map of Türkiye's Eastern Black Sea region (see Figure 1) locates these three provinces along the Black Sea coast and marks their key highland plateaus (*yayla*) where major festivals occur. On the map black dots indicate provincial centres and red triangles show the highland festival sites: Kadirga highland (on the Gümüşhane-Trabzon border), Ayder highland (in Rize), and Kafkasör highland (in Artvin).

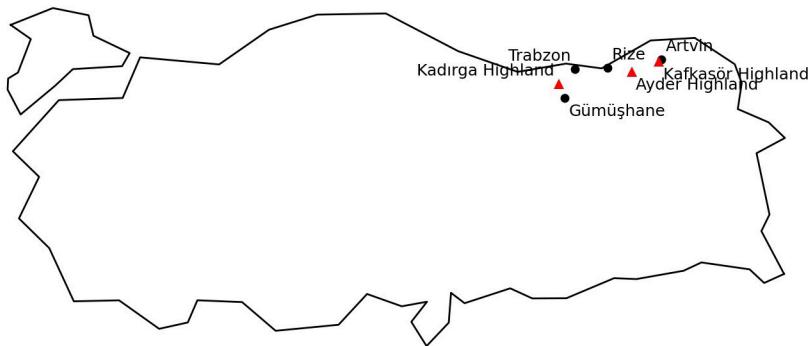


Figure 1. Map of Türkiye's Eastern Black Sea Region showing key city centres (black dots) and highland festival sites (red triangles). Map by the author.

## Gümüşhane: Kadırga Highland Festival and Social Cohesion

*Kadırga yaylası* (Kadırga highland), officially located in Gümüşhane province (though often associated with neighbouring Trabzon), hosts one of the region's most renowned highland festivals. Known historically as the *Kadırga Otçu Şenliği*, this centuries-old summer gathering takes place annually on the third Friday of July, coinciding with the traditional peak of the transhumance season when communities ascend to cooler high pastures. Even today, thousands of people converge on the plateau for the festival, which functions as a focal point for renewing communal ties through music, dance, and shared ritual. The Kadırga festival serves as a communal performance of local identity, in which cultural continuity is both celebrated and reinforced (see Figure 2). Historically, the highland pasture provided not only summer grazing for livestock but also a social arena for inter-village interaction, fostering a robust tradition of collective celebration that persists in modified form (Şışman 2007; Yılmaz 2018; Kaya & Yılmaz 2018, 2024). According to fieldnotes from a pre-festival visit, villagers began arriving days in advance to prepare the site: they cleared the pasture, erected tents and rehearsed ritual dances, underscoring the communal organisation behind the event.

At Kadırga, participants enact time-honoured rituals that blend festive excitement with spiritual devotion. Central to the festivities is the horon dance, performed in large circular formations to the frenetic melodies of the kemençe, a three-stringed Black Sea fiddle. Men and women lock arms and execute intricate step sequences, occasionally punctuating the rhythm with high-pitched cries of joy (see Figure 3). These energetic dances (Kemençe TV 2024) are at once expressions of communal identity and displays of athletic skill, reflecting a physical culture honed by life in the mountains. Another cornerstone of Kadırga is the collective prayer held at noon on festival day: attendees gather at the summit's famous open-air mosque to perform Friday prayers on the grass (see Figure 4). This practice infuses the event with a sacred dimension, transforming an alpine meadow into a site of worship. The coexistence of exuberant dance and reverent prayer epitomises the dual nature of the festival. Beyond its entertainment value, the Kadırga gathering carries profound spiritual and emotional significance for participants. Many visitors include members of

the Black Sea diaspora who return to their ancestral highland each summer expressly for this occasion, underscoring how the festival functions as a homecoming that renews bonds across generations and distances (Şışman 2007, 2010; Yilmaz 2018; Kaya & Yilmaz 2018, 2024). The fieldnotes indicated that many festival-goers emphasised a strong sense of *hemşerilik* (fellowship among those from the same region). In local conversations, Kadırga was often described as an annual reunion where far-flung friends and kin could reconnect with their shared roots. The Kadırga highland festival remains a vital social institution, anchoring a dispersed community to its highland heritage through shared performance and belief. According to fieldnotes from the morning after the festival, the plateau returned to its usual quiet: only a few locals remained to clear away the makeshift stage and scattered decorations, emphasising the contrast between the festival's collective effervescence and the ordinary calm that followed.

From a Durkheimian perspective (Durkheim 1995), the Kadırga festival exemplifies what Durkheim termed “collective effervescence”, the heightened emotional energy that arises from people gathering to perform rituals in unison. The horon dances, communal music-making, and group feasting generate an intense feeling of unity and exhilaration that reinforces social solidarity. Even those who have migrated to distant cities often return for Kadırga, bridging geographic and generational divides as they rekindle a shared sense of belonging. In these moments of collective joy, individual differences fade and the community experiences itself as a cohesive moral unit. At the same time, the festival illustrates how local practices become internalised as part of what Bourdieu (1977) calls the community *habitus*. Through repeated participation, young people learn traditional dance steps, prayers, and customs, gradually absorbing the dispositions and competencies that mark membership in the highland community (Kaya & Yilmaz 2018). Over years and decades, these embodied practices constitute a shared *habitus* – a durable set of learned traditions and ways of being – that helps preserve regional culture even as social and economic conditions change.

## Highland Festivals in Türkiye's Eastern Black Sea Region:



Figure 2. Women wearing traditional clothes at the Kadirga Highland festival. Photo by Gümüşkoza, 2024.



Figure 3. People dancing horon and a traditionally decorated horse on the Kadirga Highland festival. Photo by Gümüşkoza, 2024.



Figure 4. Open-air mosque in Kadirga Highland. Photo by Karadeniz Kültür Envanteri, n.d.

From a Geertzian perspective (Geertz 1973), the vivid practices at Kadirga constitute an enacted “text” of culture, each ritual element embedded in a web of local significance that only a thick description can fully unravel. The communal horon dance, for instance, is more than mere entertainment: it symbolically embodies social unity and historical continuity, as its tightly linked circle and synchronised steps enact a living narrative of shared identity. Similarly, the open-air mosque prayer imbues the highland landscape with sacred significance, transforming an everyday pasture into a spiritually resonant communal space that entwines religious devotion with a shared sense of place. Even the tradition of adorning a festival horse can be interpreted as an emblem of the region’s pastoral heritage and communal pride, a tangible symbol laden with local meaning beyond its immediate spectacle.

Additionally, the Kadirga festival can be viewed through Goffman’s dramaturgical lens (Goffman 1956) as a grand stage for the performance of cultural identity. The public “front stage” of the festival features well-choreographed dances, costumed performers, communal meals, and other visible displays of heritage that affirm a positive image of the community to both insiders and visitors. Meanwhile, behind the scenes (the “backstage”), local organisers, vil-

large leaders, and sponsors coordinate logistics and negotiate interests out of the public eye from managing crowds and scheduling events to balancing religious propriety with celebratory freedom. This duality underscores how community leaders actively manage impressions to uphold tradition and solidarity, even as they adapt the event to new audiences. Finally, processes of modernisation and reflexive adaptation are evident in the recent evolution of Kadırga. Improved roads and digital media have made the highlands more accessible, spurring greater attendance by tourists and widespread dissemination of festival images. While some locals voice concern that commercialisation may dilute the festival's authenticity, many also welcome the economic opportunities that larger crowds bring. In this regard, Kadırga now occupies a delicate middle ground between safeguarding cultural habitus and embracing contemporary demands, a balance characteristic of what Giddens (1991) calls "reflexive modernity". Indeed, observers note that Kadırga and similar highland festivals today serve not only as markers of local identity but also as regional "event tourism" attractions, linking grassroots cultural sustainability to broader developmental goals (Haberal 2013; Akbaş & Baykal 2022).

## **Rize: Ayder Highland Festival and Ecological Awareness**

East of Gümüşhane lies Rize, a province celebrated for its lush green hills, extensive tea plantations, and misty mountainous terrain. Among Rize's many upland pastures, the Ayder Plateau has become one of the most visited and symbolically significant. Ayder's annual summer festival – once a modest highland gathering timed with the transhumance cycle – has transformed into a large-scale event that integrates environmental awareness with traditional celebration (Fettahoğlu Şahin et al. 2013). Historically, families from surrounding valleys would ascend to Ayder in late spring with their herds, and communal festivities marked this seasonal migration. According to fieldnotes from the days before the festival, villagers arrived early to Ayder to prepare the plateau: they cleared trails, arranged event areas and set up stalls, reflecting the communal effort behind the celebration. In recent decades, as road access improved and tourism grew, the Ayder highland festival evolved into a multifaceted affair, featuring not only folk music and dancing but also concerts, craft fairs, and educational workshops on nature conservation. The festival is now positioned

as both a cultural occasion and an environmental forum, reflecting local efforts to respond to ecological concerns while sustaining heritage. This convergence of ecological consciousness and cultural performance is a defining characteristic of Ayder's contemporary festival identity (Fettahoğlu Şahin et al. 2013). Visitors encounter a celebratory atmosphere resonant with Black Sea folk traditions, yet one that explicitly foregrounds the value of the natural environment that makes those traditions possible (see Figure 5). During the Ayder festival, the researcher noted that some local residents were uneasy with the swelling tourist crowds, often remarking that the celebration was "better in the old days" before mass tourism. Nonetheless, the fieldnotes indicated that the festival grounds remained remarkably clean even amid the throngs of visitors, reflecting a collective effort to maintain order and respect for the environment.

One of the unique aspects of the Ayder highland festival is its deliberate emphasis on sustainable living and environmental stewardship. The event's programme (which now routinely spans several days) includes workshops on sustainable pasture management, guided nature walks through the surrounding alpine forests, and public panel discussions on issues like climate change and biodiversity loss. For example, villagers and agricultural experts jointly demonstrate traditional beekeeping practices and organic tea cultivation methods, linking local heritage to ecological sustainability. Such activities aim to educate both locals and visitors about the fragility of the mountain ecosystem and the importance of preserving highland landscapes for future generations. Local environmental non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and activist groups have effectively used the festival as a platform to advocate for responsible tourism and stronger environmental protections. Through informational booths and scheduled talks, they press for policies to control unplanned development in Ayder and to safeguard water quality, forest cover, and wildlife in the Kaçkar Mountains (Fettahoğlu Şahin et al. 2013). These interventions have incrementally turned the festival into a site of grassroots environmental governance, where celebration of nature is coupled with calls for its conservation. Consequently, what was once a purely agrarian communal feast has become, in part, an exercise in environmental education and advocacy, blending new values into the fabric of an old tradition.

## Highland Festivals in Türkiye's Eastern Black Sea Region:



Figure 5. Folk dances in the Ayder Highland. Photo by Türkiye Kültür Portali, n.d.



Figure 6. Ayder Highland. Photo by Türkiye Kültür Portali, n.d.

The prominence of ecological themes at Ayder has fostered what Durkheim (1995) might term a “moral community” around environmental responsibility. Festival participants – whether local residents or tourists – are invited to unite around shared principles of sustainability and respect for nature. In effect, the highland gathering serves as an environmental ritual that symbolically reinforces a collective ethic of stewardship. This communal focus on protecting the upland environment binds people together in a sense of duty towards the land, adding a contemporary moral dimension to the festival alongside its celebratory functions. At the same time, each performance and practice at Ayder carries layers of cultural symbolism that can be “read” in multiple ways. Adopting Geertz’s (1973) interpretative approach, we can view the Ayder festival as a text of symbols about local identity. The folk dances and songs, the marketplace of organic foods and handmade crafts, even the scenery of the green highland itself (see Figure 6), all convey messages about Rize’s agrarian heritage and the community’s relationship with nature. These symbols are not static: a local elder, a returning migrant, or a first-time urban tourist may interpret a given ritual or display differently. For instance, a local folk dance evokes ancestral memories for villagers, represents eco-cultural authenticity for visitors, or even serves as an “Instagrammable spectacle” for younger attendees. Such varied readings generate a dynamic cultural discourse within the festival, demonstrating how traditional forms are continually reinterpreted in context of new environmental values and audience perspectives.

Power dynamics are also at play in shaping the Ayder festivities. Using Bourdieu’s (1977) concepts of capital and field, one can discern how various stakeholders imbue the festival with their priorities. Different groups bring different forms of capital: local authorities and businesses contribute economic and political capital, environmental NGOs contribute cultural capital in the form of expertise and credibility, while local artisans and performers have the social capital of community respect. These actors negotiate – sometimes tacitly, sometimes explicitly – over the festival’s content and emphasis. The result is an ever-evolving programme where certain activities (say, an eco-tourism workshop or a popular folk concert) might gain prominence depending on which stakeholders exert influence and how resources are allocated. For example, if government tourism funding is substantial in a given year, there may be a push for more high-profile entertainment to attract visitors; conversely, if environmental activists are ascendant, educational components may increase.

The field of the Ayder festival thus becomes a microcosm of broader social forces, with the balance of cultural, social, and economic capital determining whose voices shape the narrative of the event. In this way, the festival not only reflects community values but also becomes an arena of subtle contestation, where the meaning of “heritage” and “ecological responsibility” is negotiated among participants with unequal influence.

From a dramaturgical standpoint (Goffman 1956), the Ayder festival “performs” an ideal of sustainable culture, even as it grapples with practical realities behind the scenes. On the front stage, the festival presents immaculate landscapes, organic food stalls, folk dancers in traditional attire, and recycling bins dotting the venue – in short, a harmonious image of tradition and modern eco-consciousness merged. This staged authenticity projects a cohesive narrative of an environmentally friendly community celebrating its heritage responsibly. Meanwhile, the backstage reveals the tensions inherent in this performance. Organisers must deal with infrastructure challenges such as waste management, traffic congestion on mountain roads, and the competing interests of economic development versus conservation. These backstage negotiations sometimes expose contradictions: for instance, efforts to accommodate more tourists (for economic benefit) can strain the very ecosystem the festival’s ethos seeks to protect. Such dilemmas reflect what Giddens (1991) describes as the reflexive negotiation of modernity, i.e. the community continuously balancing growth-oriented ambitions with the imperative of environmental integrity. Ayder’s highland festival thus vividly demonstrates the tightrope that many contemporary cultural events walk: it must remain true to its local roots and ecological message, yet it cannot escape the pressures of commercialisation and popularity that modern success brings. According to fieldnotes from the morning after the festival, the Ayder plateau returned to its usual quiet: only a few locals remained to dismantle stalls and collect litter, emphasising the fleeting nature of the celebration’s collective effervescence.

## **Artvin: Kafkasör Highland Festival and Harmonious Plurality**

Situated near the Georgian border, Artvin is distinguished by its steep mountains, dense forests, and a vibrant patchwork of local culture. The city of Artvin

and its surroundings have long been home to diverse ethnic identities (including mostly Turkish, but Laz, Georgian, and Hemshin), who despite their differences coexist in peace. The Kafkasör highland festival has emerged as a signature event of this province, celebrated for how it showcases regional culture through music, dance, cuisine, and communal revelry (Mercan et al. 2020). The festival's very name – Kafkasör, evoking the Caucasus – hints at the blending of influences present. Each summer, Artvin's residents and visitors gather on the Kafkasör Plateau to partake in a series of events that range from folk dance competitions and concerts to the famous bullfighting tournaments that are unique to this region (see Figure 7). These bullfights are a traditional spectacle in Artvin: unlike Spanish bullfighting, they involve bulls pitted against one another (with no human harm), and the winning bull is celebrated as a symbol of strength and communal pride. Such events draw crowds from across the province and even neighbouring Georgia, adding to the festival's reputation as a symbol of Artvin's spirited and inclusive highland culture. Overall, the Kafkasör festival has become emblematic of what locals describe as harmonious pluralism, the idea that multiple cultural identities can be expressed and enjoyed collectively in a single celebratory space.



Figure 7. Bullfights at the Kafkasör Highland festival. Photo by Gündem Artvin, 2024.

The experience of attending Kafkasör is often described as immersing oneself in a rich tapestry of multicultural expression. On the festival grounds, one

can hear an array of musical styles and languages. A Laz *horon* dance might be performed to the rapid drum and fiddle rhythms characteristic of coastal Black Sea villages, followed by a Georgian *kartuli* dance accompanied by accordions or bagpipes echoing the Caucasian highlands. It is not uncommon to see colourful costumes that reflect different regional styles: some dancers don the familiar Black Sea attire of layered skirts and waistcoats, while others wear garments influenced by Georgian or Caucasian traditions. The culinary offerings at Kafkasör are equally diverse. Food stalls prepare local favourites like *mıhlama* (a hearty cornmeal and cheese porridge) and *Laz böregi* (a sweet layered pastry), alongside dishes inspired by Georgian cuisine. Festival-goers thus quite literally taste the mixture of cultures. Perhaps most striking is how legends and folklore from various groups are openly shared on the Kafkasör stage. Members of different communities recount their folk heroes or ancestral tales – Laz seafarer epics, highland nomad stories, or Georgian love legends – sometimes translating or adapting them to be understood by the wider audience. These narratives inevitably emphasise themes of cooperation, neighbourly coexistence, and a collective regional identity that transcends linguistic or ethnic lines (Doğanay & Orhan 2014; Mercan et al. 2020). In the dances and stories of Kafkasör, cultural differences are not erased but rather celebrated under an overarching spirit of unity-in-diversity. The fieldnotes indicated that at Kafkasör, festival-goers from varied ethnic and cultural backgrounds openly acknowledged their differences while affirming a shared sense of belonging. Sometimes in conversations, it was to hear participants remark, “we are all different here, but part of the same whole” – a statement reflecting the festival’s inclusive ethos of unity amid diversity. The festival arena thus becomes a living demonstration of how Artvin’s people construct a unified regional identity out of heterogeneous cultural threads. Fieldnotes from the days before the festival noted that locals began preparations early: they pitched tents on the plateau, assembled the bullfighting arena and cared for the bulls, underscoring the communal organisation behind the event.

Analysed through Durkheim’s framework (Durkheim 1995), the Kafkasör festival generates a powerful collective consciousness that encompasses the area’s cultural diversity. The shared activities – whether joining a large circle dance or cheering side by side during a bullfight – produce a sense of communal belonging that transcends particular ethnic or linguistic affiliations. This Durkheimian collective effervescence is palpable when hundreds of

participants interlock hands in a dance or sing a chorus together: the emotional energy uniting the crowd affirms a common social bond. Importantly, this bond does not eliminate the recognition of diversity; rather, it provides a higher-level identity (an Artvin highlander, for instance) that contains and respects sub-group identities. In parallel, Artvin's festival life offers insight into the community's *habitus* in Bourdieu's sense (Bourdieu 1977). The repetition of certain highland customs – be it folk dances taught to each new generation, or the yearly cycle of preparing traditional foods for festival guests – inculcates dispositions and skills that become second nature to participants. Over time, children and grandchildren of festival-goers absorb these practices as normal parts of life, internalising a repertoire of cultural knowledge that persists even amid social change (Mercan et al. 2020). This shared *habitus*, built up through years of communal festivity, fortifies local identity: regardless of one's ethnic origin, knowing how to dance the region's dances or cook its dishes becomes a mark of belonging to Artvin's highland community.

Clifford Geertz's interpretative lens (Geertz 1973) further illuminates how Kafkasör communicates and consolidates meaning for Artvin's residents. The festival is replete with symbols with each dance style, costume variation, and culinary recipe carrying deeper meanings about history and values. A Geertzian "thick description" of the event reveals, for example, that a Laz dance performed on the Artvin stage is not only entertainment but also a statement about the region's Laz community claiming its place in the collective story. Similarly, a Georgian song sung in Turkish translation might symbolise the bridging of cultures, signalling that diverse heritages are cherished within a unified public narrative. These symbolic cues, when woven together, paint a picture of Artvin's cultural mosaic and its emphasis on unity rather than division. Local commentators often note that the festival's popularity stems in part from its success in framing diversity as a source of strength, a narrative explicitly reinforced by speeches and stories during the event (Mercan et al. 2020). The interpretative significance of Kafkasör lies in its role as a storytelling venue where the meaning of being from Artvin is continually co-created by participants. Through ritual and symbol, the community affirms a pluralistic identity: one that is inclusive and resilient, having adapted traditional highland festivity into an occasion that mirrors the province's complex social fabric. From a Goffmanian standpoint (1956), Kafkasör also involves front-stage and back-stage dynamics. On stage, diverse cultural groups perform their heritage to affirm collective unity; backstage, organizers negotiate representation of each group.

However, this enthusiastic and lively atmosphere was not permanent. According to fieldnotes taken the morning after the festival, the plateau had returned to near silence: only a few locals remained to dismantle stalls and collect scattered banners, emphasising the contrast between the festival's conviviality and the ordinary calm that followed.

## Discussion

Our analysis of the Gümüşhane, Rize and Artvin highland festivals interprets ethnographic insights to identify common cultural dynamics alongside distinctive local nuances. Many attendees travel from urban centres as part of the Black Sea diaspora, treating the festival as a homecoming that renews ties with ancestral heritage. All three festivals revolve around exuberant communal performances – circle dances (*horon*), traditional music, shared feasts and collective rituals – that publicly reaffirm values of solidarity and collective identity. These events generate what Durkheim (1995) termed collective effervescence: through synchronised song, dance and prayer, villagers and visitors alike experience a heightened sense of unity. In such moments individual differences fade and the community feels like a cohesive moral unit. Our field observations confirm that each festival's core rituals – from Ayder's honed *horon* circles to Kadirga's open-air prayers – spark this intense shared emotional energy. This collective effervescence helps explain why these gatherings endure year after year as anchors of social cohesion.

In Goffman's dramaturgical perspective (Goffman 1956), each highland festival functions as a staged performance of communal identity. The mountain plateau becomes a "front stage" where villagers don traditional dress, perform folk dances and lead rituals that signal an authentic local culture to insiders and visitors alike. Mastery of these cultural scripts – knowing the right *horon* steps, songs and etiquette – confers symbolic capital and prestige (Bourdieu 1977). Fieldnotes noted visitors often gravitating to skilled *horon* dancers. This indicates that dancers and musicians occupy symbolic prestige at the festival. In one instance, a tourist in Kadirga was accompanying the most talented and enthusiastic *horon* dancer, while his friend recorded the event to share on social media. In other words, *horon* masters, those in the most traditional attire, the

best *kemençe* players, and so on, were positioned at the center of the festival, acting as symbolic capital and a focal point.

This front-stage display both unites the community in a shared image and subtly reproduces local hierarchies: elders and sponsors who organise the events accrue symbolic power by defining which customs are highlighted. Behind the scenes (the “backstage” in Goffman’s sense), organisers negotiate logistical and cultural decisions out of the public eye, carefully managing impressions to uphold the festival’s authenticity and communal reputation.

Bourdieu’s concept of habitus (Bourdieu 1977) is evident in how these festivals transmit culture across generations. Each festival acts as a participatory classroom: children and youths learn by doing. Year after year they observe elders offering prayers, performing the dance or serving food, gradually absorbing the dispositions and skills of highland life. Over time these practices become second nature: one’s familiarity with local songs or skill in the horon becomes a tacit marker of belonging. This ongoing socialisation reproduces the community’s shared habitus, embedding values and rhythms from the past into each new generation. Yet because learning takes place in a living event, the habitus can also evolve. For example, a banner with environmental slogans was displayed during a dance performance at Ayder (fieldnotes), indicating youths’ influence on programming. In this way the festivals both stabilise the culture and permit its incremental adaptation.

A Geertzian interpretative lens reminds us that every element of the festival is symbolic: each ritual is a “text” conveying layered meaning (Geertz 1973). For instance, the circular formation of the horon dance is itself a potent symbol of unity and continuity, while the open-air mosque on Kadirga’s summit sacralises the landscape by merging the sacred with the ancestral land. In Rize, the Ayder festival’s integration of nature workshops foregrounds the community’s bond with the environment; in Artvin, the bull-wrestling and inclusion of performances from diverse groups signal a pluralistic regional identity. Even the decoration of horses or the choice of festival songs can be “read” as cultural meaning, telling stories of pastoral heritage, devotion or local pride. These symbolic readings show that the festivals act as dense cultural texts, in which music, movement and material objects communicate history and values as much as any spoken narrative.

Another common theme is the balance between continuity and change under modern pressures. All three festivals face tourism and media interest,

prompting organisers to adapt programmes for larger audiences. We observed that community leaders are generally cautious: they might introduce concerts or contests to attract visitors, but often only after extensive local consultation. Changes initiated and managed by locals (for example, Ayder's eco-education sessions) tend to be embraced as organic evolution of tradition, whereas top-down commercialisation is sometimes resisted as a dilution of authenticity. This dynamic reflects Bourdieu's notion of symbolic domination: when outsiders dictate cultural content, locals feel their symbolic power is undermined. Hence the most resilient festivals were those steered by local voices, blending new elements on the community's own terms. Such adaptive hybridity provokes debate – elders worry about losing sacred depth, youths welcome fresh themes –, but that debate itself is a sign of a living tradition. Across the cases, the core rituals (*horon*, music, prayer, folklore costumes) remain intact, even as their meanings are continuously rewritten by participants to address present concerns.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives provide a multi-layered analysis. Durkheim illuminates how the festivals generate communal effervescence and sacred community bonds (Durkheim 1995). Goffman reveals how participants consciously perform identity on the social stage, managing front-stage impressions and backstage realities (Goffman 1956).

Bourdieu's framework exposes how cultural capital and habitus operate in these settings, showing who holds symbolic authority and how tradition is reproduced (Bourdieu 1977). Geertz's interpretative approach underscores the depth of symbolism: every song, dance or ritual act can carry multiple local meanings (Geertz 1973). Viewed together, the festivals emerge as dynamic social institutions that are simultaneously celebrations of heritage, sites of social reproduction and stages for negotiation. They are not mere static customs but living cultural texts that anchor solidarity and allow adaptation. This discussion suggests that sustaining these traditions requires attention to their emotional and symbolic dimensions as much as to economic or touristic factors.

## Conclusion

Our findings indicate that the Gümüşhane, Rize and Artvin festivals function as communal rituals generating collective effervescence, renewing social bonds,

and conveying shared values. They also show how communities adapt tradition (by adding ecological themes, etc.) while retaining core identity. By uniting villagers, kin and diasporic members in shared performances of dance, music and prayer, the festivals symbolically enact shared histories and values, reinforcing a common identity; this ritual process both binds participants together and delineates cultural boundaries, such that fluency in local traditions becomes a marker of belonging. At the same time, the festival space provides a forum for negotiating change on the community's own terms, as new themes (such as ecological advocacy or popular entertainment) are woven into the celebrations alongside time-honoured customs. This allows communities to adapt creatively to modern influences while maintaining their core heritage.

Drawing on Durkheim's notion of collective effervescence illuminates how the intense shared energy of festival rituals fosters communal unity and moral solidarity. Bourdieu's concept of habitus explains how embodied cultural dispositions – from mastery of the horon dance to local dialect and ritual roles – are reinforced and transmitted at these gatherings. Geertz's interpretative framework underscores the festivals as 'texts' rich in symbols through which local histories and values are communicated across generations. Goffman's dramaturgical perspective helps us see the festival as a stage on which cultural identity is performed, with distinctive frontstage displays for outsiders and backstage negotiations among insiders. Through this layered theoretical lens, the study demonstrates that the festivals' symbolic practices are dynamic processes of cultural reproduction rather than static relics of the past. These modern festival practices reflect a centuries-old pastoral tradition, demonstrating continuity between past and present.

These insights have broader implications. Highland festivals emerge as exemplars of how local cultural traditions can be revitalised even amid globalisation and tourism. The case of Türkiye's Eastern Black Sea communities underscores that communal rituals can anchor identity and place in an interconnected era. Methodologically, the research highlights the value of participant observation combined with interpretative analysis, showing that classical sociological concepts remain vital for understanding contemporary communal life. By bridging ethnographic findings with theory, the research contributes to the literature on ritual and social cohesion. However, this research was based on three case festivals and observational data; future research could include

additional sites or interview-based studies. For example investigating how younger generations engage with *yayla* culture would deepen these findings.

The findings suggest that supporting highland festivals as living heritage may benefit community cohesion. Cultural heritage management must balance tourism development with local community control, ensuring festivals remain inclusive and meaningful to participants. Environmental planning and sustainable development around festival sites are also crucial: protecting mountain pastures, regulating visitor numbers, and funding cultural education all help maintain the intangible skills (music, dance, ritual practices) that distinguish insiders. By integrating cultural conservation with environmental sustainability, policymakers can help preserve both the symbolic vitality of these festivals and the natural environment on which they depend.

## Funding

No funding or financial support was received for this study.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Assistant Professor Artum Dinç for his kind assistance during fieldwork.

## References

Akbaş, Ferdi & Baykal, Füsun 2022. Dünyada Yaylacılık Kültürüne Coğrafi Bir Bakış. *Journal of Geography*, 45: 195–213. <https://doi.org/10.26650/JGE-GO2022-1171902>

Bourdieu, Pierre 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge University Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre 2003. Participant Objectivation. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 9 (2): 281–294. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3134650>

Doğanay, Hayati & Orhan, Fatih 2014. Artvin İlinde Nüfusun Başlıca Özellikleri. *Doğu Coğrafya Dergisi*, 19 (31): 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.17295/dcd.98734>

Durkheim, Émile 1995. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (K. E. Fields, Trans.). Free Press. [https://monoskop.org/images/a/a2/Durkheim\\_Emile\\_The\\_Elementary\\_Forms\\_of\\_Religious\\_life\\_1995.pdf](https://monoskop.org/images/a/a2/Durkheim_Emile_The_Elementary_Forms_of_Religious_life_1995.pdf)

Fettahoğlu Şahin, Burcu; Demirel, Öner & Özkır, Duygu 2013. Ayder (Çamlıhemşin-Rize/Türkiye) Termal ve Yayla Turizm Bölgesinin Termal Koruma ve Turizm Gelişimi Açısından Değerlendirilmesi. İnönü Üniversitesi *Sanat ve Tasarım Dergisi*, 2 (5), 151–164. <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/pub/iujad/issue/32465/360996>

Geertz, Clifford 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.

Giddens, Anthony 1991. *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Stanford University Press.

Goffman, Erving 1956. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. University of Edinburgh, Social Sciences Research Center. [https://monoskop.org/images/1/19/Goffman\\_Erving\\_The\\_Presentation\\_of\\_Self\\_in\\_Everyday\\_Life.pdf](https://monoskop.org/images/1/19/Goffman_Erving_The_Presentation_of_Self_in_Everyday_Life.pdf)

Gümüşkoza 2024. Binlerce Kişi Kadırğa Yaylası'nda Otçu Şenliği İçin Bir Araya Geldi. *Gümüşkoza*. <https://www.gumuskoza.com.tr/haber/20975238/binlerce-kisi-kadirga-yaylasinda-otcu-senligi-icin-bir-araya-geldi>

Gündem, Artvin 2024. *Kafkasör Festivali Takvimi*. <https://www.gundemartvin.com/kafkasor-festivali-takvimi>

Haberal, Hikmet 2013. *Yayla Kültürü ve Yayla Turizmi*. Doğu Karadeniz Kalkınma Ajansı – Doğu Karadeniz Belediyeler Birliği - Kalkınma Bakanlığı.

İstanbul Ticaret Odası 1997. *Karadeniz Bölgesinde Yayla Turizminin Geliştirilmesi, Bölgesel Gelişme ve Çevreye Uyumlu Yapılışma*. İstanbul: Mega Ajans.

Karadeniz Kültür Envanteri n.d. Kadırğa Yaylası Üstü Açık Cami. <https://karadeniz.gov.tr/kadirga-yaylası-ustu-acik-cami-2/#prettyPhoto>

Karaman, Oktay 2020. Osmanlı Devleti'nde Yaylalardaki Anlaşmazlıklar (1858–1918). *Jass Studies-The Journal of Academic Social Science Studies*, 82: 411–420. <http://dx.doi.org/10.29228/JASSS.46575>

Kaya, Mutlu & Yılmaz, Cevdet (2018). Kültür Coğrafyası ve Kültürel Miras Açısından Doğu Karadeniz'de Otçu Göçü Geleneği ve Kadırğa Otçu Şenlikleri. *Türk Coğrafya Dergisi*, 71: 69–79. <https://doi.org/10.17211/tcd.454455>

Kaya, Mutlu & Yılmaz, Cevdet 2024. Mythological Foundations of Highland Festivals: The Case of The Kadırğa Otcu Festival. *Journal of Geography*, 48: 17–31. <https://doi.org/10.26650/JGEOG2024-1233423>

Kemençe TV 2024. Kadırğa Yayla Şenlikleri. *Youtube*. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dy0qPW\\_Wbn0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dy0qPW_Wbn0)

Mercan, Mustafa; Yücel, Mehmet & Sanal, Şule 2020. Artvin İli Folklorunda Boğa Güreşi Festivalları. *Mersin Üniversitesi Tip Fakültesi Lokman Hekim Tip Tarihi ve Folklorik Tip Dergisi*, 10 (3): 317–326. <https://doi.org/10.31020/mutftd.682357>

Sezer, İbrahim 2015. Doğu Karadeniz'de Gelişme Potansiyeli Yüksek Bir Yayla Turizm Merkezi: Kulakkaya Yaylası. *Doğu Coğrafya Dergisi*, 20 (34): 89–114. <https://doi.org/10.17295/dcd.21997>

Somuncu, Mehmet & Ceylan, Serdar 2015. Folk Music, Local Dances and Summer Pasture Festivals in Rural Areas of the Eastern Black Sea Region, Turkey. *Coğrafi Bilimler Dergisi*, 13 (2): 79–92. [https://doi.org/10.1501/Cogbil\\_0000000165](https://doi.org/10.1501/Cogbil_0000000165)

Şişman, Bekir 2007. Karadeniz Yöresinde Yaşayan Kemençeli Âşıklık Geleneği. *Uluslararası Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi*, pp. 210–224. <https://www.sosyalarastirmalar.com/articles/minstrelsy-tradition-with-fiddle-in-the-black-sea-region.pdf>

Şişman, Bekir 2010. Kültürel, Yapisal ve İşlevsel Açıdan Doğu Karadenizde Yaylacılık ve Yanya Şenlikleri (Hıdırnebi ve Kadırbaş Yayıları Örneği). *Uluslararası Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi*, pp. 549–559. <https://www.sosyalarastirmalar.com/articles/kltrel-yapsal-ve-levsel-adan-dou-karadenizde-yaylaclk-ve-yanya-enlikleri-hdr-nebi-ve-kadrga-yaylalar-rnei.pdf>

Türkiye Kültür Portalı n.d. Ayder Yayıları - Rize. Rize İl Kültür ve Turizm Müdürlüğü. <https://www.kulturportali.gov.tr/turkiye/rize/gezilecekyer/ayder-yaylasi>

Wacquant, Loïc J. D. 2004. *Body and Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Yılmaz, Onur 2018. Doğu Karadeniz Kemençecilik Geleneğinde Yöresel Ekoller. *Motif Akademi Halkbilimi Dergisi*, 11(24): 124–136. <https://doi.org/10.12981/mahder.445756>

Zaman, Mehmet 2007. *Doğu Karadeniz Kıyı Dağlarında Yayılar ve Yaylacılık*. Atatürk Üniversitesi Yayıncılığı.

**Vildane Özkan**, PhD, sociologist, Assistant Professor at Gümüşhane University, specialises in comparative cultural sociology. Her current research interests include everyday life, historiography, institutions, protest movements, public sculpture, and symbolic practices, in different cultures. She conducts both theoretical and field-based studies.

email: [vildaneozkan@gmail.com](mailto:vildaneozkan@gmail.com)

ORCID: 0000-0002-1534-9948

# The Laughter in and around Treasure Tales

***Mare Kalda***

*Department of Folkloristics, Estonian Literary Museum*

*E-mail: mare.kalda@folklore.ee*

**Abstract:** Traditional treasure tales can be interpreted as stories of success and failure. Based on the texts in the Estonian Folklore Archives, the current article focuses on the role of laughter within treasure tales and in their audiences. When someone in a legend makes a mistake, misses an opportunity, or gets embarrassed when searching for treasure, the audience may respond with laughter. The laughter heard during storytelling is an ambiguous sign, as both the characters' failure and success can evoke the same reaction. On the other hand, when treasure tales are told as belief legends it is the supernatural being that sometimes laughs, making its presence known by a peculiar laugh that serves as a warning to the human character.

Some treasure tales can be categorised as funny stories by genre. This means that the narratives tend to be taken as humorous based on genre conventions. Indeed, treasure legends can be told for entertainment, but at the same time laughter can conceal a listener's mixed feelings about the content of the narrative.

Human characters in treasure tales laugh in the same situations in which they would in real life. In addition, the fear of being laughed at makes sense in treasure tales because people rather avoid doing certain things and hide their deeds and thoughts associated with treasure hunting.

**Keywords:** Laughter, treasure tales, tale world, belief legend

When telling legends a storyteller sometimes starts laughing, if not outright, then chuckling a bit. In recordings of folklore interviews one can hear bursts of laughter accompanying the conversation. Tales about hidden treasure have also been told to the accompaniment of laughter. What makes participants in these performance situations laugh? Is this a sign that a joke is being told? Is there something inherent in the topic of treasure that calls forth certain emotions in audiences and results in bursts of laughter? A rush of laughter can easily arise not only during storytelling, but also in a lecture situation after the title of the presentation is mentioned. The lecture topic can create ambivalent expectations in listeners, who question whether they are being asked to attune themselves to the real or the fictional, whether the matter is believable or unlikely. In contrast, a talk about the folk calendar, the metrics of runo songs or the history of a folklore collection does not illicit such an anticipatory reaction.

Apart from the fact that in certain contexts the telling of tales about hidden treasure is accompanied by laughter, episodes of laughter also belong to the content of the narrative: characters in the story laugh. As a content element in the story, laughter has a specific function in the evolution of the narrative events.

The present article will focus on the one hand on laughter in treasure tales (based on approximately 6,000 legend variants transcribed in the Estonian Folklore Archives). It will also discuss the bursts of laughter accompanying the telling of treasure tales based on recordings made during fieldwork in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (250 tape recordings in the same archive). The recorded materials allow the researcher to investigate the question of what laughter reveals when telling treasure tales. Based on examples I will attempt to give an overview of the role of laughter in stories, and in the performance situations of these stories, and find out whether there are common elements among reactions arising on both levels.

Among treasure tales collected in the Estonian Folklore Archive over the last few hundred years one can find examples of people laughing, and people being overcome with joy, happiness, or contentment. These situations are supplemented by episodes in which the characters in a story are afraid of being laughed at, or where treasure hunting is undertaken entirely for the sake of a joke. Observations made about the meaning of laughter both in the story realm and in the telling realm lead to the question: in what kinds of legend episode does laughter break out, what is it connected to, and what does it express? However, by posing these questions, this article does not aim to develop hu-

mour studies, because the author believes that laughter does not always signify movement into the field of humour.

Laughter during storytelling has rather different stimuli from laughter on a content level (from the perspective of the fairy tale genre, cf. Röhrich 2008: 199–201). Therefore, I draw methodologically upon the ethnography of narrating, according to which different realms need to be kept in mind simultaneously: interaction between narrators and listeners, during which there is talk of treasure, and the events in the story realm, narrated in a certain situation (Young 1987: 24–37; Palmenfelt 2007). Thus, the story realm is actualised in the narrating, even if the story relays events that might have happened or did happen in the real lives of tellers and listeners. Katharine Young emphasises that folk narratives represent unusual happenings located within the geography of the ordinary world (1987: 56). Ulf Palmenfelt and Lena Marander-Eklund, whose research object is personal experience stories, do not raise the question of the specificity of the story realm in non-fiction narratives (Palmenfelt 2007; Marander-Eklund 2006). Merili Metsvahi (2002) on the other hand examines different levels of narration based on the example of the legend genre, in which case the boundaries between the realms of narrative content and narration are more obvious.

Situations in which the storyteller laughs have caused folklorists and representatives of neighbouring research fields to puzzle over why the informant reacts this way. Storytellers may laugh in certain situations when speaking of events in the fictional world as well as transmitting content into the context of the ordinary world. But they sometimes react in exactly the same way if they get confused or experience ambiguous feelings toward the story they tell. This happens when the distance between the story and the real world of the storyteller and audience is unclear or is not specified.

### **Crisis of enculturation, communication tools, rituals, turning things into a joke...**

The contexts of laughter have inspired a search for explanations and reasons for laughter as a behaviour. Humour researchers define the category of the joke as their research object, focusing first and foremost on the textual characteristics of laughter, less on the audience. However, laughter has also

been extensively studied in humour research (cf. e.g. Morreall 1983: 1–59; Martin 2007: 153–190). When searching for basic explanations of laughter behaviour, both humour and laughter theorists refer to Thomas Hobbes, who, while not offering a definition of humour, characterises laughter as the expression of a sudden feeling of happiness caused either by contentment with one's own action or noticing a lack in another, in comparison to whom one feels better<sup>1</sup> (Hobbes 1985 [1651]: 125; cf. also Heyd 1982: 286, 292). Thus, according to Hobbes, starting to laugh presumes a feeling of triumph or contentment.

Lists of varying, even contradictory, laughter situations begin with Anthony Ludovici's book about the mystery of laughter (1932).<sup>2</sup> Decades later, John Morreall offers a division between humoristic and non-humoristic cases of laughter (Morreall 1983: 1–2; also mentioned by Knuutila 1992: 96–98). Morreall locates the example of the reaction to finding out about winning the lottery in the area of non-humoristic laughter. It seems that there is a similar experiential basis for the emotion that treasure tales describe in connection with finding treasure. In contrast, humoristic laughter accompanies listening to a joke or recognising trickery; other stimuli for laughter could be other people's mishaps or simply a jolly mood, which can give rise to laughter for no particular reason.

Today laughter is defined as an instinctive, contagious behaviour that is subject to unconscious control and rarely occurs in solitude. Laughter articulates speech and is mainly not connected with humour. Speakers laugh more frequently than their listeners, and men try to make their women companions laugh by means of their behaviour, while women, indeed, laugh more frequently than men (Provine 2000, 2004; Panksepp & Burgdorf 2003; cf. Röhrich 2008: 201–202). In this connection, psychologist Robert Provine stresses that he studies laughter without distinguishing it from the mechanisms of humour.

As a folklore genre, the legend does not differ remarkably from ordinary speech. This piece of narrative folklore is woven into conversation when a narrator thinks it is a good illustration of a situation, a way of influencing other participants, advancing the conversation at hand, or if a narrator just wants to share the legend she or he knows. Of course, a legend can be told during a specific storytelling session in which clear distinction is made between the (partially) professional teller and the listeners (Bauman 1992: 46; Andersen 2011; Sobol 2020). Sometimes the participants in a storytelling session laugh because

they consider the narrative to be funny. But on the other hand both the narrator and the listeners laugh because the laughter makes a connection and facilitates more uninhibited communication. It is very likely that some informant's laughter during folklore interviews can be interpreted as communicative laughter.<sup>3</sup> For example, when folklorists asked a woman from Sürgavere, south Estonia about a treasure tale regarding the money pit in her former home village, the interviewee reacted by laughing. She apologised for forgetting the story, but by laughing she bought a bit of time, and as the conversation continued, she was able to recall the legend.<sup>4</sup>

Weighing the various stimuli for laughter, Lena Marander-Eklund (2008) has identified characteristics of laughter that occurs in a conversational context. Through an in-depth analysis of birth stories, she shows how conversational laughter becomes an element of narrative style. Laughter simultaneously provokes and hides emotion: joy and the release of tension, pain and the feeling of loss of control of one's body, fear and helplessness, anger and vulnerability, feelings of embarrassment. A small number of birth stories told during her research project were presented as situational comedy and thus some comical laughter was involved. The laughter accompanying the narration turned out to be a way of transmitting emotions. However, Marander-Eklund also makes a significant observation: the narrator's expression of non-comical laughter does not automatically provoke shared laughter in other conversation partners (Marander-Eklund 2008: 106).

Thus, the narrator of a personal experience story might laugh when transmitting even a non-comical incident (compare the results of R. Provine's observation: the speaker laughs more than the listener). Although she or he is laughing, the listener maintains seriousness because she or he senses the serious tone of what is being conveyed. With respect to the presentation of other genres as jokes and anecdotes, it is considered in good taste not to laugh at one's own jokes (Viidalepp 2004 [1965]: 103). Nevertheless, almost everyone can recall exceptions in which the performer who tells a joke laughs, or situations in which a tale that was not meant to be laughed at evokes an (inappropriate?) jolliness in the listener. At the same time if tales are told mainly for entertainment purposes the humorous rhetoric is used to narrate both personal experience stories and legends, and the audience responds with laughter as expected. In addition to communicative laughter and humorous laughter, the infectious quality of laughter itself can prevail. Eik Hermann (2006: 129) writes that starting from a

certain intensity, laughter generates more laughter, which does not derive from the original joke; those engaged in such laughter would not usually be able to reply precisely about what it is that amuses them.

In addition to comical laughter and contagious conversational laughter we can observe laughter in response to ambiguity in legend content.<sup>5</sup> With respect to the laughter accompanying the telling of treasure legends, it is important to note that all participants, the teller and the listeners, and even the researcher, sense ambivalent feelings toward the topic under discussion. Do people laugh because something is funny or because there is confusion? Perhaps the “dark side” of laughter is revealing itself at these moments and people are laughing at someone or something (cf. Panksepp & Burgdorf 2003: 543).

During fieldwork in Setumaa in 1996, ethnologist Aivar Jürgenson noticed that informants laughed when speaking about religious topics. In his subsequent article, entitled “Seeking Religious Confession during an Enculturation Crisis” (Jürgenson 1997), he explained how such bursts of laughter, albeit funny in themselves, seemed inappropriate to him in his fieldwork (Jürgenson 1997).<sup>6</sup> According to Jürgenson, people were becoming more distant from the wisdom of their forbears, and under the influence of processes of secularisation they tended to laugh at mythological representations (beings) (*ibid.*: 82–83). In Oring’s interpretation the laughter accompanying the narration of a supernatural experience decreases the extent of truthfulness attributed to the event (Oring 2008: 139). Bill Ellis (1987: 54–57) has discovered that interpreters of the urban legend “The Hook” arrived at completely different results depending on whether their sources were journalistic versions of the story or recordings of interviews. When reading printed versions of the stories, reactions of participants in the conversation were not included; in contrast, the audio recordings were accompanied by multivocal chuckling. B. Ellis’ research experience leads us to regard the Estonian treasure tale “Only the same hand that buries the treasure can take up it again” (Aarne 1918 type 64, Jauhiainen 1999 type P 421) as an anecdote and not a “serious” belief legend. Based only on archive manuscripts this tale might be classified as an ordinary legend (cf. example 1).

Example 1. Grandmother kept telling [the story] ... So the old man put the gold there, in the old days there were large grain threshing rooms, with hearths, too, ash hearths. A big oven, the kind where the ash was scraped in [chuckles]. The old man, damn it, put his gold there before

he died. It was said that “the hand that puts, takes”. The old man died [keeps telling the story with laughter in her voice] and the old women dragged him to that place, using his hand to scrape for gold. I don’t know whether he got the gold or not [change in tone of voice]. That’s how Grandmother told it. (RKM, Mgn II 3073 (12) < Simuna khh – O. Kõiva, A. Tael, M. Jallai < E. K., 74 a (1978).)

This might be an example of laughter that discredits content, i.e. it signals not only that the storyteller is not taking the story seriously but considers the described situation to be ridiculous. In all the approximately ten recordings of the same tale found in the folklore archives between 1960 and 1982 one can hear the storyteller’s laughter, not at the beginning, when the teller is biding his or her time so as better to remember by laughing lightly, but during the content of the story, in the description of the attempt to find treasure through ‘the hand that put it there’. The tale made the listeners laugh, something that also happened in interview situations. In contrast, manuscript variants do not reveal informants’ attitudes. One variant of the same story from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>7</sup> describes a search that, it is claimed, really took place. Rhetorical devices in the text, such as reference to a court case (the story is said to have been written down in parish court records), and its connection to a specific person (one “Törsaare papa”) at a specific time (1861) indicate that the story should be taken seriously.

In his essay on laughter in the Middle Ages, Jacques Le Goff (2006 [1989]: 169) emphasises the importance of the historical treatment of laughter: “Depending on the era and the society, attitudes toward laughter, practices of laughter, objects and forms of laughter have been changeable.” Unfortunately, there is no evidence that would confirm decisively that, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century “Only the same hand...” and other – at a first sight – belief legends did not evoke laughter, while they did after World War Two. In the case of old texts, we can find only rare descriptions of how the teller and the audience reacted during the storytelling and what emotions they expressed. August Annist, researcher of Estonian literature and epics, characterised a countryman’s reaction to the recounting of the feats of the epic hero Kalevipoeg as “broad, Olympian peasant’s laughter”, which resembled Kalevipoeg’s own mirth after he threw the water spirit into the bog (Annist 2005: 656). Perhaps some treasure tales have evoked a similar audience reaction.

There are parallels confirming that, for some reason, as long as three hundred years ago, a legendary topic was met with laughter. In the context of the historical study of belief legends Merili Metsvahi quotes Hermann von Bruiningk's work on werewolves in Livonia: "When Thies, called to be a witness [in court concerning another matter], has to swear that he is telling the truth, another peasant starts laughing. When he is asked why, he answers that everyone knows that Thies is in communication with the devil and that he is a werewolf" (cf. Metsvahi 2001: 101). Further, Metsvahi writes that accusations made by Thies himself took a more serious turn in 1691, when even the judges "laughed at him and sent him on his way unpunished". However, it is still unknown why the abovementioned bystander laughed. Information that we have about laughter in the contexts of supernatural matters lead us to consider not only the marker of enculturation crisis (cf. Jürgenson 1997), and various reasons to laugh over a joke, but various other stimuli, including emotions provoked by the level of narration and the story realm. Indeed, it is true that as a behavioural phenomenon, laughter is strongly bound up with context (Martin 2007: 155; Solomon 2006: 79–89). This makes cases in which laughter is embedded or made relevant in treasure tales all the more interesting. Taking into consideration the laughter of the character in the legend we can in certain cases determine the tale type to which the story belongs.

Elliott Oring regards laughter and humour, interconnected with each other, as rhetorical devices in folktales (Oring 2008: 130, 139–140). As already indicated, it is to be expected that laughter is quick to burst out when a tale is being told for entertainment; in such cases serious content is turned into a joke during the performance.<sup>8</sup> Humour then enters into the service of the tale's rhetoric, and the events described in the tale amuse people. Leea Virtanen has discussed tales of haunting and horror that have a surprise ending and has shown how such narratives function as a parody of the folktale (2000: 108–109). During the performance of quite scary legends, both the tellers and listeners sometimes laugh, and we can perceive the using of tales for entertainment. When the narrator of a treasure tale laughs, the interpreter immediately has to begin guessing. Either the partner in the conversation has contradictory feelings, or perhaps taking her of his time to answer. She or he might be concealing a lack of knowledge, either not believing what is being said, or just the opposite, believing it with conviction, but hiding behind laughter in the fear of being compromised. The essential ambivalence of the folktale cautions us about in-

terpreting the laughter that accompanies the telling. Laughter cannot always or univocally be regarded as a signal that the content of the story is not being taken seriously. A. Jürgenson (1997: 80) states that a joke is not the only provocation of laughter. Based on her extensive experience, G. Bennett (1989: 296) claims, “The teller and/or the listener sometimes laugh even when they have a serious attitude toward the topic of conversation and in no way plan to discredit what is being told. Oring (2008: 139) concludes that there are many kinds of laughter, not all of which constitute a response to humour”.

The story of a woman from Põlva parish in southern Estonia who said in 1973 that she had seen gold coins laid in a circle on the ground, creates a double effect.<sup>9</sup> Looking for an explanation of her experience, she pointed to the possibility that the devil’s hand was involved, and then laughed. However, she neither turned the story into a joke, nor did she argue for belief in the devil’s existence (traditionally, the devil is often the guardian of hidden treasure). During the conversation the interviewee revealed that it was her grandfather who had connected his childhood experience with “the old devils” (her grandfather had told her the tale). For the narrator herself, the content of the story remained ambiguous, as can be seen in the conclusion: “Who knows what kind of a thing it is.” However, neither the utterance of the story nor the laughter that accompanied it brought clarity to the matter.

## Who laughs within the story world?

Folktales do not focus on feelings of legend characters in detail, because this would slow down the transmission of events. However, treasure tales do provide some information about emotions: joy, hope, fear, doubt, insecurity, disappointment, envy, greed; emotions that provoke laughter in the characters in the story or seem to amuse those who know the tales.

In the treasure tales, laughter has a significant influence on events in all but one tale type, “The woman from an auger hole” (in fairy tale index, Ee 423\*, cf. Järv, Kaasik & Toomeos-Orglaan 2009: 563). A hidden treasure episode occurs in the approximately twenty variants of this tale type noted in Estonia. The main content of the tale is as follows. A man marries a being (probably an elf) who came out of an auger hole.<sup>10</sup> One day the woman starts laughing in a puzzling manner on the way to church and agrees to admit the reason

for this only on condition that her husband shows her where she has come from. It turns out that what made her laugh was a treasure she saw by the side of the road, which was visible to her because of her unearthly background. Variants of the story differ as to what or who actually points to the location of the treasure: does the horse stumble on the pot or do talking ravens betray its location? Later, when the woman has already gone on her way, the flesh-and-blood man simply has to go and take the treasure out. The one who laughs is the unearthly being who has information that the human character did not have. We could speak of this as laughter at knowing a secret, or even *the laughter of superiority* (Morreall 1983: 6–10; italics in original). Up until then not laughing was the mark of the elf's otherness; knowing a secret that is meaningful for humans makes her act like a human being, i.e. by laughing her reaction provokes her husband to ask about the reason for her laughter, as is common in human relations. The woman reveals the information, which has become clear to her, but in return the man must reveal his secret, specifically where he got his wife.

The laughter of supernatural beings also occurs in other types of treasure tale, but elsewhere it is not as decisive for the course of the tale's events. Once again, laughter becomes a sign of contact with a different kind of reality. A human perceives the difference between this and ordinary laughter, and the unexplained laughter provokes fear. We can construct a dense framework of a religious interpretation around the laughing supernatural being, but what is noteworthy here is that the laughter sounds wrong somehow. This is particularly notable when laughter and crying are heard alternately, as in a tale submitted to a legend collection competition in 1939. L. Vister, a high school student in Tõrva at the time, recorded the tale of a pot of gold in Kullalohu forest.<sup>11</sup> According to conditions set to get the gold, one had to walk back and forth through the forest in the middle of the night. One man tried to fulfil the condition, but he began to hear “ridiculing laughter” and on his last walk heard “mournful crying and moaning”. In 1911 folklore collector Hans Karro wrote down a long tale to send to the Estonian Literature Society, in which the male character had heard, while counting money he had previously found, the sound of eleven strange voices laughing at once.<sup>12</sup> This episode acts as a warning and belongs to the list of other signs of evil among the character's negative experiences. Rather than creating a feeling of fun, this laughter forces the human to be cautious, as if to

alert his senses to an encounter with a feared, dangerous world. Supposedly comical responses elsewhere force mortals to remain serious.

However, the laughter of a supernatural being in treasure tales does not occur only to hinder the activity of the treasure seeker. As was said, in certain situations laughter can definitely be interpreted as the expression of a feeling of superiority, for example of the treasure guardian when laughing as an expression of superiority at human misfortune that happens while seeking treasure. As a result, we perceive a certain variability here in that the guarding creature either gives or does not give a treasure to a person. For example, in a tale sent in 1895 from Kronstadt to the organiser of a folklore collection in Estonia,<sup>13</sup> black men by the treasure fire laugh out loud when they see a human walking on the fire in order to receive wealth. The man had to throw an object into the fire to receive this fortune (by doing this he would be marking part of the wealth as his own). Because he has nothing within easy reach, he walks into the fire himself. After that the guardians disappear, but the man realises that he has actually stepped into a waterhole. Climbing out of the water the man hears a voice laughing and mocking. “Look at the fool! He wanted to get money from us, and jumped into a pond!” The failure of this human’s action is confirmed by the laughter of his ghostly opponents, with the story being textualised with a humorous tone. The treasure hunters’ failure is common in treasure tales, while in a few legend types they are literally laughed at (see Jauhainen 1999 type P 101).

Tale type ATU 763 “The Treasure Finders Who Murder One Another” is (according to the international folk tale index) an example that includes an episode of laughter where ordinary people communicate and mock each other. Three brothers are going treasure hunting, but the oldest refuses to participate hoping to get money without doing anything. He is, of course, ridiculed by his younger brothers, who laugh at him. “Behold the man who hopes to be given money without digging or exerting himself. We’ll see whether it comes true.”<sup>14</sup> But it turns out later that only the oldest brother survives because after finding treasure the younger brothers murder one another so as not to share the money (one of them is stabbed to death and the other is poisoned). After certain twists and turns in the plot, the older brother’s hopes come true.

The situation in which the human character in a treasure tale laughs at a supernatural being is rather rare. When a person has outsmarted a *koll* or devil and dared to rejoice, punishment is not far away, as can be expected in belief legends. In a legend connected with Kirumpää fortress in south Estonia,

the condition for finding the treasure is to bring a foal, a rooster and a child to the spirit of lake Tamula. One man replaced the child with a cat, received the money chest and laughed at the success of his cheating. After this the lake got up and chased him and the man was forced to drop the money chest.<sup>15</sup> However, Leea Virtanen (2000: 112) has discussed the possibility of laughing at a supernatural being in legends from another point of view. According to her, the narration of belief legends includes the narrative ridiculing of a dreaded creature, making it permissible to laugh at a supernatural being.

One of the more surprising research results was that there was no overt ban on laughter in treasure tales. A ban on speaking, for example blurting out a secret, is relevant if the treasure is designated for a specific individual. In particular tale variants laughter is treated as the equivalent of speaking, and laughing is enough to make the treasure disappear. An outburst of laughter is accompanied by talking. In the example above, the human character is unable to remain silent. Rather, strange figures, with whom it is forbidden to speak, are released into the treasure-seeker's path. In one tale, seeing three oxen walking on two feet and one fish carrying another caused the male character to laugh, but he managed to remain silent and serious. However, a chicken dragging a load of hay and a lion protecting baby chicks was too much, and the search turned out to be in vain.<sup>16</sup> Intuitive recognition is built into such concatenations, which John Morreall cited as examples of laughter caused by an absurd situation and a funny series of events (Morreall 1983: 13). According to Morreall, such laughter at an absurd situation does not contain a sense of superiority, nor does it operate in any way to benefit the one who laughs.

## **When something is done just for the fun of it in treasure tales**

As is sometimes the case in everyday life, chance plays an important role in treasure tales. Therefore, it is not uncommon for a treasure hunter to express joyful emotions or laugh in satisfaction when accidentally finding a hidden treasure. The phrase doing something 'just for the fun of it' is used in other legends where the treasure is not found by chance, but the finder has some information about the possible location of the treasure in advance. Then the phrase is used to mean effort without serious commitment that nevertheless

leads to success. In one tale from Helme, a poor villager goes to look for a mattock shown to him in a dream, for the fun of it; the story goes that in fact he finds money there, which he uses for his son's education.<sup>17</sup> Among the texts of a legend collecting campaign from 1939 is a report on treasure found by the folklore collector's forefather. When ploughing a field the ancestor had noticed a juniper tree and a rock, and just for the fun of it dug in that place, finding an iron box "full of gold and jewellery". Later he went to the bank and exchanged the gold for currency.<sup>18</sup> In contrast, in tales oriented toward serious and systematic searching, in some cases reflecting the activities of almost professional treasure hunters, the fortune fails to appear. Ironically, planned activities do not lead to the desired result, although trying just for fun does.

Some treasure tales are essentially warning stories, which, for example, forbid dealing with the devil, or even mentioning his name. Surprisingly, in one story a person dares to cast a spell using the devil's name. According to a legend variant from Harju County in northern Estonia<sup>19</sup> a ploughman sees his neighbour burying a kettle of money and overhears him conjuring the devil. The eyewitness shouts out for the fun of it, "the money for me, the kettle for the devil!" Indeed, a man in a black coach does bring the treasure, the pile of money is left to the man, and nothing worse happens. The one who longed for money has dared to compete with the potentially dangerous devil. Other examples emphasise that there can be no fun when ghosts and spirits (including the devil) are involved. Just as laughter might arise from contradictory impulses, considering something a joke is ambivalent in treasure tales. In some cases, one is allowed to accept suspicious challenges, try them out for the fun of it, and nothing harmful results. In other cases, there is sufficient warning that contact with another reality is out of the question, that there can be no digging for fun, and attempts to search are abandoned. Some treasure tales have been noted in which a person goes to check something out just for the fun of it, almost gains possession of a treasure chest, but is finally deprived of it because she or he has, by accident but unavoidably, violated additional conditions. These three scenarios illustrate the fact that when encountering hidden treasure just for the sake of it, or just for fun, the result cannot be predicted.

## Treasure tales as jokes

A number of tale types are classified as jokes according to folkloristic classification. This might lead one to believe that such tales create fun, and that the laughter aroused when listening to them is humoristic laughter. Of interest in this respect are tale types that focus on a fortunate coincidence: "The Treasure at Home" (ATU 1645), "A Dream of Treasure Bought (Guntram)" (ATU 1645A) and "The Robbers under the Tree" (ATU 1653, the fifth subversion). The "Dream of Marking the Treasure" tale type (ATU 1645B) reflects a fortunate coincidence only at the beginning of the tale. In addition to those already named, "The Talkative Wife and the Discovered Treasure" (ATU 1381) is included here. Arvo Krikmann, researcher of proverbs and sayings, and of folk humour, has characterised the types under discussion here as tales of undeserved luck, alongside deceptive jokes concerning deserved success or failure, and jokes concerning stupidity or deserved failure (Krikmann 2003: 170). According to Krikmann, coincidence does not really belong among the motivating factors in jokes, although it is the activator of events in realistic tales or novellas. However, treasure tales are very much oriented towards coincidence. Even if the story tells of the planned search, coincidence intervenes on a plot level, changing the course of the action. Tales of fortunate discoveries and unfortunate failures seldom acquire a joke-like quality. Thus, one should not be surprised that tale types classified in the area of jokes according to the international classification are sometimes not actually jokes or are not jokes in particular local cultures. That instances of coincidental discovery and unfortunate failure could both illicit laughter is another matter. In the first case this happens because of empathic sharing of the finder's joy, in the second because of a feeling of superiority<sup>20</sup> because no one gets the treasure.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century more archaic treasure tales, that in earlier times were told as jokes, gradually faded from the living tradition, though they were still published in folk tale anthologies. However, the folklore archive always offers surprises, and we can find such a joke recorded as late as 1970. The female teller could not hold back her laughter at the end of every phrase spoken to the folklorist when she told of how an old man had dreamed of treasure and marked its location with excrement. At the end, the narrator confirmed, laughing, that it was a true story, everything the man in the story had dreamed of

actually happened. In this tale we can see the idea of a connection between money and excrement, which has often been of analytical interest. Researchers have been challenged to investigate the equivalence of money and excrement (for example Arnoux 2005; as well as Dundes 1962: 1040–1041; Goldberg & Lewis 2000: 50–51).

In the case of the joke about marking treasure, the imagined situation might have seemed funny to the audience but not to any of the story's characters. Even if a person laughs out of embarrassment or when getting into a pickle (the case of non-humoristic laughter), this is not seen in this case. Laughter about getting into a pickle can appear as a dilemma on the level of the narration: the story might indeed be funny, but when and where is it appropriate to retell it?

The "Dream of Treasure Bought", tale type (ATU 1645A), has traditionally been placed in the same section as anecdotes and jokes in folktale classifications. Does the story make anyone laugh? If so, could there be anything funny to the listener? The main narrative line of the tale is as follows: a nobleman (a common man in variants) is on a journey and falls asleep under a tree. His servant (or companion) observes an insect or little worm creep out of his mouth, go to a stream, and try to cross it. The servant lays his sword (or stick) across the stream and the little animal crosses over. Later the animal returns the way it came and goes back into the mouth of the sleeping man, who then wakes up and says how he saw a place where some treasure is buried. Another man tells of what he observed; they discuss the matter and find the treasure. Studying the Estonian versions of the tale we can conclude that in our cultural area such a story does not function as a joke and has been circulated only as a belief legend. Legend scholars have again and again experienced how laughter as an emotional reaction rings out at the performance of a belief legend. Yet we are not certain about a laughing reaction after listening to this particular story; apart from which the laughter accompanying belief legends does not necessarily derive from humour. The Estonian legend variants of ATU 1645A (consisting of 26 texts in the archive) do not point to anything ridiculous either in, or relating to, legends. Michael Chestnutt (1991) has searched for an analytical explanation of the qualities of jokes in tale type ATU 1645A. Based on Scandinavian variants, he has stressed that a particular kind of logic is expressed through the story.

An episode of laughter also belongs to the content of "The Treasure at Home" (ATU 1645). Laughter in the story realm does not make the events in this story funny in the narration realm. Even if the story appears to be a

joke in certain situations, the narratives collected in the folklore archives still favour the other classification, specifically as a legend. As in the legend-like fairy tale “The Woman from an Auger Hole”, laughter becomes a repeated content element in the variants of ATU 1645. The character in the tale dreams (or it is said) that he finds a treasure on a bridge (or square) in a city (Riga, Tallinn, Tartu, Narva). He goes to find it but nothing happens. He walks around until a townsman takes an interest. During a short conversation, the townsman laughs in a superior way over the apparent stupidity and gullibility of this recently arrived man.<sup>21</sup> During the conversation it also becomes clear that the hidden treasure is actually to be found in the countryman’s farm, which the townsman had earlier dreamed of. The countryman realises how things are, returns home and finds a kettle of money. In a more elaborate version of the story, this is followed by another episode of laughter. Indeed, a few years later some soldiers happen to visit the same farm. They keep laughing and laughing at the message inscribed in a foreign language on the edge of the kettle they see in the farmhouse that says “the deeper you dig, the better you find”. The hints and explanations offered in a laughing tone turn out to be relevant information. If the character in the story laughs, then how do the storyteller and the audience respond? Liisa Kümmel, being a good storyteller, was not struck by laughter when she was interviewed during fieldwork in 1963. She said:

But one time it happened that some Russians came in and wanted something to drink. So, the man gave them something to drink from the pitcher. The men looked on and laughed. He asked, ‘why are you laughing?’ They replied, ‘it says here “take from the bottom, where it’s thicker!”’ So, the man started thinking, what does that mean, take from the bottom, it’s thicker. He started to look around again. He found a great kettle full of coins. That was enough to find himself a wife. That was how it was with money holes.<sup>22</sup>

## Practical jokes inspired by treasure lore

In addition to traditional legends, folklore collections contain stories about how people who take hidden treasure too seriously have been ridiculed. Pranksters tend to amuse themselves at the expense of the target of the joke, taking advan-

tage of the situation in order to laugh at their companions. Laughter is provoked by setting the companion up as the target of the joke; failure seems funny right from the beginning. If the prank misfires for some reason, the hoped-for effect of the joke does not prevail, and no tale is born that can later be told with amusement. The opposite is also true: the butt of the joke does not talk about ridicule unless it is the teasers who fail. Based on John Morreall's example (1997: 37–40) we can assert that the creation of personal (mental) distance acts as a stimulus for jokes and laughter: what happens to other people is funny, but if the same had happened to oneself, it would not have been funny at all.

Practical jokes have been performed on the basis of treasure lore in two ways. One of these is fake treasure. Here coins are scattered in the path of the treasure hunter, or a false money pot is hidden, or a fire is made that might imitate the gleaming light of treasure. In other cases, those who are being teased do not have the intention of getting their hands on the treasure. In such cases, an image connected with treasure lore is activated, for example in order to frighten his companions the joker disguises himself as a horrifying treasure guardian.

Tales that describe the failure of someone's serious treasure hunt can also offer the possibility of jokes and ridicule. For example, in a longer narrative transcribed in 1933 about two passionate treasure hunters, we encounter a well-developed failure story formed of several episodes.<sup>23</sup> Initially the tale develops in the frame of a belief legend: the treasure hunters are hindered by an unexpected heavy storm and beasts are sent by the devil. The tale employs two aspects of the rhetoric of truth used for telling a legend (Oring 2008): the story is connected to a real place and person, and there is reference to a real person who had often spoken of his treasure-seeking adventures. However, the narrative is resolved differently. "Some pranksters made a little fire, rattled broken beer bottles and broke an old pot. Others called old T. [the character's name] out from the tavern to see and listen to how the devil had run off with the money, with a rattling sound, depriving T. of the treasure. This tavern joke was told by an old man named H. H. ..." A long time later, during fieldwork in 1997, the folklorist was told this same practical joke, which was probably a vital part of local tradition concerning treasure buried in a certain place. The characters of this story dug only to make it look as though they had removed a pot of money. They made the landowner angry, indicating that the prank was successful.<sup>24</sup>

In some ways practical joking inspired by treasure lore cancels out tradition because it decisively overturns those episodes in a folktale that have previously

been presented as fact. However, on the other hand, even though they have given the tale a new direction, such changes keep the original tale alive. The evolution of a tale in the community from information relevant to the object of the joke also creates the opportunity for a laugh of superiority: who would believe that treasure fires burn, and ghosts guard treasure? Such people deserve to be ridiculed.

## Conclusion

In tradition related to hidden treasure laughter is expressed both on the level of narration (the teller and the listeners laugh) as well as in the story realm (the characters in the narrative laugh). On the basis of the thematic text corpus of the Estonian Folklore Archive, we can say that in most cases laughter at the narration level does not synchronise with the laughter of the characters in the story realm. Listeners laugh or are amused when the character in the tale is in a pickle, is deprived of the hoped-for benefit or does something wrong. When there is an empathic reception, joy at the character's good fortune is appropriate. John Morreall (1997: 43–44) and Eik Hermann (2006: 149) have called attention to this contradiction in laughter, which breaks out when there is failure but also when there is success. Indeed, treasure tales are stories about finding or being left empty-handed, and the obstacles encountered along the way. The contrary nature of laughter appears in treasure lore, in the situations that occasion laughter. Laughter when telling the tale depends on the context of presentation and the emotional reactions of the participants.

Treasure tales make one laugh if they are told in a funny manner, for example if the main reason to tell them is entertainment. In the case of treasure jokes, the genre issues a licence to laugh in advance. As a genre, the legend flexibly adjusts to different contexts, and so it becomes possible to tell about hidden treasure seriously, or, alternatively, by turning it into a joke, as we have seen in various examples above. If one needs to find an explanation for laughter in a treasure tale and in the narration context, there are more factors to keep in mind than genre conventions. Laughter in a treasure legend might be simultaneously humoristic laughter and a sign of ambivalent feelings. However, laughter endangers the extent to which the narrative can be taken seriously. Laughter might also hide the fact that the topic touches a person deeply.

Alongside the more complicated reasons for laughter, it seems that communicative laughter is a natural accompaniment to storytelling. Sometimes the narrator of a personal experience story laughs when asserting that she or he personally landed in the middle of the events being relayed. In this manner she or he emphasises ownership of what was experienced and is being told. Using rhetoric and other performance conventions, including telling the tale as a joke, the teller can achieve the same reaction in listeners, and all participants in the narrating situation laugh together.

In belief legends laughter is a signal of the beyond. The being who laughs possesses information that is inaccessible to mortals because of the limitations of the latter's senses. Several common beliefs and warnings are also relevant in treasure tales including those that apply to laughter more generally. Hearing suspicious laughter, a human who wants to find treasure has to be careful: there may be a supernatural being nearby, and the human has to decide whether to avoid the encounter or use the chance that is being offered.

Sometimes characters in treasure tales laugh in situations where people would also laugh in their ordinary lives, either at someone else's misfortune, the success of a practical joke, upon seeing a comical array of things (in the case of surprising success), or as a result of discerning the absurdity of a situation. Even if in treasure tales and during the narration of tales the laughers do not coincide, one can nevertheless claim that just as characters are energised by laughter in the story realm, laughter offers a challenge to listeners' senses. There is yet another factor that brings them closer: just like a person in the real world, a legend character leaves something undone or does something secret to avoid becoming the object of others' laughter.

## Acknowledgements

This research was supported by EKKD-III5 "Patterns of emotional development in Estonian culture"; EKM 8-2/20/3 "Narrative and belief aspects of folklore studies" and by the European Union through the European Regional Development Fund (Centre of Excellence in Estonian Studies, TK-145).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In some examinations of laughter, a quotation is formed on the basis of this passage from Hobbes: “Laughter is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves” (see Panksepp 2005: 63). The chapter of Hobbes’ *Leviathan* that makes distinctions between emotions states: “Sudden Glory, is the passion which maketh those Grimaces called Laughter; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves. And it is incident most to them, that are conscious of the fewest abilities in themselves; who are forced to keep themselves in their own favour, by observing the imperfections of other men. And therefore much Laughter at the defects of others is a signe of Pusillanimity. For of great minds, one of the proper workes is, to help and free others from scorn; and compare themselves onely with the most able” (Hobbes 1985 [1651]: 125; cf. also the e-book version at Project Gutenberg: <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/3207>).

<sup>2</sup> I consider contemporary humour theorist Victor Raskin’s evaluation of A. Ludovici somewhat strange, the latter having written about the dark side of laughter along with its light side as if he hated humour (cf. Krikmann 2004: 22–23. Emphasis mine). Jacques Le Goff (2006 [1989]: 169) praises John Morreall’s (1983) consideration of the serious side of laughter.

<sup>3</sup> On psychological and sociolinguistic aspects of communicative laughter see for example Glenn 2008, and O’Connell & Kowal 2008, in particular 163–174.

<sup>4</sup> See RKM, Mgn II 2063 (c) < Suure-Jaani kkh < Sürgavere – I. Rüütel, A. Väljaots < female informant, born 1898 (1971). This woman, 83 years old at the time, told the story with a significant personal connection because she had participated in the attempt to find the treasure. Here and hereafter in the current article, the informants of archive texts are anonymised in cases where the publication of the narrator’s name does not seem ethical.

<sup>5</sup> On the essential ambiguity of legends see Lindahl 1986.

<sup>6</sup> In moments of leisure during shared fieldwork, folklorists have discussed the backgrounds of their conversation partners’ laughter. Generally, such discussions are undocumented, although some information has been recorded in the fieldwork diaries in the Estonian Folklore Archives.

<sup>7</sup> EKS 4°5, 256 (3) < Rõuge kkh – W. Luik (1888/1889).

<sup>8</sup> Eda Kalmre (2010) has studied the issue, drawing examples from contemporary legends.

<sup>9</sup> RKM, Mgn II 2378 (d) < Põlva kkh – I. Rüütel, O. Kiis < female informant, born 1901 (1973).

<sup>10</sup> According to the international classification of folk tales, the core of ATU 826 is the devil writing a list of sins on a cowhide, which is witnessed by a holy man. Fairy tale researcher Risto Järv (2000: 113) indicates that “researchers have classified this content as belonging to a legend, though it also reminds one of fairy tales”. In the current enquiry we are interested in tales where ATU 826 and the revelation of the location of the treasure are combined (cf. also Aarne 1918, tale type 59).

<sup>11</sup> ERA II 237, 56/7 (9) < Helme khh – L. Vister < Jaak Vister, 58 years (1939).

<sup>12</sup> EKS 48 XXIII, 21/5 (95) < Palamuse khh – H. Karro (1911).

<sup>13</sup> E 15377/84 (3) < Kroonlinn – D. F. Roosipuu (1895).

<sup>14</sup> E 13966/9 (4) < Koeru khh – O. Hintzenberg < Aadu Tomberg (1894).

<sup>15</sup> E 15516 < Põlva khh – J. Melzov (1895).

<sup>16</sup> ERA II 243, 595/7 (15) < Hargla khh – S. Suur < Hipp Suur, 74 years (1939).

<sup>17</sup> E 12229/30 (24) < Helme khh – J. Karu (1894).

<sup>18</sup> ERA II 222, 315/6 (6) < Kuusalu khh – E. Sammelselg < Aleksander Sammelselg, 60 years (1939).

<sup>19</sup> E 53125 (43) < Keila khh – P. Berg < Julius Rääp (1922).

<sup>20</sup> On humour deriving from a feeling of superiority see Heyd 1982: 291–292; Morrell 1983: 6–8; Knuuttila 1992: 106–107; Krikmann 2004: 28–29.

<sup>21</sup> The scene containing this story was staged in a similar manner at the Emajõe Summer Theatre open-air performance of *Money* (seen 7 August 2010 in Tartu). The man from the city relates the advice he got in his sleep and laughs it off as irrelevant.

<sup>22</sup> See RKM, Mgn II 889 (d) < Tori khh (1963).

<sup>23</sup> ERA II 58, 257/67 (7) < Paistu khh – M. Sarv < Marie Noorkukk, 50 years (1933).

<sup>24</sup> EFA I 21 (4) < Kanepi khh, Kõlleste v – K. Tamm < male informant, 86 years (1997).

## Sources

Estonian Folklore Archives, ELM:

E – the manuscripts of M. J. Eisen, 1880–1934

EFA – ELM folklore manuscripts from 1996 onwards

EKS – Estonian Literary Society folklore manuscripts, 1872–1924

ERA – Estonian Folklore Archives, 1927–1944

RKM – Estonian State Literary Museum folklore manuscripts, 1945–1999

RKM, Mgn II – ELM audio recordings of the, 1953–1993

## References

Aarne, Antti 1918. *Estnische Märchen- und Sagenvarianten. Verzeichnis der zu den Hurt'schen Handschriftsammlungen gehörenden Aufzeichnungen*. FF Communications 25. Hamina: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia.

Andersen, Lene 2011. Contemporary Storytellers and Traditional Folk Narratives in Denmark. *Fabula*, 52 1/2: 43–57.

Annist, August 2005. *Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwaldi "Kalevipoeg"* (The Epic *Kalevipoeg* by F. R. Kreutzwald). Eesti Kirjandusmuuseum. Tallinn: Eesti Keele Sihtasutus.

Arnoux, Dominique J. 2005. *Feces*. Alain de Mijolla & Gale Cengage (eds.). *International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*, Vol. 1. A–F. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA.

ATU = Uther, Hans-Jörg 2004. *The Types of International Folktales. A Classification and Bibliography based on the System of Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson*. FF Communications, 284 & 285. Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia.

Bauman, Richard 1992. *Folklore, Cultural Performances, and Popular Entertainments*. New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bennett, Gillian 1989. "Belief Stories": The Forgotten Genre. *Western Folklore* 48 (4): 289–311.

Chesnutt, Michael 1991. Nordic Variants of the Guntram Legend. *Arv. Nordic yearbook of folklore* 47: 153–165.

Dundes, Alan 1962. Earth-Diver: Creation of the Mythopoeic Male. *American Anthropologist*. New Series 64 (5): 1032–1051.

Ellis, Bill 1987. Why are Verbatim Texts of Legends Necessary? Gillian Bennett, Paul Smith & J. D. A. Widdowson (eds). *Perspectives on Contemporary Legend* 2. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, pp. 31–60.

Glenn, Philip 2008. *Laughter in Interaction*. Studies in Interactional Sociolinguistics 18. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hermann, Eik 2006. Naeru vääristamine: mäng, mänglevus, nali (Valuing Laughter: Play, Playfulness, Joke), *Vikerkaar*, 1–2: 126–150.

Heyd, David 1982. The Place of Laughter in Hobbes's Theory of Emotions. *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 43 (2): 285–295.

Hobbes, Thomas 1985. *Leviathan*. London: Penguin Classics.

Jauhainen, Marjatta 1999. *Suomalaiset uskomustarinat. Tyypit ja motiivit*. Tarkistettu ja laajennettu laitos Lauri Simonsuuren teoksesta *Typen- und Motivverzeichnis der finnischen mythischen Sagen* (FF Communications 182. Helsinki 1961). Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura.

Järv, Risto 2000. "Vana-aolidsõq jutuq kaasajal – kogumiskogemus Orava külas Siberis (Old Stories in Contemporary Times: a Collecting Experience in Orava Village

in Siberia). *Mäetagused*, 15: 98–123 (<http://www.folklore.ee/tagused/nr15/jarv.htm>).

Järv, Risto; Kaasik, Mairi & Toomeos-Orglaan, Kärrí 2009 (eds.). *Eesti muinasjutud I:1* (Estonian Fairy tales). *Imemuinasjutud*. Monumenta Estoniae antiquae V. Fabulae populares Estonicae. Tartu: Eesti Kirjandusmuuseumi Teaduskirjastus.

Jürgenson, Aivar 1997. Enkulturatsiooni kriisi usutunnistust otsides (Looking at the Crisis of Enculturation: Thoughts while Transcribing Recordings of an Expedition). *Mäetagused*, 3: 79–91 (e-version <http://www.folklore.ee/tagused/nr2/seto.htm>).

Kalmre, Eda 2010. Belief Tales and Humour. Presentation at the Conference of the Working Group of Belief Narratives Network in St. Petersburg, May 17–19, 2010. Manuscript.

Knuutila, Seppo 1992. *Kansanhuumorin mieli. Kaskut maailmankuvan aineksena* [Mentalities of folk humour]. Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seuran toimituksia 554. Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura.

Krikmann, Arvo 2003. Puändita naljandite struktuurist (The Structure of Non-Punchline Jokes). *Keel ja Kirjandus*, 3: 161–177.

Krikmann, Arvo 2004. *Koestler, Raskin, Attardo ja teised: Lingvistiliste huumoriteooriate uuemaist arenguist* (Contemporary linguistic theories of humour). Reetor 4. Tartu: Eesti Kirjandusmuuseum.

Le Goff, Jacques 2006 [1989]. Naer keskajal (Laughter in the Middle Ages), *Vikerkaar*, 1–2: 169–180.

Lindahl, Carl 1986. Psychic Ambiguity at the Legend Core. *Journal of Folklore Research*, 23 (1): 1–21.

Ludovici, Anthony 1932. *The Secret of Laughter*. London: Constable Press.

Marander-Eklund, Lena 2006. The Actors in Young Women's Childbirth Narratives. Kaivola-Bregenøj, Annikki, Klein, Barbro & Palmenfelt, Ulf (Eds.). *Narrating, Doing, Experiencing. Nordic Folkloristic Perspectives*. Studia Fennica Folkloristica 16. Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, pp. 140–157.

Marander-Eklund, Lena 2008. Narratives and Emotions: Revealing and Concealing Laughter. *Folklore: EJF*, 39: 95–108 (e-version <http://www.folklore.ee/folklore/vol39/eklund.pdf>).

Martin, Rod A. 2007. *Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach*. London: Elsevier Academic Press.

Metsvahi, Merili 2001. Libahunt Thiesi võitlused. *Klaasmäel* (Thies the Werewolf). *Pro Folkloristica* 8: 101–113.

Metsvahi, Merili 2002. Inimene ja narratiiv. Püha Jüri legendi näitel (A Human and a Narrative Based on the Religious Legend of St George), *Lemmeleht. Pro Folkloristica* 9: 121–146.

Morreall, John 1983. *Taking Laughter Seriously*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Morreall, John 1997. *Humor Works*. Amherst: Human Resource Development Press.

O'Connell, Daniel & Kowal, Sabine 2008. *Communicating with One Another: Toward a Psychology of Spontaneous Spoken Discourse*. Cognition and Language: A Series in Psycholinguistics. New York: Springer-Verlag.

Oring, Elliott 2008. Legendry and the Rhetoric of Truth. *Journal of American Folklore*, 121 (480): 127–166.

Palmenfelt, Ulf 2007. Expanding Worlds: Into the Ethnography of Narrating. *Folklore. EJF*, 37: 7–18 (e-version <http://www.folklore.ee/folklore/vol37/palmenfelt.pdf>).

Panksepp, Jaak 2005. Beyond a joke: from animal laughter to human joy? *Science*, 308: 62–63.

Panksepp, Jaak & Burgdorf, Jeff 2003. “Laughing” rats and the evolutionary antecedents of human joy? *Physiology & Behavior*, 79: 533–547.

Provine, Robert 2000. *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation*. New York: Viking.

Provine, Robert 2004. Laughing, Tickling, and the Evolution of Speech and Self. *Current Directions in Psychological Science. A Journal of the Association for Psychological Science*; 13 (6): 215–218.

Röhricht, Lutz 2008. “And They Are Still Living Happily Ever After”. *Anthropology, Cultural History, and Interpretation of Fairy Tales*. Burlington: The University of Vermont.

Sobol, Joseph 2020. *Liars, Damn Liars, and Storytellers: Essays on Traditional and Contemporary Storytelling*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.

Solomon, Robert C. 2006. *True to our feelings: what our emotions are really telling us*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Virtanen, Lea 2000. Uskomustarinat – naurun ja kauhun rajalla (Belief Legends – On the Borderline of Laughter and Horror). Vasenkari, Maria & Enges, Pasi & Siikala, Anna-Leena (Eds.). *Telling, Remembering, Interpreting, Guessing. A Festschrift for Prof. Annikki Kaivola-Bregenhøj on her 60<sup>th</sup> Birthday 1st February 1999*. Kultaneito III. Scripta Aboensis 1, Studies in Folkloristics. Joensuu: Suomen Kansantietouden Tutkijain Seura, pp. 108–114.

Young, Katharine 1987. *Taleworlds and Storyrealms: The Phenomenology of Narrative*. Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.

**Mare Kalda** (PhD) is Senior Research Fellow at the Estonian Literary Museum, Department of Folkloristics. Her main research areas are legends (especially treasure legends) and digital folklore.

Email: [mare.kalda@folklore.ee](mailto:mare.kalda@folklore.ee)

ORCID: 0009-0007-0395-4044

# Ostension and Criminal Legends: Contemporary Horror Tales as Part of Online Youth Lore

***Eda Kalmre***

*Senior researcher at the Department of Folkloristics, Estonian Literary Museum,  
Tartu, Estonia*

*e-mail: eda.kalmre@folklore.ee*

**Abstract:** This article examines the phenomenon of ostension and criminal legends in the context of contemporary horror tales circulating among Estonian youth, particularly through digital media. It explores how narratives about “men in white vans,” killer clowns, and Slenderman evolve from online spaces into real-life practices, triggering moral panics and shaping public discourse. Drawing on folklore theory and the concept of ostension, the study analyzes the interplay between oral and digital traditions, media amplification, and participatory culture. The findings highlight how these legends reflect societal fears, identity construction, and the blurred boundaries between fiction and reality in the digital age.

**Keywords:** ostension, criminal legends, urban legends, digital folklore, participatory culture, moral panic, Slenderman, killer clowns, social media, Estonian youth lore

Panic broke out in the small town of Põlva in south Estonia following a viral social media post about a masked man, some two metres tall, who jumped out of a suspicious white van that he had been driving

around the town to kidnap a schoolboy. This incident was one of several similar cases that the local police had had to investigate. The girl who had posted the unsettling warning claimed that her teenage brother had been involved in the incident, and he said that other boys had found themselves in similar predicaments as well. Another scary story that circulated in the town cautioned that criminals attacked lone individuals after dark to harvest their organs. (Harju 2018: 1)

The digital space connects us all in a global sphere of tradition, allowing horror tales and the characters therein from all over the world to be adopted easily into the Estonian context. This article was inspired by recent incidents that supposedly took place in Estonia and rumours based on these putative incidents. Two more public cases even led journalists to reach out to the author of this article for a comment. These incidents, and the horror tales they inspire, share a common framework and recurring characters: evil clowns and men in white vans who abduct children. Another common aspect of these narratives is that they are spread by children or teenagers. The source of these stories about allegedly true incidents was invariably online sites and social media platforms. Journalists reporting on several of these cases, and posts on social media, brought the tales to public attention and even led to police investigation.

In folklore studies, these types of narrative are regarded as contemporary elaborations of the legend genre: they are identified as belief-based contemporary legends, popularly called urban legends. The difference between older agrarian legends and modern urban legends lies in the broader scope and range of themes of the latter, as urban legends draw significantly from real life, cinema, video games, popular culture, and online digital content. The repeating patterns in these tales might reference older motifs but are just as likely to include more recent narrative motifs. They often follow rather humorous plotlines, and the narrative style can resemble that of tall tales (see also Kalmre 2013).

The narrative tradition about evil creatures tormenting children hardly represents the lighter side of folktales. Many urban legends mediate sentiments of revenge, violence, or xenophobia and are inspired by or even focus on fear of a violent death. Scholars of contemporary legends acknowledge that the crimes described in the narratives have indeed taken place, although as narrations they have a traditional structure, repeated motifs, and

are unverifiable, and as such are definitely part of folklore, not the reality (Brunvand 2001: 469; Ellis 2003: 197).

How, then, should a folklorist describe these incidents and narratives? How are they formed and spread? This article aims to approach these questions by relying on the genre specificity of legends and so focuses on the rhetoric employed when covering such incidents in traditional and online media. Another intriguing angle is exploring what is known about the origins of these beliefs, tales, characters and collective online creation (i.e. the interplay of digital and oral traditions), as well as society's reactions to these tales.

## Ostension and criminal legends

Modern digital solutions have become essential in the study of contemporary legends based on practices, their methods of dissemination, and embeddedness in culture. Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi (1983) introduced the concept of ostension, borrowed from semiotics (see Eco 1976: 224–226), to convey the associations between legend, its performance, and real-world practices rooted in belief. Their approach combines several, at times synergistic, levels: knowledge of tradition, perception, discourse, and activity. Dégh and Vázsonyi argue that ostensive activities both manifest and construct legend cycles. Indeed, it has been suggested that contemporary legends are not folk tales or popular literature but forms of social behaviour (Ellis 2003: 10).

An ostension-based approach is usually necessitated by the recurring and symbolic emergence of the contemporary legend tradition on different media channels. This way it is brought closer and becomes more familiar to its listeners, readers, and spectators, shaping their sense of reality and, on occasion, causing them to imitate certain aspects of these narratives. (Kalmre 2013a: 59–60)

Ostension can be divided into different categories, such as pseudo- and proto-ostension, etc. Pseudo-ostension involves a hoax or a practical joke, through which perpetrators enact a legend scenario. Proto-ostension describes situations in which an individual so strongly identifies with the legend that he or she claims it to be their personal experience, in which case the legend acquires the status of memorate. Sometimes a story recounted as an (alleged) experi-

ence of others is presented as a personal experience. While ostensive practices have evolved and proliferated in the contemporary online media sphere, the phenomenon itself is much older and has been characteristic of legends in general. The author has encountered narrators' immersion in the story from the older legend repertoire, such as in speculation surrounding a post-war sausage factory that operated in Tartu, Estonia. Storytellers present their experience as a bridge between the legend plot and the real world, blending stereotypical legend events with real-life events (Kalmre 2013a; see also Metsvah 2000). Ostensive practices both reflect and construct the legend cycles they inspire. The abovementioned public media phenomena have also been described within the framework of moral panic.<sup>1</sup> After panic breaks out in the community, several forms of ostension may independently emerge and start influencing each other.

Linda Dégh (2001)<sup>2</sup> has adopted a separate term, *criminal ostension*, to categorise contemporary sensational legends: gory, tragic, and frightening narratives that spread via media coverage of events along with the opinions, rumours and comments associated with them. The media publicises these narratives, adding details of the practices to known developments. This is how the subculture of stories about murders and murderers evolves, for example. Killers, their stories, and supporting characters in the story become evened out and stereotyped through media and popular rumour, all of which facilitates variation of the legend tradition (Dégh 2001: 428–440).

Pamela Donovan's (2001, 2004) research on criminal legends emerged around the same time as Degh's approach. According to Donovan, criminal legends function both as social practices and as texts reflecting ontological insecurity. They mediate, individualise, and normalise fears associated with public safety. Donovan has, for example, studied legends of organ theft and the harassment of children in theme park toilets as among these tales. During the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, such tales circulated mainly through oral transmission, but also via electronic mail and personal networks.

## Ostension in the digital age

Since the horror tales and incidents that will be discussed below involve children and adolescents, it is perhaps worth reviewing the functioning and established characteristics of the horror tales involving this particular lore group. This

provides an additional interesting insight as it explains how the idiosyncratic features of this group's lore are reflected in contemporary incidents.

The prevailing view during the first campaign for the collection and analysis of schoolchildren's lore in Estonia in the 1990s was that children's horror tales are an authentic synthetic genre that combines religion, physical movement, and storytelling. This applies to children's activities and tales shared among peers, whether at birthday parties, in boarding schools, or on summer camps, etc. This lore involves predicting the future, summoning spirits, telling scare stories, occasionally playing a fantasy game, pranking or scaring someone, etc. Scholars who studied such material at the time emphasised that even though children's repertoire was shaped both by everyday life and adult folklore, they clearly distinguished narrative truth from reality (Kõiva 1996: 184).

Although children recount quite spooky stories about supernatural creatures, they emotionally detach themselves from their narratives. The horrors that take place in the tales allow them to expand the boundaries of their emotional experience; however, balancing safety and fear is still part of the fun, allowing those participating to demonstrate bravery and fearlessness. (Vahtramäe 1996: 164)

On the one hand, children's lore reflects their rebellious stance against adult norms, while on the other hand enforcing group solidarity. Telling horror tales and feeling safe in the face of a shared fear experience is not only entertaining but also shapes the social and power dynamics within the group. In a narrative situation, participants enjoy witnessing others' fear and trepidation. (Kalmre 2013: 148–149; Virtanen 1980: 103).

Estonian children's horror lore from the 1960s to 1980s, involving ghosts, spirits, blood-soaked hands, suffocating pantyhose, evil dark men, and blood-suckers, has since the 1990s been added to reports on contemporary fears about organ theft, murderers, aliens, haunting travellers, and other scary beings inspired by the mass media, television, popular culture, literature and cinema (Hiiemäe 2020). A folklorist cannot help but notice that these modern tales often recycle references and motifs borrowed from the early legend tradition.

The networking and pervasive influence of the digital age have significantly broadened opportunities for ostension. Folklore is no longer merely a local phenomenon, and the internet serves as a perfect channel for disseminating folk tales (as well as rumours and other forms of folklore). The digital distribution

of folktales provides researchers far better opportunities to decode and observe these tales, to understand the cultural biases, social expectations, prejudices, fears, and anxiety that they reflect. While the tales or legends transmitted in oral tradition convey emotions in a coded language, in digital form they are exposed more clearly (see Blank 2009: 9), or perhaps with a greater bias due to the anonymity of the poster. Today's pocket-sized digital media (e.g., smartphones) allows children to document and share a group legend trip to an old house or Halloween pranks played on their friends. Digital imaging and photography have become commonplace and seamlessly integrated into everyday communication practices (Hand 2012: 11).

Both online and offline (or oral) communication are common among children and teenagers, who by nature perform ostensive activities. For this age group, online self-presentation is largely associated with their offline identity creation. This, however, means that as teenagers document and share their daily experiences, they are also sharing their ostensive practices.

A notable example of how digital fiction can transform into a belief that is reinforced by the offline cultural practices of children and youth is the Slenderman phenomenon (or Slender Man), a character created on June 10, 2009 by Something Awful forum user Eric Knudsen (user name Surge) as part of a Photoshopping contest challenging users to create paranormal images. Initially, Surge created two black and white images of children, to which he added a tall, slender, spectral figure wearing a black suit. He later supplemented his submission with snippets of text, supposedly from witnesses, describing abductions of groups of children and giving the character the name The Slender Man. The figure, with its fictitious subtext, quickly became viral and additions to the tale were made on different platforms and in different communities; the story inspired a horror movie and spread into video games (Gasim 2017; Chess 2015).<sup>3</sup> The Slenderman story is a true *creepypasta*, a popular term derived from online slang for horror legends and images spread online (see Blank, McNeill 2015: 5).

In the pre-digital media and internet era, adult folklore influenced the beliefs and narrative tradition of children and young people to some extent and often retrospectively; however, now the digital and visual sphere has largely blurred the lines between different age groups. The Slenderman character emerged from adult online activity and permeated youth and children's folklore. The pop culture products, the film, and video games featuring Slenderman have

become an adult business and an entertainment sensation, but also a collaborative source of beliefs for children and youth.

The Slenderman character has been compared with traditional fairy lore. Since the fictional 'mythology' of Slenderman has evolved outside the narrative canons of folklore studies, the character's appearance, motifs, habits, and abilities are not fixed but change depending on who is telling the story. The storytellers can thus use existing Slenderman tropes and imagery to create new tales. The opportunity to use the ideas of others when offering one's own ideas and experiences has inspired the creative participatory culture that emerged around the Slenderman phenomenon. Digital platforms have made the entire process related to the phenomenon highly visible and easy to spread, as digital communication solutions expand and, at the same time, focus on specific activities, creating new sets of practices.<sup>4</sup>

This set of activities, in which the existing online content of different genres (photos, videos, texts, etc.) becomes mixed with individual creation and experiences on social platforms, could be characterised as participatory culture (see Jenkins 2006). Logically linked digital photography and participatory culture, to which content is added that is not easily verifiable, as is typical of legends, invite users to develop the truth value of narratives (see also Shifman 2014; Kalmre 2022: 33–42).

Although Estonian schoolchildren were aware of Slenderman, the character never gained much popularity locally. Archive sources, however, include some stories recounted by children:

For a while, I was afraid of Slenderman. He is a man who has not had much luck in life; and he lives in the forest and has tentacles. He is also very tall and, of course, dead. At night, I was afraid that he was watching me through the window, and sometimes when riding my bike through the dark forest in the countryside, I was afraid that he would come and kill me. A friend told me a true story about how two teenagers stabbed a third one nine times to see Slenderman, who lived in the forest. The third teenager died, and the two others went to prison. (Tallinn, girl, age 13) (Hiiemäe 2019: 25–26)

This account, recorded during the 2017–2018 countrywide campaign for collecting school lore, organised by the Estonian Literary Museum among 4<sup>th</sup>- to 12th-graders, refers to a tragic, true event that took place in Wisconsin, United

States, where two girls lured their friend to the forest and stabbed her. The perpetrators later claimed that they had read about Slenderman online and feared his retribution if they did not attack the friend. Since this incident, the mythological character that had been born online and had so far only scared children, entered the public consciousness and became part of real-world dangers.

## Men in white vans

The media example, mentioned at the beginning of this article, informs us that the case in Põlva involving criminals driving around in a van, is not the first of this kind to be investigated by the local police. According to the chief of the police department:

“For some reason, the ‘white van’ story and other similar legends have repeatedly emerged specifically in Põlva.... About two years ago, there was a major construction project in the area and the builders drove vans, which started the rumours about white vans snatching people from the streets.”

The police chief emphasised that they routinely investigate all reports even when they had reason to believe that they are urban legends. “There’s no point admonishing those who spread these tales, as people really do get scared,” he noted. “It is our responsibility to inform the community, as people need reassuring that things are not as they are told, that these scare stories are unfounded.” (Harju 2018: 2)

At the same time, the news article describes a rather typical transmission pattern of such horror tales from friend to friend.

The boy had heard horror stories about a white van in another town, so he became scared and ran away.... The boy told his friend about the suspicious-looking man and the van, and the story being passed from one boy to another acquired further alarming details. He also talked to a relative living in that other town about the event, and the latter ended up sharing it on social media. (Harju 2018: 1-2)

Rumours typically spread in waves. The boy's van scare in Põlva may have been prompted by an incident in Harku that had been discussed in the media a year before. Specifically, on November 25, 2017, the Estonian daily *Postimees* (The Postman) published a news story titled "A shocking incident in Harku municipality: masked men pulled a child stepping off of a bus into their van" (Väli 2017). This news was very likely also inspired by the Facebook post. The post was widely shared on social media and reported on all Estonian media channels, including a weekend special news review on Estonian state television. The news article that mediated the rumour described how a school-child had been violently pulled into a white van and held hostage. The story was as sensational as it was ambiguous, which is characteristic of rumours. A few days later it turned out that the only truth-based aspect of the story was the fear and the feeling that if something like this would happen, it would be a dire situation. This is probably why the story was shared on social platforms making journalists cover the incident as a cautionary tale in the form of a news story, and why the police became involved. It can be assumed that these very horror tales shared in the media reverberate episodically among local Facebook communities. For example, around the time of the Põlva incident, a similar alarming announcement was posted on the Facebook pages of two other local communities (see *Kambja / Ülenurme Kuulutaja*). Comments to the post demonstrate how a topic that was originally discussed only by children assumed a more serious status after being picked up by adults. Around February 24, 2024, a similar post appeared on the Facebook page of *Melliste Teataja*, a local news outlet in Kastre parish in southern Estonia.<sup>5</sup> This incident will be discussed in further detail towards the end of the article.

Alarming rumours about a white van have circulated across Europe, Scandinavia, and elsewhere for more than a decade, owing to the wide reach of social media. General reports about kidnapping of women and children<sup>6</sup> by criminals in white vans can be found on dozens of English-language media sites, which generally confirm that it is "an urban myth or urban legend", inspired by true life and pop-cultural phenomena (see O'Sullivan 2019; Sambeck 2022). Likewise, in 2012 in Sweden and in 2009 in Australia, during investigations initiated in response to a parents' Facebook posts, the police concluded that it was an urban legend that had no factual foundation and had snowballed on social media. Yet, the tales reflect quite well the collective problems and fears prevalent in society (Burger 2014, 2016).

In the accounts from Europe, the van is generally white because minivans of this colour are simply the most popular. However, this is not always the case: at the 2019 International Society Contemporary Legend Research (ISCLR) conference, we discussed the white van phenomenon with Czech folklore researcher Peter Janeček and the Slovak folklorist Zuzana Panczová, who claimed that in Slovakian urban legends the van is usually black. We agreed that in all the three countries, rumours about vans spread mainly in smaller townships and rural areas. The Dutch folklorist and media scholar Peter Burger (2014, 2016) has pointed out that in Great Britain, the white van as the setting of a crime was probably inspired by a popular television series about a white van and its wayward, at times violent, driver.

## An evil clown crawled out of the internet

In the 1980s, stories about adults wearing clown costumes and driving around in vans to harass and murder children became popular among youngsters in the United States and Great Britain. Children were telling stories about vans driven by men who were dressed as clowns and lurked around schools, ready to ambush children. The tales made adults concerned enough that they turned to the authorities to have them investigate these reports, yet the investigations remained inconclusive: the police reported that the stories were just children's fabrications. In the United States, the sinister evil clown archetype dates back to 1940s' comics and was popularised by Bozo the Clown from the popular children's television program in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The evolution of the evil clown figure was shaped by the 1970s true-life capture of John Wayne Gacy, a child molester and serial killer who worked as a clown. Gacy had killed over 30 men and boys, even though he never committed his murders in the clown costume. By the 1980s, this archetype of the malevolent, evil, clown was well established in the United States and spread to Western Europe through books, television series, and later also video games (Brunvand 2001: 313—315; see also Van de Winkel 2016).

In the late 1980s or early 1990s, psychologists adopted the term coulrophobia, denoting the fear of clowns. YouTube hosts dozens of videos featuring evil clowns, the purpose of which is to scare viewers. Some of these, such as the clown videos posted on the Italian channel DM Pranks, have spread like wild-

fire. Belgian folklore researcher Aurore Van de Winkel (2016) has noted that coulrophobia narratives circulate in periodic waves. The 2014 surge in France first spread in Western Europe before arriving in Eastern Europe somewhat later. The tale allegedly started from a practical joke in which a masked teenager chased another with a plastic knife. In France, rumours started to spread on social media about one or several people lurking near schools and attacking children. The social media posts triggered active response, with teenagers posting links and images to warn against clowns. In some cases, the rumour intertwined with pre-existing hearsay about vans. For example, in Italy, a story made the rounds about Polish clowns driving around in a van and snatching people from the streets to harvest their organs. It is known that in many cases, the fear of clowns has been exploited in pranking or intimidation, but it has also inspired crimes (see Van de Winkel 2016). Previously, and perhaps even now, clown lore appears to be more prominent in countries that observe Halloween traditions.

In Estonia, the evil clown figure took hold somewhat more slowly than in Western countries. Piip and Tuut and other locally known clowns who entertain children at parties and in hospitals, have become popular relatively recently and are positive and fun characters. Stories about evil clowns, however, have been well known among Estonian schoolchildren at least since 2018, possibly even before that, as the following fragment of a school lore text indicates:

A long time ago – I think it was in 2016 – there was talk about killer clowns and someone I knew told me about a person dressed as a clown standing outside her friend's window (she lived on the ground floor), holding an axe or something. The clown stood there for a long time, staring at her window, and her parents were at work (it all happened at night as her parents worked nightshifts). She called the police but by the time they arrived, the clown was gone. (Girl, born 2003) (Hiiemäe 2019: 25)

The evil clown character 'hit the streets' relatively recently. On September 25, 2023, a police station in Viljandi received a call from a 14-year-old boy who claimed that he had been pursued by an aggressive clown.

The police responded to the call as high priority and found at the site a group of frightened children running from an imagined clown. On this Monday afternoon, internet officer Elerin Tetsmann noted that for her it was unprecedented that a scare which had started online had manifested at this level in real life,

causing children feel genuine distress and turn to the police. Officer Tetsmann emphasised that the children had done the right thing by contacting the police.

The incident unravelled after a Snapchat joke, which was essentially a horror tale about a clown who allegedly walked around in Kantreküla district in the town of Viljandi and terrorised children. Analysing the local youngsters' conversations allowed the police to conclude that the posts, riddled with obscenities, were made by primary school or older students. Even so, the rumour began to spread among elementary school children who gathered in groups and tried to find the clown late in the evenings. During their search they had met some older students, who further fuelled the scary story so that the younger children were frozen, fearing to go on or return home, and thus sought help from the police (Suurmägi 2023a).

## Media coverage

Media reports of incidents involving white vans and evil clowns reflect not only on the assumed criminal aspect and explanations, but also on the broader phenomenon of urban legends: the cases are introduced as internationally known and spread narrative creations. The author of this article has been contacted for an expert commentary (see Harju 2018b; Haav 2023).

The reports do not explore the motivations of the original posters of the scare stories because the incidents take place in small, tight-knit communities where everyone knows everyone else. For instance, the event in Harju municipality was truly scandalous, and even before the police had solved the case social media intervened with public explanations. People shared a fake video of a school harassment case that the original poster had allegedly been involved in, suggesting that his being held in the van was an act of revenge. Public discussions did not directly state that the boy was lying for some reason but speculated extensively about possible motivations for lying about such things (see Raud 2017). The focus of the comments was reflecting on the peculiarities of children's thinking and behaviour and on the reasons why they might fear evil characters or lie about them: children have the propensity to blur fantasy with reality and playfully test the boundaries between fear and safety, in addition to which little lies are allowed as a means of asserting oneself.

Telling horror tales, excitement, fear, confronting the fear and overcoming it, and deliberately frightening others – all this has always been part of being a child and in many cases persists into adulthood. Evil cultural characters from different time periods like the Red Hand, Freddy Krueger, and Candyman, whom one was supposed to fear but who were captivating, were mentioned by my colleagues. Killer clowns have made regular appearances and disappearances among children over a dozen or so years.... Smartphones have undeniably introduced new fears and anxieties that a middle-aged person like me would not necessarily understand. But I believe I understand this clown phenomenon quite well, and it is not part of the smart digital sphere. It is part of a person growing up and the fantasy that the smart world is essentially destroying. (Suurmägi 2023b)

“An urban legend? According to psychologists, children are highly inventive and can make use of urban legends to get away with things. Children might find it difficult to change their story, fearing that if a matter this serious has been brought to light and even the police has become involved, they may get seriously admonished, rather than say that it was just a whimsical thought or a lie told to cover one’s being late,” explains the psychologist commenting on the increasing number of recent cases in which a child’s fantasy about a white van has caused public panic. (Väli 2018)

While in the pre-internet era, such horror tales and related practices used to be confined to children’s and youth culture, social media communication has now brought these tales and their evil characters to the broader public space. For the new target group, a former children’s tale can turn into actual criminal risk. The cases from Harku municipality, Põlva, and Viljandi demonstrate how the playful establishment of social relations and a belief system, which is typical of children’s and youth culture, has introduced a different kind of threat (a moral panic) when entering a broader public sphere, and adopts different connotations that paint the outside world as inherently dangerous and criminal. The change of context assigns an incident or a case socio-critical implications, with the current legal and moral norms demanding punishment for a crime that endangers a child’s safety or his or her body. I encountered a similar change in meaning when a rumour spread outside a children’s lore group. In 2005, an adult

happened to overhear children telling tall tales about torturing cats (throwing them out of their skin) that were supposed to repulse the listener. This resulted in the publication of a socio-critical media piece, claiming that youth are cruel and lost, followed by a criminal investigation, which eventually concluded that such a method of torture is impossible to execute, and it could not have happened. The entire case proved to be an urban legend based on old tall tales, or so-called hunter tales. (See Kalmre 2013)

At least one amusing example, mentioned above, about resolving panic about a van in a small rural area occurred in a social media communication in late February 2024. In terms of the cases here, the author was unable to observe the social media communication between the children concerned, but as mentioned before, she had the chance to witness how an incident triggered by a spontaneous fear of vans among children in a small community near Tartu resolved relatively easily. Interestingly, this is supposedly the first account from Estonia in which the van is reported to be black.

Poster Carmen: Today between 18:00 and 18:30, a black van was following two girls on the Melliste-Poka road. When the girls started to run, the van sped up and began reversing towards them. Luckily, the girls managed to hide. They said that someone was scanning them with a flashlight from the field and between the trees. Please talk to your kids. Ours were able to run to someone they knew, who later gave them a ride home. Unfortunately, the girls were really shaken and couldn't say what kind of a van it was.

Poster Getter: We happened to be out walking the dog around that exact time on Poka road. We were using a flashlight. There were a few vans driving by. Our daughters were playing with their flashlights too, trying to make light effects in the falling snow. Maybe it was the parked van that was suspicious, and then another van pulled up, and it seemed like they had some kind of technical issue. I'm not saying the girls didn't experience something, but fear can really play tricks on us, and even more so in the dark. So perhaps this was just a misunderstanding?

Poster Carmen: The girls did mention another van, and said that one moved too.

Commenter Rauno: That was us. My friend had run out of gas. [Added a photo.] (*Melliste Teataja*)

## Conclusion

The digital age has made children's and young people's awareness of supernatural and evil characters, along with narratives about them, more general and generalised in the world than ever before. The three types of evil character discussed here – men in white vans, evil or killer clowns, and Slenderman – each have a slightly different background and evolution, yet they all target children as their victims. While killer clowns and Slenderman are mythological beings, men in white vans are real malevolent criminals. Stories surrounding these characters are based on deep-seated fear of being exposed to physical harm, which can be traced back to earlier folk tradition. Analogous are, for example, tales about black Volgas and blood-drives that circulated in the former Soviet Union. The alleged current crimes of evil men in white vans are associated with child molesting and organ theft. The tales seem to tell us something about what is happening in society. Media researcher and folklorist Peter Burger analysed reports on white vans in Dutch online and media sources between 1999 and 2015 and describes in his study the shift in the identity of evil villains over this period from harassing child abusers to Eastern European immigrants, and eventually to Muslims. This sequence of characters reflected the social tensions and fears that emerged in the Netherlands in these years, as well as issues with immigration. (Burger 2014, 2016)

Horror tales involving white vans are fuelled by popular and online culture, including movies, video games, YouTube shorts, any kind of mocking, including memes and pranks. It seems that, for many reasons, these white van stories are more familiar and topical in Estonian children's and youth culture, probably because these tales are based on a more universal (older) horror tale tradition as these threats and stories about evil men luring people into cars have been known in Estonia for almost a century. Less popular here are legends about killer clowns, and especially Slenderman, which resonate more deeply with the Western cultural space; their spread has been shaped solely by digital culture.

Clearly, there is no stopping the emergence of horror tales and incidents associated with them, and every single case requires careful study of the circum-

stances involved. Indeed, there is always a chance that these are fears based on legitimate concerns and adult intervention is absolutely warranted. There are several international examples of how online horror games and tales circulating among children and youth online could have such an impact on them that it leads to life-threatening behaviour, as happened in the Slenderman case.

Ultimately, all the children's horror tales and incidents examined here reflect changes in our contemporary world: the supremacy of the internet and social media and the prevalence of fear in entertainment shape people's belief systems and narrative models, as well as their social relationships. The digital sphere has popularised these tales and the characters in them as universal and impactful and they have a rich and varied digital content that allows different genres and activities to become embedded. Thus they have an undeniably more immediate and profound impact than pre-internet-era horror tales.

## Acknowledgements

This article was supported by the Narrative and Belief Aspects of Folklore Studies research project (EKM 8-2/20/3).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>that the shared values, wellbeing, and interests of a community or society are under threat. The threat to society could also be perceived within a social group, often associated with children or teenagers, who are more vulnerable to media influence due to social conditioning and personality.

<sup>2</sup> Linda Dégh conducted legend research in the pre-social media era, and it is based on the influences of written media on narrative creation.

<sup>3</sup> See also *Slender Man*, a 2018 American horror movie, written by David Birke, directed by Sylvain White. Folklore surrounding Slenderman has also been influenced by a YouTube series *Marble Hornets* (2009) and several video games based on this character.

<sup>4</sup> The Slenderman phenomenon has inspired popular studies (see, e.g., Chess 2015; Mar 2017). In addition, a special issue of the academic journal *Contemporary Legend* (vol. 5, 2015) is dedicated to this topic.

<sup>5</sup> The posts of *Melliste Teataja* are no longer accessible on Facebook; the author has screenshots of these posts and comments.

<sup>6</sup>In Estonia, rumours about people-snatchers in a van seem to belong mostly to children's lore. The author is aware of only two panic tales: In 2012, it was reported that several masked men were driving around in a minibus, intoxicating women and pulling them in the bus (*Virumaa Teataja*, 2012). A year later, the police investigated a puzzling incident in Tartu (Mets 2013).

## Online sources

*Kambja/Ülenurme Kuulutaja*. Facebook.

*Melliste Teataja*. Facebook.

## References

Blank, Trevor J. 2009. *Toward a Conceptual Framework for the Study of Folklore and the Internet*. – *Folklore and Internet: Vernacular Expression in a Digital World*. Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, pp. 1–20.

Blank, Trevor J., McNeill, Lynne S. (2015). Boiling Over: Creepypasta, Slender Man, and the New Face of Fear in Folklore. *Contemporary Legend*, series 3, vol. 5, pp. 1–13.

Brunvand, Jan Harold 2001. *Encyclopedia of Urban Legends*. New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company.

Burger, Peter 2014. *Monsterlijke verhalen. Misdaadsagen in het nieuws ne op webforums als retorische constructies*. Den Haag: Boom Lemma.

Burger, Peter 2016. White Van Stories: Stranger Danger, Rhetoric, and Media. – *Perspectives on Contemporary Legend. 34<sup>th</sup> International Conference, Tallinn June 28–July 2, 2016*. Tartu/Tallinn: ELM Scholarly Press, pp. 12–13.

Chess, Shira 2015. *Folklore, Horror Stories and the Slender Man: The Development of an Internet Mythology*. New York: Palgrave Pivot.

Cohen, Stanley 1972. *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*. MacGibbon and Kee Ltd.

*Contemporary Legend 2015, The Journal of the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research*, Special Issue: *The Slender Man*, series 3, vol. 5.

Dégh, Linda 2001. *Legend and Belief. Dialectics of a Folklore Genre*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Dégh, Linda; Vaszonyi, Andrew 1983. Does the Word “Dog” Bite? Ostensive Action: A Means of Legend Telling. *Journal of Folklore Research* 20, pp. 5–34.

Donovan, Pamela 2001. Crime Legends in Old and New Media. [https://www.academia.edu/68875631/Crime\\_Legends\\_in\\_Old\\_and\\_New\\_Media](https://www.academia.edu/68875631/Crime_Legends_in_Old_and_New_Media)

Donovan, Pamela 2004. *No Way of Knowing. Crime, Urban Legends and the Internet*. New York & London: Routledge.

Eco, Umberto 1976. *A Theory of Semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Ellis, Bill 2003. *Aliens, Ghosts and Cults. Legends We Live*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Gasin, Glenn 2017. The Slenderman Legend: Everything you need to know. – *CBC News*, March 6. <https://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/the-slenderman-legend-everything-you-need-to-know/>

Haav, Margus 2023. Kuidas kuri kloun esimest korda internetist välja puges. (How the evil clown first emerged from the internet) – *Sakala* 30. IX, pp. 8.

Hand, Martin 2012. *Ubiquitous Photography*. Cambridge, UK; Manden, MA: Polity Press.

Harju, Ülle 2018a. Hirmujutt põhjustas kaubikupaanika. (The scare story caused a van panic), *Lõunaleht*, 14; 5. IV, pp. 1–2.

Harju, Ülle 2018b. Ohutud linnalegendid „Luunja kurk“, „Salatipesu“ jt (Safe urban legends “Cucumbers from Luunja”, “Salad dressing” and others), *Lõunaleht*, nr 14; 5. IV, pp. 2.

Hiiemäe, Reet 2019. *Eesti õpilaste üleloomulikud kogemused*. (Estonian schoolchildren's supernatural experiences). Tartu: Eesti Folkloori Instituut, EKM Teaduskirjastus.

Hiiemäe, Reet 2020. Hirmude kirjeldused tänapäeva õpilaspärimuses. Subjektiivse kogemuse ja meediamõju seostest. (Descriptions of fears in contemporary schoolchildren's narratives: On the relationship between subjective experience and media influence), *Keel ja Kirjandus*, 1–2: 80–94.

Jenkins, Henry 2006. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York University Press.

Kalmre, Eda 2013. On Reality, Truth and Ideologies in the Case of Munchausen Tales. *Folklore*: EJF, 53: 141–158.

Kalmre, Eda 2013a. *The Human Sausage Factory: A Study of Post-War Rumour in Tartu*. Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi.

Kalmre, Eda 2022. Nature Returns: Dolphins and Dinosaurs. On Fake News, Photoshop Urban Legends and Memes during the COVID-19 Lockdown, *Estudis de Literatura Oral Popular (Studies in Oral Folk Literature)*, 11: 31–46.

Kõiva, Mare 1996. Siis astu aknalaauale. (Then step onto the windowsill), *Mängult päriselt. Tänapäeva folkloorist II*. M. Kõiva (Ed.). Tartu: Eesti Rahvaluule Arhiiv & Eesti Keele Instituut, pp. 166–188.

Mar, Alex 2017. Into the woods: how online urban legend Slender Man inspired children to kill, *The Guardian*, Dec 7, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2017/dec/07/slender-man-into-the-woods-how-an-online-bogeyman-inspired-children-to-kill>

Mets, Risto 2013. Tartu naine väidab, et teda vägistati mikrobussis. (Tartu woman claims she was raped in a minibus), *Tartu Postimees* 26. XI. <https://tartu.postimees.ee/2610022/tartu-naine-vaidab-et-teda-vagistati-mikrobussis>

Metsvahi, Merili 2000. Muistend kui tegelikkus (Legend as reality). *Maa-alused. Pro Folkloristica VII.* Tartu: Eesti Kirjandusmuuseum, pp. 44–59.

O’Sullivan, Donie 2019. A Facebook rumour about white vans is spreading fear across America, *CNN Business*, 4. XII. <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/12/04/tech/facebook-white-vans/index.html>

Peck, Andrew 2015. At the Modems of Madness: The Slender Man, Ostension, and the Digital Age, *Contemporary Legend*, series 3, vol. 5, pp. 14–37.

Raud, Geidi 2017. „Koolidirektor Harku vallas juhtunust: konkreetse juhtumi taga oli lapse ekslik käitumine“ (“School principal on incident in Harku rural municipality: The specific incident was caused by a child’s erroneous behavior”), *Õhtuleht*, 27. 11. <https://www.ohtuleht.ee/842684/koolidirektor-harku-vallas-juhtunust-konkreetse-juhtumi-taga-oli-lapse-ekslik-kaitumine->

Sambek, Becca van 2021. Where Did the Urban Legend About Serial Killers Stalking Victims in White Vans Come From, *Oxygen. True Crime*, 21. 09. <https://www.oxygen.com/the-toolbox-killer/crime-news/serial-killers-in-white-vans-who-did-urban-legend-come-from>

Shifman, Limor 2014. The Cultural Logic of Photo-Based Meme Genres, *Journal of Visual Culture*, December (doi:10.177/1470412914546577)

Slender Man, *Wikipedia*. [https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slender\\_Man](https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slender_Man)

Suurvägi, Marko 2023a. Õuduslugu põhjustas Viljandis keskõise paanika (Horror story caused midnight panic in Viljandi), *Sakala*, 27. 09, pp 3.

Suurvägi, Marko 2023b. Tapjakloun on iidne hirm, mitte nutimaailm (The killer clown is an ancient fear, not a fiction story from internet), *Sakala*, 27.09, pp 2.

Vahtramäe, Ell 1996. Vaim, vaim, ilmuta ennast! (Spirit, spirit, reveal yourself), *Mängult-päriselt. Tänapäeva folkloorist II.* M. Kõiva (Ed.). Tartu: Eesti Rahvaluule Arhiiv & Eesti Keele Instituut, pp. 156–165.

Van De Winkel, Aurore 2016. Hostile Clowns in France, Halloween 2014: A Micro-History of a Legend Cycle, *Contemporary Legend*, series 3, vol. 6, pp. 41–54.

Virtanen, Lea 1980. *Lastenperinne*. (Children lore). Helsingin yliopiston kansanrunous-tieteen laitoksen toimite 6. Helsinki: Helsingin yliopiston kansanrunoustieteen laitos.

*Virumaa Teataja* 2012 = Politsei kinnitusel ei vasta info Rakveres liikuvatest maskidega vägistajatest töele (Police confirm that the information about masked rapists roaming Rakvere is not true), *Virumaa Teataja*, 9. 07. <https://virumaaateataja.postimees.ee/901502/politsei-kinnitusel-ei-vasta-info-rakveres-liikuvatest-maskidega-vagistajatest-toele>

Väli, Kristjan 2017. Šokeeriv juhtum Harku vallas: varjatud näoga mehed tirisid bussist väljunud lapse kaubikusse (Shocking incident in Harku rural municipality: Men with hidden faces dragged a child off a bus into a van), *Postimees*, 25. 11. <https://www.ohtuleht.ee/842392/sokeeriv-juhtum-harku-vallas-varjatud-naoga-mehed-tirisid-bussist-valjunud-lapse-kaubikusse>

Väli, Kristjan 2018. Väljamõeldud valge kaubik ja kommionu võivad olla lapse appikarje suurest murest (A fictional white van and candy cane can be a child's cry for help from a great worry), *Õhtuleht*, 16. 05, pp 7.

**Eda Kalmre**, PhD, senior researcher at the Department of Folkloristics, Estonian Literary Museum (Vanemuise 42, 51003 Tartu). Her main research areas are contemporary legend, rumors, visual folklore, local traditions and oral history

E-mail: [eda@folklore.ee](mailto:eda@folklore.ee)

ORCID: 0009-0000-5038-002X

# The History of a Little-Known Monument by Estonian Sculptor Amandus Adamson

**Vladimir Vaingort**

*NGO Kardis, Tallinn, Estonia*

*E-mail: kardis@kardis.ee*

**Abstract:** Monuments created by Estonian sculptor Amandus Adamson in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in St Petersburg, Tallinn, Sevastopol and other places are dominant features of popular architectural ensembles in these cities. Adamson's creative legacy – which includes a little-known large (more than two metre) sculpture of Peter I, the history of its creation and installation in 1916 and the statue's subsequent fate – is explored in this article. Over the past century, the sculpture has disappeared and then been installed in a new location three times as a result of social cataclysms that occurred during this time. Each time the architectural community of the Ukrainian city of Poltava (where the sculpture is located) saved Adamson's creatively successful work from destruction.

**Keywords:** sculptor and urban planner, style of the sculptor Adamson, Peter I by Adamson, saved sculpture, Adamson's work in Poltava

## Introduction

The late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were marked by a rise in national consciousness in the western regions of the Russian Empire, including, in particu-

lar, Estonia. One consequence of this was the emergence of a first-generation national intelligentsia. Among its most prominent representatives was the artistic intelligentsia including painters, graphic artists, and sculptors. Their artistic style typically developed under the influence of the Russian academic school – since most had studied at the Imperial Academy of Arts in St Petersburg – and the latest trends in Western European art, as many also studied in Paris or other European centres.

One of the most prominent figures among them was the sculptor Amandus Adamson (1856–1929), who is listed among the 100 Great Estonians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in today's Republic of Estonia. Adamson's sculptural works are held in museums in Estonia, Russia, and Western Europe. However, he achieved the greatest renown for his monumental sculptures, large-scale works the majority of which are preserved in St Petersburg, other Russian cities, and Estonia. His sculptures adorning building façades and his commemorative monuments have been described extensively, and photographs of them are featured in numerous albums, exhibition catalogues, and museum displays dedicated to Adamson. Yet among his oeuvre there is a major monumental work that remains relatively obscure and is rarely reproduced due to the complex history of its relocations, movements not always tracked by Estonian or Russian authors writing about Adamson. This work is a two-meter-tall sculpture of Peter I, the origins and subsequent movements of which constitute the subject of the present study.

## **The Sculptor Adamson and His Artistic Signature**

Amandus Adamson was born in 1855 at the Uuga-Rätsepa farmstead near the Baltic port (now town of) Paldiski, Estonia, the second child of a sailor and a peasant woman. In 1860, Adamson's father sailed to America and never returned. Amandus was placed in the Toompea school for children from impoverished families in Reval (now Tallinn), where he demonstrated an early aptitude for art by carving figures out of wood.

In 1875, he moved to St Petersburg and, in 1876, enrolled in the Imperial Academy of Arts, studying in the class of Professor Alexander von Bock. After graduating from the Academy in 1879, he remained in St Petersburg and taught at the School of the Society for the Encouragement of the Arts. With a grant from this society, he travelled to Paris, where he lived and worked until 1881.

In 1881, Adamson returned to St Petersburg as an instructor at the Stieglitz Art School. During this period, he participated in the reconstruction of Mikhailovsky Palace. It was also during this time that he created his well-known sculpture *The Ship's Last Sigh*, which marked the beginning of a recurring maritime theme in his work. Other notable compositions include *Fisherman from Muhu Island*, *Listening to the Voice of the Sea*, *Mermaid on a Rock*, *The Sea is Roaring*, *The Sea's Only Kiss*, and *The Birth of Venus*.

However, Adamson gained widespread fame as a monumental sculptor. He created large-scale sculptural forms and public monuments that are still a source of pride in the cities where they were erected during the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Adamson's realised and unrealised monument projects are distinguished by their seamless integration of sculptural and architectural elements, forming cohesive artistic wholes. The first such monument, created in collaboration with architect Nikolai Thamm Jr., was the Monument to the Sailors of the Battleship *Rusalka*, unveiled in Reval (now Tallinn) on September 7, 1902. The monument is a complex artistic ensemble: the bronze figure of an angel in flight with outstretched wings and a cross in his right hand points toward the sea, mounted on a tall, massive pedestal of grey and pink granite that resembles the prow of a ship battling waves represented by chaotic clusters of granite boulders that form the monument's base. One side of the pedestal features a bronze bas-relief depicting a ship sinking in the waves; another bears the carved names of twelve fallen officers. The monument is surrounded by low granite posts connected by metal chains, with bronze plaques listing the names of the deceased sailors. The composition as a whole is situated on the seashore at the end of a tree-lined avenue that leads to a baroque palace built for Catherine I (wife of Peter the Great).

Equally significant in terms of urban design is the widely known ensemble centred around the Monument to Sunken Ships in Sevastopol Bay, commemorating ships scuttled during the Crimean War. Unveiled in 1905, this monument – created by Adamson in collaboration with architect Feldman and military engineer Enberg – features an artificial granite rock emerging from the sea, upon which stands a white diorite column topped with a Corinthian capital. Atop this, a bronze double-headed eagle spreads its wings. The eagle clutches a wreath in its beak and a naval anchor in its talons, a potent symbol. The monument's tragic counterpoint is emphasised by the contrast between

the randomly arranged granite boulders at the base and the austere form of the Corinthian column rising above the rippling sea. These two monuments, along with several white marble interior-scale sculptures, established Adamson as one of the foremost sculptors in Russia at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They led to commissions for façade sculptures on two prominent buildings on Nevsky Prospect in St Petersburg: the Eliseev Brothers Trading House and the Singer Company Building. Both were constructed around the same time in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, in a bustling commercial area. Their architecture, rich in early Art Nouveau detailing, required sculptural elements that would neither be overwhelmed by nor visually compete with the elaborate façades. This challenge was compounded by the proximity of the buildings: the Eliseev building stood directly opposite the multi-figure monument to Catherine II, while the Singer Building faced the Kazan Cathedral with its majestic semi-circular colonnade and flanking sculptures. In both cases, Adamson found elegant solutions. The four massive sculptures on the Eliseev façade – Science, Commerce, Industry, and Art – were perfectly integrated with both the building's design and the surrounding Nevsky Prospect. Matching the size and style of the Catherine II monument opposite, these figures contributed to one of the grandest sculptural ensembles on the avenue.

In the case of the Singer Building, Adamson and architect Pavel Suzor devised an original solution, crowning the building's corner with a glass dome adorned with Adamson's allegorical sculptures, creating a visual response to both the Kazan Cathedral's dome and the vista along the Catherine Canal (now Griboyedov Canal).

By the early 1910s, Adamson was officially recognized alongside Antokolsky and Trubetskoy as one of Russia's leading sculptors. His monuments, along with decorative work on the Trinity Bridge in St Petersburg and friezes in two halls of the Russian Museum, earned him the title of Academician of the Imperial Academy of Arts in 1907. His nomination was supported by the landscape painter Arkhip Kuindzhi, sculptor Alexander Opekushin, and architect Vladimir Suslov. In 1911, he won a Academy competition to design a monument commemorating the 300th anniversary of the Romanov dynasty in Kostroma (the project was never realised).

Given Adamson's body of monumental work, it is understandable why, without holding a competition, he was approached in 1914 to create a statue of Peter I for the Poltava Petrine Cadet Corps. Both the commissioners and the

sculptor were acutely aware of the monument's context in a city already rich with memorials to Peter the Great. Directly in front of the Cadet Corps building stood the imposing Monument of Glory, created by Thomas de Thomon for the centennial of the Battle of Poltava, in the centre of the Round Square. All the buildings surrounding the square including the Cadet Corps itself were constructed as a commemorative ensemble for the centenary of the battle in 1809. Designed by leading Russian architects, the ensemble earned Poltava the nickname Little St Petersburg. Figure 1 shows the façade of the Cadet Corps building, designed by architect Bonch-Bruyevich in the late Classicist style, harmonising with the other buildings around the Round Square (the Cadet Corps, completed in 1840, completed the architectural ensemble).

Adamson's decision to create a statue of Peter I without any architectural enhancements to the monument's presence is thus understandable: he sought not to compete with the monumental composition by Thomas de Thomon, which was placed at the visual intersection of all buildings on the circular square (Monument of Glory, see Figure 2).

The bronze figure of Peter was 204 cm tall, the exact height of the emperor. He is depicted wearing the uniform of a colonel of the Preobrazhensky Regiment. The sculpture, overall, is a harmonious composition in the late Classicist style (Figure 3). It was cast under the sculptor's supervision at the Petrograd foundry of K. F. Werfel in dark patinated bronze. The pedestal was made from a monolith of Finnish granite, quarried and finished by the Granit Joint Stock Company in the town of Hanko, according to designs by military engineer Lieutenant General Nikolai Konovalov, a graduate of the Poltava Cadet Corps (class of 1861). The above information is drawn from Alexander Romashkevich's article "A Gift to the Corps on Its 75th Anniversary, December 6, 1915" (Romashkevich 1915: 215).

Little-known sculpture by Amandus Adamson



Figure 1. Building of the Poltava Petrovsky Cadet Corps. (Image source: [https://ua.igotoworld.com/ru/poi\\_object/52381\\_petrovskiy-poltavskiy-kadetskiy-korpus.htm](https://ua.igotoworld.com/ru/poi_object/52381_petrovskiy-poltavskiy-kadetskiy-korpus.htm))



Figure 2. Monument of Glory in Poltava. (Image source: <http://histpol.pl.ua/ru/component/content/article?id=842>)



Figure 3. Sculpture of Peter I by Amandus Adamson. (Image source: <https://ru.espresso.tv/mestnye-vlasti-poltavy-blokiruyut-snos-pamyatnika-petru-i>)

## The History of the Monument

The monument to Peter I was a gift to the cadet corps from its alumni, who collected funds for this purpose through a subscription. As stated in the aforementioned article by Romashkevich:

The idea of presenting a gift arose as early as 1913 within the walls of the corps itself and was enthusiastically received by its alumni. At meetings of the Poltava cadets, it was decided to present a full-length bronze statue of Emperor Peter I. A managing committee was elected, which included General of the Infantry Bazhenov (Class of 1859), General of the Cavalry Stavrovsky (1863), Lieutenant General Pototsky (1863), Privy Councillor Kovalevsky (1865), Lieutenant General Konovalov (1867), Lieutenant Colonel Saranchov (1872), Lieutenant General Pototsky (1874), Lieutenant General Moralevsky (1875), Major General Popov (1875),

Colonel Bykov (1877), Colonel Romashkevich (1881), and Colonel Komendantov (1882). The committee immediately began informing former pupils of the corps and gymnasium – via newspapers and letters sent to known addresses – about the subscription and the commission of the statue.... On the front of the pedestal was placed a bronze plaque with the inscription “To our alma mater from grateful alumni, on the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the corps, December 6, 1915.” The other sides bore bronze plaques with the names of all donors, including given name, patronymic, surname, and year of graduation. Due to wartime circumstances, the statue could not be delivered to Poltava by December 6, 1915, and only arrived on February 29, 1916. The unveiling, consecration, and presentation to the corps took place on March 20. (Romashkevich 1915: 215)

Romashkevich is also the author of the article “On the Unveiling of the Statue of Emperor Peter the Great at the Poltava Petrine Cadet Corps”, published in the *Poltava Herald* on March 22, 1916, which states: “On March 20 this year, the Poltava Petrine Cadet Corps installed and consecrated a monument statue of the great reformer of Russia, Emperor Peter I, presented to the corps by its former pupils in honor of its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary.”

Despite a fairly large number of testimonies regarding the monument itself, discrepancies exist concerning its exact location. Some publications state that it was installed at the courtyard entrance of the corps building (Korsunsky 2012), while others claim it stood in the main vestibule at the street-facing entrance. The situation remains unclear. A detailed historical report (Korsunsky 2012) asserts that the statue was installed in the courtyard (at the edge of the parade ground) in front of the building’s rear façade. A photograph from the 1950s shows a pedestal bearing the bust of General Vatutin, a hero of the 1941–1945 Great Patriotic War who commanded the liberation of Poltava in 1944. The article claims that the bust of Peter I previously stood on that very pedestal.

This scenario is plausible. However, the relatively informal placement of the monument, intended seemingly for “internal use only”, raises questions. The Cadet Corps was not strictly a military academy but more akin to a gymnasium: a preparatory institution for those intending to pursue further education in specialised military schools. Graduates were not necessarily destined for military careers. Therefore, the parade ground played a less central role in the education process than it did in fully military academies.

It seems more logical that the statue was located in the main entrance foyer, situated directly behind the formal entrance to the building. Admittedly, the height of the foyer raises some concerns. While the space could accommodate the two-metre statue and its pedestal – with the commemorative plaques mentioned by Romashkevich – it would have occupied the full vertical space of the foyer. Installing a granite monolith and the statue inside would have posed significant logistical challenges. Difficult, but not impossible.

To clarify the statue's original location, I sought assistance from Boris Tristanov, historian and founder of the website History of Poltava, and Save-Poltava, a non-profit organisation. In his reply, Tristanov wrote:

I consulted once again with Poltava architects, as well as with the Poltava Regional Museum and archive. All confirmed that the statue of Peter I stood in the foyer of the PPC [Poltava Petrine Cadet Corps]. Vladimir Moklyak, of the PRM [Poltava Regional Museum], stated that a bust of Peter once stood in the courtyard. I am aware of only one bust, donated by the Poltava nobility to the corps in 1890, but whether this is the same bust remains unknown.

It is also worth noting that the bust of Vatutin clearly did not stand on the pedestal of the Peter I statue, as the latter was granite, while the former was made of concrete, as seen in photographs from the 1950s.

## The Monument Saved Twice

The exact date when the Cadet Corps lost the statue of Peter I is unknown. Officially, the corps was closed by decree of the Council of People's Commissioners on February 12, 1919. However, instruction at the school had effectively ceased by the end of 1917. Between 1917 and 1919, control over Poltava changed hands multiple times. Various factions, for example the Reds, the Whites, and others, occupied the corps building during this period. The fate of the statue during these years remains uncertain. There is evidence that in 1920 a bust of Vladimir Lenin was installed in the building, possibly on Peter's pedestal. It is also known that from 1920 onward, the statue of Peter I was housed in the Poltava Regional Museum. Where it was between 1918 and 1919 remains

unclear. Fortunately, the Poltava authorities had the discretion not to send the statue for scrap.

Upon receiving the sculpture, the Museum's management, due to its large size, decided not to house it indoors but instead installed it in the Museum courtyard on a low brick-and-mortar pedestal, almost level with the ground. Local youths enjoyed standing beside it to compare their height with that of the emperor. The sculpture remained in this location until 1941.

After Nazi Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union, anticipating the front line's advance into eastern Ukraine, local authorities began evacuating cultural assets, including museum collections, as early as August 1941. The statue of Peter I was laid on the ground and packed in some fashion, but was not taken, probably due to its size. In late August or early September – exact details are unknown – a museum staff member (perhaps a janitor) pushed, or helped push, the two-metre bronze statue into a shallow drainage ditch along the fence line. This ditch had been constructed to prevent soil erosion from the museum courtyard, which sat on a slope above a ravine. The sculpture fit into the ditch and was covered with branches from nearby shrubs and, later, fallen autumn leaves. The strategy worked: no one ventured onto the overgrown slope beyond the museum fence, and no one searched for the statue, apparently assuming it had been evacuated with other artifacts.

In September 1944, the museum building was destroyed by fire. The statue was rediscovered in the spring of 1945, after Poltava was liberated from occupation, and was once again placed on its preserved low pedestal.

## The Third Reincarnation of the Monument

The further fate of the bronze statue of Peter is described in the memoirs of Lev Vaingort, long-term Chief Architect of Poltava, in his book *Notes of a Provincial Architect*. Below is the chapter recounting the installation of the sculpture of Peter I in front of the Poltava Battle Museum, presented in full. The chapter is titled “Should We Erect a Monument to the Tsar?”:

This unexpected problem arose in the autumn of 1950, just as we were preparing to complete the installation of a monument to Peter I in front of the newly established State Museum of the History of the Battle of Poltava.

The granite pedestal, produced in the Kyiv workshops of ‘Stroymonument’ and designed by architect D. S. Verotsky, was already in place, and the sculpture lay beside it. Suddenly, I was summoned to the Propaganda and Agitation Department of the Poltava Regional Committee of the Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of Ukraine. There, one of the instructors (whose name I do not recall) subjected me to what was essentially an interrogation: “Comrade Vaingort, what is this I hear about you erecting a monument to the Tsar?” He ordered all work to be halted. My explanations that the project had been approved by all the relevant authorities, including the Ministry of Culture and the State Construction Committee of Ukraine, and that the museum opening was only two days away, making it impossible to leave a bare pedestal in front, were dismissed.

The Propaganda Department has submitted a request to the Ukrainian Central Committee of the Communist Party (Bolsheviks). Until we receive authorisation to install the statue of Peter, we have no right to proceed, and we will not.

Dismayed by this turn of events, I managed to get an audience with Mark Sidorovich Spivak, the First Secretary of the Regional Committee, who had asked me just the day before about progress on the museum and monument. After hearing me out, the ‘First’ immediately asked his secretary to call the Central Committee’s Propaganda Department. Then, thinking better of it, he cancelled the call and told me: “Since the Central Committee has not issued any directives regarding the monument, you should act in anticipation. Organise the work tonight and make sure that by morning, Peter is standing on the pedestal. And do your best to come down with something for a couple of days. Understood?” he concluded meaningfully.

I had reached him late in the day. Everyone had already left the construction site. But Mark Sidorovich arranged for two vehicles to be placed at my disposal, and I got to work.

I sent one vehicle for supplies and refreshments for the workers. In the other, I went to rouse the teams needed to install the sculpture overnight – specifically, stonemasons and riggers.

I told the crew that an important delegation would be arriving in the morning and that we had to finish the monument overnight. They grumbled, but agreed to the emergency job. With a promised bonus and *mogarych* (traditional refreshments; a kind of informal treat or feast offered as a token of gratitude or as an incentive), they committed to working at full speed to complete everything by morning.

By midnight, accompanied by the chant “Heave, once more, heave!”, the two-metre-tall figure had been hoisted onto the pedestal. By 7 am, the work was complete.

The crew sat down to celebrate, and I went home, warned my wife, and headed off to be ‘ill’ at my mother’s house (she lived on Karl Liebknecht Street).

I did not attend the museum opening and avoided showing up at the regional committee for the next month.

The newspapers reported on the museum’s opening, but made no mention of the monument.

A month later, the Secretary of the Central Committee for Ideology, Nazarenko, arrived in Poltava. As usual, I was part of the entourage accompanying him around the city. When the motorcade headed toward the Poltava Battlefield, my heart sank: what would happen when we reached the monument?

As we approached, Mark Sidorovich Spivak ordered the cars to stop about 200 metres from the museum and suggested we first examine the mass grave of Russian soldiers and the improvements made to the surrounding area, before proceeding to the museum.

The guest was pleased with everything. When we reached the museum, Nazarenko exclaimed: “How wonderful that Peter the First is here!” Everyone entered the museum, while our ‘First’ held back, waited for me, shook my hand, and gave me a conspiratorial wink, nodding toward the monument.

When we parted, he came up to me once more and said: “Well, Comrade Chief Architect, you see – we prevailed!” (Vaingort 2001).

In 2024, a debate arose in Poltava regarding the future of the monument to Peter I in front of the Poltava Battle Museum (Figure 4). Several groups initiated a campaign to dismantle the monument as a symbolic protest against the aggression of the Russian Federation, which launched a full-scale war against Ukraine in 2022. On February 24, 2025, the sculpture of Peter I was removed from its pedestal and relocated to the museum courtyard. Responding to an enquiry from local historians, the Director of the Poltava City Department of Culture, Elena Romas, stated: “The sculpture, which is part of the core collection of the Field of the Battle of Poltava State Historical and Cultural Reserve, will remain there. Its relocation or destruction is not planned.”



Figure 4. Monument to Peter I in Poltava, in front of the Museum of the Battle of Poltava. (Image source: <http://monuments.top/pamyatnik-petru-v-poltave>)

In this instance, the preservation of architectural heritage was ensured thanks to the museum's accounting records. Thus, Adamson's sculpture finds itself once again in the museum courtyard, and hopefully its adventures are not yet over.

## References

Korsunsky, V. 2012. *Art School / Cadet Corps: On the Monuments to Peter I and Vatutin*. URL: <https://foff4ik.blogspot.com/2012/12/ppkk-monuments.html> (accessed 13/02/2025).

Romashkevich, A. D. 1915. *Materialy k istorii Petrovskogo Poltavskogo kadetskogo korpusa. / Po ofic. dan. sobral podpolk. A.D. Romaškevič* (Materials on the History of the Petrovsky-Poltava Cadet Corpus). Poltava: I. A. Dokhman

Vaingort, Aria-Leon S. 2001. *Zapiski provincial'nogo arhitektora* (Notes of a Provincial Architect). Poltava: Astreya-Inform. <https://histpol.narod.ru/books/vaingort/vaingort-00.htm>

**Vladimir Vaingort**, PhD, is an architect at the Baltic Institute of Housing Economy and Policy, Tallinn, Estonia. His main research area is architecture, art history, monuments.

E-mail: kardis@kardis.ee

# Horticultural Cooperatives in Estonia and Lifestyle Change: The Case of Ihaste

**Maris Kuperjanov**

*Referent and archivist, Department of Folkloristics, Estonian Literary Museum*

*E-mail: maris.kuperjanov@folklore.ee*

**Andres Kuperjanov**

*Etnoastronomer, an independent researcher*

*E-mail: cps@obs.ee*

**Abstract:** This article explores the historical development and transformation of horticultural cooperatives in Estonia, focusing on the example of Ihaste near Tartu. Initially established during the Soviet era to mitigate food shortages, these cooperatives provided urban residents with small plots for growing essential crops. Over time, legislative changes allowed the construction of summer houses, and by the late 1960s, thousands of families participated in cooperative gardening. The study highlights the socio-cultural significance of these plots, which offered not only food security but also psychological benefits and a sense of autonomy during political oppression. Based on archive materials and interviews, the article examines how Ihaste evolved from a horticultural district into a suburban residential area, reflecting broader lifestyle changes. Following Estonia's independence, privatisation and economic shifts transformed garden plots into permanent homes, while gardening practices shifted from subsistence to leisure and ornamental purposes. Current challenges include land rights, environmental risks, and urban development pressures. The case of Ihaste illustrates how horticultural cooperatives have adapted to changing social,

economic, and ecological contexts, maintaining cultural continuity while responding to modern needs.

**Keywords:** horticulture, horticultural cooperative, food security, self-sustainability, urban gardening

## Introduction

Spending summer in the countryside has been one of the preferred forms of vacation for the city dwellers. But even for them, the countryside has not always meant just vacation. Following the history of garden plots and summer cottages, it becomes apparent that these gained special momentum during and after World War II, when food shortages occurred in several affected countries due to the disruption of supply chains and the need to grow their own food became more important in an urbanising environment. Self-sufficiency and food production became a crucial survival strategy, and such practices were often supported by community cooperation. National campaigns were also conducted for gardening and food growing, for example Britain's wartime domestic gardening campaign Dig for Victory! which prompted a huge expansion in allotments. As a result, by 1943 the British produced a lot more food in allotments and private gardens than they did before the War (Ginn 2012: 296). Similar campaigns to transform urban spaces into productive land and to combat food shortages by growing vegetables during crises have been adopted in other countries (for example Japan, the USA, Germany).

The living environment in Estonia changed significantly during and after World War II. During the Soviet occupation, the land became state property, and collective farms were established on land taken from the farms (Banner 2019: 226–227). Only a small garden remained for residents to use. Within these limits they had to maximise the utility of available space to cultivate food crops and graze livestock in an effort to supplement their diet, which had been affected by systemic shortages. When possible, people tried to relocate to the urban areas to find easier employment and living conditions, leading to a gradual attenuation of their connection to the land and to nature.

The article discusses: (a) how popular horticultural cooperatives were created in Estonia; (b) what stages can be distinguished in the development of

horticultural cooperatives; (c) what does today's horticultural cooperative look like, using the example of Ihaste; and (d) the current problems.

## Theoretical background

Agriculture, despite being commonly perceived as a rural phenomenon, has a longstanding history within urban environments, adapting over time to changing socio-economic and spatial dynamics (Yuan *et al.* 2022). Ensuring food independence has been particularly important during times of crisis and disruption of supply chains, for example government campaigns during the world wars (e.g. Ginn 2012: 296, Yuan *et al.* 2022) or the surge in public interest in self-sustainability and urban gardening during the recent COVID-19 pandemic (Hume *et al.* 2021, Yuan *et al.* 2022). The extensive establishment of war or crisis gardens resulted in increasing domestic food production amid economic or logistical hardships, exemplifying the historical role of urban farming in supporting food security.

Due to urban expansion and suburbanisation, the locations of numerous Estonian gardening cooperatives transitioned into suburban or peri-urban zones, resulting in this land being considered part of urban agriculture. Urban and peri-urban agriculture (UPA) uses practices that yield food and other outputs through agricultural production and related processes (transformation, distribution, marketing, recycling) that take place on land and other spaces within cities and surrounding regions (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, n.d.). UPA not only uses research associated with the natural sciences (agronomy, pollution, water and soil quality among others), but also important raises questions of a social and economic nature such as land markets, migration from rural to urban spaces and social integration, among others (Matos Souza & Sales Batista 2013). The UPA perspective recognises the evolving spatial and functional integration of food cultivation into suburban landscapes as part of broader urban agricultural systems.

Gardening can afford practitioners enhanced well-being, self-esteem and improved quality of life. Nurana Mamedova (2015) has previously researched community gardening benefits for both individuals and the environment based on urban gardening in Tartu, focusing mainly on smaller allotments. Gardening has significant psychological benefits, including reduced stress, anxiety

and depression through connection with nature, nurturing responsibilities, and achievement from plant growth; the benefits to physical health by boosting exercise and mobility are also equally important (Soga *et al.* 2017). In the case of post-World War II Estonia we must consider the fact that the Soviet Union had taken the land away from Estonian citizens during the process of collectivisation, and having access to even a small piece of land allowed individuals to cultivate a sense of personal agency (Banner 2019: 253). This also improved the individual's connection to the environment and nature, offering crucial psychological benefits amid political oppression and land dispossession.

## Method

The review uses articles and studies of public gardens in Estonia from the 1950–2024 period. In addition, the authors conducted semi-structured interviews in which the questions concerned the existence of the Ihaste garden district and its functions, management and construction with first and second generation individuals from former horticultural cooperatives and a descendent of local farm family in Ihaste area. We also asked whether and why the summer house had turned into permanent dwellings and about general changes in lifestyle and leisure time.

## The early stages of cooperative gardening

The first cooperative allotment sites, or horticultural cooperatives, appeared in Estonian urban areas at the beginning of the Soviet era, as food shortages continued in the country after World War II. To mitigate these shortages, municipalities began to distribute land to workers so that they could grow their own garden products. During this period, the construction of any permanent structures on this land was prohibited, and people could use the area only for horticultural activities. In small settlements, land plots were usually located within a 10-minute walk of the apartment buildings in which people lived, while in larger cities gardening cooperatives were located further away.

The materials collected by scientists from the Estonian National Museum show that collective farmers had 0.5 hectares of arable land, while state farmers initially had 0.15–0.25 hectares, with the plot size for state farmers growing

to 0.5 hectares after 1983; owners of private houses in towns and cities also had to allocate part of the land on their plot to gardening (300–600 m<sup>2</sup> in the city, 700–200 m<sup>2</sup> in rural areas) (Viira 2012: 10). The first garden settlements were built back in the late 1950s, with horticultural cooperatives formed based on these in 1965. In Tartu the vast majority of horticultural cooperatives established in the 1960s have survived to this day. On the official information page of the City of Tartu (Tartu Linnaaiad 2025), among the older cooperatives are Tiigi, Veeriku, Timuti, and Ihaste. From this we see that the sizes of horticultural cooperatives and individual plots varied. Tiigi Garden, with an area of 10 hectares, was established in 1965 in the Veeriku district as a garden cooperative for the local electric company and is probably one of the largest privately used communal gardens in Tartu County. It contains 91 plots, each of the considerable size of 500–1000 m<sup>2</sup>. Veeriku Garden covers only 2.7 hectares, where plot sizes vary between 60–120–180 m<sup>2</sup>. The area is mainly used for growing vegetables in open ground and in small greenhouses. Timuti horticultural land has been used by members of the Tartu Horticultural and Beekeeping Association since the 1960s. Today, there are about twenty users, and several plots are vacant. All cooperatives have agreements with the city of varying duration; the Timuti contract for land use with the city is valid until 2033, while most others expire in 2027 and later. The newest gardens include, for example, the one established in 2019 (formerly called Lammi Garden) with a land-use permit valid until 2029.

Changes in legislation in the 1960s made it possible to locate horticultural cooperatives at a distance, and then people were allowed to build small summer cabins. Cooperatives were usually created at the workplaces, with mainly employees participating, while management staff used the institution's summer cottage. The land designated for gardening was mainly unsuitable for large-scale agricultural production, often being a barren or swampy area. But although the land did not belong to individuals, instead being given for use by the state, this small piece of land provided people the opportunity to feel like masters of their own land (Banner 2019: 253). This was enough to contribute to the increase in the value of the land; in addition, a small cabin made it possible to stay overnight. By the end of the 1960s, about 6,000 families were already concentrated in horticultural cooperatives in Estonia and by 1985 ca. 100,000 individuals were involved in horticultural cooperatives (ENE 1985: 91). At that time, the main purpose was the growing the garden products necessary to feed

the family with, for example, up to two dozen fruit trees on a relatively small area, in addition to which families could grow most of the necessary potatoes and other vegetables.

As the plots given to people for use were small, they had to work around this limitation and try to fit in many fruits and vegetable plants as efficiently as possible. For example, one of the Estonian National Museum's correspondents describes his garden in Järvakandi in the following way:

There were 12 apple trees, 16 red currant bushes and 10 black currant bushes in the garden adjacent to the house. In addition, there were raspberries, garden strawberries and chokeberry tree in the garden. All kinds of root crops grew in the beds, pumpkins were planted on a compost pile, and a 118-square-metre greenhouse supplied tomatoes, peppers, and cucumbers. There were early potatoes growing in the backyard. In the garden, we were field beans, peas, and cucumbers under film coating for decades. (Viira 2012: 10)

The enthusiasm for jam-making was widespread in Estonia, extending beyond diverse preserve varieties to include the canning of jams, compotes, salads and juices in home kitchens, with an array of fruit and vegetables alongside foraged wild berries and mushrooms. This practice underscored household self-sustainability efforts, particularly during wartime or post-war scarcities akin to other countries that shared the same fate. Canning, drying, and other food preservation techniques ensured year-round access to nutrition. Although food shortages have been resolved and the need to stock up on food to survive the winter and diversify the diet has disappeared, cellars full of preserves and stored fruits and vegetables are still a significant part of many households. "In Võru, for example, women went to count who had 200 jars in the basement, who had 250, and who barely had 70 jars with preserves." (Viira 2012: 10)

Later the food program adopted by the Central Committee of the Communist Party at the May 1982 plenum set the task of "ensuring a reliable supply of all food products to the population, significantly increasing the consumption of highly nutritious foods and significantly improving the structure of nutrition." The issue was so topical that in 1983 the Party recommended that the leadership of the Tartu City Committee horticultural cooperative carry out explanatory work so that the land would not only be used for summer holidays, but also that "everyone should grow fruits or vegetables" (Viira 2012).

## Horticultural cooperatives in the Ihaste area

Compared to gardening cooperatives near the capital city Tallinn, the construction of Ihaste in Tartu took place later, probably because many people had relatives living close by in rural areas with whom they could spend their holidays and help with agricultural work, receiving vegetables, fruits and even, for example, meat in return.

The name Ihaste comes from the village Ihaste. It is probably not as old as the first archaeological finds at this place, since the location of the Stone Age settlement of Ihaste is neither more nor less than 10,000 years old. Ihaste district includes meadows and floodplain areas on the left bank of the Emajõgi River, below Tartu, the relief gradually becoming higher to the north and northeast.

In 1967, 144.2 hectares of land were allocated to horticultural cooperatives here, of which about 88 hectares were usable; it took two years for horticultural cooperatives to obtain a plot of land in Tartu (Toomsalu & Visnapuu 1969). Applications for the establishment of horticultural cooperatives in Ihaste began in 1967, with the horticultural cooperative district planned by Maie Ilumäe (Tartu, n.d.). The allocated plot was able to meet the requirements of only 28 horticultural cooperatives (745 members). The number of members in cooperatives varied, with up to 90 members (Toomsalu & Visnapuu 1969). They planted trees on the plot, built a small house of the permitted size, and tried to build a sauna. In 1977, Ihaste was administratively annexed to the city of Tartu. The figures showing the growing popularity of the district speak for themselves: by 2020, 2,721 people were living in Ihaste, and its area had grown to 424 hectares (Tartu, n.d.).



Figure 1. The first picture from 1975 shows a pond has been dug in the swampy part of the plot allocated for the cooperative; the sandy part has already been filled in. The second picture shows the same view in 2024. The former sandbank is difficult to see after 50 years, and in general the place has changed dramatically.

The early days of Ihaste can be described as joint construction: relatives and colleagues were the first to lend a helping hand, and common labour days (a variant of community service, like clean-up days) were organised. The quality of received land plots was different, as indicated by previous statistics: there were sandy land and swampy areas, but there was also agricultural land suitable for farming: "Our plot was on a sandy area. So, if you dig even in the current garden plot, then somewhere at a depth of 30 centimetres at most there will be black soil, with clean sand under it. There used to be sand pits in this moorland, where people went to sunbathe and children could play in the sand." (Interview 2).

The plots of land have been owned by the same families for generations, and they tried continuing their traditions in the best possible way. It was typical to involve children in gardening and farm maintenance. The children who were brought to the summer cottage cooperative areas for the weekend, formed groups with local farm children and they played, swam and spent their childhood together:

It was back in the days of my grandmother's ancestors, in my time everything was already there. It was a farm, a farm plot, and in my childhood there was another small farm house there. The children were obliged to make vegetable beds and weed. But at the same time, since there were children around, it was also possible to play and it was much better than in the city. But I didn't realise it until I was an adult. At that time, I thought that I had school friends in the city, why would I go to the countryside, because then it was a rural area. Every Friday I went to the country, and on Sunday I returned.... we had a proper water supply there, there were no problems with irrigation. (Interview 1)

The initial construction was carried out with the help of relatives, which was typical for all regions:

I remember that in 1969, the institution transferred the so-called potato furrows to the employees, and a year later horticultural cooperatives were established and building residential buildings on the site was forbidden. Those who built dwellings were forced to demolish them. My father and my husband were building, and they chose the cheapest project. (Interview 4)

The plots were allocated, my father received a plot, and since the apartment was located in the city, mother and father decided that they would engage in agriculture in Ihaste. The project was official, but it resembled an informal settlement, as the entire street was practically built up according to one project. As they said, at first it was a small booth where you could change clothes and prepare food. Then the construction started. Judging by the stories, the materials were somehow acquired somewhere, and my father was helped by his son-in-law, his own father (my grandfather) and colleagues. Thus, a small garden house was built with a dry toilet, a tiny tiny kitchen unit, two rooms and a woodshed. It was ready sometime in the early 1970s. According to my recollections, I can say that the electricity was turned on in 1971 or a year later. (Interview 2)



Figure 2. The most common summer house built according to a standard project, and Arvo Veski's popular book *Construction of Summer Houses* (1971).

Designing summer houses became a significant source of income for architects all over Estonia, as most summer house owners were building their dwellings within a short period of time. In 1971, the first edition of Arvo Veski's book *Construction of Summer Houses* was published, which became a real bestseller as it contained plentiful practical instructions that most home craftsmen could understand and were able to use in the construction of their own small summer houses.

The speed of construction in Ihaste district was characterised by rapid connection to the electricity grid and the house was registered with the city council, as well. However, there are several typical failed approaches to land cultivation,

such as excessive fertilisation (chemicals had replaced natural manure), which led to groundwater contamination, in addition to which constant land use has led to depleted of the soil. The bigger shock was related specifically to water, as the water-rich wells dug in many plots turned out to be contaminated with nitrates and nitrites.

In early 2000, the city of Tartu received a subsidy from the European Union, and the residents of Ihaste were able to connect to the central city water supply and sewerage system at a 75% discount. This meant that Ihaste had acquired all the amenities of the city. At the same time, construction was carried out around the summer cottages as well as, to the delight of residents, the construction of a pavement, which made the road, with its increased traffic load, safer for pedestrians.

## Risks and limitations for the plots

The main risk was that in the long run the land belonged to a cooperative or it had been obtained from a company. These workplace gardens were small and on land owned by the town or the state. The main difference was that after Estonia regained independence cooperative shareholders could privatise an apartment, house, or horticultural plot using privatisation vouchers, the so-called yellow cards, which were issued to citizens in the early 1990s as part of the country's transition from a state-controlled to a market economy. At the same time, the owners of the plots belonging to the workplace had few rights: when the city decided to take over the land for development, the gardens, with their greenhouses, were demolished. People did not, and still do not, have the right to compensation. This situation persists to this day with plot holders having no rights over this land.

Of the gardens belonging to the institutions, those beside the railway were notable. Railway workers had the right to have a small plot and lay out beds for vegetables, bushes, erect a small greenhouse and sometimes even a small shed made of improvised materials.

In 2013, the Railway Gardens exhibition was held with great success at the Estonian National Museum (curated by Heli Hinto and Kristy Ziugand). The exhibition gave a cross-section of gardens located along the railway that passes through Tartu using photographs taken from spring to autumn 2013. When the

rail tracks were removed the gardens were also destroyed. The Railway Gardens exhibition provided an opportunity to recall aesthetically different buildings and gardens and was chosen as the audience's favourite in the Create Your Own Exhibition competition of that year (Tarand 2013).

Like the railway gardens, other sites belonging to institutions also appeared to be under the threat of destruction. For example, in 2011, the plots next to Tallinn Airport were demolished, "as a result people who had considered the garden plot their second home for several decades were left without daily gardening activities" (Karro-Kalberg 2014).

Similarly, the so-called garden system of the Chinatown of Tartu (officially Jaamamõisa district), where one-story wooden houses were built after the World War II for the families of Soviet Army officers, was destroyed. The area was formerly a closed Soviet military site separated from the rest of the city by a stone wall, on the other side of which was a military airfield that was closed to civilians. Although multi-storey houses were also built in Chinatown in the 1970s and 1980s. it This was area of the gardens which belonged to the Raadi military airfield. The gardens and the summer houses attached to them, made of improvised materials. The gardeners gradually formed their own community. When the air force left in the 1990s, some of the residents stayed in Tartu and continued to cultivate these gardens. Since the remnants and everything that was at hand were used as building materials, some of the erected buildings looked picturesque. The poor quality and peculiar appearance of the buildings and gardens attracted attention after the closed area was opened to the public and new construction began. As many Soviet military personnel and other garden plot users left for Russia or grew old and died, much of this area was abandoned and further deteriorated over the decades. As part of the construction of a new road, approved in the General Plan of Tartu for 2030, the gardens were demolished in August 2023.

Even though this area is now open to the public, former gardeners continue to come and recall the former days at this location. For example, Pjotr, who spent most of his time here for 50 years, recalls it with love. "There were pear trees here, and there was a greenhouse. Then there was another one. Tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers – everything was home-grown. Onion, garlic, everything was there. I was young and I had the strength, but now I don't". Pjotr, a former horticulturist from Chinatown. (Punamäe 2023)

## Changes in the nineties and later

Mari Nuga (2016) notes that people began to move *en masse* and turn summer cottages into residential buildings back in the 1990s. This was done (contrary to current popular belief) by poorer people, since it allowed better control of costs. They were able to build gradually and slowly improve their living conditions; some people financed their construction activities by renting out an apartment in the city. During the real estate boom, which began later, plots belonging to garden cooperatives became increasingly attractive around the towns and cities in Estonia. During this period, a lot of economically prosperous families moved to live in private housing and new residential areas, and for many people the horticultural areas became a more comfortable and homely alternative to suburban neighbourhoods (Nuga 2016).

As mentioned above, land plots were privatised in exchange for yellow cards and entered into the land register under the name of the new owner. Such actions gave the owner the opportunity to plan the reconstruction. In the 1990s and early 2000s, new projects began to be commissioned to transform old summer cottages into modern insulated houses. Construction refinancing was often carried out by selling or renting out a city apartment, with the money (often along with a bank loan) going to cover project costs. Some people went abroad to earn money for construction, either to Germany or Scandinavia, including Finland. The projects often had to be changed several times, which meant new expenses, and several respondents mentioned that they had decided to make their new insulated homes bigger to accommodate children and grandchildren. The purchase of new houses, including the resale of completed houses and the relocation of children and grandchildren to places of residence in Ihaste, meant that the population there was of different age groups. At the same time, it was noted that relatives who receive high salaries, especially abroad, bought one or more places of residence, often in different parts of Estonia.

Nevertheless, respondents acknowledged that what was built with their own hands is dearer to them than what was created with hired labour, adding that building themselves was partly inevitable for financial reasons. In addition, it is still common practice for the children in the family, and the next of kin, to have the right to several beds in order to grow plants, as well as having their own room in the now insulated house. This ensures a broader responsibility among the relatives, giving them the opportunity to stay out of town.

On April 1, 2002, the builders came and started building, and in August of the same year the house was ready – a two-story house with a gable roof. For the construction, we had to sell the apartment in Annelinn, and during the construction we lived on the ground floor with our family – my wife and a small child. In our spare time, we built the second floor ourselves. It was also a real challenge. You plaster the wall the day before, come home from work the next day, take sandpaper and start sanding this plaster, apply a new layer – and so on from day to day. (Interview 2)

Major changes can be noted in plot use. Land formerly used mainly for crop production has changed to accommodate ornamental gardening and leisure activities, something that became evident in the interviews. Even before recommendations on cultivating land and growing healthy food, diet enrichment was one of the main goals of horticultural cooperatives. The respondents emphasise that also in their cases most of the land originally served agricultural purposes: fruit trees were planted, greenhouses were built for plants that do not grow outdoors in Estonia (cucumbers, tomatoes, peppers, etc.):

The lion's share, or two thirds of the plot, was a field. Initially, there were nine apple trees. There were about a dozen berry bushes, and the rest of the land was under root crops: carrots, potatoes, beetroot, dill. And slowly we began to build greenhouses there, filling in the foundation.... Two greenhouses were for tomatoes, one for cucumbers. Then there was another bed where cucumbers also grew. In those days, in the deep Soviet era, there was practically no need to buy garden products in the shop. Potatoes, carrots, beetroot, turnips, everything that could be imagined was home-grown. (Interview 2)

Garden products, berries and apples were mainly grown. It wasn't a place to lie on the grass, at least not here, but it seemed like that in other places too. Every piece of land was supposed to provide a yield. For me, this meant work. I couldn't go out with friends, for example, to the sea. I was probably 35 years old, and my children used to travel with us, they probably liked it. (Interview 4)

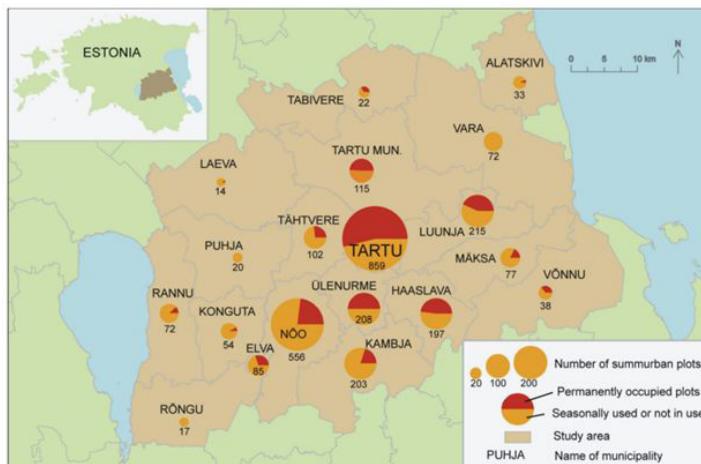


Figure 3. In 2015, an article appeared reviewing the transition of former suburban cooperatives located in Tartu County to permanent settlement, by which time half of the suburban summer houses had already been converted into residential buildings. (Nuga *et al.* 2015)

Big changes have also taken place in cultivated plant species and varieties. After the gardening of the 1970s to 1990s when experiments were carried out with various exotic plants, diversity was increased when people started bringing back plants and seeds from holidays or hiking trips. This category also includes experiments growing grapes and efforts to keep them alive in the hard winters. In later periods, it becomes obvious that gardens are primarily used for recreational purposes and ornamental gardening, as there were no longer any food shortages after the transition from a state-controlled to a market economy. For the same reason, preparation of jam and other preserves has turned from a necessity into a hobby, and is now often replaced by eating the berries fresh or freezing them, which means that eating habits have also changed. However, there are signs that people are keeping their plots of land, and that old trees and bushes are being maintained, although they are no longer being planted in such large numbers. The respondent humorously noted:

When the hungry time comes, we will plough the lawn and plant potatoes. And if we grow field crops in one place for 50 years and apply only fertilisers there, then in the end we will find ourselves in a situation when, so to speak, the tops of potatoes grow to the chest, and in the furrow there are potatoes the size of berries. The earth will simply stop

bearing fruit, it will be depleted; now it is resting under the grass. And if we're ever left out in the cold, or some economic need arises.... We'll uproot the grass, plant potatoes and farm again. (Interview 2)



Figure 4. Ihaste, where former garden houses have been converted to residential buildings. Ihaste has one of the oldest Neolithic settlements in Estonia (~8000 BC) and now on this site is a new development between rural cooperatives (right).

## Conclusion

Based on interviews and documentary evidence, the origins of Tartu horticultural cooperatives mirror global trends such as urban expansion and suburbanisation. Some Estonian horticultural cooperatives, including Ihaste, have now acquired the status of official city districts; however, beyond providing residential space, they also constitute part of urban agriculture and urban nature.

Horticultural cooperatives in Estonia emerged during the Soviet era, primarily in the 1950s and 1960s as a response to chronic food shortages. Authorities allocated small plots near urban areas to workers to grow fruit and vegetables. These cooperatives quickly gained popularity because they provided food security, autonomy, and psychological relief during times of political and economic hardship. By the late 1960s, thousands of families were involved, and by 1985 approximately 100,000 individuals participated in cooperative gardening.

The development of horticultural cooperatives can be divided into several stages:

1. Initial Phase (1950s–1960s): plots were strictly for gardening; construction was prohibited.

2. Expansion (1960s–1980s): legislative changes allowed small summer houses; cooperatives became social spaces.
3. Privatisation and Transformation (1990s): after re-independence, plots were privatised and summer cottages converted to permanent homes.
4. Modern Era (2000s–present): the purpose of gardening shifted from subsistence to leisure and ornamental, with improved infrastructure and urban integration.

Ihaste has evolved from a horticultural district into a suburban residential area with modern amenities such as water supply and sewerage systems. While some gardening persists, the focus is now on ornamental plants and recreational use rather than food production. Many former summer cottages have been rebuilt into insulated family homes, reflecting lifestyle changes and urbanisation.

Key challenges include insecure land rights for plots still without cooperative or institutional ownership, environmental issues such as soil depletion and groundwater contamination, and urban development pressures that lead to the demolition of garden areas. Additionally, balancing heritage preservation with modern housing needs remains a concern.

## Acknowledgements

The authors express their gratitude to all interviewees for their valuable contributions. This article was prepared as part of the Estonian Literary Museum's scientific project EKM 8-2/20/3 within the framework of planned 2023 research on multilocal lifestyles.

## Sources

Interviews are archived in the EFITA (Folklore Department repository) at the Estonian Literary Museum.

## References

Banner, Anneli 2019. *Eesti aia ajalugu* (The history of the Estonian garden). Tallinn: Hea Lugu.

ENE 1 1985. *Eesti Nõukogude Entsüklopeedia* (Vol. 1, p. 91).

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. (n.d.). Urban and peri-urban agriculture. Retrieved from <https://www.fao.org/urban-peri-urban-agriculture/en>

Ginn, Franklin 2012. Dig for victory! New histories of wartime gardening in Britain. *Journal of Historical Geography*, 38: 294–305. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2012.02.001>

Hume, I. V., Summers, D. M., & Cavagnaro, T. R. 2021. Self-sufficiency through urban agriculture: Nice idea or plausible reality? *Sustainable Cities and Society*, 68, Article 102770. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scs.2021.102770>

Karro-Kalberg, Merle 2014. Ühisaiad rikastavad linna (Community gardens enrich the city). *Sirp*, May 22. Retrieved from <https://www.sirp.ee/s1-artiklid/arhitektuur/2014-05-22-17-47-47/>

Mamedova, Nuriana 2015. *Tartu ühisaedade sotsiaalseid, maakasutuslikke ja aianduslikke aspekte* (Master's thesis, Estonian University of Life Sciences).

Sousa Matos, R., & Batista Sales, D. 2013. *Urban agriculture: The allotment gardens as structures of urban sustainability*. <https://doi.org/10.5772/55892>

Nuga, Mari, Metspalu, Pille, Org, Anette, & Leetmaa, Kadri 2015. Planning post-socialist suburbia: From spontaneous pragmatism to collaborative planning? *Moravian Geographical Reports*, 23(4): 36–46. <https://doi.org/10.1515/mgr-2015-0023>

Nuga, Mari 2016. *Soviet-era summerhouses: On homes and planning in post-socialist suburbia* (Dissertationes Geographicae Universitatis Tartuensis 62). Tartu: University of Tartu Press.

Nuga, Mari 2016a. Unistusidealest kodust (The dream of a perfect home). *Sirp*, 14. October. Retrieved from <https://www.sirp.ee/s1-artiklid/arkitektuur/unistus-idealest-kodust/>

Punamäe, Ode Maria 2023. Tartus lõpetati Hiinalinna vanade aiamaaide likvideerimine (The liquidation of the old houses of the Chinatown has been completed in Tartu). *ERR News*, August 29.

Soga, Masashi, Gaston, Kevin J., & Yamaura, Yuich 2017. Gardening is beneficial for health: A meta-analysis. *Preventive Medicine Reports*, 5: 92–99. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pmedr.2016.11.007>

Tarand, Kaarel 2013. Rongid, rongid, kuhu te ...? (Trains, trains, where are you ...?). Retrieved *Eesti Rahva Muuseumi ajaveeb*. 28. 11. 2013 <https://blog erm ee/?p=3911>

Tartu. (n.d.). Ihaste. Retrieved from <https://www.tartu.ee/et/ihaste>

Tartu Linnaaiad 2025. *Tartu linna- ja kogukonnaaiad 2025*. Retrieved from <https://tartu.ee/et/tartu-linna-ja-kogukonnaaiad#:~:text=Veeriku%20linnaosas%20aadressil%20Ravila%20tn%2049a%20asub%20umbes,ja%20on%20ilmselt%20üks%20suuremaid%20ühiskasutuses%20eraaedu%20Tartumaal>

Toomsalu, L., & Visnapuu, D. 1969. *Aianduskooperatiivi õiguslik seisund ja tegevus* (Legal status and activities of horticultural cooperatives). Tartu Riiklik Ülikool.

Veski, Arvo 1971. *Suvemajade ehitamine* (Construction of summer houses). Tallinn: Valgus.

Viira, Ants 2012. Söömine Nõuka-ajal: tühjust täis poletid ja külluse all ägavad peolauad (How they ate in the Soviet era: Empty store counters and home-tables overflowing with food). Õhtuleht, July 7. Retrieved from <https://www.ohtuleht.ee/melu/483818/soomine-nouka-ajal-tuhjust-tais-poletid-ja-kulluse-all-ägavad-peolauad>

Yuan, Grace Ning, Marquez, Gian Powell B., Deng, Haoran, Iu, Anastasiia, Fabella, Melisa, Salonga, Reginald B., Ashardiono, Fitrio, Cartagena, Joyce A., Hernandez, Gian Powell B. & Lau, S. S. Y. 2022. A review on urban agriculture: Technology, socio-economy, and policy. *Heliyon*, 8(11), Article e11480. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2022.e11480>

**Maris Kuperjanov** is an archivist in the Department of Folkloristics at the Estonian Literary Museum. She has compiled and edited collections of contemporary folklore and folk calendar customs. Maris Kuperjanov is a Committee member of the SIEF WG *The Ritual Year*. She is currently involved in the projects connected with human–nonhuman relations and multilocal living style.

e-mail: [maris.kuperjanov@folklore.ee](mailto:maris.kuperjanov@folklore.ee)

ORCID: 0009-0002-4359-4411;

**Andres Kuperjanov**, MPhil, is an independent researcher, he is active in the field of ethnoastronomy and astronomy in culture, currently he is working with the projects antrobotany and multicultural living style. His publications include a monograph (in Estonian) *Estonian Sky*, chapters and articles on the ritual year and ethnocosmology.

e-mail: [cps@obs.ee](mailto:cps@obs.ee)

ORCID: 0009-0009-7927-5683

# Holy Apparition. The birth and development of St Andrew Bobola's cult in Strachocina

**Tomasz Kalniuk**

*Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, Institute of Culture Studies,  
Nicolaus Copernicus University, Poland*

*E-mail: tekantrop@umk.pl*

**Abstract:** Both the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> have brought into Polish religious life new places of cult, built upon miraculous events. The epoch considered as secularised turned out to be a time of intense manifestation of the supernatural. This paper presents the origins and the development of the St Andrew Bobola sanctuary in Strachocina. The text is based on available literary sources as well as the author's empirical research conducted over several years of field study. First, selected information concerning the martyr's cult in the past is provided, followed by an outline of its development. Second, the presence of the saint in the consciousness of contemporary inhabitants of Strachocina and pilgrim visitors is depicted.

**Keywords:** miracles, holy places, religiosity, sacred, sacrosphere of Poland, spirituality, St Andrew Bobola, Strachocina, visions

Phenomena that can be described as supernatural occupy a permanent place in the long history of culture. They are present at the birth of many communities, whose founding myths point to the primal manifestation of the sacred as a proper impulse for the development of their cultures. The commemoration of an

extraordinary experience, originally through a rock or a post, and later through more sophisticated architectural forms, developed religious cults and co-created the cultural identity of various communities (see e.g. Kalniuk 2019: 81–87; Eliade 2004: 36; Orsi 1999). A place marked with a sacred symbol was both a geographical and social centre of a community's life (Eliade 1999: 8, 22, 52; Eade, Sallnow 1991: 78). The properties of this area belong to the condition of liminality, as understood by Victor Turner (Turner 2010). A holy place is a kind of exterritorial zone, means of communication with another reality, or division line between the sacred and profane. The successful process of sanctification of a place requires the presence and leadership of religious authorities.

Religion and its priests are responsible for the transmission of meta senses and definition of their expression in a group. They participate in establishing a regulated festive cycle. The sacred is materialised in an organised religious cult (van Gennep 2006: 37–38; Orsi 1999: 11–12; Rappaport 1999: 141). This phenomenon can be illustrated by contemporary devotional practices that honour various saints. Although those divine chosen ones, according to the Christian credo, dwell in the heavens, through their relics, statues and pictures, they remain closely connected to certain places on earth. They possess objects dedicated to them, from small roadside shrines to magnificent basilicas, as well as days devoted to them, from liturgical commemorations to feasts in their honour (Bouflet 2011; Bynum 2007). Saints abide in the liminal area, being 'borderline people' (Turner 2010: 116–125). In a broad cultural landscape, they are, among others, mediators that mediate between the faithful and the sacred (Kalniuk 2014). In the Christian context, this is specially manifested in cult places devoted to them such as sanctuaries, considered so-called 'hotlines' to supernatural reality (Turner & Turner 2009: 15). These church objects are space-times with interesting origins and dynamics (Seweryniak 2010: 21–42). This paper proposes a study a new place of cult, the sanctuary of St Andrew Bobola in Strachocina, near Sanok. The narration is based on available literary material, as well as empirical data, drawn from the author's field research over several years<sup>1</sup>. First, selected information concerning the martyr's cult in the past is provided, followed by an outline of its development. The presence of the saint in the consciousness of contemporary Strachocina inhabitants and pilgrim visitors is then depicted<sup>2</sup>.

## Bobola in historical visions

Andrew Bobola was a Jesuit priest who spent most of his life in the Pińsk area (formerly Polesie, currently in Belarus), whose inhabitants were diversified both in terms of ethnicity and religion. This fact, connected with his strong missionary involvement and notable successes in that field, in the context of historical events of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, lead to an unequivocal assessment of the saint. He used to be called a 'hunter of souls'. Considered a saint by Catholics, and thought of as *persona non grata* by Orthodox Christians, he disturbed public opinion of his time destabilising the already tense socio-political and religious situation in the region. This led to a certain reserve towards him, which is still present even today, especially in Orthodox circles.

Source materials have allowed researchers to reconstruct, to a satisfactory degree, the history of the Bobola family. The sources indicate that in the 13<sup>th</sup> century they lived in Silesia as impoverished noblemen (Paciuskiewicz 1996: 9). At the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century they appeared in Lesser Poland, still, as before, without high social status. They did, however, have connections with representatives of some notable families, which led to their spread over the country. The presence of the Bobola family between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries was reported among others in Jasło, Krosno and Sanok, where they were known as moderately well-off and trustworthy citizens. The Bobolas had a strong commitment to Catholicism, which, in the period after the Reformation, was expressed, among others, by maintaining friendly relations with Jesuits, known for their counter-Reformation activity. Heraldic analysts claim that St Andrew originates from the Bobola family of Lesser Poland. This can be confirmed by the statement he made in a Lithuanian Jesuit's house: "I, Andrzej Bobola of the Lesser Poland" (ibid.: 8). Based on information on his ancestors and knowledge of the baptism customs of that time, the birth date of the saint was determined as 30<sup>th</sup> November, 1591 (30<sup>th</sup> November is the feast day of St Andrew the Apostle). A note preserved in Pińsk indicates that Andrew Bobola died a martyr on 16<sup>th</sup> may 1657 (Niżnik 2016: 67).

The process of being declared a saint was problematic for Bobola. After his martyrdom, there were no socio-cultural repercussions that would stimulate the 'expansion of holiness'<sup>3</sup>. The cruelty of the Cossacks, which stood behind the death of Bobola, and the threat they still posed, might have efficiently suppressed

the spontaneous reactions of the people (Besala 2010). As a result, Bobola was forgotten. In fact, this 'social amnesia' was caused by a number of factors: the aforementioned threat from the Cossacks, opposing propaganda on the part of the Orthodox Church, as well as the attitude of the Jesuits themselves. The congregation focused on enduring the turbulent times rather than cherishing lofty ideals. Bobola was just another one of the 49 Jesuits murdered at the time of the 'flood', and was buried accordingly in the crypt of the Pińsk church in a simple, black-painted, coffin. The panorama of difficult socio-political events could have closed the case forever. However, the recognition of his holiness was only postponed in time and developed in stages. The intermittent commemorations of the martyr followed by longer periods of oblivion reoccurred several times, in 1702 (Pińsk), 1819 (Vilnius), and 1987 (Strachocina). The analysis of events connected with the development of Bobola's cult clearly shows the presence of the supernatural factor. Bobola consequently communicated with people through dreams and visions<sup>4</sup>. The same schema applied to historical events as well as the foundation of a new place of his cult, located in Lesser Poland, thus it seems appropriate to present it here.

In 1702, the monk appeared in Pinsk. During the apparition, he accused Marcin Godebski, the Jesuit superior, of politicking, and then, conditionally, offered to help him (Popłatek 1996: 138–139). To get this help, it was necessary to find Bobola's body, which was successfully done after several days. The corpse, with no typical signs of decay but with clear indication of torture confirming his identity, "was cleansed, wrapped in a new shroud, adorned with new garments and a black damask chasuble, and then placed in a new coffin, which was then placed on a scaffolding in the middle of the crypt, opposite the window" (Popłatek 2007: 118–139). Initially crowds of poor people, and then the nobility too, started gathering around the place. People who were afflicted by hunger after military requisitioning and then decimated by the plague in 1709–1710 reported to the Jesuits that they had received extraordinary help from the martyr<sup>5</sup>. These reports inclined Alexander Benedict Wyhowski, the ordinary of Lutsk, to officially explain the situation. In the course of this work a nearly 2,000 page document was prepared containing numerous testimonies of miracles. Since the presented material was deemed insufficient for confirmation of martyrdom, a decision was made to collect further evidence. Descriptions of four miracles through the intercession of Andrew were requested. This requirement was met as early as the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, although it did not lead to beatification which

took place only on 30<sup>th</sup> November, 1853. The canonisation followed on 17<sup>th</sup> April of the following year after the examination of another miracle<sup>6</sup>.

Again, during the time of partition in 1819, Bobola appeared to a Dominican, Alojzy Korzeniowski. The visitor appeared in the friar's monastery cell in Vilnius, introduced himself, and then asked the monk to open the window, through which the slightly frightened Dominican "saw immeasurable space instead of a cramped cloister garden" (Popłatek 2007: 214). In that space he could see an enormous military conflict. "When such a war comes, Bobola said, the coming of peace will be accompanied by the resurrection of Poland, and I will be declared its main patron" (*ibid.*). To legitimise the authenticity of the apparition, he left behind his handprint<sup>7</sup>. The fulfilment of the prophecy was completed in two stages. After 99 years Poland regained its independence, and after over 180 years, Andrew Bobola became its patron.

## **Bobola in contemporary visions**

At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Bobola drew attention to himself again, in the small Lesser Polish village of Strachocina. As a result of these events, the village was declared the birthplace of the priest. The results of intensified research show that the saint strove to be recognised by appearing at night throughout almost the whole 20<sup>th</sup> century at the rectory, thus unintentionally frightening the priests working there. Father Ryszard Mucha, who worked in Strachocina parish between 1970 and 1983, had the most numerous apparitions. According to most local inhabitants, these events led to a nervous breakdown for the priest: "The former parish priest, Father Ryszard Mucha, got sick because of, among others, fears and spiritual experiences. I heard him say that somebody comes at night, stands and waits at the door" (53-year-old woman from Strachocina). Father Mucha's successor, prelate Józef Niżnik, does not fully agree with this diagnosis and explains that it was the lack of understanding and care from people around him that led to his breakdown. The priest, who managed recognises the apparition's slim posture, dark beard and long cassock as Andrew Bobola, deflected criticism directed at his predecessors, claiming that an encounter with an apparition is a unique and difficult matter. He recalls that the first time he was woken up at night, he threw himself at the figure as if it was a thug. He thought he was dealing with a burglar (Paciuszkiewicz 1996: 18, 20).

The process of discovering the truth took him over three years and involved multiple encounters with the mysterious figure. He uses the term 'encounter' as in his opinion the regular visit time (2:10 a.m.) and knocking at the door pointed to good intentions and a willingness to communicate: "I realised that the one who knocks wants to enter, so I no longer thought that he needed help, but that he might need something more" (author's conversation with Father Niżnik). The change of his attitude kept evolving until the decisive conversation took place during the night between 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> May, 1987. "It was then that I consciously started communication with the figure. I asked who he was and what he wanted. Then I heard a voice that in a way penetrated me: 'I am St Andrew Bobola. Start honouring me in Strachocina'" (Niżnik 2016: 105). The villagers' reports seem more vivid and rich in detail:

From what he said, I know that a figure would come at night, either visible or invisible. At two after midnight, every other night, the door would open wide. No matter what time he would go to bed, it would wake him up. The crucifix or a picture on the wall would move so much that it seemed it might fall at first but then it would stop. The invisible figure would just walk a little around the room. But the man is only a man – he would go to sleep in another parish, as he wouldn't be able to put up with it. He would say exorcisms with the sisters in the rectory. (85-year-old woman from Strachocina)



Figure 1. The Parish House, site of the saint's apparitions. Photograph by the author 2018.

The first conversation between Niżnik and Bobola turned out to be the last. “When they started the cult of Bobola, then peace came”, one of my interlocutors concluded (58-year-old woman from Strachocina). The puzzle was solved. “When I asked him those two questions, I didn’t think he might be a saint, as there was no cult of Bobola here. The cult was clearly initiated at the saint’s request” (author’s conversation with Father Niżnik). Along with the transfer of his relics from his sanctuary in Warsaw, pursuant to a relevant decree, on the 16<sup>th</sup> May, 1988, St Catherine church in Strachocina became the sanctuary of Andrzej Bobola. On this day the cult was officially started here. However, the presence of the saint, though unconscious, was present much earlier in the landscape and nomenclature. This can be seen, for example in a toponym ‘Bobolówka’, which was used by local villagers for the area around the church. Within several years ‘Bobolówka’ was adapted for religious purposes. On the hill that is considered a birthplace of Bobola, there is a big, roofed field altar. To reach it, one walks along the Stations of the Cross, with scenes from the life of the saint. Down below, in the field, there is a modest tourist base: several tables, benches and toilets. In the summer, on the 16<sup>th</sup> of each month, processions are organised there.

A new tradition was started in Strachocina. After a long time, ‘Bobolówka’ was discovered and appreciated. Pilgrimages started being organised to the hill near the church and liturgy was celebrated there (beginning in 1992). On the provisional construction of the altar, an inscription was placed: “This place has been chosen by God”. It was a clear reference to what happened in 1591 on the hill, namely, to the birth of Andrew Bobola. (Paciuskiewicz 1996: 40)



Figures 2, 3. Pilgrims on their way to Bobolówka. Photograph by the author 2018.

The villagers, for the most part, identify with the newly discovered patron, actively taking part in pastoral initiatives taken up by the parish. The church has been restored and scenes from the life of the saint have been carved on the ornamented entrance door. Inside the temple, a 15<sup>th</sup> century font has been exposed, where the future patron saint of Poland is thought to have been baptised<sup>8</sup>. The sanctuary is visited by ordinary pilgrims as well as notable representatives of both church and civil authorities. It is they who largely contribute to the development of the saint's cult (author's conversation with Father Niżnik). The process of social and cultural change in Strachocina under the influence of the cult of Bobola is significant. The changes are noticed both by the local inhabitants and visitors. A local religious sister claims that "Bobola religiousness" plays an important role in the religious life of local people (53-year-old woman from Strachocina). A pilgrim from Ustrzyki Górne pointed out that:

the development is visible in the example of the rectory and, of course, 'Bobolówka'. If we go back to several years ago, the only thing that was here was a dilapidated shed. Today it is a totally different place. Every year something new appears: Stations of the Cross, toilets, a carpark. We are present in the internet, and Father Joseph regularly posts pic-

tures from events that take place here. Strachocina, thanks to Bobola, is famous now. (49-year-old woman from Ustrzyki Górne)

The parish priest has a similar opinion: “Religiously, these are not the same people. A colossal change has taken place. It is not the same village anymore. In the past it used to be just an unknown village. Now, if you ask anybody in Poland about Strachocina, they will rather be familiar with the name” (author’s conversation with Father Niżnik). Checking these opinions against some past records, evolution cannot be denied. In 1972, the parish priest Józef Mucha made this bitter record in the Chronicle of the Roman Catholic parish in Strachocina: “All pastoral works seem very sluggish. A clear, visible sign of the lack of God’s blessing. With the exception of a group of elderly women [who came with] children, there is nobody you can count on. The attendance at mass is still low” (Paciuszkiewicz 1996: 61).

The cult is understood by many local people as the activity of the parish priest and religious sisters, as they are considered to be “experts in the sacred” (see Witek 2014: 112). “It is mainly the nuns who sustain the cult, rather than lay people. It is too far to the church, which is located on the border of the village” (71-year-old woman from Strachocina). At the same time, on being asked about Bobola, the nuns direct you to the parish priest. He is also considered by the villagers to be the repository of the mystery and a person worth talking to. “It is the elders whom you need to ask, or the parish priest.... The presence of the sacred in Bobola’s cult is regulated by the authority of priests – the functionaries of the sacred” (Ślusarska 2014: 90), and its territorial scope has a local-centric character, centred around the church and ‘Bobolówka’ (Pawluczuk 2003: 154–155). These rather narrow parameters for the cult stand in opposition to a broad, multifaceted character of the saint’s intercession in the consciousness of local inhabitants. One of them claimed: “I think that he helps everyone who needs help, the poor and the sick” (58-year-old woman from Strachocina). Another one added: “The storms and hail are around us, the roofs are blown off, and nothing bad happens to us. We are protected by Bobola” (38-year-old woman from Strachocina).

## The birth and development of St Andrew Bobola's cult in Strachocina

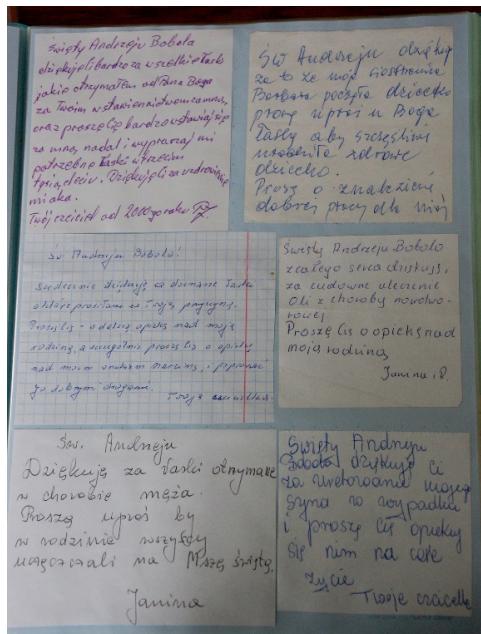


Figure 4. Handwritten entries by pilgrims in the Book of Intentions. Photograph by the author 2018.

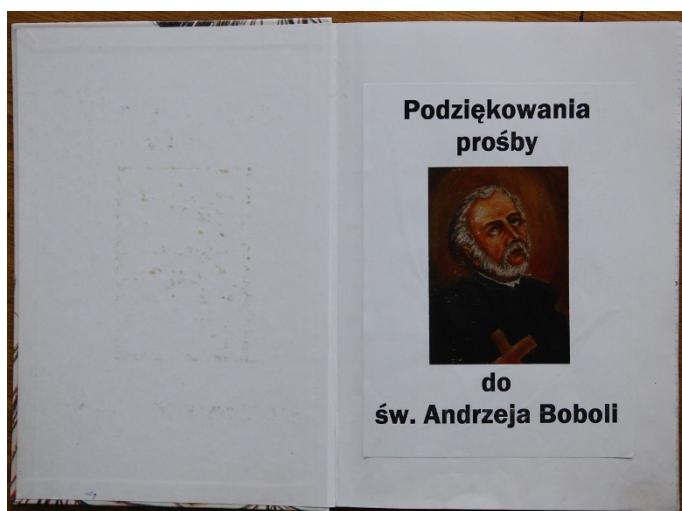


Figure 5. Book of Intentions: prayers and thanksgiving to St Andrew. Photograph by the author 2018.

The parish priest explains that “Andrew cannot be pigeonholed, as his help is extensive, dealing both with physical and spiritual matters” (author’s conversation with Father Niżnik). In his opinion, Bobola’s mission has a complementary as well as original character relative to other patron saints in Poland. On the other hand, according to the parish priest, the martyr’s unprecedented calling for his cult shows both his uniqueness and the significance of his mission.

Incidents connected with Bobola relate to the rescue of the country. For many years I had been looking at it in a different way, but recently it struck me that he did not say he wanted to be honoured by parishioners, but by the Polish. If we had understood that before and honoured him, Poland would probably be different now. He used to offer his help in relation to the fall of communism in Poland. Whenever Poland was in danger Andrew Bobola offered help beforehand. I think that the essence of Andrew Bobola is Poland and the nation. He is Poland’s saint. Not even for the church in Poland, but for Poland itself. The Strachocina sanctuary is important for Poland, only if people could understand that (author’s conversation with Father Niżnik).

## **Bobola, Strachocina, and Polish religiosity...**

The example of Bobola and his cult in Subcarpathia region shows the vitality and dynamism of *sacrum*. It also manages to illustrate man’s desire to relate to the realm of mystery and his refusal to accept its elimination. The appearance of Bobola and recognition of the saint in the frightening apparition indicate to the autonomy of the supernatural sphere and a multitude of its possible expressions. The church authorities claim that although the incidents initiating the cult were far from a typical scenario, they definitely had a positive effect. Pieces of Bobolas history imprinted in the local area and contemporary images of the saint were combined in the emergence of the sanctuary. It has led to a new understanding of the known time-space as a sacred place connected with the martyr. There were at least two possible courses of action. Strachocina without Bobola, instead of a flourishing centre of catholic devotion, could have become a centre for the promotion of *fabula incredibilis* tales. If it had been preserved in the common consciousness as a scary place with a ‘haunted rectory’, it would attract sensation-seekers rather than pilgrims<sup>9</sup>. However, this countryside sanctuary has become more and more recognisable as a centre of religious cult.

The Strachocina case shows that political transformation in Poland did not generate secularising processes leading to prevalent religious indifference<sup>10</sup>. The supernatural is still manifested in floating post-modernity. Pilgrimages, as well as the cult of saints and artefacts connected with them, still profile religious behaviours of the Polish (see e.g. Margry 2008: 13– 46; Coleman and Eade 2004; Orsi 1999; Eade and Sallnow 1991). To some extent, new places of cult, such as the Strachocina sanctuary, sustain and develop the traditional devotion, without being its hostages. The novelty of the sanctuary described here is manifested, among others, in the departure from the Marian complex and schematicity of origin so often seen in similar places (see e.g. Zachar Podolonińska 2019: 284–326; Niedźwiedź 2014: 79; Hermkens, Jansen and Notermans 2009; Halemba 2006). The scale and character of this centre work towards harmonious diversification of Polish sacrosphere. Today, we can observe the coexistence of centres significant in terms of national identity as well as smaller ones. Alongside visiting major sanctuaries (for example a pilgrimage to the national Marian sanctuary in Częstochowa), pilgrimages to local cult places (for example the St Andrew Bobola sanctuary) are growing in popularity. Sometimes the route of one pilgrimage includes centres of different significance. This phenomenon mirrors plurality, which is typical of modernity, and is also present in the religious sphere.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The article presents reflections and conclusions from anthropological fieldwork which I performed a few times in Strachocina. During my participant observation, I wanted to interview people who represented different degrees of awareness and commitment to worship. Hence, although dealing with the religious sphere is customary for priests, friars and nuns they constituted only one sub-group of my interviewees. Apart from the clergy, I also interviewed locals and pilgrims and/or tourists of all ages and sexes.

<sup>2</sup> See for example a particular case study on similar subject (Klimek 2018).

<sup>3</sup> An expression used by Joanna Tokarska-Bakir in the context of dynamic development of the cult of relics and pilgrimages (Tokarska-Bakir 2000: 279). The history of culture gives numerous examples of social unrest connected with saints. “As an example, in the early Middle Ages the Welsh dioceses of St David and St Llandaff were competing against each other, while the acquisition of relics gave higher status to a sanctuary and its clergy as well as bringing prosperity” (Bowi 2008: 267).

<sup>4</sup> The saint could be authoritarian in what he said. Although such behaviour may be rare in one dimensional hagiography, it is well known in religious studies. The non-schematicity of apparitions and their opposition to what is normative, regular and organised seems typical (Turner and Turner 2009: 182).

<sup>5</sup> Among the beneficiaries of the miraculous events were both Catholics and orthodox Christians. A similar situation reoccurred in Połock, where the body of the martyr was transferred. The Orthodox composed a hymn in his honour (see Niżnik 2016: 81; Polak 1996: 210–211).

There are numerous examples indicating that the miracle addressees ('miracle takers') were (and are) morally imperfect people, as well as religiously indifferent (see Świeżyński 2012: 241). A testimony of a supernatural phenomenon by people of different religions or atheists occurs relatively often. The power of the "witnesses without tongue" is particularly valuable and excludes any doubt (Tokarska-Bakir 2000: 286–287).

<sup>6</sup> The theory of miracle is broad and varied both in consideration of the origin and the course of such an event, as well as in the attempts to interpret it. This explains miracles as an ahistorical monolith, the evolution of which can clearly be observed (see e.g. Pyysiäinen 2002; Ashe 1978; Swinburne 1970).

<sup>7</sup> In this image, one can see the reference to so called 'divine feet', i.e. footprints in various places, supposedly left by holy people. They can be found all over Poland and much more widely and were properly honoured (Baruch 1907).

<sup>8</sup> There is a connection to an interesting folklore moment, well known from folk stories about self-propagating or self-denying holy statues or pictures. A font where nuns used to grow pansies, as an 88-year-old respondent from Strachocina said in the summer of 2018, remained still when four large men attempted to move it. However, it could be moved without any problems into the church, where it still stands in the presbytery. A similar motif can be found in Polish folk tradition. And as with the case of the 'stubborn' font, there is a story of sunken church bells, which, after being taken out of the depths, could only be moved to a place where a church was supposed to be built. Moving them anywhere else was impossible (see Wróblewska 2018).

<sup>9</sup> The toponymy of Strachocina predestined it to development in this direction, which was, however, changed through the manifestation of holiness. The history of culture knows examples of the exorcising nature of saints' presence (see Węglarz 1983:152; di Nola 1997: 186).

<sup>10</sup> Researchers in socio-cultural phenomena point to the specificity of secularisation processes in Central and Eastern Europe. In this context, they emphasise the distinctiveness of Polish religiosity (see e.g. Bruce 2013: 13; Collins-Mayo 2010: 1139–1142; Casanova 2004: 19; Borowik 2003: 41–59).

## References

Baruch, Maksymilian 1907. *Boże stopki: archeologia i folklor kamieni z wyżłobionymi ślädami stóp* (Divine feet, archaeology and folklore of stones with carved footprints.) Warszawa: E. Wende.

Besala, Jerzy 2010. *Andrzej Bobola – patron od spraw niebezpiecznych* (Andrzej Bobola: A patron of dangerous matters.) *Polityka.pl*. Available at <https://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/historia/1505486,1,andrzej-bobola---patron-od-spraw-niebezpiecznych.read> (last accessed 17/10/2025).

Borowik, Irena 2003. *Transformations of catholicism and religiosity of catholics in Poland*. In: Irena Borowik (ed.) *Religions, churches and the scientific studies of religion. Poland and Ukraine*. Kraków: Nomos, pp. 41–59.

Bowi, Fiona 2008. *Antropologia religii. Wprowadzenie* (Antropology of religion. An introduction.) Trans. by K. Pawluś. Kraków: Jagiellonian University Press.

Bruce, Steve 2013. *Secularization. In defence of an unfashionable theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Casanova, José 2004. *Religia, europejskie tożsamości świeckie i integracja* (Religions, European lay identities and integration.) Trans. by M. Pasicka, Znak, Vol. 595, No.12: 18–39.

Coleman, Simon & Eade, John (eds.) 2004. *Reframing Pilgrimage. Cultures in Motion*. London–New York: Routledge.

Collins-Mayo, Sylvia 2010. *Secularization and desecularization in Europe and North America*. In: Daniel Patte (ed.) *Cambridge dictionary of christianity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 1139–1142.

di Nola, Alfonso Maria 1997. *Diabel. O formach, historii i kolejach losu szatana, a także o jego powszechniej a złowrogiej obecności wśród wszystkich ludów, od czasów starożytnych aż po teraźniejszość* (The Devil: On the forms, history and vicissitudes of Satan, as well as his malevolent presence among all peoples, from ancient times until now.) Trans. by I. Kania. Kraków: Jagiellonian University Press.

Eade, John & Sallnow, Michael (eds.) 1991. *Contesting the Sacred. The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage*, London: Routledge.

Eliade, Mircea 2004. *Okultyzm, czary, mody kulturalne* (Occultism, Witchcraft, and Cultural Fashions: Essays in Comparative Religion.) Trans. by I. Kania, Warszawa: KR.

Eliade, Mircea 1999. *Sacrum i profanum. O istocie religijności* (The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion.) Trans. by R. Reszke, Warszawa: KR.

Halemba, Agnieszka 2006. *Negotiating Marian apparitions: The politics of religion in transcarpathian Ukraine*, New York & Budapest: Central European University Press.

Hermkens, Anna-Karina; Jansen, Willy & Notermans, Catrien (eds.) 2009. *Moved by Mary: The Power of Pilgrimage in the Modern World*, Aldershot: Ashgate.

Kalniuk, Tomasz 2019. *Drogi i miejsca religijności ludowej. Antropologiczne studium nowych ośrodków kultu we współczesnej Polsce: Strachocina, Stryszawa, Sokółka i Legnica* (Routes and Places of Folk Religiosity. Anthropological Study of New Centres of Worship in Contemporary Poland: Strachocina, Stryszawa, Sokółka and Legnica.) Toruń: Nicolaus Copernicus University.

Kalniuk, Tomasz 2014. *Mityczni obcy. Dzieci i starcy w polskiej kulturze ludowej XIX i początku XX wieku* (Mythical others: Children and elders in Polish folk culture in 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries). Toruń: Nicolaus Copernicus University.

Klimek, Maria 2018. *Medjugorje and the Supernatural. Science, Mysticism, and Extraordinary Religious Experience*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Margry, Peter Jan 2008. *Secular Pilgrimage: A Contradiction in Terms?* In: Peter Jan Margry (ed.), *Shrines and Pilgrimage in the Modern World: New Itineraries into the Sacred* Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, pp. 13–46.

Niedźwiedź, Anna 2014. *Competing Sacred Places. Making and Remaking of National Shrines in Contemporary Poland*. John Eade, Mario Katić (eds.), *Pilgrimage, Politics and Place-making in Eastern Europe. Crossing the Borders*, Burlington: Ashgate, pp. 79–99.

Niżnik, Józef 2016. Święty Andrzej Bobola. Życie, objawienia, cuda, (St Andrzej Bobola: Life, apparitions, miracles). Kraków: AA Publishing House.

Orsi, Robert A. 1999. *Introduction – Crossing the City Line*. In: Robert A. Orsi, (ed.) *Gods of the City. Religion and the American Urban Landscape Religion in North America*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 1–78.

Paciuszkiewicz, Miroslaw 1996. *Znów o sobie przypomniał. Św. Andrzej w Strachocinie* (He reminded us about himself again: St Andrzej Bobola in Strachocina). Kraków: WAM Publishing House.

Podoloniská, Tatiana Zachar 2019. *'Peripher to the Centre': Private Apparition of the Virgin Mary (An In-depth Qualitative Analysis of the Apparition's Narrative with Field Journal Notes)*. Tatiana Zachar Podoloniská (ed.). *Traces of the Virgin Mary in Post-Communist Europe* Bratislava: Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology, Slovak Academy of Sciences–VEDA Publishing House, pp. 284–326.

Polak, Elżbieta 1996. *Cuda świętego Andrzeja. Świadectwa, życie i modlitwy* (The miracles of St Andrzej: Testimonies, life and prayers.) Kraków: WAM Publishing House.

Świeżyński, Adam 2012. *Filozofia cudu, W poszukiwaniu adekwatnej koncepcji zdarzenia cudownego* (Philosophy of Miracle. In Search of an Adequate Concept of a Miraculous Occurrence). Warszawa: Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw.

Popłatek, Jan 1996. Błogosławiony Andrzej Bobola. *Życie, męczeństwo, kult* (Blessed Andrzej Bobola: Life, martyrdom, cult). Kraków: WAM Publishing House.

Popłatek, Jan 2007. *Święty Andrzej Bobola. Łowca dusz* (St Andrzej Bobola: Hunter of souls.) Wydawnictwo Diecezjalne, Sandomierz.

Rappaport, Roy 1999. *Ritual and religion in the making of humanity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Seweryniak, Henryk 2010. *Geografia wiary* (The geography of faith.) Warszawa: Więź Publishing House, pp. 21–42.

Ślusarska, Magdalena 2014. *Marketing religijny, sacrobiznes i dewocjonalia na topie* (Religious marketing, sacro-business and religious objects in vogue). In: T. Chachulski, J. Snoppek, M. Ślusarska (eds.). *Religijność w dobie popkultury* (Religiosity in the age of pop culture). Warszawa: Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, pp. 63–92.

Tokarska-Bakir 2000. *Obraz osobiły. Hermeneutyczna lektura źródeł etnograficznych* (Odd image: Hermeneutical reading of ethnographic sources.) Kraków: Universitas Publishing House.

Turner, Victor & Turner, Edith 2009. *Obraz i pielgrzymka w kulturze europejskiej* (Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture.) Trans. by Ewa Klekot. Kraków: Jagiellonian University Press.

Turner, Victor 2010. *Proces rytmalny. Struktura i antystruktura* (Ritual proces: Structure and antistructure). Trans. by E. Dżurak. Warszawa: State Publishing Institute.

van Gennep, Arnold 2006. *Obrzędy przejścia. Systematyczne studium ceremonii* (Rituals of the passing: A semantic study of a ceremony). Trans. by B. Biały. Warszawa: State Publishing Institute.

Węglarz, Stanisław 1983. *Pustelnicy – ludowi święci* (Hermits – folk saints) *Polska Sztuka Ludowa. Konteksty* (Polish Folk Art: Contexts.) No 3–4: 151–162.

Witek, Halina 2014. *Konsument sacrum. Wokół kaplicy św. Barbary w Silesia City Centre* (A consumer of the sacred: On St Barbara chapel in Silesia City Centre). T. Chachulski, J. Snoppek, M. Ślusarska (eds.) *Religijność w dobie popkultury* (Religiosity in the age of pop culture.) Warszawa: Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, pp. 106–115.

Wróblewska, Violetta 2018. *Zapadłe karczmy/Zatopione dzwony* (Godforsaken taverns / Sunken bells). V. Wróblewska (ed.). *Polska bajka ludowa. Słownik* (The Polish folk fairy tale: A dictionary). Available at: <http://bajka.umk.pl/slownik/lista-hasel/haslo/?id=200> (last accessed 29/10/2025).

Tomasz Kalniuk

**Tomasz Kalniuk**, PhD, he is working at the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, Institute of Culture Studies, Nicolaus Copernicus University. His main area of research area: religion – culture relation, cultural manifestations of sacrum, transformations of religiosity, vernacular religiosity.

E-mail: [tekantrop@umk.pl](mailto:tekantrop@umk.pl)

ORCID: 0000-0002-2098-0160

# Bridging Mythology and Science: Lessons from a Mental Mapping Workshop on the Perception of Environmental Health Crises

**Reet Hiiemäe**

*Senior researcher, Department of Folkloristics, Estonian Literary Museum, Tartu,  
Estonia*

*E-mail: reet.hiiemae@folklore.ee Corresponding author*

**Mare Kalda**

*Senior researcher, Department of Folkloristics, Estonian Literary Museum, Tartu,  
Estonia.*

*E-mail: mare.kalda@folklore.ee*

**Abstract:** This article presents a report on a mental mapping workshop conducted in Estonia within the framework of the CHRYSES project, examining the methodological, ethical and analytical insights gained at the workshop and situating them within a broader theoretical context. Drawing on both the structure and outcomes of the workshop and making comparisons with other topical case studies, the article demonstrates how mental mapping can serve as an effective tool for uncovering differences and gaps between scientific and grassroots (for example mythological-folkloric) approaches to environmental health crises (EHC). These variations – manifested in spatial priorities, narrative emphases, and related risk assessments – offer critical lessons for improving public communication and engagement in the face

of future EHC scenarios. By highlighting best practice considerations, this study contributes to advancing participatory methods that bridge knowledge systems and enhance resilience in environmental health governance.

**Keywords:** maps, mythological legends, environmental health crises, mental mapping workshops, ethics

## Introduction

Environmental health crises (EHC) demand not only scientific expertise or active stakeholder input but also meaningful public engagement to foster resilience and collective action. Yet, gaps often exist between expert knowledge and the mental models held by the wider public, shaped by cultural narratives, myths, spatial perceptions and lived experiences. Project CHRYSES (Mapping Environmental Health Crises – Public Understanding Through Myths and Science, carried out in 2025–2026) pursues an interdisciplinary approach to investigating the interplay between myths and science. It looks at how our societies conceptualise and represent environmental health crises, utilising the versatile representation medium of maps to unify the corresponding perspectives of mythological-folkloric (and other grassroots) approaches and science to enhance public understanding of such global crises.<sup>1</sup> One of the central methods that CHRYSES uses to acquire crucial new knowledge of spatial crisis response is through various map workshops (organised by folklorists, geographers and visual designers) that engage decision-makers, politicians and policymakers, media organisations and lay people, thus enabling mutual learning through dialogue and feedback. As part of this objective, a mental mapping workshop<sup>2</sup> was conducted in Estonia in October 2025 by folklorists Reet Hiiemäe and Mare Kalda, bringing together members of the general public, local community leaders, and experts. Its aim was to discuss the cartographic depictions of crises in traditional mythological legends (picked from an anthology of plague legends, Hiiemäe 1997), contemporary media reports about COVID-19 and African swine fever in Estonia's bigger newspapers (from 2020 and 2025) and scientific maps accompanying such reports to identify possible gaps as well as similarities in understanding and reasoning, for example in spatial narrative models and related risk assessment of environmental health crises. Participants commented on the material

verbally and draw their own mental maps based on this material; in addition, they were asked to draw a mental map of a potential major future environmental health crisis that they subjectively considered most threatening and likely to occur in their area and their imagined response to it. Their comments were recorded, transcribed, coded into motif clusters and analysed.

The insights gained from the Estonian workshop will serve as input for the next CHRYSES mapping workshops (for example a policymaking workshop in Ireland, map-creation workshops thematising COVID-19 and water pollution experiences in England, a workshop seeking feedback to maps and visual narratives in Finland with the aim to create an informative exhibition on the topic) and thus this article is also a presentation of the current state of knowledge. As ethics-related choices and other meta-level decisions significantly determine what material is received and how it is engaged, we will first analyse ethical and related methodological considerations, and then provide an overview of the central findings on the content level. Thus, this report springs from two anchor questions. First, what methodological and ethical considerations need to be targeted when applying mental mapping as a participatory tool for environmental health governance? Second, how do spatial priorities and related narrative emphases differ across scientific and grassroots perspectives on environmental health crises, and how can these insights inform risk communication strategies?

## Ethical Considerations Guiding Researcher Choices

Environmental health crises place diverse communities under pressure while simultaneously demanding trustworthy research and ethical interactions with these communities, who serve as partners in data creation (for example by providing their mental maps). Our mental mapping workshop made us more aware than before that ethical practices are not neutral 'plug-and-play' instruments, they actively shape how participants perceive risk, agency, and their own well-being and how they narrate crises (or are willing to reflect on a given topic at all). Although our discussion on ethics revolves around experiences gained during one specific project, we assume that drawing on other topical case studies will enable wider generalisations about data collection, the structuring of workshops, and the interpretation of individual mental maps. This section distils the lessons learned, emphasising the need for contextualised ethics that

support the same agency and (subjective) well-being that participatory mapping methods aim to cultivate.

Some ethical dilemmas arise in relation to the specificity of international collaboration. International projects often presume that ethics can be standardised across countries and disciplines, deriving from centralised ethics approvals. However, although Estonia follows the same regulations as the rest of the European Union,<sup>3</sup> some debates about ethics, which were held in Western European countries several decades ago, only reached Estonia (as well as several other post-Soviet states) after the adoption of the GDPR in 2018. Traditionally, direct, informal and relationship-driven practices tend to function better and align with established community norms in Estonia. Thus, formal documents need to be drafted carefully and context-sensitively as they can function as moral technologies: their form and tone co-produce participants' experiences of research.

Certainly, when preparing ethics documents, the focus should not be solely on the 'right' phrases to pass ethics approval, but on whether they really protect. However, our experience underscores how even consent language is not merely informational but also performative. While scientific literature generally talks about the need to use simple language in consent forms (cf. for example Feinberg et al. 2024; Wilson et al. 2018: 15), specific cultural nuances are also important. Long formal consent forms that include sections about legal recourse, detailing which court participants could contact if their rights were violated, which are perfectly acceptable in some Western European countries, might have a particularly frightening effect on the older generation in Estonia, who have experienced the injustice of Soviet bureaucracy. For them, such standard consent forms can subtly convey how participation, or even merely signing a document, might be precarious or legally fraught. In earlier practice, we have experienced situations when participants say that they would be happy to give an interview but refuse to sign a consent document. The lesson is not that formal is bad and informal is good, it is that local resonance is crucial for participant trust and engagement. Therefore, the length, tone, and legal framing of consent materials should be adapted not only to applicable policies and institutional risk tolerance but also to vernacular traditions and expectations.

## Ethical Approval as a Magical Protective Charm?

Obtaining approval from an ethics committee often creates a misleading sense that all necessary ethical obligations have been fulfilled once the application is accepted and participants have signed the informed consent form. This perception raises a fundamental question: whom do these procedures primarily protect? While ethical requirements and signed consent forms are intended to safeguard participants as well as researchers, in practice they frequently appear to protect rather the researcher. Even after reading an information sheet, participants might lack a comprehensive understanding of what will happen to the materials (for instance, hand-drawn maps) they provide. Yet, sensitive data will not become less sensitive after a participant signs a consent form; rather, consent increases the researcher's responsibility to handle that data properly. But even researchers themselves might not always know the full trajectory of these materials, which is why informed consent documents typically include vague statements such as "the map drawings may be used in academic research and publications". For non-specialists, the nature and dissemination of academic publications might remain opaque, although participants rarely express concern about this ambiguity as they consider it sufficient for trust if the researcher is nice and shows understanding.

Another common assumption is that minimising data collection and processing automatically enhances ethical integrity. While reducing data can mitigate risks, it should not compromise the analytical potential or the meaningfulness of the material. For example, in our mapping workshop two participants drew a detailed micro-map of their surroundings. One of them placed a house with the label "home" at the centre, the other wrote the exact address of her home on the house. This is an example where a detail is important on the level of analysis but simultaneously sensitive on the level of data protection. The same tension becomes even more evident in the context of open science requirements. An increasing number of academic journals now require authors to provide the underlying raw data alongside their manuscripts as a condition of publication to promote the transparency and reproducibility of results. While voice recordings are classified as more sensitive data than transcripts because the voice can reveal identity, health conditions, and other personal traits (cf. for example Cychoz 2020), providing only transcripts

could seem preferable. However, in the case of the comments provided in our workshop it seemed that even high-quality transcripts failed to capture nuances conveyed through tone, intonation, humour and voices talking simultaneously. Consequently, making only transcripts available appears inadequate, as they are less representative than the original audio recordings leading researchers to conclude that it might be better not to share this material at all.

It is also tacitly assumed that the core ethical principles (i.e., autonomy, dignity, maleficence, non-maleficence, justice) are universally valid. Although there is no doubt that these principles are crucial, in practice, however, we experienced a certain dynamic relationality, realising that choices necessary to grant them depend on cultural context, scientific tradition (including related established power dynamics), research discipline, sets of participants and related trauma and safety issues. Several proponents of participatory methods call for a fundamental shift in the dynamics of knowledge production, one that transfers significant decision-making power to participants in order to uphold their justice and autonomy (see for example, Gaventa & Cornwall 2001). However, our earlier experience indicates that such a transfer is not always welcomed: in one case, women with a history of intimate partner violence did not value the opportunity to participate in such a decision-making; instead, they perceived it as coercive and burdening (and thus, needed help with their traumas first). Further research points out that power-sharing can be difficult to achieve due to participants' traditional perceptions of the roles of researchers (cf. for example Wilson et al. 2018: 12). In addition, particular approaches should differ when studying, for instance, the spatial vocabulary of drug couriers or the mental maps of intimate partner violence victims or those of an indigenous group in the midst of heated land debates – where immediate risk and trauma could be present – compared to research focused on the mental maps of a generally well-functioning community that aim not to address imminent threats but to improve future crisis communication. Even the same well-tested participatory method might be considered minimal risk in one context and moderate or high risk in another, with the potential to replicate colonising or traumatising effects (cf. Coombes, Johnson & Howitt 2014: 847; Lake & Wendland 2018: 16).

Some authors find that sometimes academia is even not interested in generating space for fair co-creation (cf. Heron & Reason 2001: 179). Nevertheless, inclusive vocabulary, such as 'transformatory', 'radical', 'speculative', 'inclusive', 'critical or participatory mapping', 'co-ownership' and 'co-creation', abounds in

most research that involves human participants, evoking a vision of egalitarian collaboration and shared authority. But when it comes to practice in the context of vernacular map creation, a pain point highlighted at some anthropology and religion conferences in recent years relates to examples of how inclusive mapping frequently remains inclusive only in a formal sense. Even with properly drafted ethics documents, institutions use anonymised mental maps created by communities as a basis for establishing oversight mechanisms, extractive economic models, or political agendas that diverge from a community's interests (cf. similar observations made decades ago in Leal 2007).

It is usually easy to recognise gross ethical abuse, although sometimes ethical doubts arise even in mutually pleasant cooperative situations. As mentioned above, many Estonians do not trust bureaucracy, but at the same time they often trust science and scientists (according to a recent report 73% of the Estonian population trusts scientists and only 4% don't, see Kree 2023: 12–13). Similarly, in the described workshop (and also in other similar situations) participants were satisfied that their comments were found useful for research and that dialogue took place. They didn't fear that their data could be misused, nor did they express any wish to control or co-design the research further, mainly because they knew and trusted the main organiser of the workshop, Reet Hiiemäe, and had heard her giving presentations on other community events. When asked if they wanted to be updated in any phase about what we will write based on their map input, only one participant wished to see the completed study *after* publication. Another participant said that it would be interesting to know about the researchers' conclusions on how different the spatial depictions were in mythological legends and on participants maps. Anonymous feedback forms that the participants completed after the workshop also mediated high feedback scores. However, since Reet Hiiemäe also explained the project research interests and her own researcher views and conclusions during our group discussion, it seemed to her that this could, to some extent, have influenced or guided what the participants highlighted in their comments. Thus, in our opinion, when there is equal interaction, there is always a dialogue that serves for better mutual understanding, although it also somewhat shapes what material is produced and what emphases dominate.

There are other situations where the lines between ethical, selective, and exploitative approaches can get blurred, depending on researcher's choices; therefore, self-reflexivity is necessary to recognise and mitigate such an im-

pact (cf. Lake & Wendland 2018: 24). Some key decisions are related to the study sample. In many research fields, the first choice of researchers is to use students as participants (for example in the research of psychology or psychology of religion more than 80% of participants are students) because they are easily accessible and often required to comply with course-related instructions (Basil 2024: 11). However, this practice can raise ethical concerns related to power imbalances and create tensions in interdisciplinary cooperation with disciplines that rely more on fieldwork and community-based research (such as folkloristics and anthropology). Even in community-based research the question arises as to who has the right to represent a community. For example, there is a tendency to include community leaders, but this could leave the voices of some community members out. Such a problem can be prevented with 'slow' praxis that includes preceding relationship building and learning about local contexts (Amauchi et al. 2021: 1), which was also the case with our workshop. Nevertheless, while community leaders and other active individuals tend to attend such workshops on their own initiative, less active members might need targeted invitations, although simultaneously such invitations would alter the natural dynamics of participation. Being aware of such dynamics, we still invited some less active members in order to have a more balanced sample, although ultimately some of them still didn't show up. This circumstance leads us to a further discussion about representativeness in the sphere of mapping.

Decolonising and critical cartography and feminist approaches often stress that maps reflect subjective experience and can privilege certain voices (for example, community leaders, men, literate participants) while marginalising others such as women, children or immigrants (cf. Blidon & Zaragocin 2019: 915). Thus, face-to-face research tends to focus on clearly framed populations considered vulnerable, while vast literatures examine mental maps and narratives of conspiracy theorists and other radically alternative thinkers mainly through their online presences. There seems to be a tacit assumption that these actors can't be dialogical partners let alone co-creators of knowledge. Yet, for a complete societal picture, we should also access and analyse the mental crisis maps sketched by such groups because they show how they perceive crises, the risks they prioritise, and the causal chains they believe in. Understanding these perceptions can better help anticipate behaviour, identify potential collaboration routes, and design crisis communication. Therefore, we are considering organising an additional mapping workshop designed to incorporate alternative

voices. However, presenting these actors publicly as research partners or citing passages from their comments could be perceived as legitimising harmful narratives, thus it might be necessary to articulate scholarly perspectives and analysis of these topics alongside such alternative views, which, in turn, might be interpreted by the proponents of those views as an attempt to override or diminish their positions.

Another critical issue concerns the representativeness of academic conclusions. When the interpretation of maps or narratives from specific groups is conducted solely by a single researcher or research team, findings inevitably reflect that team's perspective. Selected participant comments should not serve merely as illustrative fragments that lend a 'community-led' veneer to the researcher's own preconceptions. A more advanced approach could involve reciprocal analysis whereby one local group examines mental maps produced by another and comments on how these align with the second group's views. Researchers could simultaneously also draw their own mental maps on the same topics (such a practice has previously been used for better understanding of spatial information while collecting place-related narrative folklore, see Kalda 2013: 158).

Participant engagement also requires consideration of financial aspects. In many research projects, expert contributors are routinely compensated, whereas ordinary participants are less frequently paid, often under the assumption that monetary incentives might compromise the authenticity of their engagement by motivating participation solely for financial gain. In the interest of equality, no payments were made to any participant in our workshop. Previous projects have addressed this dilemma through non-monetary recognition, such as offering certificates or skill-building opportunities (see Banks & Brydon-Miller 2018). In our case, food was provided as a gesture of appreciation. This practice, however, raises questions about whether even such gestures might influence participants to provide more favourable feedback than they otherwise would. Our anonymous feedback forms indicated that all participants felt they were treated ethically and that their voices were heard. Yet, this prompts further reflection if such positive feedback is sufficient for researchers to claim an ethically sound process, or if courtesy or social norms lead participants to exaggerate their satisfaction, even in anonymous formats. While extreme discomfort would probably prevent positive feedback even under anonymity, the

possibility of subtle bias remains a consideration when evaluating the integrity of participatory research.

## Implementation of Ethics as a Continuum to Support Agency and Well-Being

Our mental mapping workshop confirmed that the implementation of ethics, much like responses to environmental health crises themselves, is situated and context-sensitive (see more about situated ethics in Simons & Usher 2000). Therefore, we conceptualise approaches to ethics as a continuum: on the one extreme is paternalistic over-precaution where participants are treated as uniformly vulnerable, placing them within a frame of non-agency. On the other extreme is full co-governance, where participants co-decide what data are collected, how they are analysed, and which solutions are designed, even extending to decision-making in relation to informed consent and treatment of data. Some projects belonging to the latter pole question the necessity of any independent ethics review (e.g. Hoonaard & Hamilton 2016; see also examples in Lake & Wendland 2018: 28). However, the majority of projects – as well as our project – will probably live somewhere between these two poles. Some research suggests involving besides researchers and participants also a risk analyst (Lake & Wendland 2018: 31) as a third party to balance the possible biases of the two former parties.

In current practice, consent forms often carry a binary mandate (at least in the European Union): if there is no signature, participation is not possible. We find that, at least in some cases, participants could serve as a primary ethical instance alongside (not instead of) formal ethics committees (cf. Banks & Brydon-Miller 2018); processual or continuous consent formats (cf. Klykken 2022) could be an option, and consent-giving should be possible not only in writing but also via recording. In this way, participants could be treated as ethical agents, not objects of protection, without diluting legal safeguards. Institutional review should ensure baseline compliance and harm mitigation, whereas participant ethics sessions could be used to review consent drafts (for example, for localising consent language to ensure the use of culturally familiar metaphors and the proper length of text, and to cover actual risks) in order to avoid all-inclusive over-securitised framings. Although some

authors define community-based research or community-based participatory research in rather strict terms (see for example Amauchi et al. 2021: 11), we believe that forms of participation can be also viewed as a continuum, and if a workshop participant does not wish to participate in power-sharing and co-design of research in a way that a researcher knowledgeable in the latest trends of participatory research considers appropriate, then the participant should have the right to participate in a less inclusive, but for him or her more suitable and meaningful, way.

Finally, in recent years, the focus of anthropology and folkloristics has increasingly shifted toward human and more-than-human relationships, which raises the question of to what extent ethical considerations can also extend beyond human participants. At the HERA Crisis Knowledge Exchange Kick-Off conference in November 2025, one statement captured this emerging challenge: “As long as we don’t consider more-than-human ethics in ethics policies and ethics committees, they cannot be truly ethical.” Yet our understanding of what lakes, plants, insects, or even supernatural entities ‘want’ remains mediated through research conducted by humans. This paradox underscores the complexity of operationalising entirely inclusive ethics within participatory frameworks.

## Repetitive Key Motifs in Vernacular Narratives and Mental Maps of EHC

Ethical considerations do not end once a mapping workshop is over: the maps produced need to be integrated into research. These maps often contain complex information (for example, multisensory aspects, landscape dynamism, symbols, reflections of local knowledge, folklore or rumours), making their interpretation far from straightforward. Researchers inevitably make decisions about which aspects to foreground, but such choices raise questions about representation bias and the potential silencing of certain perspectives embedded in the original mapping process. As Wilson, Kenny and Dickson-Swift (2018: 8) also note, ethical dilemmas persist throughout the research cycle, including during data analysis and dissemination. This underscores the need for reflexivity and transparency in documenting how and why certain elements are emphasised over others.

Recent research has begun to question the dominance of Western scientific perspectives in the use of maps as supposedly objective vehicles for public communication (e.g. Duncan 2006: 411), thus various community-based participatory grassroots mapping approaches have been suggested as an opportunity to add plurivocality and cultural embeddedness. However, upon closer inspection, several commonalities can be observed between scientific and vernacular mapping. For example, in the case of COVID-19, not only the scientific maps and news media, but also vernacular storytelling constantly tried to draw clear narrative maps of safe, affected, or threatened areas and people, as has been shown historically (Hiiemäe 2016). One of the goals of our workshop was to identify these dynamics comparatively, although as a hitherto under-used aspect we also examined the depiction of maps and trajectories in mythological legends about epidemics.

Below, we describe some of the recurring elements of grassroots map imagery that we consider relevant for future crisis communication. Our analysis draws on the maps and accompanying comments created by nine participants (seven women and two men); to support broader generalisations about cultural patterns, we occasionally reference other contemporary materials depicting environmental health crises.

The results of this workshop showed that similarities in mythological legends, scientific maps, media reports, and the participants' own mental maps occurred most often in the clear separation of dangerous and safe areas, as illustrated most clearly by the following map depiction:

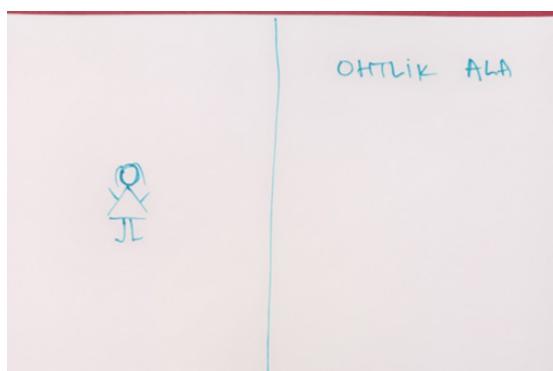


Figure 1. The most concise map image clearly delineating the position of the participant who draw the map. On the other side of the border is an area clearly marked "dangerous zone" (woman N9, F08-004).

The clear boundaries of the threat were also evident in the contrast between the city and nature (or further, the rural region) depicted on some maps. Earlier analysis of responses to COVID-19 in 2020 in Estonia similarly revealed that beautiful natural places were perceived as safe, a notion reinforced by some official recommendations that encouraged walks in nature, implicitly equating such environments with desolation, emptiness and thus reduced risk. But in reality, during the COVID-19 period some easily accessible bog trails in Estonia were more crowded – mainly by urban residents – than city-centre malls. Part of the reason for the popularity of these natural areas was, of course, also the fact that compliance with official isolation requirements was not checked there. In Estonian mythological legends about the plague spirit, hiding in deep forests and impassable bogs is often described as a way to survive, underscoring the practical as well as symbolic role of isolation as a protective measure. People who hide like this are depicted as refuges whom the plague spirit is not able to find. Modern community mental maps also included other micro-level and real-context-based landscape elements as markers of safety: for instance, water bodies and hills were perceived as safe or as granting safety, opposed to the city which was depicted as the embodiment of danger. These elements remained the same regardless of whether the mental map was drawn as a retrospective reading of mythological legends where the plague spirit cannot cross a lake or hill, or when depicting potential future crises (such as a military crisis). One male participant (M8) sketched a sign pointing towards the nearest town on his mental map, adding the words: “City. Noise and information clutter”, hinting simultaneously at audible noise and disruptive information overload.

On some workshop maps, the boundaries of danger were marked with colours, with in one case this choice explained using categories of purity and impurity (similarly to the symbolism described by Douglas 1966), highlighting how spatial representations can echo cultural frameworks of order and contamination:

I have a very colourful map... I just thought that if I'm standing here on the road now, that there's already danger in Äksi village, right? I'll make it black [*must*]<sup>4</sup>, because black is a kind of like devastated land, exactly. And then the villages of Lähte and Pupastvere and Puhtaleiva – that they're still clean now, that they're a little bit yellow, and then I'll

demarcate them with these different colours, that this point is clean and that one is [clean] and that one is [clean] (woman N1, F08-004).

It is interesting to observe that while on scientific geographical maps and in safety coding systems red is the colour most commonly used to indicate danger, while yellow refers to caution (usually for physical hazards) and orange is a warning, especially in relation to hazardous machinery and the risk of injury (OSHA-ANSI 2025; Rosen et al. 2024), vernacular colour codes seem here to rely more on another cultural symbolism with hints at darkness, light and purity. More map examples would be needed to make broader generalisations about map colour preferences and about compatibility with colour preferences in other contexts (cf. also Sutrop 2000 about the use of colour terms in Estonian).

Unlike conventional maps, several maps that were produced in our workshop included the mapmaker and his or her home, suggesting that these representations were not merely spatial but also personal, reflecting the intertwining of place and identity as well as revealing the participants' own priorities and values embedded in the mapping process. The focus of the drawn mental maps was mainly on the micro-level. The following spontaneous discussion that accompanied reading a media article about COVID-19 exemplifies how places that are perceived as more distant and therefore less dangerous are vague and non-relevant also on a person's mental crisis map, even if references to the same places (in the given case, to Wuhan) were constantly made in the news (cf. Hiiemäe et al. 2020: 26). Among other things, one of the commentators sees in the vaguely worded media information about Wuhan parallels with folktales that don't deserve to be taken seriously:

N9: It's also written here "the disease is said to have originated in Wuhan" – it sounds like a folktale.

Interviewer: Did you ever look for where Wuhan is on the map?

M8: In China [laughing]. Somewhere on the other side of the map.

Interviewer: Does it matter to us whether the disease started in Wuhan?

M8: No. For us, the disease started in Milan.

Thus, for these two participants, Wuhan is somewhere far enough not to trigger a behavioural response related to fear, yet Milan – one of the earliest European epicentres of COVID-19 epidemic – is considered the beginning of the disease in their eyes.

It is possible that because our initial discussion centred on mythological legends about the trajectories of the plague spirit, participants were somewhat more eager to employ personifications when mapping threats related to modern environmental health crises. However, the use of personification is, even today, a common practice as it “allows us to make sense of phenomena in the world in human terms – terms that we can understand on the basis of our own motivations, goals, actions, and characteristics” (Lakoff & Johnson 1980: 34). Personifications continue to play a significant role in modern imagery as a means of embodying abstract concepts such as fears or crisis, something that is closely tied to tradition-based thinking, which often results in community-level ‘trust maps’ diverging from official scientific representations. Similar to the binary categories of good and evil in fairy tales, material collected in 2020 about COVID-19 revealed a perception that close, trusted individuals could not pose a threat because love and danger were seen as incompatible within the same person, for example one respondent in 2020 expressed the opinion that her grandchildren just can’t infect her. In two cases of our current workshop, female participants even depicted the threat as gendered – specifically male –, which could reflect symbolic associations with stereotypes of danger and dominance. At the same time, personified representations can inspire the depiction of certain forms of agency; for instance, when a threat is mapped in the form of a clear living creature, it creates the possibility to imagine countermeasures such as physical resistance or strategic intelligence, or at least to imagine better how far away the danger is.

Here we can see notable parallels with mythological plague legends in which liberation from the plague is achieved through physical violence against the plague spirit, a shrewd verbal response, or outwitting it. A gendered dimension again emerged: maps and comments by female participants more frequently reflected reliance on escape or strategic thinking, whereas one male participant’s (M8) map and another’s (M7) comment introduced the theme of combat, one even rendered humorously as a fight between the historical plague spirit and the personification of the modern African swine fever. But here too, the boundaries between different threats are depicted as absolute and clear:

The big pig farm at the end of the lake is indeed there – it’s not exactly at the end of the lake, but still quite close to it –, and there’s African swine fever there on my map. There are people by the church who are

watching the [human] plague – it came from somewhere. There are people by the pig farm who are actually hoping that if there are pigs and the usual [human] plague here, they will fight each other and then it will clear the air – both [swine fever and the human plague] will end. The usual [human] plague can't come here [to the pig farm], because there's swine fever here – the human plague is afraid of it. There's another plague [swine fever] here by the farm and it's safe [for people] here, but dangerous for pigs. Here [by the church] it's dangerous for people (man M8, F08-004).

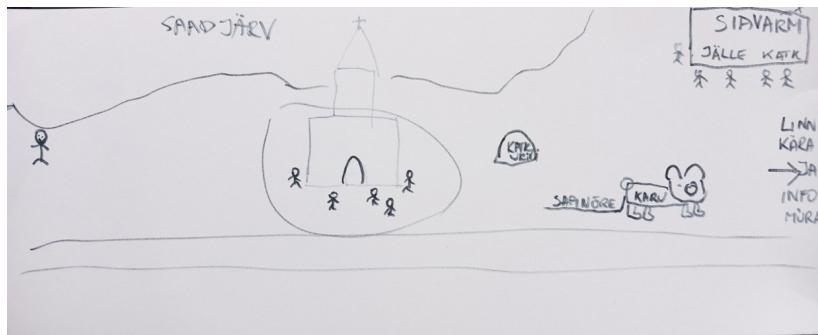


Figure 2. One of the mental maps that placed the church at the centre. Narrative explanation in the previous passage spatially contrasts the area around the church to the area around the farm ("siavarm").

Overall, the dominant emphasis in participant imageries – as tends to be the case in mythological plague legends – was on survival and coping (see a similar conclusion in relation to COVID-19 folklore in Hiiemäe et al. 2020: 25). Notably, none of the workshop participants envisioned scenarios in which they or their loved ones would die (except for one woman who briefly mentioned that she doesn't want to think that her sons could be mobilised in the war if there were to be a military crisis), suggesting a cultural and psychological inclination toward resilience rather than fatalism. Vernacular spatial narratives thus serve as mental encouragement when they delineate escape routes, imaginary hindrances to stop danger (high walls, gates, invisible tunnels) or differences of scale (for example on a map depicting a future military crisis, military equipment and bombers were drawn small). The mapmaker herself commented: "To feel safe, there are no very dangerous weapons on my map" (woman N2, F08-004).

Official conventional crisis maps and media news (for example the maps related to COVID-19 or African swine flu) on the contrary tend to focus more on risk, danger and the statistics of deaths (for example numbers of victims going up or down), which functions besides information sharing as affective infrastructure that circulates anxiety, fear, and urgency, shaping how crises are lived and governed (see more on the affective functions of maps in Bosworth 2023). The perception that official communication on major epidemics focuses too much on danger and hopelessness and not enough on constructive agency also becomes evident in the following comparative participant comment:

There was one-on-one similarity of the African swine fever with this corona time. What's the difference at all? Swine flu – everyone is dangerous; with coronavirus it was the same – those who are unvaccinated are dangerous, going out is dangerous, everything is dangerous. Frankly, no solutions are proposed in the official approach (woman N9, F08-004).

Official crisis management guidelines usually try to cover all crises, but two of our workshop participants who discussed such recent crisis training, organised by local governments and the state, found that recommendations such as “Share phone numbers with your neighbours and call them” may not work if, in people’s mental map, neighbours are not part of the solution but are instead part of the problem. Thus, community-level mental support maps (indicating who helps whom in a particular crises) are probably influenced, at least to some extent, by elements of reciprocity rooted in traditional peasant culture as well as by current community relationships. For instance, one of our participants (woman, N1) described in a relatively detailed spatial manner to whom exactly she would send e-mails to warn these people about a military crisis. Two participants (woman, N1 and woman, N3) provided a mental map of their family ties, describing how they would bring their close relatives who live in various cities to their rural home, which they considered would be safe(r) in a military crisis. The discussion developed an interesting spatial dynamic between moving and staying, expressing imagined routes of escape in a gradual manner, up to the point where even the rural home wouldn’t be perceived as safe and flight to other countries across the Baltic Sea would be undertaken. Here again, spatial inspiration was sought from a previous similar crisis in 1944, during the final stages of World War II, when over 70,000 Estonians fled across

the Baltic Sea, mainly by boat, before the Soviet Union reoccupied Tallinn and other major cities.

Similarly, on conventional crisis maps, crises are often given a uniform, homogeneous representation, depicting danger as equal concentric circles radiating from the epicentre. In contrast, the micro-level of the maps drawn to represent specific crises allows attention to be focused on landscape features, for instance considering that an epidemic is less prone to move over large lakes. In mythological legends about plague epidemics, landscape forms often have a decisive role, for example, the plague spirit cannot cross a flowing stream. Only one workshop participant noted that her map did not have landforms, while for others they clearly played a significant role. For example, one participant explicitly wrote on her map, which visualised the trajectory of the plague spirit based on a mythological legend: “The plague cannot cross the lake or [go over] the hill” (woman N3, F08-004).

It is more difficult to interpret why several participants placed the church at the centre of their maps. It is clear that huge sacral buildings are important knots even on the maps of non-religious people. The proximity of the sacred and danger also appears in mythological legends, for example Anttonen (1996, 2000), who has written extensively about sacrality in relation to boundaries, danger, and prohibition in folk belief, argues that sacrality is often constructed through categorical boundaries that separate what is considered pure or inviolable from what is dangerous or polluting. Research in cognitive geography and landscape studies confirms that people prioritise landmarks that are both visually striking and culturally significant, and sacral architecture fulfils these criteria by linking spatial perception to shared heritage, making them highly memorable reference points regardless of personal belief (cf. Liutikas 2023). One of the workshop participants clearly said that although she placed a church at the centre of her map, it didn't have a sacral meaning. Yet in another participant's description, below, we can find hints to sacrality and religious connotations:

[The plague] came from the direction of the 'sea' [big lake] of Tabivere and then it entered there, right here the church, because it wanted the people who go to this church, like well – the plague is evil –, so it wanted to destroy these good Christians and this rooster has been added here as if it were supposed to protect them. But well, it didn't work out as the plague came here on this rooster. Yeah, and then it'll probably go from

here to Tartu. But I'll stay here, and I'll feel safe because I'll have the lake Saadjärv, the big hill and then the lake Soitsjärv in between, well the plague won't get over these borders anytime soon. But if it starts coming closer to my place here in this direction, then I'll run away somewhere in this [opposite] direction (woman N3, F08-004).

A parallel can be drawn with discussions about safe and unsafe places during the COVID-19 period, when the belief emerged in various settings in Estonia that the virus could not spread in churches as well as saunas. The latter view could be linked both to the sauna's cultural status as a quasi-magical or sacred space and to the practical notion that heat acts as a disinfectant. Echoing Estonian folk legends that portray sacred groves as places for healing rituals, face masks began appearing at natural sacred sites soon after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Tied to trees, these masks seemed to reflect a continuation of traditional health practices aimed at seeking protection from illness. Thus, the category of sacredness needs nuanced attention even in the spatial depictions of a modern, generally secular population.

## Conclusions

Project CHRYSES has provided an unparalleled opportunity to learn a more nuanced approach to understanding the spatial depictions of environmental health crises as well as ethical issues related to research design. Our experience confirmed that such mapping workshops can provide richer evidence grounded in embodied, situated, and collective grassroot knowledge arising from local environmental peculiarities, spatial experience and narrative tradition, to finetune scientific research and public health crisis communication. However, we also realised that, when misrepresented, environmental health crises themselves as well as maps and spatial comments and narratives based on such crises can become a geography of injustice (cf. Soja 2010). Therefore, to move towards a geography of balance, such workshops should go beyond formal engagement of community members and act as sites of knowledge formation and dialogue, since conversations with participants often prompt reconsideration of concepts, categories, and interpretative choices. Ideally, such a research process will contribute to better understanding between grassroots and scientific realms as well as across disciplines. We hope that this report

will give impetus and serve as a catalyst for subsequent, even more refined, practice-based case studies.

## Acknowledgement

Project CHRYSES is supported by CHANSE and HERA, and funded by the Research Council of Finland under Grant Agreement 369388, Research Ireland under Grant Agreement RI4046, UKRI/AHRC under Grant Agreement UKRI463, and the Estonian Research Council under Grant Agreement 4-8/25/14. The article is also related to the ELM project 8-2/20/3 and project TK215 (financed by Estonian Ministry of Education and Research).

## Note

<sup>1</sup> More information on the project can be found on the project webpage: [chryses.aalto.fi](http://chryses.aalto.fi).

<sup>2</sup> In this article we use the following definition of mental map: “Mental map refers to the spatialization of meaning in the minds of individuals or a group of people. It is a theoretical construct that becomes accessible to scrutiny through its behavioural, oral, textual, or graphical manifestations.... A mental map is a variety of any such model that is neither graphically fixed nor otherwise articulated but rather exists implicitly as part of a mindscape” (Götz 2024).

<sup>3</sup> For instance, research ethics in Estonia is regulated by the Estonian Code of Conduct for Research Integrity ([https://etag.ee/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/HEA-TEADUSTAVA\\_eng\\_2023.pdf](https://etag.ee/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/HEA-TEADUSTAVA_eng_2023.pdf)); an increasing number of reports and handbooks addressing research ethics are being published.

<sup>4</sup> *Must* can mean both black and dirty in Estonian.

## Archival sources

F08-004 – collection of epidemic folklore (Reet Hiiemäe) in EFITA (the scientific archive of the Department of Folkloristics, Estonian Literary Museum)

## References

Amauchi, Juliana F. F., Maeva Gauthier, Abdolzaher Ghezeljeh, Leandro L. L. Giatti, Katlyn Keats, Dare Sholanke, Danae Zachari & Jutta Gutberlet 2021. The power of community-based participatory research: Ethical and effective ways of researching. *Community Development Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15575330.2021.1936102>

Anttonen, Veikko 1996. Space, Body, and the Notion of Boundary: A Category-Theoretical Approach to Religion. *Temenos: Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion*, 32, pp. 19–32. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33356/TEMENOS.4779>

Anttonen, Veikko 2000. Toward a Cognitive Theory of the Sacred: An Ethnographic Approach. *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore*, 14, pp. 40–58. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7592/FEJF2000.14.sacred>

Banks, Sara & Brydon-Miller, Mary (eds.) 2018. *Ethics in Participatory Research for Health and Social Well-Being: Cases and Commentaries*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315106847>

Basil, Michael 2024. Student samples in research. In John E. Edlund & Austin Lee Nichols (eds.). *The Cambridge Handbook of Research Methods and Statistics for the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (Vol. 2, pp. 3–23). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009000796.002>

Blidon, Marianne & Zaragocin, Sofia 2019. Mapping gender and feminist geographies in the global context. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 26(7–9): 915–925. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2019.1636000>

Bosworth, Kai 2023. What is 'affective infrastructure'? *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 13(1): 54–72. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20438206221107025>

Cychosz, Margaret; Romeo, Rachel R.; Soderstrom, Melanie; Scaff, Camila; Ganek, Hillary; Cristia, Alejandrina; Casillas, Marisa; de Barbaro, Kaya; Bang, Janet Y.; Weisleder, Adriana. 2020. Longform recordings of everyday life: Ethics for best practices. *Behavior Research Methods*, 52(5): 1951–1969. <https://doi.org/10.3758/s13428-020-01365-9>

Douglas, Mary 1966. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Duncan, Sally L. 2006. Mapping whose reality? Geographic information systems (GIS) and "wild science". *Public Understanding of Science*, 15(4): 411–434. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963662506061885>

Feinberg, Isaac Z., Gajra, Arti, Hetherington, Lauren, & McCarthy, Katherine S. 2024. Simplifying informed consent as a universal precaution. *Scientific Reports*, 14(1), 13195. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-024-64139-9>

Gaventa, John & Cornwall, Andrea 2001. Power and knowledge. In Peter Reason & Hilary Bradbury (eds.) *Handbook of action research: Participative inquiry and practice*. London: Sage, pp. 70–80.

Götz, Norbert 2024. Mental Map. In: Warf, B. (eds). *The Encyclopedia of Human Geography*. Springer, Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-25900-5\\_288-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-25900-5_288-1)

Heron, John & Reason, Peter 2001. The practice of co-operative inquiry: Research “with” rather than “on” people. Edited by Peter Reason & Hilary Bradbury. *Handbook of Action Research*, 1, pp. 179–189.

Hiiemäe, Reet 1997. *Eesti katkupärimus* (The Estonian Plague Tradition) (Eesti muistendid. Mütoloogilised haigused I.). Tartu: Estonian Literary Museum.

Hiiemäe, Reet 2004. Handling collective fear in folklore. *Electronic Journal of Folklore* 26: 65–80. <https://doi.org/10.7592/FEJF2004.26.hiiemae>

Hiiemäe, Reet; Kalda, Mare; Kõiva, Mare; Voolaid, Piret 2021. Vernacular Reactions to COVID-19 in Estonia: Crisis Folklore and Coping. *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore*, 82: 21–52. DOI: 10.7592/FEJF2021.82.estonia

Van den Hoonaard, Will C., & Hamilton, Ann (eds.) 2016. *The Ethics Rupture: Exploring Alternatives to Formal Research Ethics Review*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Kalda, Mare 2013. „See on minu paik!“ Ida-Virumaa kohajuttudest (“This is my place!” and place-related folklore.) Rüütel, Ingrid (ed.). *Ida-Virumaa rahvakultuurist*. Rakvere: Viru Instituut, pp. 157–174.

Klykken, Fride Haram 2022. Implementing continuous consent in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, 22(5): 795–810. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941211014366>

Kree, Hanna 2023. Eesti Teadusbaromeetri 2023. a uuringu raport. [Report of the Estonian Science Barometer 2023] Tartu: 2024. [https://etag.ee/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Eesti-Teadusbaromeeter\\_raport.pdf](https://etag.ee/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Eesti-Teadusbaromeeter_raport.pdf)  
Last accessed on 8 December 2025.

Lake, Danielle & Wendland, Joel 2018. Practical, epistemological, and ethical challenges of participatory action research: A cross-disciplinary review of the literature. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 22(3): 11–42.

Lakoff, George & Johnson, Mark (1980). *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press.

Leal, Pablo Alejandro 2007. Participation: The ascendancy of a buzzword in the neo-liberal era. *Development in Practice*, 17(4/5): 539–548.

Liutikas, Darius 2023. Sacred Space in Geography: Religious Buildings and Monuments. In *Geography of World Pilgrimages*. Cham: Springer, pp. 77–112.

OSHA-ANSI 2025. Color codes of OSHA and ANSI. <https://ee.creativesafetysupply.com/articles/safety-colors/> Last accessed on 8 December 2025.

Rosen, Zoey, Long, Marilee, Schumacher, Andrea, DeMaria, Mark, & Brammer, Alan 2024. Expert and public preferences and perceptions of different color schemes and map overlays on a tropical cyclone wind exceedance forecast graphic. *Weather, Climate, and Society*, 16(3): 497–510. <https://doi.org/10.1175/WCAS-D-23-0110.1>

Simons, Helen & Robin Usher (eds.) 2000. *Situated Ethics in Educational Research*. London and New York: Routledge.

Soja, Edward W. 2010. *Seeking Spatial Justice*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Sutrop, Urmas 2000. The basic colour terms of Estonian. *Trames Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 4 (1): 143–168.

Wilson, Erin; Kenny, Amanda; & Dickson-Swift, Virginia 2018. Ethical Challenges of Community Based Participatory Research: Exploring Researchers' Experience. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 21(1): 7–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2017.1296714>

## Declaration of interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding this manuscript.

**Reet Hiiemäe**, PhD, senior researcher, Department of Folkloristics, Estonian Literary Museum, Tartu, Estonia. Her main research subjects are belief narratives, protective rituals, spatial depiction of environmental health crises, contemporary folklore.

E-mail: [reet.hiiemae@folklore.ee](mailto:reet.hiiemae@folklore.ee)

ORCID: 0000-0001-8942-8983

**Mare Kalda**, PhD, senior researcher, Department of Folkloristics, Estonian Literary Museum, Tartu, Estonia. Her research areas are treasure legends, geocaching, memes, contemporary folklore.

E-mail: [mare.kalda@folklore.ee](mailto:mare.kalda@folklore.ee)

ORCID: 0009-0007-0395-4044

# **The Establishment of New Rituality in Ukrainian Amateur and Professional Music under Soviet Totalitarian Rule**

**Iryna Sikorska**

*Department of Musicology and Ethnomusicology, Maksym Rylsky Institute of Art Studies, Folkloristics and Ethnology at the National Academy of Science, Ukraine*

*E-mail: sikorska1959@gmail.com*

**Oksana Letychevska**

*Department of Musicology and Ethnomusicology, Maksym Rylsky Institute of Art Studies, Folkloristics and Ethnology at the National Academy of Science, Ukraine*

*E-mail: letychevska@gmail.com*

**Inna Lisniak**

*Estonian Folklore Archives, Estonian Literary Museum; department of Musicology and Ethnomusicology, Maksym Rylsky Institute of Art Studies, Folkloristics and Ethnology at the National Academy of Science, Ukraine*

*E-mail: i.lisnyak78@gmail.com*

**Abstract:** The article explores the developments in Ukrainian musical culture during the 1930s within the framework of the emergence of the 'new rituality' imposed by Soviet totalitarian rule. It focuses on the transformation of folklore practices into ideologically controlled forms of artistic expression. The study highlights how both amateur stage practices and professional music were integrated into the system of Soviet new rituality.

In response to political and social demands, pseudo-folklore works were produced: traditional melodies were provided with ‘ideologically correct’ texts, and characteristic rhythmic, intonational, and modal features of folk genres were stylised and simplified to meet the requirements of Socialist Realism. Mass events and large-scale musical gatherings replaced traditional ritual practices and served as instruments of ideological mobilisation. Their repertoire invariably included songs about the October Revolution, the Communist Party, Lenin, Stalin, and the ‘friendship of peoples’. Particular attention is paid to the phenomenon of the music Olympiads, which functioned as ritualised spectacles combining professional and amateur performance, symbolic glorification of Soviet leaders, and the demonstration of unity around the Party. In this way, the new Soviet rituality subordinated musical creativity to the state’s ideological imperatives and turned both professional composition and amateur performance into instruments of political indoctrination.

**Keywords:** new rituality, mass song, music Olympiads, pseudo-folklore, amateur stage practices, professional music, Soviet totalitarian rule

## Introduction

Ritual practices have always been a fundamental part of human life, illustrating a close bond with nature. The entire history of humankind is, in some way or another, connected to ritual as a system of symbolic ceremonial actions, defined by tradition or custom and intended to achieve a specific goal. Rituals are classified by their types, notably magical, religious, secular, and everyday, as well as by their content, functions, and communal nature. Collective ritual practices play a crucial role in society, functioning as a form of social control and “the construction of a limited and limiting power relationship”, according to Catherine Bell (1992).

History often witnesses repeated attempts to establish a new rituality during periods of social upheaval, promoted by the pro-government elite as “new rites and holidays for the people” (Sadomskaya 1990). Instances include the practices of the French Revolution and the rise of Soviet power in the 1920s, when new rituals replaced traditional and religious celebrations and introduced a new cycle of ideologically driven calendar holidays. The development of the Soviet system of holidays since 1917 has been extensively analysed by Tetyana Haievska (2013).

From a broader perspective, the phenomenon of new rituality can be examined through the concept of ‘political religion’ proposed by Emilio Gentile (2006). According to Gentile, totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century established sacralised political practices where ideology took on the qualities of faith, and collective acts of participation were turned into quasi-‘liturgies’ or ‘state liturgies’. Previously, Oleksandr Riznyk and Oleksandr Hrytsenko (1998) drew parallels between traditional religious rites and the ritualised structure of Soviet mass festivities.

In the Ukrainian context of the 1930s, both amateur and professional music served as an important channel for this sacralisation: choral festivals and musical Olympiads functioned as public rituals of ideological mobilisation, while professional compositions reinforced the ‘canon’ of soviet political mythology. In this way, the creation of new rituality in soviet musical culture can be seen as part of the broader phenomenon of political religion.

In response to political demands, a significant number of pseudo-folkloric songs (Miller 1990) have emerged, either through the combination of traditional melodies with ‘ideologically correct’ texts or by employing rhythmic, intonational, and modal features of various folk music genres in creating pseudo-folkloric samples. These mechanisms are somewhat similar to how ancient materials are used to develop rituals for entirely new purposes, as described by Mare Kõiva (2017).

These new songs aimed to replace the traditional folklore of rural areas with what was known as ‘soviet folklore’, which served to regulate and control Ukrainian culture ideologically (Ovcharenko 2023: 270). The historical and political conditions leading to the emergence of the genre of ‘soviet folklore’ are analysed in Roman Kirchiv’s (2010) key work *The 20<sup>th</sup> Century in Ukrainian Folklore*. The fifth chapter of this monograph, titled “‘Soviet Folklore’: Reality or Fiction?”, considers the pseudo-folklore of the Soviet era as a form of opposition to traditional folk art.

Recent studies emphasise the crucial role of Soviet policy in shaping and influencing folklore, which was transformed into a tool of cultural policy – “socialist in form, national in content” (Kencis, Bronner, Seljamaa 2024). Soviet cultural ideology produced ‘new folklore’ as a substitute for traditional practices in Ukraine and other western border regions. As William Noll (2023) emphasises, in the 1930s, the Soviet authorities deliberately created and sustained the phenomenon of a parallel culture, offering ideologically controlled

practices in place of genuine folk traditions. This perspective allows for a clear tracing of the mechanisms through which the new ritual was institutionalised and cultural unification achieved.

The primary method of assimilating, reproducing, and spreading ‘new folklore’ became organised mass creativity known as *samodiyalnist* (amateur artistic activity). The Soviet authorities saw musical amateurism as a tool for shaping the ‘new socialist person’, in which the collective takes precedence over the individual (Lisniak et al. 2022). Participants in choral ensembles performed a standardised repertoire, mainly new specifically Soviet mass songs that reflected the ideological directives of the time, while the structure of the performances was subordinated to the principle of demonstrating the unity of the masses. Thus, in the 1930s, amateur music demonstrated loyalty to the Soviet system and served as an instrument of state cultural policy. At the same time, mass concerts and musical Olympiads were transformed into ritualised practices and used as means of ideological mobilisation (Lisniak 2023).

This view facilitates a comparison between Soviet practices in Ukraine and the models of European, especially Baltic, singing festivals, while also emphasising a crucial difference. Whereas in Latvia and Estonia such festivals reinforced national identity (Kuutma 1996), in Ukraine, they served as a tool for its erosion and subordination to totalitarian ideology. Factual material for the article was drawn from folklore collections published during the Soviet period (*Ukrainian Soviet Folk Songs*, *Ukrainian Folk Lyric Songs*), as well as from musicological studies (notably Valerian Dovzhenko’s *Essays...*, 1957) and musical periodical collections of the 1930s (*Music for the Masses*). A new, more objective perspective on the musical events of the 1930s became possible only after Ukraine gained independence, first reflected in the works of Valentyna Kuzyk (1992) and subsequently developed in articles for the 5<sup>th</sup> Volume of the *Ukrainian Music Encyclopedia* (2018) and a chapter in a collective monograph (2021). The issues addressed in this article gain particular relevance in the context of the Russia–Ukraine war. The methods of creating and disseminating pseudo-folklore, which serve as tools for promoting totalitarian ideology, remain relevant today, especially in the context of the active development of social media and internet technologies.

In preparing this article, the following methods were used: the principle of historicism – to study specific stages in the history of Ukrainian music; the method of systemic analysis – for organising and examining the collected fac-

tual material on the subject; the comparative method – to identify intonation similarities between Ukrainian folk and Soviet popular songs; the biographical method – for analysing particular stages in the lives and creative activities of individual figures associated with music; interviews – conversations with musicians, ethnomusicologists, and musicologists conducted during 1990–2025 – for gathering recollections and clarifying details; source studies – for examining concert posters, programmes, as well as book catalogues and indices.

This article examines mass musical events and mass songs as essential ritual practices in Ukrainian society after the Soviet government's rise to ideological dominance and the consolidation of the totalitarian regime in the 1930s, which supplanted traditional religious and folk rituals.

## 1. Historical Context of Ukrainian Musical Culture of the 1930s

This section examines the conditions under which Ukrainian musical culture developed under the consolidation of Soviet power, the gradual establishment of a totalitarian state system, and the rise of the personality cult.

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, the Bolsheviks achieved their final victory over most territories of the former Russian Empire. This victory, which involved the forcible enslavement of various lands and peoples, allowed them to begin building a new totalitarian state, the Union of Soviet Republics. As a result of the Ukrainian struggle for liberation between 1917 and the 1920s being defeated, the country once again reverted to the colonial status it had under the Russian Empire, but at that time on ostensibly 'voluntary' terms as one of the union republics. The external Ukrainisation and ideological pluralism of the 1920s gave way to a strict hierarchy of power embodied in democratic centralism and the dominance of the ideology of Marxism–Leninism. An example of this is Joseph Stalin's response to a cautious reminder from members of the Ukrainian government about the promised sovereignty and equality of the republics. "You have played government and republic long enough; it seems that it is time to end the game" (Parkhomenko 1992: 11). Thus began the decade of the Great Terror, which in Ukraine was initiated and steered through the orchestrated Union for the Liberation of Ukraine case of 1930, a period that, as Bilokin' (2017) observes, resulted in millions of victims. While the peasantry was subdued through the

man-made Holodomor of 1932–1933, the intelligentsia was broken by mass repressions based on fabricated facts charges.<sup>1</sup> The guideline (directive) and starting point of the new period was the Resolution of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (bolsheviks) On the Reorganisation of Literary and Artistic Organisations (April 23, 1932). In accordance with this decree, and following the example of the all-Union associations – namely, the Union of Soviet Writers and the Union of Soviet Composers – the Union of Soviet Writers of Ukraine (May, 1932) and the Union of Soviet Musicians of Ukraine (November, 1932) were established. At every level, the authorities systematically enforced the slogan, proclaimed in the early years of the October coup: Whoever is not with us, is against us. In practice, this left artists with no ideological choice whatsoever. Consequently, there could be no talk of the declared freedom of creativity, nor even of formal neutrality. Artists – including composers and performers – were forced to consistently demonstrate their loyalty and dedication to communist ideals.

The authorities, in turn, established mandatory conditions, effectively issuing state commissions for propaganda works, where: "...music had to glorify the achievements of the Soviet people and the Party, their political and moral unity, and, consequently, the 'happy' reality of the time" (Parkhomenko 1992: 17). Therefore, the compositions produced had to celebrate the greatness of the 'world's first socialist country'. These works were considered 'correct' in content and suitable for public performance.

At the same time, alongside the ideologically correct artistic exercises – metaphorically referred to within the creative milieu as 'ritual dances' – works of genuine aesthetic and artistic value would occasionally emerge, most of them rooted in folk traditions. Such works testified to the artists' loyalty to the authorities and served as a form of indulgence, sometimes even saving lives (as will be written later).<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, in Ukrainian music of the 1930s under Soviet rule, music, poetry, and other artistic fields, a new ritual developed: the creation and dissemination of compositions and mass performances that honoured the prevailing ideology. This ideology acted as a modernised religion, replacing traditional beliefs that were deemed taboo under Soviet rule. Such works served as demonstrations of personal loyalty to the authorities, evidence of political reliability, and ultimately a claim to the right to exist.

Stalin's Great Break established the so-called creative method of Socialist Realism. According to Myroslav Popovych (1999: 647), this was, rather, a certain philosophy within which works of literature and art were to exist. The main objectives were the glorification of the Communist Party and its 'wise leaders,' Lenin and Stalin, the celebration of socialist labour, and the depiction of happy life and friendship among the peoples of the Soviet Union. Similar to the new Soviet literature, the emergence of a new Soviet folklore was proclaimed, intended to occupy a higher ideological level compared to the traditional folklore.

## 2. The Emergence of Novel Ritual Practices and the Genesis of Soviet Musical Folklore in Ukraine

This section examines three factors: the rise of new Soviet rituality, considering current research; the evolution of insurgent folklore and its transformation under social influences, the mechanism through which traditional folklore was replaced by Ukrainian Soviet folklore as a shift from oral collective creativity to mass artistic products; and the effect of Soviet intervention on Ukraine's traditional folk heritage.

During the Soviet period in Ukraine, musical folklore remained a crucial part of the cultural landscape. Its influence on society was recognised even by the official ideology, which described folklore, means, collective creativity, as "an effective weapon for the social reconstruction of life" (Berezovskyi 1968: 17). Under conditions where the Communist Party aimed to dominate every aspect of human activity, oral collective creativity, like works of professional art, was assessed for the 'correctness' of its ideological stance, in line with the mechanisms described in the previous section. This could lead to official bans and the subsequent removal of certain works from musical circulation, including entire folk genres, as happened with songs of a spiritual nature. Practices of reinterpretation and ideological editing of texts were also employed in particular genres, notably *dumy*<sup>3</sup> and *koliadky* (carols).

The ideological regulation of folklore was merely one aspect of the broader cultural transformation, which also affected the entire system of traditional ritual.

## 2.1. The rise of Soviet ritual practices

Bolshevik ideology disrupted the traditional annual cycle of ritual folklore and religious festivals. It was replaced by a new ritual calendar, with the main holidays being May Day and the anniversary of the October Revolution (November 7, New Calendar). As early as 1919, these dates were celebrated in Ukraine by young workers, accompanied by staged performances such as *Liberation of Labour*, *The Internationale*, and the *Arsenal Uprising* in Luhansk and Kyiv (Lysenko 1982: 6). After the Bolshevik government was established in Ukraine, such ritual celebrations became permanent, helping to reinforce the prescribed order of social life. The new Soviet ceremonial culture expanded to include regular Party congresses at various levels, the commemoration of anniversaries linked with leaders Lenin and Stalin, newly created Soviet organisations (such as the Komsomol), and selected cultural figures deemed ideologically sound, all typically accompanied by mass gatherings and concerts (Riznyk & Hrytsenko 1998).

A mandatory musical feature of party events was the performance of revolutionary songs, which gained the status of sacred (in the sense of the latest sacral). These songs increasingly fulfilled functions that had traditionally been associated with ritual or ceremonial singing in communities, thereby replacing customary forms of musical expression with ideologically framed alternatives. Alongside international socialist anthems, such as “The Internationale”, “La Marseillaise”, “Warszawianka”, there were anonymous songs, often reworked or textually revised versions of well-known folk or composed melodies such as “Вы жертвою пали” (You Have Fallen Victim), “Замучен тяжелой неволей” (Tortured by Heavy Captivity), “Перше травня” (The First of May), and others. These songs were performed in both Russian and Ukrainian versions, the latter thanks to poetic translations made, in particular, by poets Mykola Voronyi and Oleksandr Oles’.

## 2.2. The Transformation of Folklore Under the Influence of Social Order

Revolutionary songs of Ukrainian origin may be regarded as rebel songs, gained popularity during World War I and the efforts to establish a Ukrainian state

from 1917 to 1921. In some cases, newly folklorised texts were set to the melodies of renowned traditional folk songs such as “То не вітер, то не буйний” (It Is not Wind, It Is not Violent), “Ой, з-під гірки все туман” (Oh, It Is All Fog from under the Hill), and others.

A considerable number of the melodies from Ukrainian rebellion songs were appropriated by the Bolsheviks and, with textual alterations, adapted to the new ideology. For example, the song “Ми робітники” (We Are Workers) was reworked from “Ми гайдамаки” (We Are Haydamaks<sup>4</sup>), “Бідак і багач” (The Poor Man and the Rich Man) from the folk song “Ой наступала й та чорна хмара” (Oh, That Black Cloud Was Coming).

Other examples include the tragic Ukrainian riflemen’s song<sup>5</sup> “Розпрощався стрілець зі своєю ріднею” (The Rifleman Bade Farewell to His Family), which became the Russian “Там, вдали, за рекой” (Far Away across the River) about Red Army soldiers, and the historical song “Ой, Морозе, Морозенку” (Oh, Moroze, Morozhenko) about a heroic Ukrainian Cossack, sung with the text “Ой, Приймаче-Приймаченку (Oh, Pryimache, Pryimachenko) about the Civil War hero Vitalii Prymakov.

A striking example of the creation of new folkloric songs in response to social demand is the use of the old humorous Ukrainian song “Ой що ж то за шум учинився” or “Комарик” (Oh, What a Fuss You Made or Mosquito) (Dovzhenko 1957: 26) about Mosquito and how he married Fly, known in many variants, especially in the arrangement by Mykola Lysenko for choir and piano (1897 V 6: 17). Below are its popular variants with modified text, produced in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (see Figure 1). An insurgent version, which, with high probability, dates back to the early twentieth century, including the lines “Mosquito joined the rebels/ to bite the Muscovite ragamuffins”, was later popular among members of the Ukrainian Rebellion Army in the 1940s (Kobylanskyi 2013).

In 1918, a Red Army couplet-style song was composed to the same melody. Yuhym Prydvorov, known as Demyan Bedny from Yelysavethrad (now Kropyvnytskyi, Ukraine) wrote the lyrics “Как родная меня мать провожала” (When My Own Mother Saw Me Off). This song was recorded on a gramophone record in Moscow in 1919, at the order of the Main Political Directorate of the Red Army, and was widely distributed among its soldiers. Consequently, a folk-inspired mass song was deliberately used as a propaganda tool by the Bolshevik authorities (see Figure 2).



Figure 1. Humorous Ukrainian song “Mosquito”. Performed by Petro Leschenko and Orchestra Hönigsberg-Albahari, 1937. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bFnX\\_wg9BME](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bFnX_wg9BME)

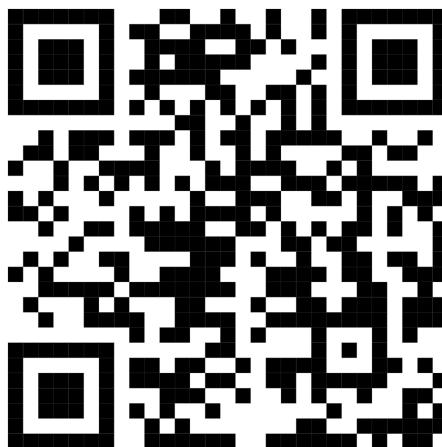


Figure 2. Soviet song “When My Own Mother Saw Me Off”. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=smHAuArbQq8>

The creation of new Soviet folklore often involved the simple replication of a folk melody, with a verbal text replaced by one that was more ideologically relevant. Sometimes, only the protagonist changed: the Cossack<sup>6</sup> became a

Komsomol member, and the Sich rifleman became a Red Army soldier. This can be observed in the ‘modernisation’ of the lyrical song “Ой у полі жито” (Oh, There’s Rye in the Field).

Whereas the traditional text speaks of a slain Cossack, the Soviet version “Ой в городі жито” (Oh, There’s Rye in the Garden) recounts the death of a Komsomol member. This adaptation was published, for example, in the collection *Ukrainian Folk Songs*. (Hordiychuk et al. 1958: 391) (see Table 1)

Traditional Folk Song Oh, there’s Rye in the Field	Soviet Folk Song Oh, there’s Rye in the Garden
<i>Ой, у полі жито</i> <i>Копитами збито</i> <i>Під білою березою</i> <i>Козачен’ка вбито</i>	<i>Ой, у полі жито</i> <i>Копитами збито</i> <i>Під білою березою</i> <i>Комсомол’ця вбито</i>
<i>Oh, there’s rye in the field</i> <i>Knocked down by hooves</i> <i>Under the white birch</i> <i>The Cossack was killed</i>	<i>Oh, there’s rye in the garden</i> <i>Knocked down by hooves</i> <i>Under the white birch</i> <i>The Komsomol member was killed</i>

Table 1. Comparison of the text of the traditional folk song “Oh, There’s Rye in the Field” and the Soviet folk song “Oh, There’s Rye in the Garden”. The text of the traditional song is taken from the collection *Folk Melodies: Recorded and Arranged by Klyment Kvitka from the Voice of Lesya Ukrainka* (Kvitka 1917).

### 2.3. The Emergence of Soviet-Era Folklore in Ukraine and Its Academic Legitimisation

A subsequent stage in the formation of Soviet musical folklore was the creation of entirely new examples to meet the authorities’ social demands. Noll (2023) describes this as pseudo-folklore because, unlike the songs of the independence struggle and social conflict, which were products of collective creativity, Soviet folklore was shaped under ideological pressure from above. Oral collective creativity was supplanted by organised mass popular or artistic creativity (Bezuhla 2004) of professional and amateur composers, performed by amateur folk ensembles. This will be examined in greater detail in Section 3 of this article.

The thematic range of Soviet folklore included songs about Lenin and Stalin (including Lenin Dear Lenin, The Country Is Shrouded in Mourning, Stalin Our Dear Leader), the glorification of socialist construction (Get Up, Time is Moving Forward, About the Canal Work, Hey the River Rapids Don't Break Anymore), and the celebration of collective-farm labour (As in Our Village, We Have Collective Farms in the Village, It's Good to Live on a Commune, Oh a Tractor in the Field). The textual basis of this pseudo-folklore frequently consisted of so-called folk poetry, actively promoted through Party newspapers such as *The Communist*, *News of the All-Ukrainian Central Executive Committee*, *Soviet Village*, and the journal *Country House*. Many melodies were close to folk idioms, employing motion in thirds and plagal cadences. A notable feature is the recurrent comparison of Stalin to a falcon or mountain eagle, evidently inspired by the song “Із-за ріп та з-за високих” (also known as the Song about Stalin, 1935) by composer Levko Revutsky and poet Maksym Rylsky, discussed in more detail in Section 4. For example, in a song included in the collection *Ukrainian Folk Songs* (Hordiychuk et al. 1958: 361), there are the following lines: “It is not an eagle, it is not a blue one/ circling above the Kremlin/ It is our Stalin with the people/ making the law.”

According to Party ideologues, folklorists were to play a crucial role in shaping Soviet folklore, which celebrated class struggle and the ‘happy’ life of workers after victory. It is recognised that a clear signal to this effect was given in Maksim Gorky’s address to the First Congress of Soviet Writers (1934). From the mid- 1930s, an intense campaign to collect and record Soviet folklore was launched to demonstrate the correct ideological orientation of mass artistic creativity and to popularise it. The Academy of Sciences of the USSR became the centre of this Soviet folklore scholarship, with several institutes engaged in the field. In Kyiv, the Academy of Sciences at the Ukrainian SSR Institute of Folklore was founded in 1936. In the same year, the collection *Ukrainian Post- October Folk Songs* was published, compiled by the ethnographer and musician Anton Lykhodii along with composers Levko Revutsky (1889–1977) and Viktor Kosenko (1896–1938). Ukrainian Soviet songs about Lenin, Stalin and the struggle against the interventionists were included in Russian translation in the major anthology *Творчество народов СССР* (*Creativity of the Peoples of the USSR*), edited by Maksim Gorky and Lev Mekhlis, head of the Red Army Political Directorate, published in Moscow in 1937.

After the Second World War, during which the Institute of Folklore was reorganised as The Institute of Art Studies, Folklore and Ethnography at the Ukrainian SSR Academy of Sciences, the pseudo-folklore Soviet songs of the 1930s continued to be published unchanged in subsequent folklore collections, serving as consistent indicators of ideological correctness. This persistence also indirectly testifies to their artificial origin.

In 1951, state publishing house *Mystetstvo* issued a collection of *Ukrainian Folk Songs*, prepared by the staff of the Institute, which included a section of Soviet-themed songs. In 1955, *Ukrainian Soviet Folk Songs* was published as a separate volume, including new works inspired by the events of the Second World War. These celebrated the heroism of the Soviet people in resisting the fascist invaders and the post-war reunification of Ukrainian lands with the help of the fraternal Russian people. As can be seen, the newly created 'folklore' continued to fulfil the ideological tasks of the Soviet authorities as an instrument of their propaganda apparatus. The academic edition *Ukrainian Folk Demy and Historical Songs* (1955), edited by Rylsky and historian Kost' Huslysty, demonstrated the violent intrusion of Soviet ideology into the traditional genres of Ukrainian folklore. The preface to the volume referred to the Party's role in exposing bourgeois-nationalist elements within the Academy of Sciences who, "led by the fiercest enemy of the Ukrainian people, the bourgeois nationalist Mykhailo Hrushevsky<sup>7</sup>, had sought to sabotage Soviet culture" (Pavliy 1955: xix). The collection included pseudo-folkloric *demy* such as "Про Леніна і Сталіна" (About Lenin and Stalin), "Про Леніна і Сталіна та про трьох братів" (About Lenin and Stalin and the Three Brothers), and "Хто ж той сокіл, товариш" (Who is That Falcon, Comrade?). Nevertheless, the publication holds significant artistic and scholarly value, as it includes extensive work by collectors of Ukrainian folklore, including *demy* published earlier by Filaret Kolessa in Lviv.

Prominent Ukrainian scholars and folklorists, including Mykola Hrinchenko (1888–1942) and later Mykola Hordiichuk (1919–1995), Zoia Vasylchenko (1918–2009), and Oleksandr Pravdiuk (1926–1984), contributed to the organisation of the corpus of Soviet folklore. Evidently, work on this subject served as a form of indulgence, enabling them to pursue their profession under Soviet rule. Alongside the fulfilment of this social commission, specialists at the Institute of Art Studies, Folklore and Ethnography continued to collect and research examples of the genuine folk tradition, thereby preserving them for future generations during the era of repression and the genocide of the

Ukrainian people, including both the bearers of the folklore tradition and the researchers themselves.

### **3. Mass Musical Events as Ritual Practices of Soviet Society**

This section examines mass musical events in Ukraine during the 1930s as a distinctive form of ritual practices of the Soviet person. Mass musical events profoundly transformed traditional practices and became an integral part of society at that time playing a pivotal role in transmitting ideology and producing a unified collective identity. To disseminate new creations among the broader public, large-scale music festivals were organised. They combined elements of theatrical spectacle, political demonstration, and amateur artistic performance. Ritual components of Soviet ‘ceremonial culture’ included large-scale festive marches of thousands of participants, the performance of works with heroic-revolutionary and laudatory themes, as well as symbolic visualisation such as portraits of Lenin, Stalin, and other party leaders, which were indispensable attributes of mass gatherings. The primary function of such events was to mobilise both urban and rural populations, legitimise the Bolshevik regime, and create a new collective identity. Under the guise of aesthetic education – although this was also partially true – a person was being born who had no right to private life, since “...everything private must be sacrificed to the abstract faceless collective” (Aheyeva 2012). In this sense, the mechanisms behind Soviet mass festivities correspond to what Gentile defines as the totalitarian “sacralisation of politics”, which led to the formation of a system that was “intolerant, invasive, and fundamentalist, seeking to permeate every aspect of individual and collective life” (Gentile 2006: 15).

Within this system, developed in the form of amateur musical performance, the growth of the amateur movement required the establishment of appropriate infrastructure in cities and villages: networks of clubs and cultural centres where rehearsals were held, and groups were organised. Although such measures might be interpreted as constructive steps toward expanding musical participation, they also served specific ideological objectives and did not arise as a naturally evolving component of musical life. In contrast, in many European countries the formation of amateur musical culture tended to develop more organically: it was

shaped by local civic initiatives, education institutions, voluntary associations, and community-based traditions, rather than by centrally imposed directives. As a concrete example, one may refer to *Bojan* and *Kobzar*, well-developed networks of choral societies in the western part of Ukraine, i.e. Galicia, which from 1772 to 1918 was the part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Amateur ensembles, choirs and orchestras became tools of cultural policy, as they provided ideological education for the human resources needed for socialist construction. The mobilisation of the broad masses was achieved through the organisation of large-scale festivities, designed both to unite and to discipline society. A special role in this process was played by the so-called musical Olympiads. Music periodicals from the late 1920s and 1930s provide valuable insights into these large-scale, ritualised musical events:

Musical Olympiads, created in the turbulent period of construction, correspond most fully to the spirit of the proletariat, to the era of grandiose social and economic achievements and gigantic building projects. They embody the collective creativity of the musical activists of the working people and inspire the masses of listeners and performers with enthusiasm and vigour for further struggle and construction (Nytsai 1929a: 6).

The journal *Музика масам* (Music for the Masses, 1929, № 10–11, 12) provided detailed instructions for the organisation of musical Olympiads, including several preparatory stages: a historical overview of Soviet musical initiatives, principles of organisation, and the programme of performances. The article emphasised that this new format replaced the less successful *Всесоюзні музичні дні* (All-Ukrainian Music Days), initiated in the 1920s by the Всеукраїнським товариством імені Миколи Леонтовича (Mykola Leontovich All-Ukrainian Society). However, the role of this society, as a centre of Ukrainian musical culture, was deliberately undermined by representatives of the Soviet authorities. Regarding this development, Kuzyk (2024: 259) observed that “the authorities decided to end the flirtation with the ‘national policy of Ukrainianisation’ and to impose Bolshevik order on the artistic sphere of Ukraine”.

The scale of growth was evident: whereas at the 1924 Kyiv Olympiad about 800 workers sang simultaneously, the subsequent Olympiad in Kharkiv attracted more than 1,200 participants from musical amateur groups. A model for Ukrainian Soviet propagandists was the open-air festivals held in Leningrad (now St Petersburg, Russian Federation), involving up to 5,000 performers and

tens of thousands of spectators. These examples reveal the Soviet organisers' aspiration to elevate art initiatives to the status of grandiose ritualised spectacles.

The aims of the musical Olympiads were defined as "the collective creativity of the working people, which inspires the masses with enthusiasm for struggle and construction" (Nytsai 1929a). Organisationally, they were structured according to the model of sporting competitions: the top ensembles, performers, composers, and musical directors were to be chosen; participants were divided by territorial sections or artistic categories; and winners were awarded monetary prizes (Lisniak et al. 2022). This structure introduced an element of competition, yet the primary goal remained the demonstration of unity and discipline.

Preparation for the musical Olympiads was carried out in advance under strict state control, with repertoires and scenarios approved by the authorities. Through such approved lists, the authorities sought to combat "hostile, nationalist elements" (Dan'shev 134: 47). The choice of venue was also important: "naturally acoustically advantageous spaces" were recommended, or else special tribunes and terraces were to be constructed. Festive spaces were decorated with slogans, flags, and symbolic elements. The solemn procession of columns was accompanied by sound; during the march, singing of "The Internationale" and Shevchenko's "Zapovit" (Testament)<sup>8</sup> was obligatory. After the official part, so-called folk festivities took place, combining disciplined ritual with freer musical practices, obviously within the limits of the permitted repertoire (Nytsai 1929a).

The Art Decades of the 1930s, a series of celebratory events held in Moscow bringing together artists from all the 'brotherly' republics, can be interpreted as a manifestation of the ritualised glorification of the Leader, serving as a symbolic demonstration of unity around the centre of Soviet power. One of the largest-scale cultural events of the Soviet period, aimed at officially presenting the achievements of Ukrainian culture at the heart of the USSR, was the Decade of Ukrainian Art and Literature in Moscow, which took place between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> March 1936 (Nevyzhyn 2011). The event encompassed a wide range of artistic forms, including theatrical performances, concerts, art exhibitions, and literary evenings. On the one hand, the Decade showcased the 'flourishing Ukrainian culture' within the socialist in content, national in form ideological formula; on the other hand, it became a powerful instrument of ideological unification and centralisation, as Ukrainian art was presented exclusively within the permitted canon of socialist realism<sup>9</sup>.

It can be assumed that Soviet ideologues partly borrowed the format of large-scale choral festivals from the European countries. For example the Baltic countries, where in the 19<sup>th</sup> century a tradition of holding large song festivals arose with the aim of promoting national unity and preserving cultural identity. (Kuutma 1996) In the Soviet context, however – and especially in Ukraine – this model was radically reinterpreted. These events became instruments of mobilisation and of the ideological legitimisation of the Bolshevik regime.

Thus, mass musical events in Ukraine during the 1930s can be regarded as a specific form of Soviet ritual practice. They combined elements of spectacle, symbolic representation, and collective participation, while simultaneously serving as a means of ideological instruction for the masses. The central musical unit – the core repertoire of amateur ensembles – was the Soviet mass song, a new genre tasked with glorifying the new order. During this period, it reached its greatest extent.

#### 4. Mass Songs as an Essential Attribute of the New Rituality

This section addresses Ukrainian Soviet mass songs with their role as the most effective instrument in the formation and maintenance of the new Soviet rituality, considered from the standpoint of contemporary historical and musicological scholarship.

As noted above, the authorities established state commissions (often supported by generous material incentives) for the creation of musical works. The vast majority of these commissions concerned song genres that were expected to provide the “authentic embodiment of ideas, themes, and images arising from the life of our country during the years of victorious socialist construction” (Baranovskaya et al. 1977). This idea was reflected in the preface to the Ukrainian collection *Mass Song*: “Song must become part of new forms of everyday life, be heard at revolutionary celebrations and gatherings, during leisure and entertainment, and convey a new worldview” (Kuzyk 1992: 161). At the same time, every sphere of life was designated by the Bolsheviks as a ‘front’, while avenues of development were rhetorically described as battles, assaults, and so forth – for example, the cultural front, the front of socialist construction, the battle for the harvest, the battle to fulfil the plan, and others.

Thus, the natural lyricism and melodiousness of the Ukrainian song were replaced by a poster-like quality, a *staccato* rhythm, and corresponding melodically declamatory motifs. It is clear that while most of these highly popular ‘masterpieces’ of the time interest us today only as froth (Parkhomenko 1992: 17), there were also works of genuine artistic value.

In response to the ‘proposal’ – in fact, order – to create a new repertoire of songs, there emerged a flood of panegyric and hymn-like ‘products’. Radio broadcasts and concert programs became saturated with songs about a happy life and gratitude to the Party and the Leader of the peoples. On the airwaves and concert stages “hyperbolisation and exalted pathos prevailed” (Parkhomenko 1992: 17). Even the ‘catchy’ titles of the works can serve as evidence of this: Vasyl Verkhovynets’s “Громи, громи, могутня пісне!” (Thunder, Thunder, Mighty Song!), Pylyp Kozytskyi’s “А маса йде до Мавзолею” (And the Masses Go to the Mausoleum), and Vasyl Smekalin’s “Вперед, за щастя людності!” (Forward, for the Happiness of the People!), among others. Songs in the form of hymns and spirited marches also appeared, calling for struggle, such as Levko Revutskyi’s and Pavlo Hrabovskyi’s “Уперед, хто не хоче конати!” (Forward, Those Who Do Not Wish to Perish!), and Vasyl Verkhovynets’s and Vasyl Chumak’s “Більше надії, брати!” (More Hope, Brothers!).

The ‘new collective farm life’ was also celebrated, for example, Verykivskyi’s and Ivan Honcharenko’s “Бойова колгоспівська” (The Collective Farm Fight Song), Koliada’s and Ivan Velychko’s “За кращий врожай” (For a Better Harvest), Kozytskyi’s and Mykola Kozhushnyi’s “Передкомунська” (Pre-communal). Joyful Soviet youth (the Komsomol) was likewise glorified, as in Kozytskyi’s and Kozhushnyi’s “Наша спілка молоді” (Our Young Union). A vast number of songs were dedicated to the Red Army, with numerous thematic collections published, such as “Червона армія” (The Red Army) and “Червоний спів” (The Red Song). In essence, these were agitational works, in which certain composers – among them Valentyn Borysov and Fedir Popadych – specialised with considerable success. Mykola Hrinchenko even referred to the highly prolific Kostiantyn Bohuslavsky as a master of the modern musical *agitka*<sup>10</sup> who “marched in the first ranks” (Hrinchenko 1940: 162). For example, Bohuslavskyi’s and Ivan Shevchenko’s “Дванадцять косарів” (Twelve Mowers) was perhaps the most widely disseminated song of the time (Kuzyk 1992: 163).

In addition, similar processes of creating ideologically oriented mass songs occurred across all Soviet republics. For instance, in Belarus, these were on a

considerably smaller scale, since at the time of the establishment of the Society of Dramatic Writers and Composers, which was founded in 1934, its music section had only fourteen members. The most active author of such songs was the head of the section, composer Isaak Lyuban (1906–1975), whose works included “Песня о дукорских партизанах” (Song about the Dukor Partisans, lyrics by Petrus Broúka, 1931), “Украсим наши хаты” (Let Us Adorn Our Houses, lyrics by Janka Kupala, 1937), etc. (Gorkii, Mekhlis, *et.al.* 1937).

#### 4.1 The Song about Stalin as a Mirror of General Processes in the Musical Culture of the 1930s

With the consolidation of the personality cult surrounding the ‘Leader of all peoples’, a substantial collection of songs dedicated to him emerged, and Ukrainian composers and poets were by no means behind their counterparts from other Soviet republics in contributing to it.

One of the most emblematic and highly dramatic examples was “Пісня про Сталіна” (Song about Stalin), also known by its more familiar title, “Із-за гір та й з-за високих” (From Beyond the Mountains and Heights, 1935), composed by Levko Revutsky with lyrics by Rylsky. By that time, the poet had already endured an arrest on the standard charge of counter-revolutionary activity and subsequent torture<sup>11</sup>. Subsequently, the Party official Andrii Khvylia<sup>12</sup> instructed Rylsky to create a song about the Father of the Peoples, thereby demonstrating his reliability. Rylsky sought the assistance of his friend, composer Levko Revutsky. As the Canadian theatre scholar Valerian Revutsky (1993: 21), son of Levko Revutsky’s elder brother Dmytro<sup>13</sup>, recalled: “...Maksym Rylsky and Uncle Levko went to my father and told him about the ‘offer’ – to write a song about Stalin. My father then advised them to write it to preserve their lives...”

The Song about Stalin was based on the ancient extended Cossack song “Ой з-за гір, з-за гір вилітав сокіл...” (Oh, from beyond the Mountains, from beyond the Mountains a Falcon Flew...), which exists in numerous melodic variants with an unchanged text and a highly dramatic storyline concerning a fallen Cossack. One version of this traditional song discussed here is presented in Figure 3, while Figure 4 provides an additional version for auditory reference.

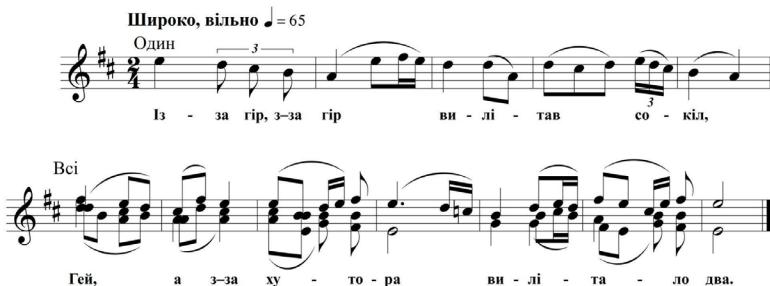


Figure 3. “Із-за rip, з-за гір вилітав сокіл...” (Oh, from beyond the Mountains, from beyond the Mountains a Falcon Flew...). (Yashchenko 1962: 118)

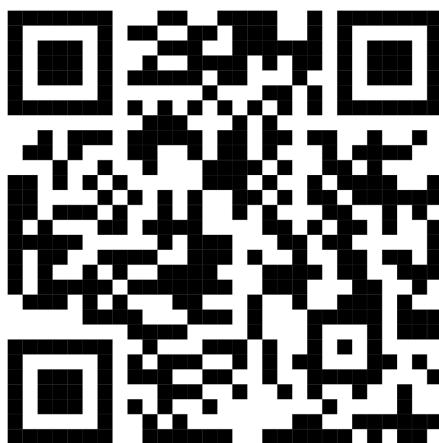


Figure 4. “Із-за rip, з-за rip вилітав сокіл...” (Oh, from beyond the Mountains, from beyond the Mountains a Falcon Flew...). Performed by the duet Solomyanyk consisting of Andriy Siletsky (actor, kobza player) and Viktoriya Titarova (folk music performer). URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4vW2PC2xFeE>

The traditional Cossack song belongs to the lyric-epic type and begins with a recitative-style solo introduction performed by a single singer. The mixolydian mode, irregular meter, elements of improvisation, and free rhythmic flow shape the characteristic intonational model typical of Ukrainian Cossack songs. Together with the central image of the falcon – one of the key heroic symbols

in Ukrainian folklore – these musical features create an authentically Cossack colouring of the song.

Phrases containing the fixed epithet ‘blue-grey-winged falcon’ (*сизокрилий сокіл*) and ‘blue-grey eagle’ (*сизий орел*) are widespread and culturally significant in Ukrainian folklore. They appear, for example, in the Cossack song “Побратався сокіл з сизокрилим орлом” (The Falcon Befriended the Blue-Grey Eagle) and in the historical song “То не орел, то не сизий” (It Is Not an Eagle, It Is Not Blue-Grey), among many others. This imagery inherently conveys notions of heroism, freedom, and strength.

In the “Song about Stalin”, the authors employ the image of the blue-winged eagle in reference to Stalin, a symbolic choice grounded in this established folk tradition. The archetype of the soaring heroic bird was readily adaptable for ideological purposes. It is evident that this traditional symbolic motif provided the semantic foundation for a semiotic inversion in the Soviet mass song. In this process, the archetypal folk image was transformed into the figure of the Eagle-Stalin, which became the ritual core of the new ideological composition.

The epic verbal turn at the very beginning of “Song about Stalin”, “Із-за ріп 3-за ріп...” (From beyond the mountains), is likewise characteristic and frequently encountered in traditional songs, for example, “Із-за гори вітер повіває” (From beyond the Mountains the Wind Blows), “Ой з-за гори кам’яної” (Oh, from beyond the Stone Mountain), and so on. It functions here like a tuning fork, aligning the listener with the powerful central character.

Although the song initially invokes elements of folk symbolism, this connection is quickly abandoned. What follows is an explicit panegyric that glorifies the Leader’s steadfastness and invincibility, elevates Stalin and positions him as a grand heroic guide. The achievements of the epoch are noted only in passing, while a distinctly militaristic tone underscores the collective mobilisation of society:

<p>Із-за гір, та з-за високих Сизокрил орел летить...</p> <p>Не зламати крил широких, Того льоту не спинить.</p> <p>На вершини всі ми линем, Сонце променем в очах...</p> <p>Льотом сонячним орлиним Вождь показує нам шлях.</p>	<p>From beyond the mountains, from beyond the heights The blue-winged eagle is flying... Do not break its broad wings, That flight will not be stopped.</p> <p>To the top we all rush, The sun beams in our eyes... In the solar eagle's flight The leader shows us the way.</p>
--	--

Table 2. The text of the “Song about Stalin” in Ukrainian and English. First and second verses.  
<https://lyricstranslate.com/uk/pisnya-pro-stalina-song-stalin.html>

In this way, Rylsky emerges as a professional who skilfully mastered the requisite laudatory rhetoric, which later became standardised and obligatory (Zholdak 1949), while at the same time integrating it with vivid imagery, metaphors, allegories, and allusions drawn from traditional sources.

Musicological analysis allows us to conclude that the melodic structure underwent a substantial transformation from the recitative-narrative manner of the traditional song to a march-like Soviet mass song characterised by functional harmonisation, choral texture, and a new ideological content. The “Song about Stalin” replicates only the external features of the Ukrainian Cossack tradition, ascending intonational gestures, the recurrent bird image, and the structural pattern of solo→chorus.

The musical component of the “Song about Stalin” was shaped more in the direction of the academic art-music tradition, while still fully conforming to the prescribed ideological requirements. The very first chords evoked the well-known chorus *Слава!* (Glory!) by Mykhail Glinka from the opera *Жизнь за царя* (A Life for the Tsar). Replacing the epic melismas of the original folk source, a concise 4/4 march rhythm was introduced. The dense orchestration, featuring prominent use of brass instruments, was designed to convey power and strength. The two-bar orchestral introduction, performed *tutti*, establishes the musical framework. A sustained tonic chord, akin to a conductor's signal, followed by energetic motion reminiscent of a martial call. Subsequently – consistent with

Ukrainian folk antiphone tradition – the male choir sings in parallel thirds, with the female voices joining on the third stanza of the verse (see Figure 5). The *tutti* of the mixed choir, with its steady rhythmic structure and repetition of the final two stanzas, symbolises a solemn, invincible procession. In some variants, the female voices lead the third and fourth stanzas, followed by the male voices, thus introducing a touch of tenderness or humanity to the otherwise sharply articulated march music, which carries heroic and declamatory intonations. As an example, listen to Figure 6.

The “Song about Stalin” was first published in the newspaper *Literaturna Ukraina* on March 12, 1936; however, it reached a wider audience on March 21, when it was performed during the radio broadcast of the closing ceremony of the First Decade of Ukrainian Art in Moscow by a large combined choir, creating a tremendous impression and, most importantly, pleasing the Leader of all peoples. On April 1, the text of the song in Ukrainian was published in the all-Union newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda*. From that time, its triumphant journey began: it was frequently performed throughout the USSR, reprinted, and translated into various languages, first of all Russian<sup>14</sup> (Sergeeva 1952).

Figure 5. The “Song about Stalin”. (Sergeeva 1952: 8)



Figure 6. The “Song about Stalin”. Performed by the Honoured State Ukrainian Chapel *Dumka* under the direction of Nestor Horodovenko, and the Symphony Orchestra of the Ukrainian Radio Committee under the direction of Herman Adler (1937).

URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ss01k0WwGh8>

Therefore, the intonational motifs in “From beyond the Mountains” can later be heard in the renowned Soviet songs “Катюша” (Katyusha) by Matvey Blanter (1938) and “Три танкиста” (Three Tankmen) by the Pokras brothers (1939), both of which were created by artists born in Ukraine. These motifs also appear in the later work “Солдаты, в путь...” (Soldiers, on the Road...) by Vasyl Solovyov-Sedoj (1954), and so on. The fanfare-like introduction and the initial hymn-style motif recall the Anthem of the Soviet Union: “Союз нерушимый республик свободных” (Unbreakable Union of Free Republics, 1943). They also closely parallel the Anthem of the Ukrainian SSR: “Живи, Україно, прекрасна і сильна” (Live, Ukraine, Beautiful and Strong, 1949), whose opening is nearly identical.

In addition, due to its widespread popularity across Soviet regions the “Song about Stalin” had a significant influence on the musical lexicon of mass songs of the time and served as a kind of letter of protection for both artists, repeatedly saving their lives. However, among the ‘common people’, the reception of the “Song about Stalin” was more mixed<sup>15</sup>. Thus, through the power of musical art, and above all the new Soviet song, the Party line was actively introduced into the minds of the broadest segments of the population, the so-called masses. As Kuzyk aptly noted: “Given the socio-psychological tasks of the time, which were

developed by the country's propaganda organs, the mass song was to become a means and a weapon of the worker and peasant... In this way, a peculiar form of ideological conditioning of the ordinary person took place" (Kuzyk 2023: 151). The mass song served not only as a propagandistic genre but also as a central element of new Soviet ritual: repeated in collective performances, embedded into festive ceremonies, and integrated into the structure of musical Olympiads and other mass events, it functioned as a ritualised practice that affirmed loyalty and reinforced the ideological order of the totalitarian state.

It is noteworthy that analogous songs continue to be cultivated today in countries with dictatorial regimes. For example, the production of numerous laudatory songs about the President – the nation's leader – can currently be observed in Belarus. Even the titles of these highly rhetorical works, performed by soloists, duets, and even the Belarusian State Song and Dance Ensemble, are telling: "Саня останется с нами" (Sanya Will Stay with Us, by Roker-Dzhoker, 2010), "Батька у нас крутой!" (Our Bat'ka Is Cool!, by Yevhenii Oliinyk and Yuliia Bykova, 2023), "Ax, Александр!" (Ah, Alexander!, by Oliinyk and Anna Seluk, 2023), "Баллада о диктаторе" (The Ballad of the Dictator, by Valery Shmat and Pavlo Duhanau, 2024), "Молитва за батьку" (A Prayer for Bat'ka, by Vital Karpau, 2025), among others. These songs are dominated by panegyric sentiment and hymn-like musical motifs, while their stylistic features range from pseudo-folk idioms to the mass-song aesthetics of the 1980s. All of them, however, bear the clear hallmarks of political commission.

Therefore, we can assert that the mechanisms associated with the new rituality characteristic of Stalin's authoritarian Soviet regime of the 1930s exhibit a remarkable resemblance to contemporary practices.

## Conclusions

The analysis of Ukrainian amateur and professional musical culture in the 1930s presents a demonstration of the emergence of new rituality enforced by the Soviet totalitarian regime. By utilising the symbolic significance of ritual and its ideological reinterpretation, Soviet cultural policy systematically supplanted traditional forms of folklore, public celebrations, and musical innovation with pseudo-folklore works and mass events intended to conform cultural practices to the priorities of the totalitarian state. The study situates these developments

within the broader context of Soviet cultural policy, emphasising the mechanisms of Socialist Realism and political religion.

The emergence of new 'Soviet folklore' is analysed through the perspective of how a novel canon of politically engaged songs was developed to communicate mythologised narratives of revolutionary heroism, socialist construction, and the cult of Stalin. The dissemination through performances by amateur ensembles, radio broadcasts, stage festivals, and musical Olympiads ensured their integration into everyday life, replacing an act of collective folklore creation with mass or popular culture. The use of folklore melodies with ideologically correct texts was accompanied by the censorship or removal from the public sphere of entire folklore genres, such as *dumy*, historical songs, and carols.

Choral festivals and music Olympiads of the 1930s became the embodiment of Soviet ritual practices. They combined theatrical spectacle, disciplined collective performance, and symbolic images that sacralised Party power. Borrowing certain external features from European choral traditions, these events changed their cultural purpose: instead of strengthening national identity, they served to dilute it and introduce unified Soviet political rhetoric. Due to their scale, repetition, and emotional impact, they functioned as quasi-liturgical acts within what modern scholarship defines as a system of political religion.

Mass songs emerged as the predominant medium for propagating ideological narratives. This genre, strongly endorsed by the state apparatus, experienced active development through the works of numerous Ukrainian composers. An exemplary instance is the "Song about Stalin" by Revutsky, with lyrics by Rylsky, which, through its incorporation of folk intonations and stylistic elements, quickly attained widespread popularity across the USSR. Its extensive dissemination rendered it an influential model for the musical language of subsequent Soviet mass songs.

The development of the new Soviet rituality of the 1930s exemplifies mechanisms characteristic of totalitarian regimes, specifically the instrumentalisation of culture and the strategic redefinition of ritual to secure ideological hegemony. The instances cited within the article concerning the development of pseudo-folklore, mass mobilisation through song, and the ritualisation of public ceremonies continue to hold significance for comprehending contemporary authoritarian cultural policies.

## Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Estonian Research Council grant project PRG 1288 A Corpus-based Approach to Folkloric Variation: Regional Styles, Thematic Networks, and Communicative Modes in Runosong Tradition (01/01/2021–31/12/2025); and TK215 Estonian Roots: Centre of Excellence for Transdisciplinary Studies on Ethnogenesis and Cultural Diversity (01/01/2024–31/12/2030).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In 1929, travel abroad was prohibited. This created an ‘iron curtain’ that separated the USSR from the rest of the world and turned it into a closed society.

<sup>2</sup> Our senior colleague, the composer and musicologist Bohdana Filts (1932–2021), recalled how, even in the comparatively more liberal 1950s, the head of the Lviv branch of the Union of Composers of Ukraine, Anatolii Kos-Anatolskyi (1909–1983), who in the 1930s had been among the pioneers of Ukrainian entertainment music in western Ukraine, urged her (at that time she was a young graduate of the Lviv Conservatory) to ‘write something ritual’. Such a piece, he explained, would open the doors for her to join the Union of Composers and help establish her reputation. Both of them understood perfectly well that this meant composing a work glorifying the Communist Party and its leaders (interview with composer B. Filts from Sikorska’s private archive).

<sup>3</sup> Ukrainian *dumy* are a genre of vocal-instrumental oral tradition, a late form of the heroic epic originating in the 15<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> centuries that reflects significant historical events and figures central to Ukraine’s past.

<sup>4</sup> Haydamaks were members of the national liberation movement in Right-Bank Ukraine in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. In a broader sense, they represent the Ukrainian rebels.

<sup>5</sup> Ukrainian riflemen’s songs were created in the Ukrainian Sich Riflemen Legion 1914–1918 during the national liberation struggle.

<sup>6</sup> Cossack: a member of a self-governing military community in Ukraine from the 15<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. More generally, a Ukrainian warrior.

<sup>7</sup> Mykhailo Hrushevskyi: a distinguished Ukrainian historian, public intellectual, and political figure. He served as the Chairman of the Central Council of the Ukrainian Peoples’ Republic from 1917 to 1918.

<sup>8</sup> In the 1930s, the nationalist themes of Taras Shevchenko, including his “Testament”, were replaced by Soviet revolutionary songs.

<sup>9</sup> Significantly, this event took place on the eve of the repressive wave of 1937–1938, during which the majority of the participating artists were either silenced or eliminated.

<sup>10</sup> Propaganda.

<sup>11</sup> The outcome was his ‘penitential’ collection, *The Sign of the Scales* (1932), which included poems celebrating Soviet reality as well as a poem about Lenin.

<sup>12</sup> The Head of the Department for the Arts under the Council of the People’s Commissioners of the Ukrainian SSR. In 1938 he was accused of terrorism and executed.

<sup>13</sup> Well-known folklorist Dmytro Revutsky (1881–1941) was brutally murdered in occupied Kyiv on the order of Soviet special services for ‘nationalism’.

<sup>14</sup> It is significant that the “Song about Stalin” is currently being actively circulated on Russian public forums, indicating that such ritualised practices have not disappeared but continue to exist today.

<sup>15</sup> The state of society at that time, and therefore its mood, is reflected in the next comment in YouTube, hidden under the nickname @jdbfdhksflndsnfjds near the entry “Songs about Stalin”: “My mother told me, that as children they learned this song by ear at school, and all of them sang in unison: ‘Мудрий ВОІІ’ (Wise LOUSE) instead of ‘Мудрий ВОЖДЬ’ (Wise LEADER) – here is a play on words that guides us all! Times were hungry, poverty was terrible, lice were everywhere, and the children could not understand why lice on the head were bad, yet one particular louse was considered wise. They thought it had to be some exception among lice. Luckily, no one knew about these childish reflections, because the parents would have been quickly sent to Siberia for such thoughts...” URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ss01k0WwGh8>

## Sources

Humorous Ukrainian song Mosquito. Performed by Petro Leschenko and Orchestra Hönnigsberg-Albahari, 1937. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bFnX\\_wg9BME](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bFnX_wg9BME)  
Soviet song When My Own Mother Saw Me Off... <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=smHAuArbQq8>

Із-за гір, з-за ріп вилітав сокіл... (Oh, From Beyond the Mountains, From Beyond the Mountains a Falcon Flew...). Performed by the duet ‘Solomyanyk’ consisting of: Andriy Siletsky - actor, kobza players, Viktoriya Titarova - performer of folk and ancient music. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4vW2PC2xFeE>  
Shraibman, Aleksei. Songs about Lukashenko: Analysis. Who Creates Them and Why? @zerkalo. 30 September 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qcu3eAzE0bM>

Song 'From Beyond the Mountains and Heights' In: Yashchenko, Leopold. The Ukrainian folk polyphony. Kyiv: Publishing House of the Academy of Sciences of the Ukrainian SSR, 1962. p. 118.

The Song about Stalin. Performed by the Honored State Ukrainian Chapel Dumka under the direction of Nestor Horodovenko and the Symphony Orchestra of the Ukrainian Radio Committee under the direction of Herman Adler (1937). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ss01k0WwGh8>

## References

Aheyeva, Vira 2012. *The Art of Balance: Maksym Rylskyi against the Background of the Era*. Kyiv: Knyha.

Artymyshyn, Pavlo; Holyk, Roman 2024. New Songs for a New Life: Soviet Folklore and Folkloristics in Western Ukraine. In: Kencis, Toms; Bronner, Simon J.; Seljamaa, Elo-Hanna (Eds.). *Folklore and Ethnology in the Soviet Western Borderlands: Socialist in Form, National in Content*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group. (Lexington series of Folklore and Ethnology), pp. 103–120.

Baranovskaya, Rasha; Brook, Mirra; Ikonnikov, Aleksey and others 1977. In: Rittih, Margarita (ed.) *Sovetskaya muzykalnaya literatura* (Soviet musical literature): *Uchebnik dlya muzykalnyh uchilish*. (Textbook for music colleges), 4<sup>th</sup> ed., supplement and processing. Moscow: Muzyka.

Bell, Catherine 1992. *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press.

Berezovskyi, Ivan 1968. *Ukrainska radianska folklorystyka. Etapy rozvytku i problema-tyka* (Ukrainian Soviet Folklore Studies. Stages of Development and Problems). Kyiv: Naukova dumka.

Bezuhla, Ruslana 2004. *Baianne mystetstvo v muzychnii kulturi Ukrayny (druha polovyna XX stolittia)* (Button Accordion Art in the Ukrainian Musical Culture (Mid-to Late XXth Century)). An author's abstract of Ph.D. thesis in Art Criticism. Speciality 17.00.01 (Theory and History of Culture), Kyiv, Kyiv National University of Culture and Arts.

Bilokin, Serhiy 2017. *Masovyy teror yak zasib derzhavnoho upravlinnya v SRSR (1917–1941 rr.): Dzhereloznavche doslidzhennya* (Mass terror as a means of state administration in the USSR (1917–1941): Source research). Kyiv: Naukova dumka.

Chebaniuk, Olena 2006. Postfolklor na postradianskomu prostori (Post-folklore in the post-Soviet space). In: Korniienko, Nelly (Ed.). *Kurbasivski chytannia: nauk. visn.* (Kurbas Readings: Scientific Bulletin): *Dialoh kultury i polityky* (Dialogue between culture and politics). Kyiv: NTsTM im. Lesia Kurbasa, 4, pp. 297–316.

Dan'shev, Myhailo 1934. *Kolhosnyi universytet samodialnoho mystetstva* (The Collective farm university of self-educational art). In: *Radianska muzyka* (Soviet music), 2-3: pp. 47–49.

Dovzhenko, Valerian 1957. *Narysy z istorii ukrainskoi radianskoi muzyky* (Sketches from the history of Ukrainian Soviet music). Part 1. Derzhavne vydavnytstvo obrazotvorchoho mystetstva i muzychnoi literatury URSR (State Publishing House of Fine Arts and Musical Literature of the USSR).

Frank, J. Miller 1990. *Folklore for Stalin: Russian Folklore and Pseudofolklore of the Stalin Era*. Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, XIV. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003069751>

Gentile, Emilio 2006. *Politics as Religion*. Princeton, New York: Princeton University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv14163w3>

Gorkii, Maksim; Mekhlis, Lev (eds.) 1937. *Tvorchestvo narodov SSSR* (Creativity of the peoples of the USSR). Jubilee edition for the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the October Revolution. Moscow: Izdatelstvo Redaktsii Pravdy.

Haievskaya, Tetyana 2013. Derzhavni radianski svitja: istoryko-kulturolozhichnyi aspekt (State Soviet holidays: historical and cultural aspect). In. *Kulturolozhichna dumka* (Cultural thought), 6, pp. 153–159.

Hrinchenko, Mykola 1940. Muzykalnyi folklor narodiv SRSR pro Lenina (Musical folklore of the peoples of the USSR about Lenin). *Narodna tvorchist* (Folk art), pp. 34–45.

Hailo, Al'ona 2020. Vydannia pisennoho folkloru 1919–1921 rokiv u spetsfondi Knyzhkovoi palaty Ukrayiny: knyhoznavchyi aspect (Publication of folk songs of 1919–1921 in the special fund of the Book Chamber of Ukraine: bibliographic aspect). *Visnyk Knyzhkovoi palaty*. (Bulletin of the Book Chamber), No. 6, pp. 22–30. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.36273/2076-9555.2020.6\(287\).22-30](https://doi.org/10.36273/2076-9555.2020.6(287).22-30)

Hordiychuk, Mykola; Rylsky Maksym (Ed.) 1958. *Ukrainski narodni pisni*. (Ukrainian folk songs). Kyiv: Vydavnytstvo Akademii nauk Ukrainskoi RSR (Publishing House of the Academy of Sciences of the Ukrainian SSR).

Kencis, Toms; Bronner, Simon J.; Seljamaa, Elo-Hanna (Eds.) 2024. *Folklore and Ethnology in the Soviet Western Borderlands*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books.

Kyrchiv, Roman 2010. *Dvadtsiate stolittia v ukraainskomu folklori* (The Twentieth Century in Ukrainian Folklore). Lviv: Instytut narodoznavstva NAN Ukrayiny (Institute of Ethnology, NAS of Ukraine).

Kobylianskyi, Volodymyr 2013. Muzyka v zhytti ukrayinskyx povstanciv na Prykarpatti (druga polovyna 1940-x – pochatok 1950-x rr.). (Music in the life of Ukrainian insurgents in Precarpathia (second half of the 1940s – beginning of the 1950s). In: *Galychnyna: vseukrayinskyj naukovyj i kulturno-prosvitnyczkyj krayeznavchy'j chasopys Prykarpatskogo nacionalnogo universytetu imeni Vasylja Stefanyka* (Iva-

*no-Frankivs'k).* (Galicia: All-Ukrainian scientific and cultural and educational local history magazine of the Vasyl Stefanyk Carpathian National University (Ivano-Frankivsk)). 24, pp. 331–343.

Kovaliv, Yurii 2007. Rytual. In: Kovaliv, Yurii (Ed.). *Literaturoznavcha entsyklopedia* (Literary Encyclopedia). In two volumes. Kyiv: Akademiia. T. 2: M–YA. <https://archive.org/details/literaturoznavchat2/page/n329/mode/1up?view=theater>

Köiva, Mare 2017. Constructing Contemporary Periodical and Occasional Rituals. In: Anastasova, Ekaterina; Köiva, Mare (Eds.). *Balkan and Balticum. Current Studies in the Postsocialist Space.* (199–222). Tartu: ELM Scholarly Press. (Sator; 18). DOI: 10.7592/Sator. 2017.18.10. pp. 199–220.

Kuzyk, Valentyna 1992. Masova pisia (Mass song). In: Hordiychuk, Mykola (Chief of the Editorial Board); *Istoriia ukrainskoi muzyky* (History of Ukrainian music). In six volumes. V. 4. 1917–1941. Kyiv: Naukova dumka. pp. 155–175.

Kuzyk, Valentyna 2018. Pisnia kompozytorska (Composer's song). In: Skrypnyk, Hanna (Chief of the Editorial Board). *Ukrainska muzychna entsyklopedia* (Ukrainian musical encyclopedia). V. 5. Kyiv: Instytut mystetstvoznavstva, folklorystyky ta etnologii im. M. T. Rylskoho NAN Ukrayny, 2023. pp. 250–254.

Kuzyk, Valentyna 2021. Shliakh modyifikatsii zhanru masovoi pisi v umovakh totalitarnoi sistemy. (Ways of modifying the genre of mass song in the conditions of a totalitarian system). In: Nemkovych, Olena (ed.). *Ukrainska muzychna kultura 1930–1941 rokiv u yevropeiskomu konteksti: novi pohliady, materialy* (Ukrainian musical culture of 1930–1941 in the European context: new views, materials): kolektivna monohrafia (collective monograph). Kyiv: Instytut mystetstvoznavstva, folklorystyky ta etnologii im. M. T. Rylskoho NAN Ukrayny, 2021. pp. 145–161.

Kuutma, Kristin 1996. Laulupeod rahvusliku identiteedi kandjana. Mäetagused 1&2. <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/e0c3/3240ddbda76d488d3cf-28c36b06215b9da0a.pdf>.

Kvitka, Klement (ed.) 1917. *Narodni melodiyyi. Z holosu Lesi Ukrayinky zapysav i uporyadkuvav Klyment Kvitka* (Folk Melodies. Recorded and arranged from the voice of Lesya Ukrainka). Kyiv.

Leach, Edmund R. 1968. Ritual. In: *International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*. Vol. 13. Psyc. – Samp. New York. pp. 520–526.

Lisniak, Inna 2023. Samodzialnist muzychna (Amateur music). In: Skrypnyk, Hanna (Chief of the Editorial Board). *Ukrainska muzychna entsyklopedia* (Ukrainian musical encyclopedia). Vol. 6. Kyiv: Instytut mystetstvoznavstva, folklorystyky ta etnologii im. M. T. Rylskoho NAN Ukrayny. pp. 278–289.

Lisniak, Inna; Cherneta, Tetiana; Tukova, Iryna 2022. Musical amateur performance in Ukraine of the 1930s as the manifestation of Soviet totalitarian ideolo-

gy. *Studia Universitatis Babes-Bolyai Musica*, 67 (Special Issue 1), pp. 7–20. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24193/subbmusica.2022.spiss1.01>.

Lysenko, Anatolii (Ed.) 1982. *Prazdnik junosti*. (The festival of youth). Kyiv: Molod'.

Lysenko, Mykola 1897. *Zbirnyk narodnykh ukraїns'kykh pisen'* (The collection of Ukrainian folk songs). Arranged for choir and piano. Kyiv, V. 6, p. 17.

Nevyzhyn, Volodymyr 2011. Dekady respublikanskogo mystetstva u Moskvi (Decades of Republican Art in Moscow). *Kraieznarstvo*, 4, pp. 263–274. [http://resource.history.org.ua/publ/kraj\\_2011\\_4\\_263](http://resource.history.org.ua/publ/kraj_2011_4_263).

Nitsai, Ivan 1929a. Gotuyemosya do organizaciyi masovogo muzychnogo svyata. (We are preparing to organise a mass music festival) *Muzyka masam*, 10–11, pp. 5–7.

Nitsai, Ivan 1929b. Gotuyemosya do organizaciyi masovogo muzychnogo svyata. (We are preparing to organise a mass music festival). *Muzyka masam*, 12, pp. 9–11.

Noll, William 2023. *The transformation of civil society: an oral history of Ukrainian peasant culture, 1920s to 1930s* (1st ed.). McGill-Queen's University Press. URL: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780228017424>.

Ovcharenko, Sviatoslav 2023. Zhanr "radianskyi folklor" yak metod homohenizatsii ukraïnskoi kultury XX stolittia (The genre "Soviet folklore" as a method of homogenising Ukrainian culture of the 20<sup>th</sup> century). *Shliak kulturalohichnyi almanakh*, 2, pp. 269–275.

Parkhomenko, Lyu 1992. Introduction. In: Hordiychuk, Mykola (Chief of the Editorial Board). *Istoriia ukraïnskoi muzyky* (History of Ukrainian music). In six volumes. Vol. 4. 1917–1941. Kyiv: Naukova dumka. pp. 5–20.

Pavliy, Pavlo; Rodina, Maria; Stelmakh, Mykhailo; Rylsky, Maksym (Eds.), 1955. *Ukraïnski narodni dumy ta istorychni pisni*. (Ukrainian folk dumy and historical songs). Kyiv: Vydavnytstvo Akademii nauk Ukrainskoi RSR (Publishing House of the Academy of Sciences of the Ukrainian SSR).

Ponomarenko, Valentyna 2018. Pisnia narodna. (Folk song). In: Skrypnyk, Hanna (Chief of the Editorial Board). *Ukraïnska muzychna entsyklopedia* (Ukrainian musical encyclopedia). Vol. 6. Kyiv: Instytut mystetstvoznavstva, folklorystyky ta etnologii im. M. T. Rylskoho NAN Ukrayny. V. 5. pp. 254–257.

Popovych, Myroslav 1999. *Narys istorii kultury Ukrayny* (An essay on the cultural history of Ukraine). Kyiv: ArtEk.

Revutsky, Valerian 1993. Spogady pro bat'ka. (Memories of father). *Music*, 6, pp. 20–23.

Rylsky, Maksym 1949. Tvorets' pisni (The Creator of the Song). *Literaturna hazeta*. Feb. 24.

Rylsky, Maksym 2015: 'Vy pryyshly i pidete, a ya vzhe ostavysya...': rubryka: Lyudy i chas (Category: People and time). *Uryadovyy kur'yer*. Berez. 14.

Ryznyk, Oleksander, Hrytsenko, Oleksander 1998. Obriady i sviata (Rites and celebrations). In: Hrytsenko, Oleksander (Ed.). *Narysy ukraïnskoi populiarnoi kultury*

(Essays on Ukrainian popular culture). Kyiv: Ukrainskyi tsentr kulturnykh doslidzhen, pp. 481–522.

Sadomskaya, Natalya 1990. Soviet anthropology and contemporary rituals. *Cahiers du Monde Russe*, 31-2-3, pp. 245–255.

Sergeeva, Yelena (Ed.) 1952. *Pesny o Lenyne y Stalyne* (Songs about Lenin and Stalin). Moscow: Molodaya gvardiya.

Vasylenko, Zoya; Hordiychuk, Mykola; Dovzhenko, Valerian (Eds.) 1955. *Ukrainski radianski narodni pisni* (Ukrainian Soviet Folk Songs). Kyiv: Akademia nauk URSR, Instytut mystetstvoznavstva, folkloru ta etnografii, Mystetstvo.

Yashchenko, Leopold 1962. *Ukrajins'ke narodne bagatogolosya*. (The Ukrainian folk polyphony). Kyiv: Vydavnyctvo Akademiyi nauk URSR.

Zholdak, Oles' (Ed.) 1949. *Velykomu Stalinu* (Narodni pisni ta dumy. Poetychni, prozovi ta dramatychni tvory pys'mennykiv Radyans'koyi Ukrayiny) (To the Great Stalin (Folk Songs and Dumas. Poetic, Prose and Dramatic Works of Writers of Soviet Ukraine)). Kyiv: Derzhvydav Ukrayiny.

**Iryna Sikorska**, PhD, senior researcher at the department of Musicology and Ethnomusicology Maksym Rylsky Institute of Art Studies, Folkloristics and Ethnology National Academy of Science, Ukraine. Her main area of research is the history of Ukrainian music, including operas, operettas, musicians, and contemporary music. She is editor-in-chief of volumes II, IV, and V of the Ukrainian Music Encyclopedia. She is also active as a music critic and journalist.

E-mail: sikorska1959@gmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0002-3485-9206

**Oksana Letychevska**, PhD, researcher at the department of Musicology and Ethnomusicology Maksym Rylsky Institute of Art Studies, Folkloristics and Ethnology at the National Academy of Science, Ukraine. Her main research area is the history of Ukrainian choral music and performance, including opera choir, famous composers and choirmasters.

E-mail: letychevska@gmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0002-6103-7072

**Inna Lisniak**, PhD, senior researcher at the Folklore Archive of the Estonian Literary Museum; and at the department of Musicology and Ethnomusicology Maksym Rylsky Institute of Art Studies, Folkloristics and Ethnology National Academy of Science, Ukraine. Her research interests include Ukrainian traditional musical folklore of the vocal-instrumental genre, the transformation of musical folklore and its contemporary manifestations in performance practice, as well as the application of computational methods in ethnomusicology.

E-mail: [i.lisnyak78@gmail.com](mailto:i.lisnyak78@gmail.com)

ORCID: 0000-0002-9079-0282

# Child Mortality and Disease in Karlag, 1941: A Comparison of Prisoners' and Free Workers' Children

**Zauresh Saktaganova**

*Research professor, Chair of Archaeology, Ethnology and Native History, Director of the Centre for Ethnocultural and Historical Anthropological Studies at E. A. Buketov Karaganda State University, Karaganda, Kazakhstan*

*E-mail: zauresh63@mail.ru*

**Alina Gladysheva**

*PhD Student, at E. A. Buketov Karaganda State University, Karaganda, Kazakhstan*

*E-Mail: a.gladysheva2010@yandex.ru*

**Aimar Ventsel**

*Senior Research Fellow in Ethnology, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Tartu, Estonia.*

*E-mail: aimar@folklore.ee*

**Abstract:** The article analyses archived statistical data illustrating mortality rates for the children of female prisoners, as well as the children of free labourers in Karlag in 1941. For a comparative view of the problem of child mortality in the Gulag in 1941, the article uses data from two other camps in the Gulag system, Vyatlag and Bureilag. The general trends and differences in the mortality rates of the children of mothers who were prisoners, and

mothers who were free labourers, were analysed. It appears that the number of children in Karlag agricultural camp in 1941 was significantly higher than in forest and railway industry camps, and the overall mortality rate of children of imprisoned mothers was lower on average. Almost two-thirds of the children who died in Karlag in 1941 were children of female prisoners. In addition, the morbidity of children of incarcerated mothers was much higher than that of the children of free labourers. The peak of the morbidity and mortality in Karlag was April 1941.

**Keywords:** Gulag, Karlag medical and sanitation services, children of the Gulag, children of Karlag, children in the correctional labour camps, children's homes, conditions of detention, infant mortality in correctional labour camps, Karlag.

## Introduction

The historical works on childhood in Stalin's Gulags embrace several historical and sociological aspects of the children's contingent in the Gulag. This includes several categories: children exiled with their parents; prisoners who were arrested as adolescents; children rendered to orphanages after their parent's arrests, and often then delivered to the Gulag; and children born in the Gulag. (Craveri & Losonczy 2012) Research on the Gulag's juvenile population is often based on studies of quite late memories of the people who spent part of their childhood in Gulag camps and experienced exile or confinement during childhood or adolescence. (Craveri & Losonczy 2017) In recent years publications about camp childhood have appeared. One of the first is the collection of documents published in 2002 and edited by Vilenski *et al.* Studies followed on Kazakhstan's camps by Kazakhstani historians through a research project that lasted from 2022 to 2024 (Allaniiazov, Saktaganova, 2023; Saktaganova 2024; Saktaganova *et al.* 2024).

Studying children's captivity in the Gulag camps is associated with multiple difficulties, the first of them is the absence, or fragmentary character, of the memories. Children born in Gulag camps were at an age which is challenging to evoke, as they were either sent very young to orphanages or taken with their relatives. Despite the resolution of the Central Executive Committee (VCIK) and the Revolutionary State Council (SNK), of the 1st August 1933, "On the Affirmation of the Correctional Labour Code of the URSS", authorising women to let their children remain with them until the age of four (Losev *et al.* 1959: 291),

the camp authorities preferred to send children away to orphanages to remove additional expense. Children were a burden for the Gulag's economy as they did not generate income. (Alexopoulos 2017: 54) There were some cases when the children were held in a special holding area, similar to a nursery, at the camp child institution until the mother was free, but these cases were rare. The historians who studied the problem of child captives in the Gulag had to, due to the rare character or the absence of memories, to count on the normative, statistical, and similar documents of the different Gulag structures. One of these structures, which organised the everyday life and the medical care of new-born babies, was the Gulag Sanitation Department.

The activity of the Gulag Sanitation Department corresponded, and often contributed, to the general strategy of the Gulag's policy, striving to wring out, according to Solzhenitsyn's expression, the maximum of the prisoner's physical capacities. (Alexopoulos 2015: 506) The camp's doctors, who were often prisoners themselves, would rarely provide dispensation from labour for ill prisoners. If doctors were suspected of being too generous towards the prisoners, they could find themselves sent to perform general work in the camp. Human life was observed from the point of view of its utility. The presence of a child could distract the mother, as was thought by the Gulag authorities, from her direct duties. According to the Gulag's Sanitation department circulars, the mother was authorised to remain with her child only during the period of breastfeeding, afterwards the child was sent to the departments of the Ministry of Education, i.e. the orphanages. Female prisoners were excused from general labour only in the last months of their pregnancy. After giving birth to the child, they were sent to the general works. In camp, the children were held in one of the structures of the Sanitation department, or children's homes (*doma mladentsa*), where, according to the sanitation reports, their lives were formally managed and supervised.

The goal of this article is to analyse and compare, according to archive material, the monthly statistical data of 1941 on the mortality and disease level of the prisoner's children with those of the Gulag free labour workers. For the realisation of this goal, we use data from several units of the Gulag Sanitation Department, including the Karaganda labour camp. Nineteen-forty-one was remarkable for the high level of child mortality. We also utilised the fragmentary memories of people who were born in the Karaganda labour camp (Karlag).

## Methodology, methods, and the materials of the study

Kazakhstan is the largest country in Central Asia. In the period we discuss in the article, Kazakhstan was part of the Soviet Union. Gulag was not the camp system but the name of an institution that governed the camp system. Specifically, on November 6<sup>th</sup> 1929 the Central Executive Committee<sup>1</sup> and the Council of People's Commissars<sup>2</sup> passed a law that imprisonment of up to three years should be served in "general prisons", whereas confinement from three to ten years should take place in prison camps in remote regions of the country (Prokopchuk 2004), opening the way for the establishment of a network of prison camps. For the management of the camp system the Main Administration of Labour Camps, Labour Settlements and Places of Detention, or Gulag, was created (*glavnoe upravlenie ispravitel'no-trudovykh lagerei, trudovykh poselenii i mest zakliucheniia*) and subordinated to the NKVD (*Narodnyi Komissariat Vnutrennykh Del*) or People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs. Gulag in its heyday controlled 36 of the so-called "corrective labour camps" (*ispravitel'no- trudovyи lager*), in fact each of these camps was a conglomerate of several prison camps. The reason Gulag camps were established in Kazakhstan was the industrialisation of the Soviet Union. Kazakhstan is rich in mineral resources such as iron, copper, coal and so forth, and to extract these resources and build settlements the leaders of the Soviet Union decided to use prison labour.

The method used in this article is based on the principle of historicism (according to this concept, historical events develop according their own dynamic and inherent rules) and the systematic character of the described phenomena. The chronological approach allowed us to analyse the conditions of the children during the period of economic and structural crisis in the Gulag system at the end of the 1930s and the beginning of the 1940s. The analytical method enabled us to clarify the influence of the structural features of the Gulag system using the function of its particular divisions, such as the Gulag Sanitation Department (*vedomost sanotdela*). Statistical and mathematical analysis was used to synthesise the statistical data from Sanitation Department reports.

In the analysis of Gulag statistical data, our attention focused on data from the Karaganda correctional labour camp (Karlag). Karlag was extremely complex and the biggest agricultural state farm (*sovkhоз*) in the Soviet Union. In

its heyday, Karlag consisted of several camps that held 100,000 prisoners. The purpose of Karlag was to produce food for a growing prisoner population and the free labour of Kazakhstan, whose task was to develop mining and industrial enterprises in the region. Karlag was located near to Karaganda city in central Kazakhstan. To better understand the specifics of child mortality in the camps at the beginning of the 1940s, analysis of two other camps in the Gulag economic system are presented: Vyatlag (a forestry camp situated in the Kaiski district of Kirov oblast in central Russia), and Bureilag, a railway industry camp situated on the Far Eastern Railway (now the Jewish Autonomous Region, a region on the Russian Pacific coast).

The prime source for this article are documents from the State Archive of the Russian Federation (ГАРФ, *Государственного архива Российской Федерации (ГАРФ)*), particularly the records of the Sanitation Department (фонда санитарного отдела). Fond: R-9414, Inventaire 1, Dossier 2767, which contain the monthly Department summary lists of different indicators such as child disease and mortality rates. They contain the following:

- indicators on extra hospital help and home attendance and overall primary numbers of attendances of children who fell ill at home, in the kindergarten, and in the nurseries (*detskie iasli*);
- indicators on extra hospital help, containing data about the number of child inpatients at the beginning of the month and those who came for the first time, including time spent in the hospital;
- indicators on mortality, containing the overall number of dead children, including the children of imprisoned mothers;
- additional data about vaccinations against the following diseases: smallpox, dysentery, typhoid/paratyphoid and diphtheria;
- additional data on the number of children, including the overall number of children of the free work force at the end of the reporting month who were aged one month to three years, from three to eight years, and in kindergartens and nurseries;
- additional data on the number of children of women in prison, including those who are placed in children's homes (*doma mladentsa*).

For a comparative analysis of the camp prisoner health and mortality in general including child mortality in Karlag for several months in 1941 we used monthly summary lists from the Gulag NKVD Sanitation Department (ITL) NKVD (Fond: R-9414, Inventory 1sup., dossier 611). There is no data for every month of 1941, but even the statistical materials used allow us to draw certain conclusions about the percentage of child mortality in Karlag.

There were also the circulars and directives of the Gulag Sanitation Department from the archive of the Gulag Sanitation Department (Fond: R-9414, Inventory 1, dossier 2753). Separate documents have been taken from the Fund of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) (Fond: 9401, Inventory 1, dossier 570), including the original secret orders NKVD URSS for 1940. The memories of people born in Karlag have also been used in this article. For instance, the interview with Tatjana Ivanovna Nikolskaia. Her interview was conducted in November 2005 by archive staff at the Memorial historical and educative society within the Children of the ALZhIR program. In addition memory fragments from one imprisoned mother and her child born in Karlag, cited in the book *Gulag-Kinder: Die Vergessenen Opfer* by Meinhard Stark, were used.

## The discussion and the results of the research

The presence of women is significant in the Stalinist Gulag; the peak was during the period of the Great Purge. According to NKVD order №0486 on “The Operation on the Repression of the Wives and Children of Traitors of the Motherland” from 15 August 1937, the wives of ‘traitors to the motherland’ and their children who were younger than 15 years old, were sent to corrective labour camps. The order made exceptions for pregnant women or women nursing babies, although this exception was practically never applied. According to A. B. Roginsky, the total number of repressed wives of ‘traitors’ was 18,000. The outline for this operation was already designed in July 1937. The resolution of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (*Politbiuro*, the de facto most powerful institution in the Soviet Union) issued an order:

1. Accept the proposition of the State Commissariat of Internal Affairs (Narkomvnudel) on the incarceration for five to eight years for all the

wives of convicted traitors against the motherland, members of the right Trotskyite spy-diversionary organisation, according to the designated list. 2. Instruct the Narkomvnudel (NKVD, the Soviet security service from 1934 to 1941 with very broad interests from economic crime to border guarding) to organise special camps in the Narym and Tugaisk regions of Kazakhstan (Grinev *et al.* 2003: 10–11).

Children appeared in the camps at the beginning of the 1930s, but only at the end of 1937 did the Sanitation Department introduced strict reporting on the disease and mortality levels of the infant population, along with reporting on the functioning of the nurseries. The instruction of the Gulag Sanitation Department from 25 December 1937 announced:

Paragraph 3: The recording of everyday attendance at nursery of the children of free labourers, and those of prisoners, is made on the monthly time sheet on form D3. At the end of the month, attendance at the nurseries must be summarised, as well as their nonattendance by the children for different reasons, as well as the medical attendance of the nursery children at home. Paragraph 4: The analysis of every month's attendance and the functioning of the nurseries must be formed in a monthly report by those responsible for the nurseries on form D4 and sent to the Sanitation Department. Paragraph 5: The Sanitation Department summarises these materials about the functioning of each nursery on form D4 in summary table D5. Paragraph 8: In the case of child mortality, the death report always has to be registered on form D7. The death report had to be made in four copies: the first had to be sent to the Camp registration section (URO or *Uchotno-raspredelitelnyj otdel*, the Accounting Distribution department), the second to a Civil Registration Office (ZAGS), the third sent to the Sanitation Department, the fourth stays in the documents of the establishment that makes the report. All the death reports are added up in summary D8 (GARF, F.R.-9414.-Op.1-D.2752.-L.19, GARF, F.91414).

The end of the 1930s was crucial for the Gulag camp system's economic set-up. As a result of the Great Purge (see Kennan 1960), camps were overcrowded with prisoners: from the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 1937 to the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 1939, the total number of prisoners grew from 1.2 to 1.7 million people. This was critical for the camp's infrastructure as the overloading of camps led to increased execu-

tions. The categories of prisoner subjected to capital punishment were men of productive age, and highly qualified workers and specialists who were actually needed in the Gulag economic structure. Political purposes prevailed over economic: instead of using 'enemies' as a cheap workforce, they were eliminated. The repressions of the Terror corresponded with the relative stabilisation of the camp's economy, which lasted until the beginning of the Second World War (Khlevniuk *et al.* 2004: 29–30).

The problem of creating special infrastructure for the children of incarcerated mothers at the beginning of the 1940s became the subject of correspondence from the Gulag authorities. In his report to the Peoples Commissar of the Internal Affairs (Narkom or NKVD) Lavrenti Beria on 19 April 1941 Gulag chief Viktor Nasedkin writes:

There are, in the camps, colonies and prisons of NKVD URSS, 12,000 children under four years old with their mothers, and 8,500 pregnant women, 3,000 of whom are in the last months of pregnancy. Only 8,000 of these children are placed in the specially organised children's institutions in the NKVD correctional labour camps, the others remain in the prison cells and barracks with their incarcerated parents. Because of the necessity to widen the net of the children's institutions in the correctional labour camps and colonies, I ask your ordinance for the allocation of 1.5 million roubles for the organisation of the children's institution for 5,000 persons in the camps and the colonies, and 13.5 million for its maintenance in 1941, 15 million roubles the total (Vilenski *et al.* 2002: 366–367) .

The expenses had to be made up from the unplanned incomes from those sentenced to the correctional labour camps.

In 1941, the chef of the Sanitation department, David Loidin, issued an instruction containing the structure of the camp children's institutions, including five types of children's institution: nurseries, children's homes, kindergartens, children's consultations, and milk kitchens. According to this instruction, the nurseries and the kindergartens were children from one month to three years old were kept, and from three to seven years old "whose mothers worked in the industries and the institutions". Children's homes were a "closed type" (*zakrytogo tipa*) of institution for round-the-clock monitoring of children from 0 to four years old. Only the children of imprisoned mothers were kept in the children's home (Alanijazov & Saktaganova 2023: 129–130).

The general data from the Gulag Sanitation Department and its structural subdivisions for 1941 gives us information on the following camp administration units: the Hydraulic Engineering Construction unit (Glavgidrostroj), fuel supply, mining and metallurgy, special and industrial construction, Bezymjansk-lag (a Gulag camp started on 25 September 1940 in Kuibyshev oblast in eastern Russia at the Volga river specialising in the building of aircraft, automobiles, aerodromes, and roads), the agricultural camps, the forest camps, and railway construction (GUZDS) (Saktanova 2024: 1-24), GARF F. 9414, In.1, D.2767). The mortality of children of prisoner mothers, in comparison to the total number of children dead in Karlag in 1941, is given in Table 1.

Months of 1941	Total number of imprisoned mothers' children from 0 to 3 years old in Karlag in 1941	Total number of prisoners who died in Karlag in 1941	Total number of children who died in Karlag in 1941 (%) in comparison with general mortality	Children of imprisoned mothers (% in comparison with total number of dead children)	% of mortality in relation to the total number of children of imprisoned mothers	Children of free labour mothers (% in comparison with the total number of dead children)
January	901	98	14 (14.3%)	10 (71%)	1.1%	4 (28.5%)
February	911	114	10 (8.8%)	9 (90%)	0.98%	1 (10%)
April	951	92	33 (35.8%)	29 (88%)	3%	4 (12%)
June	1018		13	8 (61.5%)	0.8%	5 (38.5%)
July	1056		25	19 (76%)	1.8%	6 (24%)
August	1101		23	13 (56.5%)	1.18%	10 (43.5%)
September	1084	139	40 (28.7%)	24 (60%)	2.2%	16 (40%)
October	1081		23	17 (74%)	1.6%	6 (26%)
November	1080		26	19 (73%)	1.7%	7 (27%)
December	1077		30	22 (73.3%)	2%	8 (26.6%)

Table 1. Indicators of the mortality in the children of imprisoned (imp.) and free labour mothers (free lab.) in Karlag in 1941 (GARF F. 9414, In.1, D.2767; GARF F. 9414, In.1, D.611).

NB information from March and May is absent in the summary data.

From the data that we have on general mortality in Karlag (statistical data from 4 months), we can deduce that the highest percentage of infant mortality was in April of 1941: of 92 of the dead (in general) 35.8 percent were children, which is 33 children. Unfortunately, we cannot provide in this table, for comparative analysis, data about the number of free labourer's children because the statistical data from the Gulag Sanitation Department contained the prisoners' children from 0 to three years old, and the free workers' children from 0 to eight years old. More detail is shown in Figure 1.

## Child Mortality and Disease in Karlag, 1941

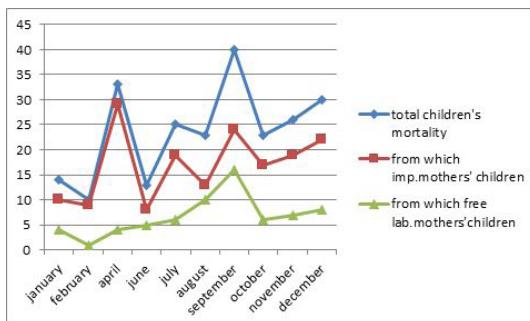


Figure 1. The mortality level of female prisoner's and free employee worker's children in comparison with general infant mortality in Karlag during 1941

NB information from March and May is absent in the summary data.

According to these data, we can conclude that almost two-thirds of the dead children in Karlag in 1941 were the children of incarcerated mothers. The highest peak of mortality for female prisoners' children in Karlag falls in April: 29 children die in this month, which corresponds to 88% of the general number of dead children. In April 1941 there were 2,153 children in Karlag, of those 1,202 (55.8%) were the children of free workers and 951 (44.1%) the children of female prisoners. The number of prisoners' dead children constituted 3% of the total number of female prisoners' children. In other months, this percentage was lower. The maximum infant mortality was in September, when 40 children died (24 children, or 60%, were the children of incarcerated mothers), which constituted 2.2% of the total number of female prisoners' children who died in this month. The percentage of female prisoners' dead children varied throughout 1941 from 60% to 90% of the overall number of dead children. In relation to the total number of female prisoners' children, the percentage of dead children varied from 0.98% to 3%.

The archival documents provide certain information that allows us to make a comparative analysis of infant mortality in Karlag. Let us compare the year 1941 with the end of the 1930s and the end of the 1950s. So, on the 16<sup>th</sup> of December 1938 a high mortality rate among female prisoners' children was documented. From the total number of children in the camp, 514, during only two months (September and October) in 1938, 98 children died (19%). This number was 1.5 times higher in 1938 than in 1941, when in the same two months 63 children died. The children died from pneumonia, which accounted for 50% of the total mortality rate. The mortality was explained in the reports

as follows: mortality from pneumonia was due to the extremely unsatisfactory state of medical services, untimely hospitalisation, and the unsatisfactory prophylactic work in the kindergarten, which led to a high number of respiratory illnesses and resulting lung complications. (GAKO. F.1171, In. 1, D.13: 61)

In 1939, 114 children died in the camp. From 1941 to 1944, 924 children died, including 202 in 1941 (the figures vary in different Gulag and Karlag Sanitation Department archive files), 314 died in 1942, 226 in 1943, and 182 in 1944 (Dilmanov 2002: 169). The mortality rate among female prisoners' children in Karlag in January 1944 was 3% of the total number of children in Karlag camps, in February 1%, and in March 1.5% (GARF F. 9414, In.1, D.2796: 186). In 1949, 570 children of prisoners were kept in five children's homes. As a result of their unsatisfactory condition, 184 children died in 1948 alone, or over 32% of the total number of children (Dilmanov 2002: 169). In 1951, in Karlag the infant mortality rate in children's homes was on average 1.2% (GARF F. 9414, In.1, D.451: 47–47 rev.). In 1952 in Karlag, the mortality rate of children in children's homes was on average 1.4% (GARF F. 9414, In.1, D.2896: 46). Thus, it was not until the mid-1950s that the infant mortality rate in Karlag decreased sharply compared to the 1940s, and the number of dead children was no longer so appalling, although its children continued to die.

For a comparative view of the problem of child mortality in the Gulag in 1941, we present data for Vyatlag (a camp that was part of the Gulag forest industry system) and Bureilag (a camp that was part of the Gulag railway industry system). Vyatlag existed in the Gulag system from 1938 to 1960 and was located in the Kajski district of the Kirov oblast in central Russia. The main areas of the camp's activities were logging, pulp production, woodworking, construction of timber railway sleepers, etc. (Ohotin, Roginskij *et al.* 1998: 200–201).

## Child Mortality and Disease in Karlag, 1941

Months of 1941	Total number of imprisoned mothers' children from 0 to 3 years old in Vyatlag in 1941	Total number of children who died in Vyatlag in 1941	Children of imprisoned mothers (% of total number of dead children)	% mortality in relation to the total number of children of imprisoned mothers	Children of the free labour mothers (% of total number of dead children)
January	60	9	9 (100%)	15%	0
February	67	4	0	-	4 (100%)
March	67	5	5 (100%)	7.4%	0
April	50	2	2 (100%)	4%	0
May	81	4	0	-	4 (100%)
June	82	0	0	-	0
July	95	1	0	-	1 (100%)
August	100	3	1 (33.3%)	1%	2 (66.7%)
September	98	3	3 (100%)	3.06%	0
October	118	6	4 (66.7%)	3.4%	2 (33.3%)
November	119	9	8 (88.9%)	6.7%	1 (11.1%)
December	110	8	6 (75%)	5.5%	2 (25%)

Table 2. Mortality rates of female prisoners' children in Vyatlag in 1941 (GARF F. 9414, In.1, D.2767: 1-24).

As Victor Berdinskikh writes in his monograph on Vyatlag: in June 1941 the listed "camp population" numbered 19,650 people, of whom 17,890 were men and 1,760 women. There were 1,662 free employee workers. "The camp was initially created for joint sex confinement, and male and female 'subzones', such as barracks were quite 'interpenetrable' allowing prisoners to come in and, to put it in their language, 'exchange opinions' on quite understandable 'issues', the male part of the camp's administration had in this respect 'the widest opportunities'" (Berdinskikh 2001: 80).

According to data from the Gulag Sanitation Department (Table 2), in Vyatlag there were from 50 to 119 children of prisoners in different months during 1941, with the percentage mortality of these children being 33% to 100% of the total number of dead children depending on the month, which was 1% to 15% of the total number of female prisoners' children. In the summer months, and in February, not a single child of an imprisoned mothers died.

Mortality peaked in January 1941, when nine children died, all of them children of imprisoned mothers, which was up to 15% of the total number of female prisoners' children. The mortality rate of children of free employee workers in different months in 1941 ranged from 0.3% to 3% of the total number of children of free workers. In January 1941 this number was 146 (0%) children of free employ-

ee workers, February 133 (3%), March 183 (0%), April 191 (0%), May 255 (1.5%), June 251 (0%), July 159 (0.6%), August 517 (0.4%), September 568 (0%), October 568 (0.3%), November 372 (0.2%), December 383 (1.8%). (In January, March, April, June, and September, no children of free-employee mothers died.)

The mortality rate of the children of free employees was lower than that of the children of imprisoned mothers, but still quite high: and in some months nevertheless reached 100% of all children who died. (see Table 2) The expected staffing level in Vyatlag on the eve of World War Two was 2,652, but there were only 1,689 free labour workers. Vacant working places were filled by prisoners (Berdinskikh 2001: 60). Viktor Berdinskikh explains: all those who were employed there sought to leave as soon as possible. We can observe the increase in infant mortality among children of prisoners in Vyatlag in the autumn and winter seasons, and on this basis we can conclude that in the northern, swampy, and humid climate, sunny days had a health-improving effect.

The other camp we will cite here for comparison with Karlag is Bureilag, a camp in the Gulag's railroad industry system. Bureilag existed from 1938 to 1942, with its centre at Izvestkovaya station on the Far Eastern Railway (now the Jewish Autonomous Region, a region on the Russian Pacific coast). Initially, it was a BAM (railway Baikal Amur Magistral) construction site on the Tynda-Zeya main line (southern Siberia close to the Chinese border). At the beginning of 1941 the camp was restructured as an automobile repair works, and with the beginning of the Second World War it functioned as an ammunition manufacturing enterprise (Ohotin, Roginskij *et al.* 1998: 177–178). The camp contingent stabilised until February 1939 and fluctuation was not so high. The stabilisation of camp life affected the mortality, which in April 1939 (in comparison with January 1939) was 3.5 times lower (Golovin 2000).

## Child Mortality and Disease in Karlag, 1941

Months of 1941	Total number of imprisoned mothers' children from 0 to 3 years old in Bureilag in 1941	Total number of children who died in Bureilag in 1941	Children of imprisoned mothers (% of the total number of dead children)	% mortality in relation to the total of children of imprisoned mothers	Children of free labour mothers (% of total number of dead children)
January	180	5	4 (80%)	2.2%	1 (20%)
February	178	7	1 (14.%)	0.5%	6 (85.7%)
March	181	6	2 (33%)	1%	4 (66.6%)
April	343	7	5 (71%)	0.4%	2 (28.6%)
May	348	10	4 (40%)	1.1%	6 (60%)
June	332	3	0	-	3 (100%)
July	343	18	4 (22%)	1.1%	14 (77.7)
August	354	25	10 (40%)	2.8%	15 (60%)
September	342	28	7 (25%)	2%	21 (75%)
October	252	6	4 (66.7%)	1.6%	2 (33.3%)
December	224	10	10 (100%)	4.5%	0

Table 3: Mortality rates of children of prisoner's and free laboures in Bureilag in 1941 (GARF F. 9414, In.1, D.2767: 1-24).

NB the information on December is absent from the Bureilag summary data.

According to the data in Table 3, the highest imprisoned mothers' infant mortality rate in Bureilag during 1941 was in December when 4.5% of the total number of female prisoners' children died. In December 1941, there were 2,299 children in Bureilag, of whom 224 were children of incarcerated mothers (of which 100% were in children's homes). In other months, the mortality rate ranged from 0.4% to 2.2% of the total number of children of incarcerated mothers. In June 1941, no children of female prisoners died in Bureilag.

The mortality rate of female prisoners' children ranged from 22% to 100% of the total number of deaths. At the same time, the mortality rate of children of free employees also ranged from 20% to 100% of the total number of deaths. It should be noted that the total number of children of free employees, registered in Gulag camps, was on average higher than the number of children of incarcerated mothers. In January of 1941 the number of children of free labour in Bureilag was 723 children, by December the number was 2,075, the highest number was in August 1941 at 2,712 children. Thus, in January and February, there were four times more children of free labour workers than of incarcerated mothers, between March and September seven times more, and in October and December nine times more. The number of children of free employees increased sharply, while the mortality rate remained approximately the same

as that of children of incarcerated mothers. The number of female prisoners' children increased approximately twofold over the year.

By comparing statistical data from the three camps (the percentage of incarcerated mothers' dead children of the total number of children), we can conclude that the overall mortality rate among female prisoners' children in Karlag was somewhat lower than in those of the Gulag's camps that focused on other economic activities such as railways and forestry. At the same time, the total number of children of female prisoners in Karlag was an order of magnitude higher than in the Gulag camps dedicated to other economic systems. One reason for the lower child mortality rate in Karlag could be that Karlag was an agricultural camp conglomerate engaged in producing vegetables and meat, so inmates had better access to food than in industrial camps (Ventsel & Zhanguttin 2016).

For a comparison of children's mortality in Karlag we present data on child mortality in corrective working camps and other penitentiary facilities from the Soviet Ministry of the Internal Affairs (MVD SSSR) from 1947 (Table 4). In this year mortality among children was one of the highest within the Gulag camp system.

Month	The number of children in institutions	Died	%
January	14,631	496	3.3
February	14,706	469	3.1
March	17,289	544	3.3
April	17,453	532	3.0
May	18,075	501	2.9
June	19,243	526	2.7
July	20,244	726	3.6
August	19,992	904	4.5
September	11,345	354	3.8
October	9,557	359	3.7
November	9,506	400	4.0
December	10,217	412	4.7

Table 4. Child mortality in work camps and other penitentiary facilities from the Soviet Ministry of the Internal Affairs (MVD SSSR) from 1947 (Khlevniuk 2004: 563–564).

Comparison of childrens' mortality of with 1947 in corrective work camps and other similar institutions of the Ministry of the Internal Affairs shows

lower mortality in Karlag camps. In 1941 higher mortality came in April (3%), September (2.2%) and December (2%), in other months it was below 2%. In 1947 overall child mortality in Gulag camps was at its lowest in June (2.7%), although in August, November and December was between 4.0% and 4.7.

Nevertheless, as we learn from the surviving memoires of Tatyana Nikolskaya, who was born in Karlag in 1941, the chances of survival for the children of female prisoners was very low. Tatyana Nikolskaya recalls:

I was born in April 1941. Or rather, not so! Not I was born, but there were two of us. Twins, born on April 9, 1941 – Vladislav and Tatiana. Vladislav, unfortunately, due to illness, Vladislav did not live to this day. And, moreover, it was a completely incomprehensible disease. Absolutely incomprehensible. So, my mother told me that it was very difficult for him ..., very difficult to survive. So there was incontinence of the head ... [the doctor] did injections and I've got huge scars on my two legs where they to put an IV drip in. Well, it wasn't an IV drip, it was some kind of solvent. After the solvent was injected, they cut it all up, and the scars formed. They said: "You see, your vitality is inherent in you." Probably, the doctors tried to save my brother, but due to the conditions in the camp, their efforts were not enough (*Deti ALZHIRA* 2005).

From the recollections of incarcerated mothers, we can conclude that the attitude toward children in the children's homes was quite formal. The mother of Albert Main, born in Karlag in May 1940, kept notes while in the camp, despite this being strictly forbidden. On February 11, 1941, she recorded her impressions of the children's home where her son was kept:

In the nursing room [the cold air from outside] was blowing in from the windows and the door. Alik was like a mouse. He never once stretched out his arms. The poor children were freezing. At times he was almost blue. Yes, January was the hardest month. Because of the cold and hunger, it was almost impossible to calm the child. With 200 grams of bread and one warm meal a day. After every feeding, there was a pain in my breasts.

Albert Mein himself recalled, "I distinctly remember standing in a crib somewhere and being cold. I can't say where exactly. Sometimes, someone would forcefully give me something, apparently some medicine or food. I tried to

resist somehow. What I remember is me standing up in the crib every time, and for some reason alone all the time (Stark 2013: 18–19).

According to statistical data from the Gulag Sanitation Department, from 20% to 50% of female prisoners' children in the children's homes of Karlag in 1941 fell ill (GARF F. 9414, In.1, D.2767). These data can be seen more clearly in Table 5.

Months of 1941	Total number of the imprisoned mothers' children from 0 to 3 years old in Karlag in 1941	Sick children in children's homes (% of total number of children)
January	901	259 (28.7%)
February	911	223 (24.5%)
April	951	456 (48%)
June	1018	269 (26.4%)
July	1056	323 (30.6%)
August	1101	376 (34.1%)
September	1084	317 (29.2%)
October	1081	338 (31.2%)
November	1080	400 (37%)
December	1077	427 (39.6%)

Table 5. Number of children who fell ill in children's homes in Karlag in 1941 (GARF F. 9414, In.1, D.2767: 1–24).

According to the data in Table 6, the highest number of sick (as well as dead, see Table 1) children in Karlag in 1941 was in April, constituting 48% of the total number of children in the children's homes (they were all the children of imprisoned mothers). In the other months, the percentage of sick children ranged from 24.5% to 39.6%. The poor condition of the children in Karlag in April 1941, in our opinion, is for the following reasons (the reporting materials and summaries do not indicate the causes of mortality in any particular month):

- Insufficient nutrition. Apart from cereals the nutritional norms in the Karlag children's homes in 1941 included – in rather modest quantities
- some bread and animal and milk fats, but should also have included fruits and vegetables (Alanijazov & Saktaganova 2023: 135). Even assuming that prisoners' children were fed according to the rules, it is unlikely that they received fresh fruit and vegetables as these were unavailable in early spring. Thus, the children's bodies were weakened by a lack of vitamins.

- Sharp temperature changes (up to 20 degrees Celsius) in Central Kazakhstan, which has a cold climate, and at the same time insufficient heating of premises. Children were extremely cold and falling ill in the children's homes.
- It is possible to assume that in Karlag in April 1941 there was an epidemic of some sort (which were quite common in the Gulag camps), which due to the insufficient supply of medicines in the camps doctors could not cope with.

A common table was used to summarise Gulag Sanitation Department data for 1941, the data on children of free labour in the Gulag camps, and data on the children of incarcerated women, which allows us to make a comparative analysis of the situation of the different children in the camps. Regarding medical care, the Gulag free labour often used the same structures of the Sanitation Department which also monitored the health of prisoners. There were no separate hospitals in the structure of the Karlag for VOHR (*voyenizirovannaya okhrana*, or paramilitary guard units) officers and free employees. The medical care of all people, both prisoners and free labour, was provided by the Sanitation Department.

As reported by Viktor Nikolaevitch Zemskov, the Gulag VOHR paramilitary guards numbered about 107,000 in the early 1940s. He notes that in addition to assisting prisoners, the sanitary service of camps and the corrective labour colony (*ispravitel'nye kolonii*)<sup>3</sup> also provided medical care for VOHR soldiers and their families (Cholak 1989).

By the early 1940s, former prisoners, who had been forbidden to leave their camps, were increasingly becoming free employees at these camps. For example, for women arrested under NKVD order No. 00486, the end of their term was to come in 1942–1943 and 1945–1946. Nevertheless, a special directive of June 22, 1941, prohibited their release from the camps because they were deemed “counter-revolutionaries, bandits, recidivists and other dangerous criminals”. The following year, a directive was issued allowing the release of CHSIRs (члены семьи изменников родины, or family members of traitors to the motherland) on the condition that they remain in the camps as free labour (Grinev *et al.* 2003: 28–29). Former prisoners who were unable to return to their previous lives after leaving the camp also became free employees because very often work was denied to ‘enemies of the people’ elsewhere.

Some structures of the sanitary service, such as those related to the supervision of children, employed free labour. The Instruction on the Sanitary Service of Prisons of the NKVD USSR from 1940 states that, regarding the maintenance of prison nurseries, “all work in the nursery is managed by the head of the sanitary service of the prison. Nursery services are to be performed by free labour medical workers according to certain staffing requirements (GARF F. 9401, In.1sch, D. 570:198).

According to Boris Aleksandrovitch Nakhapetov, a historian of the Gulag Sanitation Department, medical care for free workers and their families was a difficult task. In most remote and forest camps there were no hospitals at all.

There are many shortcomings in the provision of medical care for the free workers and their families, as well as to the personnel of the guards, which are summarized as follows: the network of hospital facilities is insufficient. This is especially acute in the deep forest camp units. Even within the administration of some forest camps, such as Usolskiy and Kizelovskiy (in the Molotov oblast, currently Perm oblast in northern Russia), there are no hospitals, and the staff, their families, and personnel of the guards often go through a lot of trouble before receiving the necessary medical care. Kindergartens and nurseries were also in insufficient quantity (Nakhapetov 2009: 82).

The statistical data of the Gulag Sanitation Department shows that the largest number of children of free labour in Karlag in 1941 was in November, with 1,354 children. The peak of mortality for this group was September 1941 with 1.3% of the total number of free labour children dying (16 out of 1,249). In 1941, from 8% to 29% of free labour children received medical care in kindergartens and nurseries in Karlag, and by the end of the year their number had risen to 30%.

## Child Mortality and Disease in Karlag, 1941

Months of 1941	Children of free labour from 0 to 8 years old	Total number of free labour children in nurseries and kindergartens (% of total number of free labour children)	Fell ill in nurseries and kindergartens (% of total number of free labour children)
January	1,114	90 (8%)	3 (0.26%)
February	1,187	92 (7.7%)	46 (3.8%)
April	1,202	115 (9.5%)	28 (2.3%)
June	1,293	133 (10.2%)	7 (0.5%)
July	1,231	136 (11%)	26 (2%)
August	1,217	187 (15.3%)	28 (2.3%)
September	1,249	230 (18.4%)	35 (2.8%)
October	1,268	336 (26.5%)	81 (6.3%)
November	1,354	408 (30%)	128 (9.4%)
December	1,330	389 (29.2%)	164 (12.3%)

Table 6. Provision of kindergarten and nursery places for the children of Karlag free labour, and the mortality rate among those children in 1941.

The mortality rate of children of free labour in kindergartens and nurseries increased during 1941 from 0.26% to 12.6% of the total free labour children. Nevertheless, a certain decline in the mortality of this group was observed during the summer months of 1941.

In some Karlag departments there were significant problems with housing for VOHR guards. In the distribution of funds for housing, free workers were considered last. This distribution policy continued from the 1930s through to the 1950s. A letter from a VOHR rifleman (*strelok*) of the VOHR, written in 1939 to the local prosecutor demonstrates this:

I live with my family practically in the open air. ... It was raining, and I didn't know where to put the child. There are leaks everywhere. I had to ask a neighbour to let me to sleep over. Since the baby was born he has always been sick from the cold. Neither the child nor my wife have been given a bread card. I cannot live on 600 grams of bread and 200 roubles. I wrote reports, but they don't help, on the contrary, my situation is getting worse and worse. I sleep in my clothes, and the child's nappy cannot be changed. I ask to exclude me from the guard, I cannot work (Dilmanov 2002: 184).

But even with such problems of child morbidity among VOHR personnel, we can see from the statistics of the Gulag Sanitation Department that in orphan-

ages and nurseries, children of free employees contracted fewer diseases than the children of prisoners in children's homes.

The greatest peak of mortality occurred in December 1941 and was about 12% of children. The increased mortality in the autumn and winter months suggests that the infrastructure of kindergartens and nurseries was inadequate: it is likely that the premises were not sufficiently heated during these months.

## Conclusion

Thus, it can be concluded that despite some financial investments made by the Gulag authorities to help with infrastructure for the maintenance of children of imprisoned mothers, the mortality rate of these children remained high. Life in the Soviet camp meant total control over the lives and activities of inmates. Although in reality inmates were sometimes able to have certain agency and could express their personality through art, or cultivating and preparing food (Ventsel & Zhanguttin 2016; Ventsel *et al.* 2014), regarding the relationship between mothers and children, control was strict and efficient. This had serious consequences on the life expectancy of children.

Almost two-thirds of all children who died in Karlag in 1941 were the children of imprisoned mothers. The highest percentage of deaths in this group of children in Karlag in 1941 was in April, when 29 children died, i.e. 88% of the total child mortality rate in Karlag of this year. Moreover, from the presented data on total mortality in Karlag it can be concluded that the highest percentage of child mortality occurred in April: of the 92 deaths in Karlag, children accounted for 35.8%.

In April 1941, there were 2,153 children in Karlag, of whom 1,202 (55.8%) were children of free labour and 951 (44.1%) children of imprisoned mothers. The proportion of incarcerated mothers' children who died was 3%. We speculate that the increased infant mortality in this month may have been due to inadequate nutrition, lack of vitamins, inadequate heating of children's homes, and a possible increase in infectious diseases, characteristic of the spring. In the other months of 1941, the percentage of deaths was lower. A definite peak occurred in September, when 40 children died, of whom 24 (60%) were children of imprisoned mothers, representing 2% of the total children of imprisoned mothers.

Overall, the percentage of children of incarcerated mothers who died, in relation to general infant mortality in Karlag, ranged from 60 to 90% during 1941. It can be argued that care of prisoners' children in the children's homes was inadequate. The fact that the organisation of life in children's homes, where children were, except for feeding time, continuously without their mothers, was a major contribution to child mortality. In 1941, 26% to 48% of the children of imprisoned mothers fell ill in the children's homes.

However, in Karlag, compared to some other Gulag camp systems, the mortality rate of children of incarcerated mothers was lower. According to the data we have presented for the other two camps in the Gulag system, we can see that in Vyatlag the mortality rate of children of imprisoned mothers varied from 33% to 100% of the total number of children who died. The number of children in Vyatlag was smaller than in Karlag (a maximum of 119 children in November). Approximately the same percentage of mortality was recorded among free labour children of in Vyatlag, with a larger number of children (a maximum of 568 children in November and October 1941). The mortality rate of children of imprisoned mothers in Bureilag ranged from 20% to 100% during 1941, where the total number of children of female prisoners was approximately 10 times lower than the number of children of free employees.

In general, we can conclude that the number of children of free employees in camps in the Gulag system in 1941 was much higher than of imprisoned women. At the same time, the mortality rate of free labour children was much lower than that of prisoners' children. However, Sanitation Department reports on attendance at children's nurseries and kindergartens by children of free labour are not sufficiently valid due to the fact that there was an insufficient number of kindergartens and nurseries for Gulag workers during the period in question. Only 8% to 30% of free labour children were able to go to kindergarten or nursery. The mortality of children of free labour, unlike the children of prisoners, was higher in the autumn and winter months.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Central Executive Committee of the Soviet Union (*Tsentral'nyj ispolnitel'ni komitet SSSR*) was the highest governing body in the Soviet Union in the interim of the sessions of the Congress of Soviets, and existed from 1922 until 1938, when it was replaced by the Supreme Soviet of first convocation.

<sup>2</sup> The Council of People's Commissars (*Soviet narodnykh kommissarov* or Sovnarkom, also as generic SNK), was a government institution formed shortly after the October Revolution in 1917. Created in the Russian Republic the council laid foundations in restructuring the country to form the Soviet Union. It evolved to become the highest government authority of executive power under the Soviet system in states which came under the control of the Bolsheviks.

<sup>3</sup> Such colonies combined penal detention with compulsory work (penal labour).

## Sources

Gosudarstvennyj archiv Karagandinskoj oblasti (GAKO). Fund 1171. Inventory 1. Dossier 13. pp. 1-61

GARF (Gosydarstvennyj Archiv Rossijskoj Federacii). Fund 9401. Inventory 1sch. Dossier 570.

GARF F. 9414. In. 1. D. 451. pp. 1-47rev.

GARF. F. 9414. In. 1. D. 611. pp.1-95.

GARF. F. 9414. In. 1. D. 2753. p.19.

GARF. F. 9414. In. 1sup. D. 2767. pp. 1-24.

GARF. F. 9414. In. 1. D. 2796. pp. 1-186.

GARF. F. 9414. In. 1. D. 2896. pp. 1-46.

GARF. F.R.9414. In.1.D.2753.p.19.

GARF. F.R.9414. In.1, dop.D.2767, pp.1-24.

GARF. F.R.9414. In.1.D.2796.pp.1-186.

## References

Alexopoulos, Golfo 2015. Destructive Labor Camps: Rethinking Solzhenitsyn's Play of Words. *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*. Volume 16(3), (New Series), pp. 499–526.

Alexopoulos, Golfo 2017. *Illness and Inhumanity in Stalin's Gulag*. New Heaven & London: Yale University Press.

Allaniazov, T. K., Saktaganova, Zauresh G. 2023. Detskie utcherezhdenia v Karlage (Children's institutions in Karlag). *Vestnik Karagandinskogo Universiteta, Seria Istorija, Filosofija* ((Bulletin of Karaganda University, Series History, Philosophy), 1 (109): 127–143.

Berdinskikh, Viktor A. 2001. *Istorija odnogo lagerja (Vjatlag)* (The origins of one camp (Vyatlag)). Moskva: Agrafl.

Cholak, S. 1989. Arhipelag Gulag glazami pisatelja i statistika (The Gulag Archipelago through the eyes of a writer and a statistician). *Argumenty i fakty* (Arguments and Facts), 45. [https://aif.ru/society/history/arhipelag\\_gulag\\_glazami\\_pisatelya\\_i\\_statistika](https://aif.ru/society/history/arhipelag_gulag_glazami_pisatelya_i_statistika)

Craveri, Marta & Losonczy, Anne-Marie 2012. Children's experiences in the Gulag. Late memories of deportation to the URSS. *Enfances déplacées. (I) en situation coloniale*, 14, pp.193–222. <https://doi.org/10.4000/rhei.3425>

Craveri, Marta & Losonczy, Anne-Marie 2017. *Enfants de Goulag*. Paris & Belin: Humensis.

Dilmanov, Satybaldy D. 2002. *Ispravitelno-trydovye lagera MVD-NKVD na territorii Kazakhstana (30 – 50 gody XX veka)* (Corrective labor camps of the MVD–NKVD on the territory of Kazakhstan (1930s–1950s)). Almaty

Deti ALZHIRA 2005. Arhiv NIPC ‘Memorial’. F. 54, In.1, D. 73. (Children of ALZHIR, 2005. Archive of NIPC ‘Memorial’).

Golovin, Sergej A. 2000. *Prinuditelnyj trud na Dalnem Vostoke SSSR v 20-30-e gody XX veka*. (Forced labor in the Soviet Far East in the 1920s–1930s). <https://Users/Asus/Downloads/prinuditelnyy-trud-na-dalnem-vostoke-sssr-v-20-30-e-gg-hh-veka.pdf>

Grinev, Vladimir M. (ed.) 2003. *Uznycy ‘ALZIRA’*. *Spisok zenshchin-zakliuchennyh Akmolinskogo i drugih otdelenij Karлага* (List of women prisoners of Akmolinsk and other departments of Karlag). Moskva: Zvenja.

Healey, Dan 2015. Lives in the Balance: Weak and Disabled Prisoners and the Biopolitics of the Gulag. *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*. Volume 16. Number 5. (New Series), pp. 527–556.

Kennan, George F. 1961. *Russia and the West. Under Lenin and Stalin*. Boston, Toronto: An Atlantic Monthly Press Book: Little, Brown and Company.

Khlevniuk, Oleg V. (ed.) 2004. *Istorija stalinskogo Gulaga. Konec 1920-h-nachalo 1950-h godov* (History of the Stalinist Gulag. Late 1920s – early 1950s). *Tom 3. Economika Gulaga* (The Economy of the Gulag). Moskva: ROSSPEN.

Losev, P. M. (ed.) 1959. *Ispravitelno-trudovoij kodeks RSFSR ot 6 nojabrja 1924 goda* (Corrective Labor Code of the RSFSR of November 6, 1924). *Sbornik normativnyh aktov po sovetskomy ispravitelno-trudovomy pravy (1917–1959 gody)* (Collection of normative acts on Soviet corrective labor law (1917–1959)). Moskva: Goslitizdat.

Nahapetov, Boris A. 2009. *Ocherki sanitarnoj sluzby Gulaga* (Essays on the sanitary service of the Gulag). Moskva: ROSSPEN.

Ohotin, Nikita G. & Roginskij, A. (ed.) 1998. *Sistema ispravitelno-trudovyh lagerej. 1923–1960. Spravochnik* (The system of corrective labor camps, 1923–1960). Moskva: Zvenja.

Saktaganova, Z. G. (ed.) 2024, *Deti kazakhstanskikh lagerei Gulaga i spetsoperatsii, 1930-e-1950-e gg. Sbornik arkhivnykh dokumentov i materialov* (Children of Kazakh Gulag camps and special operations, 1930s–1950s. Collection of archival documents and materials). Moskva: ROOSPEN.

Saktaganova, Z.; Abdrahmanova, K., Allianiazov, T. & Eleukhanov, S. 2024. *Deti kazakhstanskikh lagerei Gulaga i spetsoperatsii. Kollektivnaia monografija* (Children of Kazakh Gulag camps and special operations, 1930s–1950s. Collection of archival documents and materials. Collective monograph). Karaganda, Print.

Stark, Meinhard 2013. *Gulag-Kinder. Die Vergessenen Opfer*. Berlin: Metropole.

Ventsel, Aimar & Zhangutin, Baurzhan 2016. Prison Camp No. 29 For Prisoners Of War From The Second World War On The Territory Of Kazakhstan Between 1943–1949. *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore*, 63: 9–28.

Ventsel, Aimar, Zhangutin, Baurzhan & Khamidullina, Dinara 2014. Social Meaning Of Culture In A Stalinist Prison Camp. *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore*, vol. 56: 7–24.

Vilenskij, Semion S., Kokurin, A.I., Atamashkina, G.V. & Novichenko, I. Iu. (eds.) 2002. *Deti Gulaga. 1918–1956* (Deti Gulaga. 1918–1956). Moskva: ROSSPEN.

**Zauresh Saktaganova**, PhD, is research professor at the Chair of Archaeology, Ethnologies and Native History and Director of the Centre for Ethnocultural and Historical Anthropological Studies, E. A. Buketov Karaganda State University, Karaganda, Kazakhstan. Her main research area is history and everyday life in Kazakhstan, woman of the USSR, and economic modernisation in Kazakhstan

E-mail: zauresh63@mail.ru

ORCID: 0000-0002-5881-482X

**Alina Gladysheva** is a researcher at the E. A. Buketov Karaganda State University, Karaganda, Kazakhstan. Her main research areas research area is history and everyday life in Kazakhstan.

E-mail: a.gladysheva2010@yandex.ru

ORCID: 0009-0003-0374-1330

**Aimar Ventsel** is Senior Research Fellow in Ethnology at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Tartu, Estonia. His main research areas are the Arctic cultural space, social anthropology, punk culture and underground music.

E-mail: aimar@folklore.ee

ORCID: 0000-0002-3242-5471

# **Spiritual Territoriality: Boundary-Setting and Place-Claiming in Burial Site Folk Stories — A Qualitative Study**

***Kristo Villem***

*Junior Researcher At Estonian Folklore Archives, Estonian Literary Museum, Tartu, Estonia*

*E-mail: kristo.villem@gmail.com*

**Abstract:** Place-lore has been gathered and recorded by Estonian researchers since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, among which are a host of accounts relating to interactions with human spirits. This article examines place-lore texts relating to burial sites, stored at the Estonian Folklore Archive. Narratives that are interwoven into these folk stories reveal a recurring motif of entities asserting ownership over place or objects or imposing spatial restrictions regarding certain sites. This article analyses these cases and proposes that these behavioural patterns indicate a reflection of values and principles among the population.

**Keywords:** place-lore, burial sites, human spirits, folk narratives, boundary-setting, ownership and space

## **Introduction**

Place-attachment can be described as a process resulting in the association of place with meaning and emotional affection (Cross 2015). Place identity, however, has been defined as a component of personal identity, a process by

which, through interaction with places, people describe themselves in terms of belonging to a specific place (Hernandez *et al.* 2007). Both of these concepts tie into the premise of this article's hypothesis, aiming to examine the correlations between recurring spiritual territoriality-related motifs in Estonian place-lore stories.

The narratives of boundary-setting by various kinds of spirits in regards to natural places as approached in this article, has been inspected by researcher Veikko Anttonen, who set emphasis of boundaries among natural sites dubbed with the title '*pyhä*', estimating lines between sacred and non-sacred, while place-lore researcher John Björkman has contributed to the discussion of borders in folkloristics by interpreting the spirits' social meaning and their effect on the regulation of the activities of the local people associated with the spirit-related sites (Björkman 2021). As a contribution to the aforementioned discourse of boundary-setting and environmental experience among motifs relating to spirits in 19–20<sup>th</sup> century Estonian place-lore, the current article approaches the matter from the angle of narratives in which spirits are depicted as asserting ownership or dominion over places or objects. Folk narratives related to places can become closely entwined with the accumulation of meanings, layer by layer, although the same places can also obtain personal significance as awareness of them grows (Sävborg & Valk 2018). Meanings accredited to spirits in place-lore can be interpreted as a reflection on the beliefs and values of local inhabitants of the surrounding landscape and by understanding the clues in these narratives, we can make choices based on this insight to impose safety regulations or help local inhabitants. Elizabeth Bird (2002) described how local narratives are formed in response to gaps in current knowledge or other factors, offering cultural explanations for the ambiguity of landscapes or phenomena.

The dynamics of sacred and everyday meanings of landscape has been analysed from various focuses and regional ranges. Estonian folk tradition has been approached from phenomenology by Ivar Paulson (1967), he describes the spirits of the dead as territorial guardians and emphasizes the continuity between the living and the dead, and the spatial division between their domains, which are concepts that have shaped the conceptual foundation for this article. The other researcher of Estonian folk religion, Oskar Loorits (1947) provides a comparative-historic point of view, linking Estonian folk belief to the Finno-Ugic tradition and broader animistic logic, which is relevant to the Udmurdic

sources referenced in the analysis part of achieved materials. His approach affirms the perspective of this article of interpreting boundary-setting as moral and cosmological rules.

More broadly, the place-identity and place-attachment and their relations with meanings such as sacredness have been studied in (landscape) anthropology. Anthropologist Tim Ingold (Ingold 1993), who established the phenomenological anthropology, argues that landscapes are not static “containers” but are lived-with and co-created by humans and other beings, reflecting the perception that warnings, prohibitions, and territorial claims of spirits’ agentive belonging and that landscapes are entangled with non-human persons. Symbolic anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who frames culture as a system of symbols, concluding that rituals, stories, and symbols encode moral orders and social values, an approach that this article’s hypothesis is derived from. (Geertz 1973) In his work *Rites of Passage*, van Gennep identifies spatial and temporal thresholds where the ordinary order is suspended. Van Gennep’s (1961) definition of liminality supports this article’s basis for describing a spirits’s authority threshold. While the influences of Paulson and Loorits are relevant to this study by broader interpretation of spirit-related phenomenology, the works of noted anthropologists (Ingold, Geertz and van Gennep) are more directly relevant to the concepts used for analysis of the examples of narrative stories.

The discussion of the relevance of belief in folklore has sparked different perspectives. Marilyn Motz has highlighted folkloristics’ ability to affirm and explore belief as a practice and its formation (Motz 1998). Estonian researcher Ülo Valk has described belief as a fundamental component in illuminating the relationship between individuals and stories, the values and ideas they carry, and the bonds between people and their engagement with the tangible and intangible worlds (Valk 2021). Although considering belief as a relevant tool in understanding the meaning of stories and narratives, American scholar Sabina Magliocco argues that belief is contextual and therefore a response to a particular set of factors (Magliocco 2012).

As an exoteric term in our contemporary society, *belief* calls into question its own validity and can often be treated interchangeably with “knowledge” (Motz 1998). As such, when a numinous high-stakes situation occurs and, Magliocco (2012) argues that those undergoing the experience go into a state of “participatory consciousness”, during which their past experiences and beliefs cast influence on given interpretations and these interpretations are

consequently expressed in the descriptions of their experienced stories. I pose an argument that burial site-related place lore accounts provide an opportunity of reflection on the beliefs and values of informants and that these insights are brought to light in the subsequent analyses of case studies.

Kaarina Koski has worked closely with materials at the Finnish Literature Society's (FLS) archives to interpret and analyse death-related entities in Finnish place-lore narratives. She discusses that belief toward the subject matter, if defined as an active and conscious reliance on a certain ontological and, consequently, normative option, presented in folk stories can play a relevant part in forming the narrators' attitudes and worldview, (Koski 2008) whereas Timothy Tangherlini (1990) argues that emergence of belief items in folk stories reinforces their status in folk belief and that folk belief motifs legitimate the message of the story.

## Material and methods

The material subject to analysis in this study is a selection of place-lore stories gathered by researchers at the Estonian Folk Archives in the XIX and XX century. I chose a sample of 315 accounts of encounters with various types of entities, both human spirits and others. The earliest narrative dates from 1889, the most recent from 1996, with most of the material focusing on the period 1930–1940. The material is spread out between the counties of Estonia as the administrative division was during the country's post-soviet era accordingly: Harjumaa – 61; Järvamaa – 48; Virumaa – 32; Läänemaa – 20; Saaremaa – 32; Pärnumaa – 11; Viljandimaa – 32; Tartumaa – 37; Võrumaa – 37 and Setomaa – 5 archived stories respectively. The reason for the unevenness of collected narratives stems possibly from the history of field work trips conducted in Estonia. During certain decades, some areas were more thoroughly inspected than others. (Tamm 2002) The criteria for looking into these specific cases were that, firstly, they have to be related to a specific localizable site, secondly, relation to a burial site, and thirdly, these cases are tied to the depiction of a spiritual entity. For clarification of what an entity is in the context of this article, Reet Hiiemäe has provided Estonian explanatory dictionary's definition of a *vaimolend*, which I maintain as the keyword that I have used for research: "a disembodied spirit in various religious depictions". (Hiiemäe 2024) The cases selected for this study

showcase different ways in which humans have crossed boundaries of spirits and have invoked some sort of consequential response. Examples of these cases are provided in the latter part of the article.

Based on the nature of the infringements of spirit-set boundaries described in narratives, I have devised four categories of cases: (1) Spirits blocking pathways; (2) Spirits objecting to human presence; (3) Spirits prohibiting certain actions; (4) Spirits claiming objects; Examples are brought from each of these depictions of spirits expressing agency over certain aspects of our humanly tangible realm. While some recorded cases in the chosen sample belong to one devised category, many narratives overlap and thus describe multiple enactments of imposed boundaries.

The methodology used for concluding the research findings were qualitative analysis of archived materials at Estonian Literary Museum, i.e. finding patterns between various texts to identify common codes (seeing/hearing spirits, accidents, illnesses, cautionary sounds, metamorphosis, two-sided conversations, physical interventions, nightmares, revenant spirits, rituals, omens etc), after identifying the codes, forming clusters of broader meaning led to creating the four main categories, subject to analysis in this article. The software used for conducting coding was the Miro mindmapping software. The criteria for validating a code was for the motif to reoccur in at least ten narrative stories found at the archive.

## **Spirits blocking pathways**

Crossroads as liminal zones have been described as places where restless spirits gather, whereas roads, edges of certain natural places such as lakes, mountains, forests etc may serve as markers for spirits that limit their movement and/or the area of effect of their power and influence (Lintrop 2021; Remmel 2022; Valk 2006). Human spirits have been thought to be associated with certain areas in a way that could be described as taking ownership of a place in nature or a structure (Björkman 2021). Such liminal spaces are governed by a set of regulations, expectations and boundaries, bypassing of which can be interpreted as a serious transgression with possible consequences (Kütt 2004; Sävborg & Valk 2018). If an encounter with a spirit takes place, regardless if physical or otherwise, bodily reactions such as heart pounding, paralysis or shivers are felt, often accredited to the energetic presence of a spiritual entity (Hiiemäe 2024).

Among recorded accounts of spirit-related burial site place lore, folkloristic narratives about the physical boundaries imposed by spirits create a reverent stigma to certain sites, lending to oral heritage that is passed on to others, creating collectively known stories. Recorded cases of people losing their agency over physical space, regardless if the spirit causing this effect is visible or not, has in some cases been reported as an alarming notion and one that would be described as intentional frightening (cf ERA II 55, 694 (3; 4), 1932). While in some cases, the pathways or zones are thought to have a certain associated time restriction, such as a non-entry time frame of midnight until the sunrise (cf RKM II 63, 483 (8), 1957), other cases involve specific actions or rituals performed by the spirits that cause the affected areas and pathways to become inaccessible for the duration. Such ritualistic occurrences include the spirits returning to their homes (cf RKM II 63, 482/3 (7), 1957), in which cases it has been deemed that the spirits prefer to be undisturbed and conduct their affairs without distractions, and thus set up a sort of barrier, asserting the spirits' boundary and will.

Although the spirits claiming ownership over places are regularly described as ambivalent by their nature (Koski 2008; Lintrop 2021), limitations of human beings' movement can be far from the extent to which spiritual entities are willing to go in order to protect the areas that they set claim to, from intrusion:

That Türnämägi — they say there are also plague graves there. That's why people supposedly see spirits there. I connected it with the fact that several people have been hit by a train there. Maybe the spirits pulled them under the train — I don't know. Anyway, in more recent times, several people have been hit by a train near Türnämägi. It's between Kohila and Vilivere stations, more towards Vilivere, where there's kind of a hill, just a bit before the track starts going downhill toward Vilivere. Right by the railway (ERA DH 1942 (4) 2015).

This example highlights a recurring motif of spirits contending over spiritual territoriality i.e. enforcing a consequence when boundaries are crossed, even by means of causing harm to humans in the process. The train passing by Türnämägi's burial site invokes consequences whether or not the perpetrators are aware of their transgression or not. Much like the legal system in our modern day society – being aware of or oblivious to the state laws has the same

outcome upon breaking the rules. In this case, unwritten rules are still rules, even if unexplained, and no merit is endowed to good or ill intention.

But what if humans entertain the idea of reclaiming spiritual territoriality by attempting to create infrastructure or erect buildings on top of areas and pathways that have been claimed by the will of spirits? Is there a possibility of peaceful cohabitation based on the recorded cases stored at Estonian Literary Museum?

In the village of Leedri, there were countless ghosts at the chapel field. Once, they tried to build a church there, but it didn't work out — the church was torn down overnight. Then people feared that the ghost might suddenly start destroying the village houses as well. To protect against this, crooked fences were made on both sides, probably so the ghosts would walk against the walls in the dark at night. Roaming ghosts were feared there, and the fear still lingers today (ERA II 230 181 (4) 1939).

The inability to construct buildings of worship, roads or other structures has been shared in many cases, some of which involve spirits inhibiting the creation of infrastructure over and over again (KKI 38 146/7 (3) 1965). In some particular cases, when a community realizes they cannot widen their own territories or protect what they have created, countermeasures such as verbal or physical boundaries are set in place to fend off what might feel like an assault by an unknown opposition, potentially instilling fear among the community. Verbal spellcrafting for protection purposes has become a less widely used practice, although in smaller, close-knit village based communities, it is that is still well-known (Remmel 2014). These practices act as resources for members of a community, reinforcing confidence in their ability to defend themselves.

## **Spirits objecting to human presence**

The rules and regulations set by spirits based on folk narratives can be rigorous to follow, given that no obvious threshold is provided as to which limitations and boundaries have been crossed. Many places have been said to be ominous due to the area being possessed by certain spirits (Panina & Vladykina 2021). Interacting with spirits within their domains, if done deliberately, can bring substantial benefits such as protection from other, sometimes malignant entities,

however in such a scenario, a set of rules may then apply for this transactional sort of relationship. These rules range from keeping a respectful attitude towards the land, being quiet in certain areas, to making animal sacrifices in exchange for good relations with the governing spirit as well as gaining good fortune (Jonuks & Äikäs 2019; Vladykina & Glukhova 2021). The roles of the spirits in narratives are often tied to the physical features of their governed landscape and are thus associated to certain specific objects on the terrain such as stones, trees, springs etc.

In cases where the protagonists of stories have fallen asleep on burial sites, statements of audible warnings are not uncommon. Regardless of the person's awareness of the nature of the place in question, "Do not sleep on my grave", or "Get off me" are widely reported. These could be a simple one-time warning, after which the person would be merely frightened (H II 16 461/2 (5) 1888), but could also incorporate the appearing of the spirit, whereas usually the spirit would appear in plain white, black or gray garments and speak in an imposing manner and coming to a close proximity (ERA II 287 171/2 (11) 1940). Although physical confrontation on the side of the spirit is more rare among cases at the Estonian Literary Museum, some spirits do not shy away from inflicting harm to the people crossing their boundaries. Whether or not a warning is issued, might not be relevant, but in a particular case, a man who fell asleep in the forest on a place later confirmed as a burial mound, was dragged through the forest a fair distance before he would say a prayer in his mind, after which the confrontation ended (ERA II 13 11 (1) 1929). In some cases, the health-related effects become apparent after a prolonged time after the encounter:

Anyone who has traveled 10–11 versts [about 10–12 km] from Tartu along the Riga road has also seen Pähni Hill, as the Riga road goes directly over the mentioned hill. And about this hill, there are many old folk beliefs and legendary meanings in this region. This likely stems from the fact that many decades ago (possibly even centuries ago), there used to be a chapel or a burial house there. Forty years ago, there was still a thick alder thicket there. Even the foundations of the buildings were still faintly visible. Wild raspberries and strawberries grew among the undergrowth. One time, a group of children went there to pick berries. Suddenly, a young woman appeared to them, wearing a long headscarf with a tall fold. She didn't say a single word to the children. One child tried to tug at her dress to check whether the woman was wearing fine clothes. After that, the child fell ill

and did not get better until sand was brought from the place where the woman had stood. This sand was mixed into drinking water and used for washing. Only after that was the child cured (H II 30 577/8 (1) 1889).

When a person has overstayed their welcome at particular sites where spirits roam, they can fall ill as a consequence. As per the above example, it is a common motif for people who come in contact with or experience the presence of a spirit, to experience physical or mental effects that may be hard to explain with common knowledge (Hiiemäe 2025). The sand used to heal the child who became sick can be interpreted as a symbolic way of making amends with the woman's spirit for the possible offense and thus severing the bond that was created by the child, albeit unintentionally. In some instances, it is believed that a person can fall to poor health by merely visiting certain burial sites or after visually spotting the revenant spiritual governor of the area. This sort of intrusion of health occurred when the formerly deceased baron and ruler of a local manor house was seen driving his carriage and horses though a forest, floating above the ground and bushes, vanishing abruptly. The onlookers included a local man who had known this baron from past times, and his distracted barking dog (RKM II 50 96 (20) 1956).

Many recorded cases reflect the will of people continuing to live on through actions, words and restrictions, which can be tracked especially in situations where the intentions regarding the owner's worldly property or land were known before they passed away (RKM II 212 19 (15) 1966). In the mentioned case where a landowner explicitly told his family that his grandson would inherit the house and not his son nor would he be welcomed to visit, once the son did in fact enter the house of his father, he would be scared away by a familiar voice echoing from the chimney, stating "Who said you could come into this house?" The son then built himself a new house and reburied his father, turning the coffin sideways, since the restless soul of his father had continued to roam his former house and torture the horses. The occurrences at the property then ceased.

Another burial site in the village of Hellamaa, was known for spirits gathering to hold celebrations (Jung 1910: 99/100 (11)). Spirits had been seen gathering around a bonfire in white robes, dancing and chanting. It was told by a third party that a young man from the village had gone to talk to a mysterious girl sitting on a stone and making a braid of flowers while singing. When the young man went into the forest and was lost from line of sight, thick fog rose

and the bonfire along with the celebrating people in white, had disappeared. The young man had been found dead in the morning at the edge of this forest.

## Spirits prohibiting certain actions

The study of border spirits is a long-spanning tradition, revisited by various researchers throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Korolainen 2024), although interpretations in border studies and the concept of 'borderscapes' is still explored and the value and meaning of borders is debated in our contemporary politically diverse world with rapid technological advancement (Krichker 2019). In folkloristics, among other belief narrative researchers, Kari Korolainen stands out as one who views narratives of specific spirits such as the border spirit, through a focused lens, aimed at dissecting the depiction of these spirits in a thorough analysis. In his writing, Korolainen expands on multiple archived cases where spirits express place-attachment and their need to assert space-related boundaries by prohibiting certain actions and disclosing existent taboos as well as the sacredness of a given area (Korolainen 2024). In this spirit, I bring an example of a narrative highlighting an entity's territorialism:

Where the Swedish church is, they've marked everything—where the cellar is and so on. The forest warden went and stuck markers everywhere with his stick. I said: "Why are you doing that? A spirit walks there. There's a dead person there—you mustn't disturb it." And the next day I saw: there was a long-haired woman at our place, across the corridor. A long-haired woman, slightly reddish—like a Swede. I would've asked: "Who are you?" But I got scared. Didn't ask. Then she vanished. You're not supposed to make a racket or break anything there. But our old man went too, started breaking and clattering around. I said right away: "You mustn't disturb that place — there's a dead person there." I even went up the ladder to check for tracks. There weren't any. Spirits don't leave tracks. It was exactly the next day that it happened. And you're not allowed to dig in that old church cellar or cut down trees in the area either. (RKM II 362 248/9 (1)).

In this case, the sanctity of the burial site is highlighted by the belief that causing a disturbance by either making loud noises or marking the area is forbidden. Seeing the apparition of a long-haired woman was interpreted as an effect of

the actions performed by the people of the story, which is a common theme among burial site-related narratives. The spirits of the stories seldom appear to people and speak, whereas separate instances of these are well-recorded (E 15076/7). Presumably, as the narrator had explained his insight to the other characters of the story with a tone of caution, the knowledge of spiritual possession of the area will have been a known factor before the incident. The taboo of digging in that area also compounds to the notion that a spirit would be evoked and possibly become enraged or disturbed, when their resting place is defiled in some way. Cutting down the trees in the surrounding area as a disallowed practice brings forth a belief that the place claimed by the residing spirit is wider and more elaborate than the specific plot of dirt in which the human remains were buried, but more intricately the surrounding forest, making the task of determining the measure of a spirit's domain more complex and tricky.

Many of the cases among the discussed corpus of narratives overlap in the four overarching categories, which I titled after initial coding. For example, human presence can be described to be intrusive for spirits alongside with specific actions that had been conducted, thus, it might not be a straightforward task to separate one from the other, unless it is explicitly indicated or referenced within the story. A recurring motif among boundary-related place lore stories is one where people, oftentimes unknowingly, set up camp to rest for the night in a place where the ground is elevated somewhat. Unsuspecting of the terrain, they thus have placed their tent(s) on top of a burial mound, causing unease to the spirit or group of spirits that reside in the area. One recorded case told of a sailor who set his tent on a well-known burial site on the lands of a farmland and went to tell of his experiences of the past night to the family of the farm house. Once he had started to fall asleep in his tent, a tall woman, wearing a blue hat came to him and started applying pressure to his body, all the while asking "Why are you sleeping of my grave?" In the morning, the man left a tormented impression. The narrator added that later a military garrison was erected on that site, but it had to be moved to another location because most of the soldiers stationed there could not sleep at night due to disturbances and sounds of different kinds (ERA II 114 511/4 (33) 1935).

Mostly, those who experience the presence of an incorporeal spirit, live to tell the tale, even in cases where the crossing of boundaries leads to mental or bodily harm to the human. Some burial sites are infamous for leading people astray and creating a state in which the affected person would lose their senses,

their sense of self, or their understanding of reality, in the most profound way (Kõiva *et al.* 2025). However, in some cases, the people who are lead astray can end up being abducted, thus, they would not be seen or heard from for some time or ever again. In a case of a burial site near the sea, it was acknowledged by local inhabitants that swimming near this place was forbidden due to roaming female spirits who would entice the swimmers to go deep into the water, never to return (ERA II 233 343 (14) 1939).

## Spirits claiming objects

In his article about Spiritual Possession and Real Estate, Ülo Valk goes into lengths at discussing spiritual ownership, possession of objects and how attachment to objects can develop through the accumulation of symbolic and sentimental meaning. He leans on the idea that if living humans can become engrossed in places and objects, then this can transfer to spirits of these people after they pass on to the next realm of existence (Valk 2006). I tend to share this view of spiritual ownership and attachments to objects and in the context of this article, will bring examples of cases that illustrate this belief, first from the side of those who experience the spirit in the waking realm and then those who have had interactions with spirits laying claim to objects in their dream states, as interactions have been reported in various states of consciousness (Hufford 1982).

A forest guard once went walking in the woods. He went to a certain cross by the path and muttered to himself: “Others always say they see spirits here, but I’ve never seen anyone. I want to knock over this cross, let’s see whether I’ll be able to sleep at night or not.” When the forest guard had reached the cross, he heard his dog growling behind his back. The forest guard looked at the dog—the dog was standing timidly behind him, staring past the cross into a small clearing. The forest guard didn’t see anything there and kept walking forward, thinking maybe a forest thief was hiding nearby.

Suddenly he saw a woman in white standing in front of him — she truly looked like a spirit. The forest guard didn’t dare move a muscle; he waited to see what would happen. All at once, the spirit came up so close that she could have touched him with her hand and stared intently into his eyes.

After standing there for a moment, she turned and left. The forest guard was paralyzed with fear. After a while, when he had recovered a bit, he started heading home — but the dog wouldn't come! The dog was soaking wet, with a drop hanging from every hair, and its head was tilted so far sideways that one eye was looking over its back. The forest guard tried to straighten the dog's head, but it stayed slightly twisted. After that day, the dog never came into the forest again; it would shiver and hide wherever it could. Sometimes the forest guard carried the dog into the woods in his arms, but as soon as he let go, it would immediately run home. From that time on, the forest guard himself approached the forest with caution (E 15076/8 1895).

This narrative is a vivid example of a person not holding the appropriate reverence towards a site known to be governed by a spiritual entity. While the forest guard knew of stories related to the place, in a way, he held a provocative attitude. When a spirit is dared to commit an action, appear or, in some cases, apply force to something or someone in the physical world, in certain circumstances it is possible, which is also the case here. In many cases, the intention of an individual is more important than whether they say it aloud or if it is an internal thought. Regardless of the form, his words held power to evoke strong emotions in the spirit who in turn deemed it relevant to show up and make it clear to the intruder that she is indeed safeguarding that site and its cross, for whatever reason the spirit might have had. Another recorded story speaks of a single large stone cross deep in the forest thought to have been erected in honour of a military officer during a war a long time ago. One time, a man had gone to that cross and pushed it over. That night, the man went to bed and a dark figure stood at the foot of his bed and asked him: "Why did you knock over that cross? Go set it back up!" The man woke up but did not see anyone. When he tried to sleep again, a cold hand grabbed his hand and once more said: "Go set the cross back up!" The next day, the man set the cross upright — and that night, he was able to sleep peacefully. Disturbances during bedtime of this kind have been distributed to it being easier for spirits to get their message through to those who face these occurrences, since the person is more vulnerable and in a restful state of mind, or entering a resting phase (Hiiemäe 2024). Being confronted in one's bed can be an alarming experience. Another site tied to cases of nighttime tormentings (*luupainaja* in Estonian)

is near Rangissaare, a sand-covered cliff where locals said to have buried the dead from times when the plague ravaged the nearby villages, leaving but a few survivors. During the times when the narrator gave account of this site, sand had been excavated and taken away for building and many buckles and brooches had come out, made entirely of gold and silver, along with other more mundane objects such as knives and nails. All of these objects were left in a hole at the mountain, because it was a widespread belief among the locals that all of these items were cursed. Those, who had dared to take the items from this burial site, would soon after be unable to sleep and be tormented at night. There are multiple of these cases recorded, all of which ended with the sleep-deprived person taking the object back and then reclaiming their peace (ERA II 221 308/12 (13)). Another noteworthy detail is that the skeletons of people from this grave were measured up to 2,80 metres long, instilling an understanding in the locals that the people of this area at that time were giants.

Although it is rare among these stories for spirits to take the time and explain their motives, intentions, hopes and wishes in a polite way, not all cases are those of violent self-expression. One instance of a narrative traced a man who was a landowner who went to dig a hole for a new potato patch. He dug deep into the ground and found, much to his surprise, a completely clean silk handkerchief. He found it nice and took it home. On consecutive nights, he was greeted in his dreams by a young lady, who kindly asked the land owner to return this handkerchief to its original place (ERA II 222 30 (29)). Similarly, there is a story of a girl who found a fleshless finger with a golden ring attached to it from a burial site, plucked the ring in hopes of turning it into a fortune. Upon falling asleep that night, she was confronted by a shadowy figure who screamed just outside of her window, demanding her to return the ring. This continued for several nights until she took the ring back. In both of these narratives, the spirit left the person to rest only after they took the object back. Taking that into consideration, it can be interpreted that the spirit felt a sort of attachment towards these objects, attributing personal meaning to these items, even if the exact nature of their relationship to the objects remains unproclaimed. The notion of spirits going to lengths in order to protect this property leaves a hint of sentimental or practical value.

Among the analysed narratives was a tale of a young peasant boy who went to collect stones from his employer's quarry at a burial site and came across a wooden barrel. Upon hearing this, he was instructed to go ahead and open it, but once he hit the wooden barrel with his axe, it clearly rung as if made of

stone and upon closer inspection, had indeed turned into stone. The next day, the barrel had morphed back into wood, creating true genuine curiosity toward whether there was something valuable inside. When the night fell, a man with long hair appeared into the young peasant boy's room and came very close, stating he would hurt the boy, would he ever try to open that barrel again. The boy could feel the man's wet hair on his body, yet after delivering this message, the long-haired man vanished (ERA II 227 568/70 (7) 1939).

## Discussion

Among the various beliefs inspected throughout this article, attachment to places and objects stands out as the prevailing link. Dissecting narratives about spiritual territoriality reveals a host of beliefs that point toward the real-life experiences of people who lived in the corresponding areas related to the stories. These stories hold clues and information about social norms as well as depiction of values prevalent at the time or recording. The agency of spirits described in my chosen corpus of narratives shows the recurring theme of social taboos, often acted out by spirits. These taboos are both psychological and physical. The crossing of spirit-set boundaries among the narratives can trigger an array of effects ranging from audible verbal warnings to loss of self-awareness and bodily harm. The unclear and, in a way, invisible nature of interactions with the spirit realm and its inhabitants may lead to an understanding that these relationships are one-sided, whereas, similarly to the human's world of communication, the spirit-human realm can also be collaborative and filled with mutual respect. This hints at the belief that staying in good regards with the unfathomable side of life such i. e. spirits may give people more of a feeling that they are in control of their life. As discussed in the previous chapters, the analysed narratives reveal that a change in attitude or revising of actions can bring forth a turn of events or change the dynamic of the relationship between spirits and people. A change in tone or a vow for further respect towards a spirit-possessed site can act as a description of atonement as a valuable socially relevant measure, valued in the time of recording. Returning of intentionally or unintentionally misplaced objects, as well as the reinstalment of a tomb stone can be a relevant way to show one's respect toward a burial site, its property and its spirits.

The belief about the grasp of spiritual possession is more spatially defined and more complex than what might seem at first glance. Burial sites, their geographic measures and human-defined scope of influence reaches wider and is more layered if taken into consideration the spiritual possession and claiming of objects around the burial site or those buried within the site. Spiritual ownership of objects described in the narratives describes what a person would experience when forming an attachment to items they hold dear to them. If an item with deep sentimental meaning is lost or stolen, emotional responses are triggered and the owner would try to reclaim it. As a form of negotiations, the spirit would ask the transgressor to return stolen object to the spirit's proclaimed domain or to restore the defiled burial site to its former state. If these negotiations are failed, the spirits in these stories were believed to possess the agency to take further measures to enforce their boundaries and will. Such narratives hold insight into the values of people who form emotional attachments to their personal belongings and project these values onto narratives when telling stories about local lore.

Narratives that describe the beliefs and values of people can hold significant relevance in how places are perceived and treated. Description of taboos in certain areas in nature can point to dangerous spots, this may be for an array of reasons. Similarly, insight from narratives can provide understanding about the thinking patterns, hopes, fears and sense of self of the respondents. Scientists from different fields can draw leads when inspecting the described narratives and in certain cases, breakdowns of terrain, natural phenomena and descriptions of implied taboos can help lead to actual practical safety enforcements for both people and nature.

## Conclusion

In this article, I inspected an archived corpus of 315 texts of narratives. The chosen texts were collected by Estonian folklorists from 1889 to 1996, although most of the chosen texts were collected in the 1930s. Key theoretical influences for this piece of writing were former works of folklorists Mari-Ann Remmel and John Björkman. The three criteria for choosing texts for this research were that the texts were: 1) descriptions of spirits based on the definition provided in the Introduction part above; 2) the locations described in the narratives are localizable; 3) narratives chosen had to be related to burial sites in Estonia.

The chosen texts passed a phase of qualitative analysis and coding and were then divided into four categories based on the content of the interaction between spirits and people. The categories were named: *spirits blocking pathways*, *spirits objecting to human presence*, *spirits prohibiting certain actions* and *spirits claiming objects*. Examples of folklore materials were brought to highlight and exemplify each of these categories.

As an attempt to unveil certain beliefs and values of people who had narrated these stories, the presented interactions and taboos can be examined as representations of patterns that took place both in the lives of the respondents between them and their contemporaries as well as occurrences that took place in nature due to different reasons, some of which may be topical to this day.

## Acknowledgements

This research is supported by TK 215 (Estonian Roots)

## Sources

Estonian Folklore Archives, collections of manuscripts E, ERA DK, ERA, H, KKI, RKM, middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century until 2015.

## References

Bird, S. Elizabeth 2002. It Makes Sense to Us: Cultural Identity in Local Legends of Place. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, Vol. 31 (5): 519–547.

Björkman, John 2021. The Spirit of the Place and the Place of the Spirit: Local Spirits, Boundaries, and Social Order in Southwest Finnish Folklore. *Temenos – Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion*, Vol. 57 (2): 209–230.

Cross, Jennifer E. 2015. Processes of Place Attachment: An Interactional Framework. *Symbolic Interaction*, Vol. 38 (4): 493–520.

Gennep, Arnold van 1961. *The Rites of Passage*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226027180.001.0001>

Geertz, Clifford 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Book Publishers.

Hernández, Bernardo; Hidalgo, M. Carmen; Hess, Stephane 2007. Place Attachment and Place Identity in Natives and Non-Natives. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, Vol. 27 (4): 310–319.

Hiiemäe, Reet 2024. Kogemuslugudes kirjeldatud kokkupuuted füüsiliselt agressiivsete vaimolenditega. *Keel ja Kirjandus*, 2024(8): 753–767.

Hiiemäe, Reet 2025. Communication with Supernatural Protectors and Helpers in Estonia in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. *Religious Dialogue and Cooperation*, Vol. 6 (6): 31–40.

Hufford, David J. 1982. *The Terror That Comes in the Night: An Experience-Centered Study of Supernatural Assault Traditions*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Ingold, Tim 1993. The Temporality of the Landscape. *World Archaeology*, Vol. 25 (2): 152–174.

Jonuks, Tõnno & Äikäs, Tiina 2019. Contemporary Deposits at Sacred Places: Reflections on Contemporary Paganism in Estonia and Finland. *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore*, Vol. 75: 7–46. DOI: 10.7592/FEJF2019.75.jonuks\_aikas

Kõiva, Mare; Boganeva, Elena; Butov, Igor 2025. Forest Spirits and Their Functions in the Traditions of Estonians, Estonian Russians and Belarusians. *Studia Mythologica Slavica*, Vol. 28: 143–162. DOI: 10.3986/SMS20252807

Korolainen, Kari 2024. The Ordinary Looks behind the Horrifying Screams: The Secrecies of Border Spirits in 20th Century Finnish Belief Narratives. *Humanities*, Vol. 13 (2), Article 49.

Koski, Kaarina 2008. Conceptual Analysis and Variation in Belief Tradition: A Case of Death-Related Beings. *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore*, Vol. 38: 45–66.

Krichker, Daniel 2019. Making Sense of Borderscapes: Space, Imagination and Experience. *Geopolitics*, Vol. 26 (4): 1224–1242.

Kütt, Auli 2005. Pühade puude ja puistutega seotud käitumisnormid pärimustekstides. *Acta Semiotica Estica*, Vol. II: 153–168.

Lintrop, Aado 2021. About vozho, the Spirit of Transition Time and Formation of Holiness among Udmurt and Komi. *SATOR 22: Udmurt Mythology and Folklore*, pp. 83–106.

Loorits, Oskar 1949. *Grundzüge des estnischen Volksglaubens*. Vol. I. *Skrifter Utgivna av Kungl. Gustav Adolfs Akademien för Folklivsforskning*, Vol. 18:1. Lund & Copenhagen: Lundequistka Bokhandeln & Munksgaard.

Magliocco, Sabina 2012. Beyond Belief: Context, Rationality and Participatory Consciousness. *Western Folklore*, Vol. 71 (1): 5–24.

Motz, Marilyn 1998. The Practice of Belief. *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 111 (441): 339–355.

Panina, Tatiana & Vladykina, Tatiana 2021. Forest Spirits in the Udmurt Worldview. *Current Studies: Udmurt Mythology and Folklore*, SATOR 22, pp. 167–195.

Paulson, Ivar 1967. *The Dead and the Living in the Northern Religions*. Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger.

Remmel, Mari-Ann 2014. Kohapärimuse mõiste uurimislugu ja tunnusjooned. Valk, Heiki (ed.). *Muistis, koht ja pärimus II. Pärimus ja paigad* (Monument, Place, and Tradition II. Tradition and Places) (Muinasaja Teadus 26:2). Tartu: Tartu Ülikool, pp. 13–70.

Remmel, Mari-Ann 2022. Hiied vee veerel. Pärimuse ja maaстiku kujundikeest looduslikest pühapaikades (Sacred groves by the water's edge. The visual language of heritage and landscape in natural sacred sites). *Mäetagused*, Vol. 83: 163–211.

Sävborg, Daniel; Valk, Ülo 2018. Place-Lore, Liminal Storyworld and Ontology of the Supernatural: An Introduction. Valk, Ülo & Sävborg, Daniel (eds.) *Storied and Supernatural Places: Studies in Spatial and Social Dimensions of Folklore and Sagas*. Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura (Studia Fennica Folkloristica 23), pp. 7–24.

Tamm, Kadri 2002. Statistiline ülevaade kogumisvõistlustest ja folkloristide välitöödest. (A statistical overview of collection competitions and fieldwork by folklorists). Hiiemäe, Mall & Labi, Kanni (eds.). *Kogumisest uurimiseni. Artikleid Eesti Rahvaluule Arhiivi 75. aastapäevaks* (From collecting to research. Articles for the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Estonian Folklore Archives). (Eesti Rahvaluule Arhiivi Toimetised 20.) Tartu: Eesti Kirjandusmuuseumi Teaduskirjastus, lk 220–239.

Tangherlini, Timothy R. 1990. "It Happened Not Too Far from Here...": A Survey of Legend Theory and Characterization. *Western Folklore*, Vol. 49 (4): 371–390.

Valk, Ülo 2006. Ghostly Possession and Real Estate: The Dead in Contemporary Estonian Folklore. *Journal of Folklore Research*, Vol. 43 (1): 31–51.

Valk, Ülo 2021. What Are Belief Narratives? An Introduction. *Narrative Culture*, Vol. 8 (2): 175–186.

Vladykina, Tatiana & Glukhova, Galina 2021. Home Spirits in the Udmurt Mythology. *Current Studies: Udmurt Mythology and Folklore*, SATOR 22, pp. 197–225.

**Kristo Villem** is a junior researcher at Estonian Literary Museum and PhD student at Tartu University. His main interests and topics of research include place-lore, liminal zones, interactions with spirits and other supernatural entities.

E-mail: kristo.villem@gmail.com

ORCID 0009-0000-2146-8831

# Feast and Community in the Village of Ribnovo, Southwestern Bulgaria, between Tradition and Modernity

**Petya Vasileva-Grueva**

*Assistant Professor at Department of Ethnology, Sofia St Kliment Ohridski University, Bulgaria*

*E-mail: p.grueva@abv.bg*

**Abstract:** In recent years, the village of Ribnovo, in the municipality of Garmen, Bulgaria, has been permanently in the media and research spotlight because of the interest in its preserved traditions, which are presented as a cultural treasure and an integral part of the identity politics of the Muslim community. For the people of Ribnovo, holidays are not just a connection with the past and the ancestors, they are also perceived as an essential part of their modern identity. Their public presentation, among other positives, support the optimisation of social relations between people and social cohesion between generations, which is important for the modern sustainable development of the community. Adapted in this way, the tradition of colourful weddings and circumcisions (*sunnet* or *sünnet*) help to harmonise relations and overcome generational differences. Holidays for Ribnovo are part of their traditions and culture and help to maintain community cohesion. When presenting heritage to a broad audience, the emphasis should be placed not only on the way it is represented, but also on the role of its bearers and performers, who perceive it as a resource to harmonise their collective values and norms and organize their contemporary social rhythm and attitudes.

**Keywords:** Bulgarian Pomak Muslims community, cultural agency, cultural heritage, feasts, sunnah circumcision, traditional weddings

## Introduction

During the winter season, Ribnovo, a high mountain village in southwestern Bulgaria, becomes one of the most popular settlements in the country. This is not because of the otherwise unique nature, the practice of winter sports or the opportunities for luxurious vacations. Winter in Ribnovo is the season of traditional colourful weddings and 'written' *gelini* (brides). In Bulgaria, it is one of the few settlements that can boast continuous natural (non-migratory) population growth, despite its geographical isolation, its poorly developed infrastructure and its distance from a large urban centre.<sup>1</sup> All residents of the village are Bulgarian Muslims (in Bulgaria the term Pomaks is also used) who practice Islam but have Bulgarian ethnic origin and speak Bulgarian.<sup>2</sup> There are two mosques in the village, which are attended regularly and where religious courses on the Quran are organised for children and students. At the end of last year (November 2024), a new modern high school building was solemnly opened in Ribnovo. The old one had not been able to accommodate the growing number of students for years. The presence of a school shows demographic stability and the retention of young families and adolescents in the village. However, the main livelihood of village residents is labour mobility around the country and abroad. Mainly men, but also entire families, perform various seasonal labour activities, generally in construction and agriculture in large European countries such as Germany, France, Spain, and Great Britain. Despite this widespread economic model, there are almost no cases of permanent immigration to the village, and funds earned abroad are often invested in the construction and furnishing of houses, as well as organising family celebrations.



Figure 1. The village of Ribnovo

It is during family feasts – *sunnat* (sunnah circumcision), engagements and weddings – that the people of Ribnovo manage to reproduce their traditions, which are characteristic of the Bulgarian Muslim communities in the region, resulting in them standing out through them from other villages, because here this heritage is not only preserved, but also seems current and alive. A connection to traditional practices from the past is most clearly sought primarily through the performance of wedding rituals. Of all the neighbouring Muslim villages in the Rhodope Mountain region, only in Ribnovo during weddings is the bride dressed in a replica of a traditional wedding costume. Her face is covered with white cream and sequins in the form of floral decorations, and a *prekriv* is placed on her head, a kind of bridal veil decorated with artificial flowers, then a veil and silver threads that are actually Christmas garlands. Transformed beyond recognition, in bright colours and a lot of glitter, the bride, together with her chosen one and their relatives, welcomes guests from near and far for two whole days. According to a tradition preserved for centuries, weddings are held only during the winter period from November to March. It is then that the harvest is already over, the men have returned from *gurbet* (seasonal labour outside the village), the houses are full of food and produce, and everyone in the village can indulge in festive joy. In the past, weddings

lasted five whole days, with a particular ritual performed on each one – guests from both families were solemnly invited, produce was prepared, the bride's *cheiz* (dowry) was carried to her new house, where it was displayed so that all the guests could see it. One of the evenings also includes the henna ritual in which the bride's hands are painted with henna, sent mainly by the groom's mother. Henna is a symbol of well-being and happiness and has protective functions against evil forces. This is also the last evening that the young woman will spend in her father's house. The next day, the wedding begins and the bride puts on her festive costume, consisting of a shirt, vest, *shalwar* (loose trousers), *rubia* and an apron. For the first time, she also puts on a *feredzhe* (a long black cloak made of velvet, worn only by married women). After dressing, the 'gluing' begins. The bride's face is smeared with either beaten egg or thick white cream, shiny ornaments begin to be arranged such as coloured foil, gold leaf or sequins. After this procedure, attended only by women, is completed, the prepared veil is placed on the bride and she is taken from her home and handed over to her chosen one. He, together with his family, the gathered guests and musical accompaniment of traditional oriental instruments (drums and *zurna*), takes her to her new home. There, after the veil is removed along with the face decoration, the *hodja* (Muslim priest) performs the Muslim wedding ritual and signs a marriage contract called a *nikah*. This is how, in short, wedding rituals were performed in the past; it is characteristic of the two largest Muslim communities within the borders of Bulgaria among Bulgarian Muslims (Pomaks) and ethnic Turks. Their family and calendar feasts, traditions, beliefs and values are strongly influenced by the Islamic religion, the dominant religious doctrine which spread across the Balkans after their conquest by the Ottoman Empire in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

In a historical context, the preservation of the religion, as well as the traditional culture and worldview of Bulgarian Muslims, has been problematic since their inclusion as a community within the borders of the new Bulgarian state after the War of Liberation (1877–1878). Their perception as an immutable part of the Bulgarian ethnic community encouraged political elites during different periods to make permanent attempts to change their Muslim identity through various campaigns associated with forced conversion (the so-called Baptism of 1912–1913) or overt support for organisations such as Rodina and its stated aim to "clarify the national consciousness" (in the 1930s and 1940s). During the communist regime (1944–1989), Bulgarian Muslim communities were sub-

jected to a number of prohibitions and restrictions, the main goal of which was not only to modernise their way of life and raise their education and cultural level, but also to erase their traditional culture and Islamic religion completely (Ivanova 2002; Gruev 2003; Gruev, Kalyonski 2008). The policy during this period was open assimilation, which included the forced replacement of Turkish Arabic names with Bulgarian ones, a ban on celebrating family and calendar holidays characteristic of the community, a ban on wearing Muslim clothing, control over visiting mosques, limiting the practice of Islam, and imposing a ‘new socialist festivity’. As a result of these measures, known in propaganda at the time and in scientific literature as the “Revival process”, even in small, isolated settlements, centuries-old traditions were interrupted, affecting not only the community’s holidays, but also its worldview and value system. Attempts to homogenise the country and create a unified socialist nation failed due to their violent nature and the repression that people had to endure. Such actions helped a persistent traumatic memory and distrust of official institutions to develop, which in the future would influence people’s strategies for belonging and making sense of their cultural heritage.

Immediately after the political changes and transition to democracy in the 1990s, the possibility of free expression of cultural specifics and identity was restored. At this time the process of dropping various traditional elements of celebration and clothing had already left its mark on the Bulgarian Muslim communities in different regions of the country. In what way, and how to restore not only tradition, but also identification markers, turns out to be as much an individual as a collective choice. This presupposes the manifestation of a palette of identities, which scholars, historians and ethnologists have registered in the course of various field studies since the early 1990s (Georgieva 1998: 286–308; Brunnbauer 1999: 35–50; Gruev 2008: 335–355). They notice both signs of the adoption of a Turkish identity (so-called Turkification), primarily due to the return and active practice of Islam (mainly in the Western Rhodopes), and cases of voluntary adoption of Christianity (in the regions of Kardzhali and Nedelino).<sup>3</sup> The development of different identification strategies and the emphasis on specific markers over others, according to the German scholar Ulf Brunnbauer, indicates an identity that is sensitive to context and determined by social, cultural, and political processes and individual decisions. Such a multiple or contextual identity is a clear indication that Bulgarian Muslims are having difficulty adjusting to their particular intermediate state of being

Bulgarians by origin and Muslims by faith (Zhelyazkova 2022: 818–824). In fact, historian Antonina Zhelyazkova even mentions a “taken away” identity, referring to the brutal policies of the communist party in the recent past on all Muslim communities. Dispossession is clearly the reason for catalysing a reverse process of constructing and legitimately presenting one’s own vision when shaping belonging, whether through religion, culture, or ethnicity. The search for a prestigious identity is underway and indications are that this process will only end when conditions are created at the macro and micro levels so that Pomak communities can feel confident and at ease in their own cultural, religious and ethnic existence.

The relatively successful implementation of the country’s political transition to democracy after 1989 and membership of the European Union in the new millennium normalised the internal dynamics of Pomak communities. Declaring affiliation becomes a matter of personal choice. Their inclusion in European labour markets, the advantages of labour mobility and free entrepreneurship relieve economic tension and allowed for a gradual opening to the world through familiarisation and the adoption of new cultural models. Bulgarian Muslims appreciate the advantages of national citizenship and origin without this necessarily being associated with pressure on their religion or Muslim identity. Contact with Western European societies and their ethnic and cultural pluralism gives them the feeling that they can harmonise their identification strategies without having to choose one dominant marker from among ethnicity, religion, mother tongue, etc. At the same time, in the various multicultural collectives, regional and cultural specificities such as traditions, folklore, festivities and clothing began to stand out and therefore be assessed by their bearers as important and defining.

Thus, for the people of Ribnovo, their existing local culture turns out not only to be the organic connection with the cultural and historical heritage of their dramatic past and ancestors, but also a powerful legitimising factor for the community in modern times, which gives them a sense of value and self-esteem.

With the start of the political changes at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, residents of Ribnovo were among the first to restore traditional elements, not only in their festive but also in their everyday clothing. Women, depending on age and status, wore *shalwar*, *feredzhe* and various types of headscarf. Of course, the fabrics were factory made, not hand-woven, and the colours were flashy but the presence of traditional clothing even then was the most visible indicator

of the strength of tradition (Georgieva 1994: 143–145). The village began to organise both village-wide festivals for the circumcision of Muslim boys, so-called sunnah circumcision, and wedding rituals with the traditional ‘gluing’ of the *gelina* (bride). Both customs were strictly prohibited by the communist regime, and after the beginning of the 1970s, they were not performed publicly due to the threat of sanctions. The return to traditional clothing and festivities is also due to the fact that the village is religiously homogeneous, no Christians live here permanently, which the locals assess as one of the main reasons for the natural restoration of their culture in a form close to that known from the past, without experiencing any inconvenience or feeling of backwardness, which the regime had previously accused them of. Indeed, in the first decades of the transition in Bulgaria, the return to traditions among some of the Pomak communities was labelled as a form of conservatism and closedness, something that did not carry value in a rapidly changing Bulgarian society that was on the path to transformation according to new democratic standards and models. Geographically, spatially and symbolically, Ribnovo seemed consciously to maintain its distance from the processes of change, although this was only at first glance. Finally, left alone by the authorities and the identity policies forcefully imposed on them, villagers intuitively directed their efforts towards two important elements in their way of life that would preserve them as a collective. On one hand, this is a strengthening of social relations within the community. Religious life is being restored, new economic models are being adopted to counteract the economic crisis and widespread constant emigration. On the other hand, they are becoming cultural agents of their own heritage and are reviving their festiveness according to the tradition that was forcibly forbidden. For Fatme Muhtar-May, cultural agency is a natural process that allows the freedom to shape one’s culture and identity depending on personal and collective preferences and needs (Muhtar-May 2014: 4–9). Muhtar-May grew up in another Bulgarian Muslim village in the neighbouring municipality of Satovcha and as a child felt the consequences of the forcibly interrupted cultural tradition as well as the so-called ‘revival process’ on her community. She defends the thesis that the heritage of Bulgarian Muslims is fragmented. Today, the various Pomak communities not only have the right to reconstruct their holidays anew but also to give them new semantics.

## Celebrating *sunnet* (sunnah circumcision)

In addition to the Muslim calendar holidays of *Ramadan Kurban* and *Bayram Kurban*, which are celebrated and honoured by all Muslims in Bulgaria, residents of Ribnovo quite consciously place emphasis on family holidays such as weddings and *sunnet*. It is through them that they build their image of a community that develops thanks to its festive nature. The *sunnet* is the holiday during which the circumcision of small Muslim boys is performed after they reach six months of age. According to the Muslim canon, this ritual physically and symbolically marks the boy's religious affiliation to Islam.<sup>4</sup> Circumcision, by its very nature, is also a form of socialisation and integration of the individual into the community, so it is perceived not only as a family, but also a village-wide, holiday. Traditionally, in the past it was celebrated for several days, a festive meal was prepared (a sacrificial animal) and a religious processions, horse races (called *kushii*) and wrestling matches were organised. On the last day, the circumcision of all children of suitable age was performed by a ritual specialist called a *syunetchiya*. As mentioned above, during the socialist period this holiday was banned. Despite the restrictions and punishments imposed on people performing this ritual, the circumcision of young boys continued. Usually, parents and relatives took action to circumvent the imposed prohibitions and found ways to secretly carry this out, sometimes at risk to the life and health of the child.<sup>5</sup> This is the reason why noisy revelry, sacrifice (*mevlit*)<sup>6</sup> and organised fights have disappeared everywhere, and the celebration is limited only to the close circle of relatives. Immediately after the beginning of the democratic changes, the practice of celebrating circumcision as a village-wide celebration was restored everywhere among the two Muslim communities in Bulgaria, the Turks and Pomaks. During the years of transition, especially among Bulgarian Muslims, there has been a desire for circumcision and the entire accompanying complex of religious and ritual actions to be fully restored and to become not only a holiday, but also an important identity marker for the community.



Figure 2. Celebrating *sunnet*

For the local people, circumcision is considered a more labour-intensive festival than weddings, as well as more expensive to organise. Usually, a time is chosen that is consistent with the work commitments of the local people. This makes the summer months unsuitable for celebrations, since a large part of the active population is outside the village. It is also necessary that some time has passed since the last circumcision in the villages of the region, so that more families can circumcise their young boys during the holiday. In carrying out the entire event, good coordination at different levels in local, municipal and religious institutions is required, as well as the activation of inter-village, neighbour and family ties. The initiative to organise these holiday is related to the intention of a family to circumcise their son and provide the necessary funds for the feast, which has many guests and lasts four days. In addition to the main financial resource for meat and other food products, the family must also mobilise close relatives to process the slaughtered animals, help with the preparation of food and welcome guests. According to the locals, organising such a festive *sunnet* is an individual act for each family and is dictated by personal need and desire. The motives can be both religious – strong faith and a desire for the child to

have a prosperous start in life as a righteous Muslim, or value-oriented – the understanding that selfless giving (donation) will cause or accumulate both personal and collective well-being. During the four days, the house of the *dunsaybiya* (host) is filled with relatives, neighbours and friends who help free of charge preparing the festive food, welcoming and seeing off guests, serving, and cleaning. This common activity strengthens the sense of community and solidarity based not only on kinship and shared values, but also on traditions.

On each of the four days, food is prepared in the amount necessary to welcome all the village guests who will visit the host's home to express their good wishes. The care taken in organising the table is also the reason why the first official day of the *sunnet* begins with the transportation of wood to the house of the *dunsaybiya* or the place where the food will be prepared. The wood is delivered by truck, cart or loaded on a donkey. Everyone in the village, according to their abilities and desires, brings wood, which will be used for the cauldrons throughout the holiday. According to tradition, the 'woodcutters' must be greeted with *zurnas* (old musical instruments). Today this element is observed, and from morning on there are musicians with *zurnas* and drums who play throughout the village during the holiday. The men who provided the firewood are also the first to be feasted. On the first day, it is customary for only men to visit the host's house, with the second day reserved for women. Then relatives and friends come and leave gifts and greet the family, who, dressed festively, receive the greetings at the entrance to their home. Usually, a *horo* dance is performed in front of the house or in the courtyard, and musicians accompany the groups of guests throughout the day playing to create a festive mood.

The second day is known for traditional horse-riding with decorated and adorned horses. Mainly young men lead saddled horses decorated with tassels, capes, artificial flowers, etc. A noisy procession is organised, during which the horses walk along the main street with some of the braver young men dancing on their backs. Musicians are given money to play, and the day ends with an organised musical program and *horo* dances in the centre of the village. Tradition dictates that the boys who will be circumcised be mounted on horses during the solemn procession on the day of the circumcision. The horses are an attraction for both locals and guests in the village as they add the necessary festivity and authenticity to the event.

The third day is loaded with the most entertainment for guests and residents of the village. On this day, *baburaks*, masked characters (only men are allowed to wear masks), perform, whose purpose and appearance is to cause laughter and a good mood among the crowd gathered in the centre of the village. At each *sunnet*, the men wearing masks are different with each choosing his own costume and mask; the objective is to be unique and original. Both male and female characters are presented, dressed in costumes that include *shalwars*, veils and scarves, and with noticeably enlarged breasts. Some of them carry stuffed toys instead of babies, use crutches to show disability, wear masks of comic book characters, turbans and so on. After the procession through the centre of the village, a humorous program of sketches and dialogues is presented to the gathered crowd, with the main goal of drawing attention to and highlighting the failings of modern society. Topics covered include alcoholism, interest in gambling and sports betting, mercantilism in human relationships, laziness, and excessive use of social networks. In an indirect way, *baburak* performances act as a social corrective, emphasizing and ironising the negative phenomena that have clearly affected the social and family lives of the villagers. The program shows that the community has a desire for self-regulation and reflection, seeking to laugh at itself and condemn its shortcomings.

The last day is also the most solemn. In addition to new entertainment, it is also loaded with religious activity and rites that give the greatest value to the circumcision ritual. The primary factor in the importance of this day is the presence of the regional mufti and *hodjas* in the village, who facilitate the religious and official figures who will participate in the festive procession and public prayer (the so-called *alay* and *dua*). At *sunnets* in the region, on the day of *alay*, between ten and fifteen important guests are always present, such as regional muftis, the chief mufti or one of his deputies, representatives of the Turkish embassy or other guests from Turkey, village mayors, deputies from the Bulgarian parliament, regional governors, etc. The participation of these representatives of the spiritual and secular authorities gives legitimacy of the highest order to the holiday and shows its important place in Muslim festivities. Many guests arrive from neighbouring villages and areas on this last day. Usually, they are not only relatives of the children who will go through the ritual, but also many people who want to join in the festive atmosphere, to see acquaintances or enjoy the organised music, dances and competitions. Again the festive program starts in the square, where the religious and official figures

who have already arrived are located, and *pehlivani* (wrestlers) appear, who will also be part of the festive procession. Despite the cold weather these men, of different ages and enviable physiques, are dressed only in leather trousers that reach below the knee and red scarves on their heads – the traditional clothing of participants in the so-called fat wrestling of the past. But the most attractive are the young children who are about to be circumcised. They differ from the other boys in the costumes they wear. The most impressive elements are the cloaks, hats and staffs that they must hold. The clothing is purchased mainly from Turkey, with the main idea being that the boy should look like a prince, emir or commander, a proud representative of the Muslim faith. Bringing him riding a horse is recommended, but not compulsory, and many boys are carried in their parents' arms.



Figure 3. The *dua* public prayer

At the appointed time, the entire procession with religious figures, official guests, wrestlers, children on horses, their parents, guests and villagers set off in a long procession to the stadium, located at one end of the village. After a tour of the field, the celebration begins with the recitation of a public *dua* (prayer). This is

preceded by a number of statements and speeches by official guests. The order is strictly defined. Religious figures speak first – the regional mufti, the chief mufti, the imams, etc., who read statements in the form of sermons. According to them, the event is not just a holiday, it is part of the essence of every Muslim, its organisation shows the responsibility of the community and its dedication to Muslim values. The norms and morals that every young Muslim must possess and show in their actions are affected. More speeches by officials follow, all of which praise the community's cohesion, religiosity, and positive development. The speeches are greeted with applause and approval from the gathered crowd, after which a prayer begins in Arabic for the well-being of the boys who will be circumcised and a public blessing for the gathered crowd. When this finishes there is an announcement that the boys to be circumcised should head to the house of the *dunsajbiya*, where the procedure will begin. Usually, an average of between 30 and 70 boys are circumcised during one *sunnet*, not only from Ribnovo, but also from neighbouring villages. While the boys undergo circumcision, the horse racing and the wrestling matches begin. The prize fund for both events is provided by the host. During the ceremony, a charity bazaar is organised with the assistance of the mufti's office, and the funds raised are used to support orphaned children from all over Bulgaria. After four long days of festivities with lots of music and merriment, the celebration ends successfully, the tradition has been observed and the religious socialisation of the male offspring has been completed. Ribnovo has welcomed and hosted guests from near and far, but more importantly for the community social ties have been reaffirmed and social networks have been optimised. In one day, the village has been a symbolic centre for all Muslims because it has brought the religious and political elite of the country together in one place.

For the people of Ribnovo, the holidays are not only a connection with the past and their ancestors, they are also perceived as an essential part of their modern identity. Each element in the celebration triggers a mechanism of social cohesion, such as mutual aid and support from relatives, loved ones, neighbours and institutions, a collective rethinking of values and a condemnation of moral shortcomings. The influence of different types of authority that are important to the community – the religious institute, the local government, the state – is renegotiated. The community has once again successfully affirmed its vitality and shown resilience in the face of today's challenges.

## The traditional Ribnovo wedding today

The restoration of the traditional colourful wedding from the past is seen by the people of Ribnovo as one of the processes of the successful 'production' of heritage. This not only revived a unique tradition that was typical for all Pomak communities, although it is no longer practiced. Nevertheless, it represents Ribnovo (and along with it also Muslim Bulgarians) as a carrier of a cultural phenomenon and part of the cultural wealth not only of Bulgaria, but also on a global scale (Muhtar-May 2014: 25–26). In fact, its recognition and popularisation as a unique and distinct tradition and its placement on the cultural map of Bulgaria come mainly from outside the community.



Figure 4. The *horo* dance in the village square

Every year with the onset of winter, the village begins the traditional wedding nuptial season. This is an event that reflects on the entire community due to the characteristic marital endogamy in the village and the presence of large clans. Even in modern times, the model of mutual assistance between relatives in the preparation and conduct of the wedding is preserved at every stage, from the

display of the *cheiz* (dowery), through to welcoming and caring for the guests. The musicians who are hired play in the village square and anyone who wishes can attend, even if they are not personally invited by the newlyweds and their families. This makes Ribnovo weddings crowded, public, and visually and materially lavish. The highlight is the 'gluing' of the *gelina* (bride), which is done on the second day of the wedding, in the bride-to-be's house. In the presence of the closest people, mainly women, the bride's face is smeared with a thick layer of *zdrave* cream and various shiny ornaments and sequins are glued on in a strict sequence.<sup>7</sup> Covering the bride's face with colourful elements is a Muslim, but not a Quranic, tradition associated with the idea of the transformation that the young woman experiences during the wedding ceremony and is a visualisation of the acquisition of a new status after marriage. Hiding the bride's true face with this peculiar mask allows for the successful passage of this important rite of passage in the life cycle of each individual (Karamihova 1993: 150–153; Kyurkchieva 2004). According to folklorist Veselka Toncheva and her comparative analysis of the ritual, where it is still registered today among the various Pomak communities the main idea of this initiation is symbolic death, passing through the afterlife and return with the new social status of married woman and future mother (Toncheva 2012). The colourful mask and the shiny *telove* (silver threads, replaced today by Christmas garlands) lowered around the bride, symbolise the veil behind which that change takes place, because none of those around her should see the true face of the *gelina*, nor should she have the opportunity to see what is happening around her.



Figure 5. The gluing ritual

After the gluing ritual, the eyes must remain closed and the woman's movements are severely restricted; she holds a mirror in her hands. The function of the mirror is ambiguous. The explanation is that either the *gelina* can use it to see what is happening around her, or that it serves to reflect everything bad so that she is not cursed. In a modern pragmatic context, the explanation for the gluing ritual is also that the colourful shiny sequins are supposed to reflect bad or envious glances and thoughts that can destroy the happiness of the young family. Brought out of her father's house and supported by her husband and mother, the young bride walks to her new home, accompanied by music, relatives, loved ones, and guests.



Figure 6. Farewell to the father's house

## Conclusions

The coverage of Ribnovo and the presentation of those of its traditions that have been preserved to this day began gradually about 15 years ago and is seen mainly in the media through reports on morning TV and other TV shows and documentaries. The 'colourful tale' of Ribnovo residents is becoming popular and recognisable, showing the 'exotic' and unknown side of some of the Muslims in Bulgaria.<sup>8</sup> The growth of the influence of social media and the rapid sharing of information further help to spread new and unknown aspects of their traditions and interest in them across national borders. This also coincides with the widespread development of cultural tourism and emerging local policies for the preservation and protection of cultural and historical heritage. The focus on Ribnovo as a place of living and active tradition has a positive effect on all spheres of the social, cultural and economic life of the community.<sup>9</sup> Ten years after my last research trip to the village, the change is visible: the dowry is richer, the weddings are increasingly crowded, and the decoration on the face and the bride's attire are increasingly lavish.<sup>10</sup> There is also a change in the

performance of the various rites in the wedding ritual with some dropped in favour of others. For example, the wedding song, a folklore characteristic of the region, is no longer performed during the gluing or when the bride is taken out of her father's house.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, attempts are being made to include other new elements such as so-called 'Turkish' henna, a ritual borrowed from wedding customs in modern Turkey, performed in the village square, or all-day music with a live performer or with a DJ.<sup>11</sup> Both elements are primarily oriented towards entertaining the guests and villagers gathered in the square. There is also a desire to revive various forgotten or abandoned elements in order to restore or emphasize authentic practices from the past, such as the traditional gifts (for example a live ram given to the bride) that are exchanged between the newlyweds and their families. In some cases, engagement and wedding are close together (within one or two weeks) or one after the other, united by the ritual of 'returning the *banitsi* (pies)', etc.<sup>12</sup>

It is clear that an active and functioning heritage is being presented, reconstructed with a view to adapting traditional wedding customs to the contemporary vision of local people for relevance, aesthetics and entertainment. According to Michel Rothenberg, heritage is both representation and social practice, knowledge and emotion, politics and imagination (Rothenberg 2013). Holidays for Ribnovo are part of their tradition and culture, but at the same time they are also key to the interaction between generations and maintaining community cohesion. When presenting heritage to a broad audience, the emphasis should be placed not only on the way it is represented, but also on the role of its bearers and performers, who perceive it as a resource with which to harmonise their collective values and norms and organise their contemporary social rhythm and attitudes. For the older generation, it is completely clear that in order to continue a tradition, young members of the community must not only be brought up with it, but also recognise and understand it as their own cultural value. Therefore, the most common answer to the question of why this is done was: "the young like it that way" or "the young want it". Participation of both young and the old shows not only the negotiation of a consensus around the implementation of each element of the holidays, but also helps build shared understanding of the markers of collective identity that are important for the entire community. In cultural terms, this allows Ribnovo to seek opportunities to present to an increasingly wider audience (national and international) the specific examples of its preserved heritage and thus generate the neces-

sary symbolic capital not only for itself as a settlement, but also for the entire Pomak community in Bulgaria. The ensemble for presenting local traditions and folklore, supported thanks to the school and the teaching staff, has already participated in several national festivals and reviews of folk art and has won several awards. Last year, in 2024, the gluing *gelina* ritual was inscribed on the national representative list of UNESCO Living Human Treasures. In May 2024, a documentary by Professor Bettany Hughes broadcast on the global television channel Viasat History included Ribnovo weddings and customs.<sup>13</sup> Thanks to modern information channels and online media, almost all holidays can be watched live. Ribnovo is already a desirable tourist destination and is included in various cultural tourism routes. These are just some of the activities that make the village and its traditions recognisable and popular and stimulate the listed rituals to seek representativeness, not authenticity. Another trend also observed is that more and more cultural figures from the Pomak communities in different settlements present and film their wedding rituals as they were performed in the past, mainly through reenactment (for example YouTube has material on similar folklore reenactments from the villages of Breznitsa and Beslen). In social terms, preserved heritage allows Ribnovo to maintain its viability and neutralise the negative contemporary trends of depopulation, demographic stagnation and one-way labour migration, which are characteristic of all Bulgarian regions that are remote from the large regional centres. The village is full of life, the school is expanding and modernising, the infrastructure is improving, small businesses and companies are operating, and the quality of life of local people is improving through the services provided. The rise of intangible local cultural heritage empowers the community, providing it with tools to successfully implement policies for the sustainable development of rural areas. In conclusion, it can be said that, although it might sound paradoxical, tradition makes Ribnovo villagers modern.

The active role of the entire community contributes to heritage being considered not as a legacy, but as a dynamic category that not only allows and encourages human creativity and the desire for preservation but also strengthens community cohesion and social integration between different groups and individuals (Santova 2014: 11–15; Ganeva-Raicheva, Bokova, Nenov 2022). The holidays that the village reproduces develop not only economically, but also socially, because they optimise the quality and nature of established social ties and therefore support the generation of the community's symbolic capital.

Today, people are bearers of unique cultural patterns. Through this process, they seek to overcome both the traumatic past and memory, as well as the accumulated negative stereotypes of Bulgarian Muslims.

In Bulgaria, UNESCO campaigns for the inclusion of selected cultural practices and examples of traditional folk culture in various representative and national lists are gaining increasing popularity.<sup>14</sup> In this way, the desire of local communities in particular to mobilise and make efforts to revive and promote their heritage among a larger audience is stimulated, while at the same time increasing recognition in a national and international context is sought. The maintenance of characteristic, 'authentic' or recognisable holidays, festivals, customs and rituals, as well as the efforts made to reproduce them, are a sure indicator of the vitality of communities. This activity is not only an effort to fit into the cultural map of the state, but serves much more significant goals related to internal processes of synchronisation, interaction, social reproduction and maintained relationships within the communities themselves.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ribnovo is a village located in southeastern Bulgaria and is part of Garmen municipality in the Blagoevgrad region. It is located high in the Rhodope Mountains at an altitude of 1200 m above sea level. The population is about 3,000.

<sup>2</sup> There are many theories about the origin of the Pomak (some spread by the Pomak themselves), but to this day the dominant factor is their Slavic Bulgarian ethnic character.

<sup>3</sup> This activity is carried out by Preast Boyan Sariev and his St John the Baptist Foundation.

<sup>4</sup> According to the Quran, but also popular to interpretation, circumcision symbolises the sacrifice that the prophet Ibrahim was going to make with his son to show his devotion to Allah. The removal of a small part of the body of every Muslim symbolises commitment and devotion to Islam.

<sup>5</sup> In a documented story, a resident of the village of Ribnovo tells of her brother's child, circumcised secretly at night near a vineyard below the village. There were complications and the child was taken to the hospital; the parents and the circumciser were in real danger of being sued. See more detail in Safie and Sherif Dzhurkin "They changed our names to make us Bulgarians" – Violence, politics, memory. The communist regime in Pirin Macedonia – reflections of a contemporary and a researcher. Sofia, 2011, 355–358.

<sup>6</sup> Mevlit (Mevlid, Mevlüt) is a significant Islamic tradition, primarily meaning the celebration or recitation of stories about the birth of the Prophet Muhammad. It also

refers to a religious ceremony held for various occasions such as deaths, births, special events involving readings from the Quran and a poem about the Prophet's life, often featuring a *hafiz* (one who can recite the Quran) and an imam.

<sup>7</sup> According to adult informants, before the introduction of the use of 'health' cream, the face was smeared with beaten egg yolk and sugar, and because sequins were not always available foil and colourful paper from *Caramel Mu* sweets were used.

<sup>8</sup> A reference to the documentary *The Colourful Tale of Ribnovo*, by Anton Hekimyan, a journalist from bTV. It is one of the first documentaries to present Ribnovo wedding traditions to a general audience: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-PmXwL1N-hY>

<sup>9</sup> The village is also becoming an attractive tourist destination outside the wedding season. Its proximity to other popular resorts such as Bansko and Ognyanovo has prompted many tourists to visit and create their own impressions of the people and the settlement.

<sup>10</sup> Dowery or *cheiz* is the name given to everything that the bride's family has prepared and purchased to financially provide for the young family's life together. In addition to traditional hand-woven fabrics and blankets, there are also purchased items such as furniture, kitchen equipment, modern electrical household appliances, etc.

<sup>11</sup> When the bride was taken away, the song "Forgive me, mother, forgive me..." was most often performed. The disappearance of singing was explained to me in two ways. One was the Quran states that a woman should not raise her voice loudly (F. R., female, around 55 years old, recorded June 2023); someone else explained to me that young people do not know and do not like these sad songs.

<sup>12</sup> The ritual of 'returning the pies' seems most vividly to demonstrate the power of the community. First, during the engagement, the groom's family unites and donates a considerable number of trays with sweet and savory pies and pastries to the girl's family. Within a week, all relatives and acquaintances on the girl's side must organise and return this number of full trays. Each time, the number of exchanged pastries exceeds a hundred.

<sup>13</sup> A crew from the show visited the village in the summer of 2023 to film material for the series *World Treasures* with Bettany Hughes.

<sup>14</sup> This refers to the Representative List of Elements of Intangible Cultural Heritage; the national Living Human Treasures system; the Register of Good Practices for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, etc. [https://bulgariaich.com/?act=content&rec=15&sql\\_which=6](https://bulgariaich.com/?act=content&rec=15&sql_which=6)

## References

Brannbayer, Ulf 1999. Diverging (Hi-)Stories: The Contested Identity of the Bulgarian Pomaks. *Ethnologia Balkanica*, 3: 35–50.

Bokova, Irena 2022. Kulturnite nasledstva mezdu poznaniye, sprezhivayavane i mestno razvitiye. (Cultural legacies between knowledge, empathy and local development). *Kulturni resursi, valorizirane na nasledstva i mestno razvitiye. (Cultural resources, heritage valorization and local development)* Sofia: IEFEM- BAN, pp. 7–42.

Ganeva–Raycheva Valentina; Bokova Irena & Nenov, Nikolay 2021. *Mestni obshchnosti, kulturno nasledstvo i muzei*. (Local communities, cultural heritage and museums). Sofia: IEFEM-BAN.

Georgieva, Tsvetana 1998. Pomaci – bulgari muslimani. (Pomaks – Bulgarian Muslims). A. Krasteva (ed.). *Obshchnosti i identichnost v Bulgaria* (Communities and identities in Bulgaria). Sofia: Petekston, pp. 286–308.

Georgieva, Tsvetana 1994. Sazhitelstvoto kato sistema vav vsekidneviya zhivot na khristiyanite i myusyulmanite v Bulgariya. (Coexistence as a system in the everyday life of Christians and Muslims in Bulgaria). *Vrazki na savmestimost i nesavmestimost mezdu khristiyani i myusyulmani v Bulgaria*. (Relationships of compatibility and incompatibility between Christians and Muslims in Bulgaria). Sofia: IMIR, pp. 136–154.

Gruev, Michail 2003. *Mezdu petolachkata i polumesetsa. Balgarite myusyulmani i politicheskiyat rezhim (1944–1959)*. (Between the pentagram and the crescent. Bulgarian Muslims and the political regime (1944–1959)). Sofia: IK „Kota“.

Gruev, Michail 2008. Balgaromyusulmanskie (pomashki) identichnosti – opit za tipologizatsiya. (Bulgarian-Muslim (Pomak) identities – an attempt at typology). *Etnicheski i kulturni prostranstva na Balkanite. Savremennost – etnolozhki diskursi*. (Ethnic and Cultural Spaces in the Balkans. Modernity – Ethnological Discourses). Part 2. Sbornik v chest na prof. Tsvetana Georgiyeva (Collection in Honor of Prof. Tsvetana Georgieva). Sofia: UI Sv. Kliment Ohridski, pp. 335–354.

Gruev, Michail & Kalionski, Aleksey 2008. *Vazroditelniyat protses. Myusyulmanskie obshchnosti i komunisticheskiyat rezhim*. (The revival processes. Muslim communities and the communist regime). Sofia: Siela.

Gruev, Mihail, Tepavicharov, V., Vasileva–Grueva, P., Kotseva–Popova, V. and Kostadinova, M. 2011. *Nasilie, politika i pamet. Komunisticheskiyat rezhim v Pirinska Makedoniya – refleksii na savremennika i izsledovatelya*. (Violence, Politics and Memory. The Communist Regime in Pirin Macedonia – Reflections of a Contemporary and a Researcher). Sofia: UI „Sv. Kliment Ohridski“.

Ivanova, Evgeniya 2002. *Otkradnatite „priobshcheni“ ili protsesa narechen „vazroditele“ 1912–1989 godina.* (Stolen possessions or the process called revival 1912–1989). Sofia: Institute for East European Humanities.

Ivanova, Evgeniya 2014. *Islyamizirani Balkani. Dinamika na razkazite.* (Islamized Balkans. Dynamics of narratives). Sofia: New Bulgarian University Press.

Karamihova, Margarita 1993. Pisanata bulka ot Galata. (The Painted Bride from Galata). *Balgarska etnografiya* (Bulgarian Ethnography), vol. 3: 150–153.

Kyurkchiyeva, Iva 2004. Svetat na balgarite myusyulmani ot Tetevensko. Prehod kam modernost. (The world of Bulgarian Muslims from Teteven: Transition to modernity). Sofia: IMIR.

Muyhtar-May, Fatme 2014. *Identity, Nationalism, and Cultural Heritage under Siege. Five Narratives of Pomak Heritage – from Forced Renaming to Weddings.* Leiden: Brill.

Rotenberg Michel 2013. *Deinstitutionalizatsiya na nasledstvoto.* (Deinstitutionalisation of Heritage). Seminar Bg, issue 8 <https://www.seminar-bg.eu/spisanie-seminar-bg/broy8/550-deinstitutionalizatsiyata-nanasledstvoto.html>

Santova, Mila 2014. *Da ulovish neulovimoto. Nematerialno kulturno nasledstvo.* (To capture the elusive: Intangible cultural heritage) Sofia: Prof. Marin Drinov Academic Publishing House.

Toncheva, Veselka 2012. *Bulkite's „maska“.* (Brides with a 'mask'). <https://infomreja.bg/bulkite-s-maska-4685.html>

Zhelyazkova, Antotina 2022. *Glas v pustinya. Yubileyni sbornik. Istorya, Speshna antropologiya i publitsistika.* (A Voice in the Desert. Anniversary Collection. History, Emergency Anthropology and Journalism.) Sofia: Gutenberg Publishing House.

**Petya Vasileva-Grueva**, PhD, is Assistant Professor at Department of Ethnology at Sofia's St Kliment Ohridski University. Her research area is current processes in Bulgarian society from the beginning of the transition period. Over the years, she has conducted field research in small settlements among different ethnic and confessional communities (mainly Bulgarian Muslims and Roma). She leads key university courses in this field in bachelor's and master's programs in Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology at Sofia University.

E-mail: [petjasv@uni-sofia.bg](mailto:petjasv@uni-sofia.bg)

ORCID: 0009-0000-3825-9067

# Meat in the Diet of the Dead (According to Material from the Traditional Period of the Bulgarians)

***Maria Markova***

*Assistant professor PhD, Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic Museum, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia, Bulgaria*

*E-mail: maria.markova@iefem.bas.bg*

**Abstract:** On the basis of archive material that has preserved the basic traditional notions of the Bulgarians, the study comments on the relationship between the souls of the righteous and the souls of sinners through the culinary code of one food, meat.

The souls of the righteous consume meat that comes from a ram (either lamb, hogget or mutton) and is perceived as a pure product; this raw material is always cooked and used to prepare *kurban* a dish with a distinctly sacrificial character. The Bulgarians conceive this dish as especially necessary for the dead, and by preparing and feeding it to them, the dead maintain the 'correct' direction of passage, guaranteeing their soul's place among the righteous in the afterlife. The souls of the greatest sinners tend to feed on blood and flesh. Such consumption is perceived by man as impure, conceptually matching the being who practices it. The living never provide flesh and blood to the most sinful souls, they do their best to interrupt this feeding process, and conceive the desire to consume both substances as a sign that the deceased has changed the proper direction of their movement and become part of the category of demons.

Thus, throughout the elements of the culinary code, the living keep the boundaries between the levels of the organised cosmos closed maintaining the mythological equilibrium within it.

**Keywords:** righteous, sinners, meat, culinary code, organised cosmos, balance, Bulgarians, traditional culture.

## Introduction

The traditional society, also known as pre-modern, pre-industrial, is the focus of this research, which has been performed in the style of classic ethnographic science. This has been defined on multiple occasions by researchers. Its most concise definition fixes tradition as an immanent socio-cultural model, possessing an orderly structure perceived as ideal, where the routines of societies always dominate over innovations and individuals. The worldview of each member of a pre-modern society is defined by a stable moral-normative framework whose roots are archaic and characterised by thinking in opposing categories and analogies, for example God—the Devil, good—evil, day—night, light—darkness, etc. Traditional people reflect through their moral standards the ways in which they communicate with others, and make sense of the world and their own lives. Each individual's life is defined by three key events – birth, marriage and death.

These are also the general characteristics of society and the outlook of the traditional Bulgarian. Bulgarian researchers, including St. Genchev, G. Lozanova, Ann. Vodenicharova, V. Vaseva, are unanimous that traditional Bulgarians conceptualise the world as composed of visible and invisible parts. Living beings (including humans) live in the visible world, which they call 'this world'. The dead inhabit the invisible world, which is called 'that world' and is conceptualised analogously as a chronotope of the dead, parallel to but inverted from that of the living. Death itself is perceived as a social regulator, an assessment of the way each individual has spent his or her days among the living (Genchev 1985; Lozanova 1989, 1991, 1997; Vaseva 1994; Vodenicharova 1999; Mihaylova 2002).

The belief that, once dead, people slowly reach the world of the dead is widespread among Bulgarians, as Genchev writes. While moving through time and space, the deceased change from 'fresh' to 'old' ('long ago'). During this period, they are still not conceptualised as benevolent to people: assimilation to the category of ancestor is a long process. The 40<sup>th</sup> day is perceived as the turning point at which, according to Christian teaching, the soul's mortality ends and the deceased takes his or her rightful place among the dead. The

transition of the individual from ‘this world’ to ‘the next’ is completed on the first anniversary of death. From this point on, says Genchev, the dead pass into the category of ‘ancestral dead’, whose traditional veneration is calendrical in nature, and so they too begin to be mentioned only on days of remembrance. With the end of the first calendar year after death, the living everywhere ritually control the transition of the deceased to ensure continuity and direction are followed, and to preserve the post-death state in which body and soul are separated. It is believed that the observance of rites will ensure the soul’s unimpeded passage to the afterlife, its incorporation into the dead, and its inclusion among the ancestors on whom the fertility and life of the living depend (Genchev 1985: 192–193, 201).

Traditional Bulgarians perceived the dead as a group mainly composed of the righteous (righteous souls), as well as a small number of sinners (sinful souls). The righteous are all of the dead whose lives were lived according to traditional rules and for whom all the traditional rites were performed after their death. The group of the righteous is considerably homogeneous.

The second group, that of sinful souls, includes those of the deceased who either sinned during their lives or in whose funeral rites there was a violation. Iv. Georgieva points out that the concept of sin enters into the moral system. She writes that popular notions include in the group of sinners those who violate God’s commandments and church dogmas (including working on Sunday, breaking fast and prayer, and rejecting the mediating role of priests); fortune-tellers, sorcerers, and those who seek their services; those who take excessive care of their appearance; those who do not honour their parents and in-laws; drunks, usurers, dishonest merchants, bribers, cursers, the envious, eavesdroppers, gossipers, slanderers, traitors (Georgieva 1985: 71–73). Guided by the observation that in the “traditional ritual practice of the Bulgarians” there are also “several types of funeral that differ from the ordinary ones”, Genchev adds these to the group of sinners as the traditional worldview negatively evaluates “actual or imaginary features of the deceased”. According to Genchev, “the largest group of the ‘peculiar deceased’ unites those who are so sinful that ‘the earth does not accept them’. These are evil-doers, murderers, arsonists, who are buried outside the cemeteries, without church rites and without observance of otherwise traditional folk customs. The only thing noted are the measures against reincarnation, since this category of people have communicated with ‘impure’ forces” (Genchev 1985: 204).

And so, unlike the group of righteous souls, that of the sinful dead is quite heterogeneous. There are many attempts to systematise it. S. Tolstaya, for example, points out that Bulgarians conceptualise the souls of sinners, demons, those violently put to death, unbaptised children and the dead with violations in funeral rites, as souls who do not know “personal well-being after death” (Tolstaya 2000).

At the same time, Bulgarian traditional notions arrange sinners in an ascending hierarchy. One of the highest positions is occupied by the vampire, whom Iv. Georgieva defines as “a demonic being, a reincarnated dead person who has a connection with a specific individual” and who “is a person who died or was buried out of order, i.e. reincarnated due to the violation of certain prohibitions” (Georgieva 1985: 50). Vaseva also classifies the group of demons as composed of eternally wandering spirits such as vampires and others, as the ‘unclean’ dead (Vaseva 1994: 153, 154, 156). A classification of the notions of demonic characters in Bulgarian tradition is also made by E. Troeva (Troeva 2003). The researcher also offers a summary of mythical and demonic notions, including the “monstrous” and the demonic body, given that people define “deviations” in the respective culture as demonic manifestations (Troeva 2011: 151). In general, researchers note that Bulgarians of pre-modern times not only believed that sinful souls have a negative effect on the living, but also contribute to some of the most sinful demonic traits. The origin of the vampire is particularly associated with the most sinful dead and with violations of funeral rites.

An original systematisation of traditional Bulgarian notions of the cosmos, as well as of the beings and relationships within it, is offered by G. Mihailova. She starts from the construction of the traditional worldview using standardised examples from life. Pre-modern Bulgarians perceived following these examples as correct and any deviation from them as incorrect. Similarly, they evaluated all people according to their observance or non-observance of moral rules in life. Mihailova defines standard benchmarks as ‘symmetrical’ patterns in culture (‘regular’, ‘normal’), and deviations from them as cultural ‘asymmetry’ (‘irregularity’, ‘lack of normality’). She also classifies beings accordingly as ‘symmetrical’ (humans and others) or ‘asymmetrical’, often identified as characters who are conceptualised as marginal. Mihailova also relates the above definitions to the deceased, defined by tradition as sinners or righteous. She points to the Bulgarian belief that a person who lived according to the established rules and passed through all the traditionally regulated stages of life, observed the

correct behaviour, with the living conducting the rites after death according to the norms, should have a one-way and irreversible transition in which all sins are forgiven. The deceased are then 'normal', their status is normal, their souls enter among the righteous and they should be associated with the category of 'symmetry'. The antipode, regardless of type of deviation during life or after death, is sinner and belongs to the category of 'asymmetry' and the 'abnormal' dead. These souls cannot reach the world of the dead and stand on the boundary between this world and the world of the living (Mihailova 2002).

Thus, righteous souls and sinners (though different in type) are presented as a pair, part of the binary opposition of the structure of Bulgarian ideas about the model of the organised world and the creatures inhabiting it. Mihailova's classification offers a new kind of treatment in the research of the dead, one of the most commented upon ethnological situations, including in the Bulgarian tradition. Here, I accept it and will use the terms 'symmetrical' and 'asymmetrical' when referring them to the dead and the souls of the dead in general: the former, as a synonym for righteous souls, and the latter, as a unifying name for sinners and the demons that derive their origin from them. Below I will comment on the relationship of the two types of dead with one part of the culinary code. So far, the culinary code has been interpreted more as an addition to the problems of death in Bulgarian tradition (Lozanova 1989, 1991, 1997; Vaseva 1994, 1997) or as one of the classifiers of demonic characters (Troeva 2011: 162–163), although it has rarely been placed at the centre of research (Markova 2011a, 2011b, 2016). At the same time, the relationship between the culinary code and death is full-blooded even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when Bulgarians still believe that among the most important duties of the living is to feed their dead, and food itself is seen as the primary means by which the living and the dead communicate.

In this paper, I will draw on archive material that preserves basic traditional notions of the care of the deceased and the impact of death on the community. The information used is extracted from 25 archive units and is part of the IEFEM-BAS archive. The material was recorded entirely in rural settings, in the extended period between the late 1840s and the 1980s, when a process of intense disintegration of traditional attitudes and culture was underway, the pace of which was uneven in different regions and settlements. The information was collected from men and women who identified themselves as Bulgarians and inhabited a wide area, such as the following regions: Montana (previously

Mihailovgrad), Vratsa, Pleven, Lovech, Sevlievo, Gabrovo, Veliko Tarnovo, Gorna Oryahovitsa, Shumen, Varna, Dobrich (previously Tolbuhin), Silistra, Sofia, Pernik, Blagoevgrad, Sandanski, Gotse Delchev, Petrich, Pazardzhik, Plovdiv, Panagyurishte, Stara Zagora, Haskovo, Ivaylovgrad, Sliven, Yambol and Burgas.

The juxtaposition of information from ethnographic sources shows that the Bulgarians had the idea that righteous souls and sinners had their own diets. Even towards the end of the traditional period, a number of features of the structure and composition of the diet of the 'symmetrical' survived, as well as individual relics of its analogue in the 'asymmetrical' dead. In general, traditional Bulgarians associated certain foods with both types of deceased. It is noteworthy that their only common food is meat. Its presence in different souls depends on the origin of the particular raw material, on its relationship to culinary technology, on the *topoi* of its positioning and consumption, on the relationship of the particular type of meat to notions of clean and unclean. Below I will try to trace this without pretending to exhaust the subject.

## The 'symmetrical' dead man

In the relatively clearly structured menu of righteous souls, meat has a strictly defined place. First of all, its appearance refers to the meat-fasting periods, fixed by the Orthodox Christian norm and clearly distinguished in the Bulgarian traditional culture. It is common knowledge that the consumption of raw materials of animal origin is permitted when one is eating meat and not allowed when one is fasting. The rule is observed by all the living and the dead in society, whose status is regulated ('symmetrical'); that is, only during the days when the consumption of meat is allowed did Bulgarians of the premodern society feed their 'regular' dead with dishes with animal ingredients<sup>1</sup>. This fact, however, does not mean that meat is a permanent part of the meat-containing menu of the dead. In fact, it is used mainly in the commemorative rites performed during the first year after death, and only when the soul begins or completes its transition. To some extent, meat is also associated with the calendar feasts of the dead, when all the ancestors of the community are honoured.

Old Bulgarians perceived meat as a particularly valuable food, including for righteous souls. It is also the main animal raw material for their meat dishes

and the main ingredient for the *kurban*<sup>2</sup> – their special ritual dish, without which the passage of the dead is unthinkable.

For the Bulgarians of the traditional period, *kurban* is a common dish. Its importance is so great that in some places its name is used as a double form of part of the communal ritual. Genchev specifically notes that in places in the north-central regions “*kurban* for the dead” is the term generally used for the rites after the funeral, spanning the period of one year from death (Bulgarsko slivovo village, Veliko Tarnovo region; Petokladentsi village, Pleven region AEIM № 360-II: 55, 59).

Bulgarians perceive *kurban* as an old dish, the making of which is known to them “from time immemorial”.<sup>3</sup> The meal is compulsorily prepared for each deceased person during the first year after death<sup>4</sup>, and several times at that. The consumption of *kurban* is always associated with meals at the communal tables to which local traditions attach the greatest importance, i.e. those after the funeral and at the most important commemorations, where the meals are often also called *kurban*; if one of these meals coincides with a day of fasting, the dish is prepared for the next most significant commemoration.

In most cases, *kurban* is cooked three times: “a total of three *kurbans* must be slaughtered during the days of remembrance in the first year” (Golitsa village, Varna region AEIM № 619-II: 25); “on three of the days of remembrance within a year of death they slaughter” *kurban* (Kilifarevo village, Tarnovo region AEIM № 361-II: 32); “for every dead, three *kurbans* are slaughtered” (Velichkovo village, Pazardzhik region AEIM № 610-II: 63); “by the end of the first year there must be three *kurbans* for the soul of the dead” (Devetaki village, Lovech region AEIM № 617-II: 90, 91); until the end of the first year, three *kurbans* are slaughtered (Dolna Dikanya village, Pernik region AEIM № 614-II: 60–61, 64); “three lambs or only one lamb shall be slaughtered by the end of the first year – no more or less than that” (Prevala village, Mihaylovgrad village); “until the end of the first year are slaughtered” an odd number of *kurbans* “up to until three” “or three exactly” (Dolna Riksa village, Mihaylovgrad region AEIM № 613-II: 26, 39–40); three times during the first year a *kurban* has to be slaughtered (Petrich); “[on] at least three of the days of remembrance it’s obligatory to prepare a *kurban*” (Dobromirovo village, Veliko Tarnovo village AEIM № 616-II: 29, 99). The three *kurbans* are related to the tables after the funeral, to the 40<sup>th</sup> day, and the day after a year passes (Pokrovan village, Ivaylovgrad region AEIM № 62-III: 33; Kilifarevo village, Tarnovo region AEIM № 361-

II: 32; Velichkovo village, Pazardzhik region AEIM № 610-II: 63), to the 40<sup>th</sup> day, the sixth month and the passing of the first year (Popintsi village, Dyulevo, Panagyurishte region AEIM № 5: 11, 12; Lilyak village, Targovishte region AEIM № 615-II: 68; Glozhene village, Devetaki, Lovech region AEIM № 617-II: 60, 90, 91), to the 40<sup>th</sup> day, the ninth month and the passing of the first year (Dolno Lukovo village, Ivaylovgrad region AEIM № 62-III: 25; Valchetran village, Pleven region AEIM № 617-II: 11, 15).

Parallel to this, the practice of slaughtering fewer or more than three *kurbans* in the first year after death is widespread. In various areas this is done only at the funeral (Varbitsa village, Pleven region AEIM № 617-II: 34–35; Kramolin village, Gabrovo region; Mandritsa village, Ivaylovgrad region AEIM № 618-II: 10, 39; Lyaskovets village, Gorna Oryahovitsa region AEIM № 695: 1; Vinitsa village, Beloslav village, Varna region, Platchkovtsi village, Etar, Gabrovo region AEIM № 619-II: 16–17, 38, 51–52, 59), after the funeral and on the 40<sup>th</sup> day (Kalipetrovo village, Siliстра region AEIM № 610-II: 81; Enina village, Stara Zagora region AEIM № 611-II: 95, 97; Kozichino village, Burgas region AEIM № 612-II: 59; Egrek village, Krumovgrad region AEIM № 618-II: 32) or after the funeral and after a year has passed (Stoilovo village, Burgas region AEIM № 612-II: 40, 44; Mendovo village, Blagoevgrad region AEIM № 616-II: 24–25). More than three *kurbans* are slaughtered on one of the days of remembrance in the third, the sixth and the ninth months (Ustrem village, Yambol region AEIM № 611-II: 49; Varbitsa village, Shumen region AEIM № 613-II: 92–93, 94, 97; Rish village, Shumen region AEIM № 615-II: 74–76, 78) or at the funeral, on the 40<sup>th</sup> day, the sixth month, after a year has passed (Golitsa village, Varna region AEIM № 619-II: 25). Local reports from the Lovech region indicate that *kurbans* are slaughtered on the third, sixth, ninth and 40<sup>th</sup> days, the sixth month and the year after death (Dermantsi village AEIM № 617-II: 46–47). K. Terzieva notes that even at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Kazanlak region they still sacrifice *kurbans* on the 40<sup>th</sup> day, the sixth month, and one, six and nine years after death (Terzieva 2006: 192–193).

When preparing a *kurban* for a deceased person, the Old Bulgarians necessarily observed certain requirements. These are mainly related to the origin of the meat as raw material and following a specific culinary technology.

The accounts explicitly note that several types of meat are never used in the making of any dish for a dead person. Most rarely it is noted that it is beef. For example, Koleva reports that in the Varna region one of the domestic

animals sacrificed was the buffalo, as it faithfully serves man daily (Galata village, Ovcharovo region, Koleva 2006: 308). Earlier information from the Pernik region says that the meal for remembrance days “cannot in any way be cooked” with buffalo meat (Dolna Dikanya village) and that this prohibition is respected even when the animal is not kept in that particular settlement (Kozhintsi village AEIM № 614-II: 66, 100).

Recorded relatively more often is the prohibition on feeding the dead goat meat. In the Gorna Oryahovitsa region it is reported that goat or kid is never slaughtered for the dish after the funeral (Lyaskovets village AEIM № 695: 1), and in the Pernik region people explicitly exclude meat from the diet on days of remembrance (Dolna Dikanya village, Kozhintsi village AEIM № 614-II: 66, 100). In the Blagoevgrad region it is specified that since the goat is considered a devilish animal, it is not used to make a *kurban* (Mendovo village AEIM № 616-II: 24-25), and material from Berkovsko indicates that its meat “is not burnt”, in the sense that it is not consecrated (Lyaskovets village AEIM № 200: 59). This connection is also traceable in materials recorded in the late twentieth century, for example in Sandanski they do not cook a goat for the dead because it is wild and a “devil animal” (Marikostinovo village, appendix I, III-IV, E. Troeva, personal communication). In the Varna region kid is one of the animals “that are not sacrificed” since it is just like “the devil – with horns and a beard” and appears as his incarnation; accordingly, “if it is promised for *kurban* it is not acknowledged and not seen “up there in the sky” (Galata village, Ovcharovo region, Koleva 2006: 308).

Quite a bit of material also points to the exclusion of raw materials derived from swine from the diet of the souls of the righteous. For example, in the Berkovsko region it is reported that “we do not burn pork”, i.e., it is not consecrated (Kotenovtsi village, Lyaskovets region), that it is “not sacrificed” for days of remembrance because “the pig digs, it eats dirt” (Chiprovtsi AEIM № 200: 26, 59, 130). The motivation in Varna region is analogous: domestic animals such as pigs, “which dig in the ground and are perceived as ‘unclean’”, are not sacrificed (Galata village, Ovcharovo region, Koleva 2006: 308). In the region of Gabrovo people know that pigs are not slaughtered for *kurban* (Kormyansko village AEIM № 886-II: 30). Pork is also not used for days of remembrance according to information from the Panagyurishte region (Poibrene village AEIM № 5: 24), Sevlievo region – when a remembrance is held, “pork is not cooked and is not eaten” (Dobromirka village AEIM № 615-II: 88). Pork is not

given away for days of remembrance, as we see in material from the Pazardzhik region (Patalenitsa village AEIM № 610-II: 49) and the Pernik region, where people say that for these days food should not “be cooked with pork under any circumstances” (Dolna Dikanya village), and that it is “brought out”, i.e. not given away for dead people (Rasnik village, Kozhintsi village AEIM № 614-II: 65–66, 81, 100). The ban on the use of pork in funeral and memorial food has also been registered in the Sandanski region (Marikostinovo village, appendix II, E. Troeva, personal communication), and the Veliko Tarnovo region, where it is known that “pork is not cooked for a dead man” (Slomer village, Veliko Tarnovo region AEIM № 616-II: 65). The juxtaposition between swine and the food of the ‘symmetrical’ dead can also be traced in the locally spread common ban to slaughter a pig up until the 40<sup>th</sup> day in the house in mourning (Haskovo region, Milcheva 1997: 151).

In the archival records it is often explicitly noted that the deceased’s meal did not include poultry meat, for example, in the Sevlievo region it is mentioned that no hen was killed for *kurban* (Kormyansko village AEIM № 886-II: 30). In some places, it is noted that the chicken “is not burnt”, for example in the Berkovitsa region (Lyaskovets village AEIM № 200: 59), the Sandanski region, where the ban is motivated by the ability of the bird to “dig backwards” and is reinforced by the fact that “it is devilish to take it to the cemetery” “chicken, hen, goose” (Marikostinovo village, appendix I, E. Troeva, personal communication). In the Varna region the hen is counted among the domesticated animals who “dig in the ground and are perceived as ‘unclean’” (Galata village, Ovcharovo region, Koleva 2006: 308). In Chiprovtsi it is said that, since days of remembrance are held with the purpose of the dead “eating” “in the other world”, “in the past people did not use hen [meat] because the hen digs and so it makes the table dirty” (AEIM № 200: 130)<sup>5</sup>.

The main animal, which in Bulgarian tradition serves as the raw material for the food of the ‘symmetrical’ deceased, is the ram, either as lamb, hogget or mutton. Usually the meat originating from these animals is also the main matter of corporeal origin that is included in their menu. This practice was well fixed by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, for example, in Berkovsko it is noted that “only sheep” is used for dead (AEIM № 200: 26, 40, 59). In some places this was fully preserved into the 1990s, when in Petrichko “only sheep meat was cooked for the dead”. (Marikostinovo village, E. Troeva, personal communication). An explanation for this common usage is recorded in various places. For

example, in Chiprovtsi they know that in order “that food may serve in the other world, it is best when it is given away and given for the dead, to slaughter a sheep, because for Christ ‘when he was born, they sacrificed a lamb’. A lamb is like an angel, therefore when a man dies people slaughter sheep” (Chiprovtsi AEIM № 200: 130–131).

In parentheses I will note that the Old Bulgarians also made substitutions for the sheep raw material intended for *kurban*, although rarely. Local materials show the appearance of beef and veal, which of course, like sheep meat, was used during meat-eating periods. Materials collected towards the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century show that the use of beef was “allowed” in Berkovsko (Leskovets village AEIM № 200: 59), that it was also known in the Veliko Tarnovo region (Slomets village AEIM № 616-II: 65) and the Pernik region, where it was possible for people to use meat from a calf or ox for the days of remembrance (Dolna Dikanya village, Kozhentsi village AEIM № 614-II: 66, 100).

Significantly more material indicates that during periods of fasting sheep raw material is replaced by vegetarian. It may be fish<sup>6</sup>, a vegetarian product (for example honey or beans) or simultaneously fish and honey (most often)<sup>7</sup>. The connection between the emergence of fish, the Orthodox Christian worldview, the conception of the animal itself as one of the symbols of Christ and the Bulgarian Orthodox Church practice of consecrating only fish or vegetable food with oil on fast days is obvious.

Fish is most often used as a vegetarian substitute for funerary-communal dishes in the first year after death. A fish *kurban* is made after the funeral on the ninth, 20<sup>th</sup> or 40<sup>th</sup> day in Plovdiv (Krasnovo village) or on the 40<sup>th</sup> day, half a year or year commemorations in the Panagyurishte region (Popintsi village AEIM № 5: 5–6, 11). Fish is also found in the Pazardzhik region (Patalenitsa village, Velichkovo), the Silistra region (Kalipetrovo village AEIM № 610-II: 46, 60, 81), and the Varna region. In the latter they prepare *ribnik* (Vinitsa village), “fish *kurban*” (Beloslav village) or just fish (Golitsa village, three *kurbans* until the first year passes). Fish *kurban* or a dish of cooked fish is made in Gabrovo region (Platchkovtsi village AEIM № 619-II: 16–17, 25, 38, 51–52). In some places in the Lovech region if the 40<sup>th</sup> day, the sixth month or the passing of the first year fall during a fast, “the *kurban* is fish” (Devetaki village AEIM № 617-II: 90–91). Locally in Veliko Tarnovo region it is noted that during fasts “meat is not cooked, only olives and fish”. Here the five *kurbans*, which are made during the first year, are divided as follows: “two fish and three lambs or two lambs

and three fish, according to the days during which the remembrance is held” (Slomer village AEIM № 616-II: 65, 71-72, 78-79). R. Hadzhieva also marks the presence of the *ribnik* on the funeral table in separate villages in Pirin (Hadzhieva 2006: 199-200).

In separate northern settlements it is explicitly noted that the fish can only be carp. This species is thought of as special and is given great significance, thus in the Pleven region, during fasts, they swap the *kurban* for the funeral with “one carp” (Varbitsa village AEIM № 617-II: 34-35). In the Veliko Tarnovo region people “roast one lamb or carp which are *kurban* for the deceased” (Slomer village) and even during the 1970s they found it obligatory, for at least three of the days of remembrance during the first year, “to slaughter a lamb or to cook or roast a carp” (Dobromirovo village, Veliko Tarnovo region AEIM № 616-II: 65, 71-72, 78-79, 99). The summary of the archival material shows that fish is most often a dish for ‘fresh souls’. It is rarely used for the ‘old deceased’: for example, in the Petrich region on the day of remembrance that falls before the beginning of the Easter fast, they cook fish or they slaughter a bird (a hen or cock) (AEIM № 741-II: 16, 32-33, 49).

Returning again to the use of sheep meat for the deceased’s *kurban*, I will note that in many cases importance is also attached to the sex of the animal<sup>8</sup> because in many areas it matches that of the deceased. Mainly in the northwest they slaughter a ram for a man and a ewe for a woman, for example in the Vidin region (Gradets village, Staropatitsa village AEIM № 612-II: 81, 94; Sredogriv village AEIM № 613-II: 2), in Montana village (Prevala village, Dolna Riksa village AEIM № 613-II: 22, 39-40), in the Sofia region and the Pernik region (Gintsi village, Vrachesh village, Dolna Dikanya village AEIM № 614-II: 10, 38-39, 60-61, 64; Galabovtsi village, Sofia region AEIM № 76: 9). In the Berkovitsa region it is especially noted that “for the woman, a female, for the man a male shall be slaughtered” (Kotenvtsi village, Leskovets village AEIM № 200: 26, 40). Locally in the Kystendil region the rule is specific: “they usually slaughter a ram for a man, a ewe for a woman, a hogget for a maiden or young (unmarried) man and a lamb for a child” (Treklyano village AEIM № 610-II: 28).

The practice of matching the sex of the sacrificed animal with that of the deceased is also known in the central northern areas. For example, in places in the Lovech region “for a woman a ewe or female lamb is slaughtered and for a man a ram or a male lamb” (Kukrina village, Devetaki village), and in Pleven region, if the deceased was an older and wealthy man, they slaughtered for

him a “*kurban* sheep or a lamb” for him (Valchetran village AEIM № 617-II: 11, 75, 91). Locally in Gabrovo region, “when the deceased is a man, a male lamb or ram is given and for a woman a female lamb or a ewe” (Dobromirka village AEIM № 615-II: 85), including during the 1980s (Kormyansko village AEIM № 886-II: 20, 30; AEIM № 888-II: 57). The practice is also known in the Veliko Tarnovo region (Duskot village AEIM № 616-II: 50, 55). Iv. Georgieva mentions that in separate villages in the Pirin region for a man they slaughter a ram and for a woman – a ewe that cannot have offspring (Georgieva 1980: 416). In the Pazardzhik region they used to slaughter “a ram for a man and a ewe for a woman or for other family members” (Patalenitsa village, Velichkovo village AEIM № 610-II: 46, 60).

According to some local information, a female animal is preferred for a dead man’s *kurban* – such is the practice in settlements in Panagyurishte region (Popintsi village, Dyulevo village AEIM № 5: 11, 12) and the Blagoevgrad region, where it *kurban* is made “only from sheep” (Mendovo village), or if the deceased is a man they slaughter an ox and if a woman a ewe (Pokrovnik village AEIM № 616-II: 24–25, 39–40). In some places, the female animal is slaughtered only as an exception, for example in Kalimantsi village, Varna region, even during modern times a male lamb is preferred, or a hogget, and on rare occasions “a female lamb may be slaughtered but before is has been under a ram” (Koleva 2006: 308).

In the eastern regions, most often, a male animal is slaughtered for the deceased. In some places by preference this is a mature animal, i.e. a ram, for example in the Lovech region (Dermantsi village AEIM № 617-II: 46–47), the Gabrovo region (Platchovtsi village AEIM № 619-II: 51–52), the Targovishte region (Lilyak village AEIM № 615-II: 64), the Sliven region (Glushnik village AEIM № 615-II: 26). This also happens among immigrants from the Yambol and Sliven regions to the Siliстра region (Alfatar village AEIM № 776: 4), and in the city of Perushtitsa until the 1950s (Kableshkova 2010: 41–42); this preference is also known in the Petrich region (AEIM № 616-II: 29).

In other eastern settlements, people slaughter a young animal, i.e. a lamb, for example in the Razgrad region (Kostandets village AEIM № 615-II: 39–40), the Veliko Tarnovo region (Slomer village, Dobromirovo village AEIM № 616-II: 65, 99), the Ruse region (Pirgovo village), the Burgas region (Fakia village AEIM № 612-II: 18, 30), the Yambol region (Ustrem village AEIM № 611-II: 48). In the latter two village it is especially noted that the animal has to be

young. In the Lovech region it is usually “a one-year-old lamb” (Glozhene village AEIM № 617-II: 60). There are even more precise requirements in the western Blagoevgrad region where people slaughter a black lamb (Dobursko village AEIM № 616-II: 10, 16). In some places in the Pleven region (Varbitsa village AEIM № 617-II: 34), the Varna region (Vinitsa village AEIM № 619-II: 16-17), the Ivaylovgrad region (Mandritsa village) and the Razgrad region (Dryanovo village AEIM № 618-II: 39, 47-48) people might slaughter a lamb or ram, i.e. sometimes the young and the old animal are interchangeable raw materials for the food of the dead.

The traditional Bulgarian *kurban* for the deceased is prepared in a specific way. Archival information records a couple of main ingredients. The first is meat, which is used only fresh. For this purpose, the animal is first slaughtered, skinned and cleaned of its insides. Only its meat and bones are used for the *kurban*, and in some places also its head<sup>9</sup>. The necessary raw materials are cut or “chopped into small pieces”, a stage that is especially noted (Alfatar village, immigrants from the Yambol and Sliven regions to the Silistra region AEIM № 776: 6). The prepared pieces of meat and bones are “as early as the morning” put into a big copper tinned container, especially meant for the boiling of the *kurban* (Ustrem village, Yambol region AEIM № 611-II: 48; Fakia village, Burgas region AEIM № 612-II: 30; Ustrem village, Yambol region). Two other main ingredient – salt and water – are added, which are poured into the container “to the rim”, and it is put to boil on a high temperature (Ustrem village, Yambol region AEIM № 611-II: 48). “From time to time”, people get rid of “the foam” (Fakia village, Burgas region AEIM № 612-II: 30) until the meal is ready.

In some places, additional ingredients are added to the dish. For example, immigrants from the Yambol and Sliven regions in the Silistra region add a couple of whole big onions and peppers (Alfatar village AEIM № 776: 6). The *kurban* is rarely boiled as a stew (the Lovech region, Vodenicharova 1999: 418– 420, notes 30, 31) with vegetable oil, fried onion, red pepper, water, tomato sauce and mint for smell (Varbitsa village AEIM № 617-II: 34).

Everywhere the *kurban* is prepared only by boiling, i.e. its culinary technology is traditional and single-type<sup>10</sup>. The information shows that for a dead person “roasted meat is not given away, but boiled meat, done in a big pot or cauldron” (Popovyanе village, Sofia region); for days of remembrance “meat is never roasted” (Dolna Dikanya village, Pernik region AEIM № 614-II: 57, 64); “the lamb or the ram are not brought roasted but boiled in a big cauldron [for

the] *kurban*" (Dryanovo village, Razgrad region AEIM № 618-II: 47–48). The *kurban* itself is defined as "boiled meat with added ingredients" (Popovyanе village, Sofia region), "boiled meat in a big pot or cauldron" (Dolna Dikanya village, Pernik region AEIM № 614-II: 57, 64); meat for the *kurban* is "boiled in a very large pot or in a tinned white cauldron" (Treklyano village, Kyustendil region AEIM № 610-II: 28–29). It is apparent that the Bulgarians perceive boiling chopped pieces of sheep meat and bones with added salt and water in a voluminous container as traditional technology for making sheep *kurban*.

The summary of the said archival ethnographic material shows that during the Bulgarian pre-modern period lamb, hogget, mutton and poultry are the main types of meat used to feed the 'symmetrical' dead. Their souls do not receive and do not consume poultry, ox meat, goat's meat or pork, the negativity towards the latter two remains present to the present day.

The arguments could continue in many directions. First and foremost is the relationship between food and death. Researchers are united in concluding that feeding the dead is among the most ancient of cultural relics, that it has a bearing on issues of sacrifice and offering, give-and-take, the right of the dead to the first portion of food, etc. (Freydenberg 1978: 38–41; Listova 1983: 166; Prop 1995: 148, 150–152; Vaseva 1994, 1997). Additionally, the connection between death and food containing meat is clearly outlined, and the sacrificial nature of the *kurban* in Bulgarian tradition is undeniable. As pointed out by G. Lozanova, in the cultures of the southern Slavs, a meal made of the meat of a sacrificed animal is among the obligatory dishes at the funeral table. It is perceived as a sacrifice for the soul, and the *kurban* itself is ritually equivalent to and interchangeable with other basic and obligatory ritual foods such as bread and *kolivo* (a type of boiled wheat dish used for remembrance of the dead) (Lozanova 1991: 6–8).

Indeed, in the Bulgarian tradition, the *kurban* for the dead is perceived as a ritual dish in contrast to an everyday one. This character undoubtedly brings it closer to bread and wheat, but unlike them the *kurban* is not a permanent part of funeral and memorial rites, but appears only at the moments of the soul's transition to the world of the dead and is perceived as crucial. Obviously, the *kurban* is conceptualised as food that is especially needed for the dead. This finding is supported by the traditional observance of the same basic requirements not only for the origin of the meat as raw material and for the culinary

technology, but also for the spatial arrangement of the *topoi* where the animal is slaughtered and the living eat the dish.

The same raw material is used to make the *kurban* in all of the country's regions. This is always fresh meat and bones from a ram (lamb, hogget, sheep), which in some places are replaced by beef (veal), an obvious difference from the everyday life of the traditional Bulgarian, who very rarely cooked or consumed fresh meat in daily life. The raw material is prepared in a primitive way, most often being chopped into large, irregular pieces; less often it is sliced. The remaining body parts are not used. In some areas the preference is for either a male or female animal, and in others its sex mirrors the sex and possibly social status of the deceased<sup>11</sup>.

Using the traditionally fixed culinary technology is of great importance. The dish uses simple, minimal ingredients: meat and bones, salt and water. It is made solely by boiling, which can take place either in the home or on an open fire outside the home<sup>12</sup>.

In Bulgarian tradition, slaughtering, preparing and eating the dish take place in two main places, in the house or at the grave of the deceased. The symbolic and real movement of the dead from his or her dwelling in 'this world' (house, home) to its chthonic analogue (grave), which is perceived as part of 'that world', points to the framing of these *topoi* as the two main focal points of the commemorative rituals in the first year after death. At the same time, the relationship between the culinary code and the home and grave of the dead also marks the change in status. A summary of the material shows that as long as Old Bulgarians conceptualised the deceased as 'new', i.e. in the first year after death, they fed them both at the grave and at home, and even visited the grave daily until the 40<sup>th</sup> day. After the first year, the connection between the culinary code and the grave diminishes, and the space of the living intensifies; respectively the meals of the deceased are considerably diluted.

The relationship between the culinary code and the grave is archaic. By the advent of modernity, the post-funeral meal had shifted more and more explicitly to the home of the deceased, despite once being held at the grave, where the animal was slaughtered. In places in the southern regions the older practice has persisted even into the modern period. For example, by the mid- 20<sup>th</sup> century, the grave *topos* was still associated with the preparation of the meat meal for the funeral: locally in the Plovdiv region they boil "the *kurban* at the cemetery itself" (Brestnik village AEIM № 611-II: 30, 31), and in one of the

Christian villages in the Kardzhali region people slaughtered and cooked the animal next to the cemetery fireplace (Pchelarovo village AEIM № 62-III: 42). Around mid-century, the post-funeral table was also set up next to the grave in a lot of villages in the Plovdiv region (Krasnovo village, Krushevo village), Panagyurishte region (Dolno village (Levski), Tsar Asen village AEIM № 5: 2, 5–6, 7, 21, 22), and locally in the Pirin region (Georieva 1980: 416). The link between the consumption of the *kurban*, the grave and the feeding of the dead is also suggested by older accounts which say that even when prepared in the home, the *kurban*, along with other dishes, was brought to the table in the cemetery, for example in the Razgrad region (Dryanovo village AEIM № 618- II: 47–48) and the Plovdiv region (Brestnik village AEIM № 611-II: 30, 31). Usually this happens with the container, for example in the Pazardzhik region (Saraya village Gerginova, B. 2010: 217, 220) and the Kyustendil region, where they hang it from a big stick so that the dish remains warm (Treklyano village AEIM № 610-II: 29).

Details of the origin of the meat as raw material, use of a certain culinary technology, the consecration of the *kurban*, and eating it near the grave are all signs of the sacrificial character of the dish and its symbolic purity. Vaseva defines the rule that food for the dead should be clean, since unclean food is conceptualised as being capable of ‘dusting’ (contaminating) the deceased’s table, as a common Bulgarian one<sup>13</sup>. Generally, the living provide only pure food and drink to the souls they feed.

Analysis of ethnographic evidence points to the conclusion that when feeding the dead, the Old Bulgarians sought to preserve established order in the organised cosmos. The archaic notion that boundaries are drawn between worlds which the living must take special care of and preserve is relatively fixed in their pre-modern thinking. These boundaries are broken down at times of crisis such as the significant moments in human life: every birth of a new person and the onset of death among the living are conceived such. Tolstaya writes that the “formula of coexistence” between the worlds of the living and the dead provides for their separate existence through strictly defined modes of interaction in chronotope and ritual, and that this “formula” aims to maintain the boundary and ensure the well-being of both the living and the dead (Tolstaya 2000: 19–20). As I have already pointed out, the dead, and especially those with an incomplete transition, carry an abstract danger which the living neutralise in various ways through rites. Vaseva points out that through their

ritual actions on the calendar days of remembrance the living aim to complete the transition of these dead, to restore stability to the society (Vaseva 1994: 157–168).

One of the means by which the living help the dead to make their transition, stabilise their status and preserve it, is obviously the culinary code. Relating this conclusion to all that has been said so far about sheep *kurban* for the dead, we can say that this food is only for those whom traditional Bulgarians perceive (assume to be, expect to be) 'symmetrical'. In a reciprocal sense, this means that by offering the righteous soul its favourite food sacrifice, i.e. sheep *kurban*, the living seek to maintain the 'symmetrical' status of the dead in the afterlife. Two local accounts are interesting in this regard. The first is from the Panagyurishte region and reports that the *kurban* is made for the "forgiveness of the sins of the dead" (Metchka village AEIM № 5: 19), i.e. by feeding the soul with this dish, the living seek to secure a place among the righteous souls. The second piece of information is from the Pazardzhik region, where it is believed that in the 'other world' the dead "form a little flock of the three *kurbans* and will be its shepherd" (Velichkovo village, Pazardzhik region AEIM № 610-II: 63), i.e., also with the help and the *kurban* slaughtered for the dead they will retain the regularity of status they enjoyed in life.

To the frequency of the *kurban* as food not just for the dead, but for the righteous dead, is significant. It is present most often in the first year after death, appearing several times: in most cases after the funeral, on the 40<sup>th</sup> day and on the day on which the first year of death passes, i.e. to a large extent the *kurban* can be defined as one of the typical ritual foods for the dead in transition. When the first year after death has passed the *kurban* is no longer an obligatory part of ritual meals. After this period, its occurrence is rather linked to the material possibilities of the family, for example, it is noted in some places that after the first year it is rarely prepared, and that it is possible to make it on the three and nine year anniversaries (Duskot village, Veliko Tarnovo region AEIM № 616-II: 50, 57), but this depends more on the means of the family (Mogila village, Yambol region AEIM № 613-II: 85). Thus, the presence of the *kurban* can be seen as a sign that the dead person for whom it is intended is perceived as 'symmetrical' and that most often no more than a year has passed since death.

It is obvious that during the period of passage from 'this world' to 'the next' (i.e. during the first year after death) Bulgarians 'control' the soul's flesh-eating through the *kurban*. It is not unimportant that 'control' is associated with meals

at communal tables, to which local notions attach the greatest importance (rather than to handouts or lesser commemorations) and where the elderly socialised men and women of the whole community participate. This prevents the risk of an unwanted reversal in the direction of movement of each deceased individual, ensuring the 'symmetry' of souls reaching the afterlife according to traditional rules, maintaining balance in the cosmos.

## The 'asymmetrical' dead

In the Bulgarian ethnographic material, there is little direct information about the diet of the 'asymmetrical' dead. Therefore, in most cases it is possible to partially reconstruct it by applying a different approach, i.e. correlating the abundance of information about the diet of the 'symmetrical' dead with specific relics of the pre-modern conception of the world through opposing categories. Such a method implicitly points to the specificities in the diet of their antipodes.

According to Bulgarian traditional ideas, demons, whose origin is associated with sinners, also consume food, but in a way that is different from that of both righteous souls and living people. Their menu is composed mainly of corporeal matter, which is, however, distinguished from the raw material used for the *kurban* of the 'symmetrical' dead. The origins of demons, their lack of substitutability and their attitude to culinary technology are what stands out<sup>14</sup>.

It is thought that some of the souls of sinners consume meat raw materials that their 'symmetrical' antipodes do not consume. For example, certain diseases whose origin is female have a marked affinity for poultry (Markova 2011b). The ghoul definitely shows a penchant for sucking the blood of pigs slaughtered for Christmas and for eating blood-sausage made with their blood<sup>15</sup>. The idea that some of the most evil demons swallow blood from humans and domestic animals is widely known among Bulgarians. A typical example is the vampire, who not only occupies one of the highest positions in the demonic hierarchy, but is also perceived as a kind of emanation of aggressive feeding behaviour. The vampire feeds on the blood of humans and some of their domestic animals (Georieva 1985: 50–52; Troeva 2003: 55), a characteristic that is understood to be a typical feature.

This leads to the constatation that the Old Bulgarians conceived corporeal matter in general as the most important, the main, and in some cases the only

dish for the demonic characters whose origins were associated with the 'asymmetrical' dead. While the souls of the righteous eat meat only during the blessed periods and at the most important moments in the first year of their transition, the greatest sinners can consume such food at all times. The vampire especially wishes to ingest mainly blood. Accordingly, its consumption, like that of human flesh, is conceptualised as a sign of harmful demons, of being in their space and of their wild and absolutely untamed nature. Bulgarians define total gluttony and eating dead creatures as impure regimes; this consumption is not only taboos, but also identified as among the absolute cultural prohibitions for members of the group (i.e. living people and souls of the righteous) (Markova 2011 a).

Beliefs never connect the consumption of blood and human meat with any kind of preliminary processing, i.e. the two materials also relate negatively to culinary technology. The semantic link between their ingestion, their raw (natural) state and the complete lack of cooking is obvious. Blood and forbidden meat are absolute and meaningful antipodes of man's food and culture<sup>16</sup>.

As Mihailova writes, traditional Bulgarians believe that "righteous souls live in the other world in paradise", but she does not specify the location of sinners clearly (Mihailova 2002). In some places in the Lovech region it is localised generally as "hell" (Dermantsi village AEIM № 617-II: 1, 42), while in other places it is considered that the souls of sinners remain "wandering the earth" (Varbitsa village, Pleven region AEIM № 617-II: 20; Kozhintsi village, Pernik region AEIM № 614-II: 84–85). This means that they consume in *topoi* and in time periods that are conceptualised as impure; the food of the 'asymmetrical' dead is also undeniably conceived as a possible contaminant on the table of its 'symmetrical' antipode. Of course, the places and time periods in which the two groups of dead eat are different. In the case of sinners, these are their dwelling places mainly located in the vicinity of their graves. Temporally, their consumption relates to the "secretive hour", the nocturnal hours locked between sunset and the first crowing of the roosters, which are also perceived most negatively (Markova 2011b). In the mentioned chronotope the most sinful souls can devour these substances, which, however, the living never provide them with, and even do their best to interrupt the possible feeding process on these foods. This reasoning has its clearest confirmation in the fragmentary notions of the feeding of the vampire. For example, according to beliefs from the Vidin region, a vampire's soul "cannot reach the other world and remains in the grave. In the 'secretive hour' after midnight, it goes out there and wanders

until the first rooster crows“ (Sredogriv village AEIM № 613-II: 10), while in the Veliko Tarnovo region they think that during the night the soul of a dead man-vampire “comes out of the grave through a small hole and goes to disturb its relatives” (Duskot village AEIM № 616-II: 48-49).

There is also a clear semantic link between consumption and the change in the status of the dead. According to the classical definition of Vl. Prop, the dead ask the living to satisfy their hunger because if they remain hungry “[they] will find no rest and will return as a living ghost. This is what the living and the dead are afraid of, and this is what fear of the dead is due to” (Prop 1995: 146, 148, 149). In Bulgarian traditional beliefs, there is apparently also a meaningful connection between the hungry dead (in general), eating human flesh, and the movement of beings between mythological levels, for example both the grateful and the hungry dead move in the organised cosmos, although unlike the grateful dead, the hungry can move towards the chronotope of ‘asymmetrical’ beings and can change status in a negative way. It is no coincidence that Bulgarians perceive eating as the main occupation of characters who devour flesh and blood<sup>17</sup>. They are perceived as constantly hungry, with their insatiable hunger awakening and developing the demonic in their nature. I will also refer to Mihailova’s observation that when hungry, demons and sinful souls seek food, becoming mobile and causing catastrophes. When they perceive ‘symmetrical’ beings as the source of their food they threaten to devour them (Mihailova 2002: 184-195). Living people cannot control the consumption of vampiric characters and thus cannot influence their behaviour. Their perception as antipodes is also guided by the action code, for example at night, when demons are active, mobile and hungry, the ‘symmetrical’ (humans, souls) are passive and static (sleeping and not eating). Therefore, the appearance in the deceased’s diet of corporeal substances which the person perceives as impure, with taboos on their consumption, can be seen as an indisputable sign that the deceased has not successfully completed the transition and has joined the category of sinners.

## Conclusion

And so, according to Bulgarian traditional beliefs, meat is the only matter of corporeal origin that can be defined as common food for all the dead. The ‘sym-

metrical' deceased satisfy their nutritional needs with meat that is perceived to be pure, and do not consume products that come from bird, buffalo, goat or pig. Their meat comes only from the ram (lamb, hogget, mutton); in many areas the animal's sex is also important; and during fasting periods sheep may be replaced by fish. Meat for the 'symmetrical' dead is always processed culinarily in a way that is used only in ritual and is characterised by primitivism, a minimum number of ingredients and the use of boiling only. Only one dish is thus prepared, called *kurban*, which has a distinctly sacrificial character. In the Bulgarian tradition, its preparation and consumption are associated with the two main *topoi* of the commemorative ritual in the first year after death, the home and the grave.

Bulgarians conceptualise the *kurban* as a particularly necessary meal for the dead. It appears mainly in the first year after death – at the funeral, on the 40<sup>th</sup> day, and the day after a year has passed since death. Then it repeatedly marks the key moments of the soul's transition to the world of the dead and maintains its 'proper' direction. By presenting the soul with pure sacrificial meat at communal meals where socialised members of the community participate, the living exercise nutritional 'control' over the flesh-eating of dead souls, ensure their place among the righteous ones, and guarantee their 'symmetrical' status in the afterlife.

For these 'asymmetrical' deceased, meat is the most important dish they can consume regardless of the periods of allowed meat consumption and fasting. The most sinful souls can even consume human flesh, and together with human blood this makes up both their main 'menu' and two of the main substances that the premodern Bulgarian taboos in relation to 'symmetrical' beings. It is believed that the most sinful souls inhabit a wilderness which the living cannot tame or control. Humans perceive their feeding as an impure mode and identify chronotopes distinguished by impurity. In general, Bulgarians conceive any being who practices such feeding as absolutely malevolent and harmful. The living never provide flesh and blood for the most sinful souls, instead they do their utmost to interrupt such feeding, conceiving the desire to consume both substances as a sign that the deceased has changed the proper direction of movement and become part of the category of demons.

By feeding the dead who are perceived as righteous, and by seeking to hinder the analogous process in the most sinful souls, traditional Bulgarians try to control the specifics of their statuses, i.e. preserving the 'symmetry' of

the former and maintain the established distance to the latter. Meat is one of the ingredients with which man serves himself. Thus, through elements of the culinary code the living keep the borders between levels in the organised cosmos closed and maintain mythological equilibrium within it.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The dependence of the dead's menu on periods of meat consumption and fasting is a cultural trait that is well known to Bulgarians today.

<sup>2</sup> Apart from this, in Bulgarian tradition only a few other meat dishes are included in the diet of the dead. These are *sarma*, stuffed peppers, eggs or cooked meat (rare and local variants). Compared to the *kurban*, the importance of these foods is much lower.

<sup>3</sup> It is noted only in isolated accounts that preparation of the *kurban* only began in more recent times. For example, material from Ivaylovgrad, recorded in the mid-1980s, notes that "in older times, in Turkish times, the ram was not used at all. In most recent times, they started to slaughter the ram and they cooked a *kurban* in a cauldron". (Dolno Lukovo village AEIM № 62-III: 22).

<sup>4</sup> Most likely, the generally known character of this obligation is the reason why in some cases it is not reported or explicitly stated in the information.

<sup>5</sup> In isolated and localised material collected after the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, when traditional relationships were rapidly breaking down, old notions were fading and being lost and new and modern elements were increasingly entering even the most isolated villages and their gated communities. At this time pork and poultry products began to be mentioned among the foods of the dead. Bacon was among the ingredients (also boiled cabbage, bulgur wheat) for a dish prepared for the funeral table locally in the Plovdiv region (Karadzhalovo village AEIM № 851-II: 111–112). Bacon is also added to the *kachamak*, which in the Gotse Delchev region "according to a very old custom" is boiled before dawn on the first Thursday of Lent and distributed "after dark for the dead" (Ilinden village AEIM № 742-II: 56). In single reports from Dobrudja among the mentioned winter foods of remembrance is pork with rice (AEIM № 632-II). Separate materials mention the fragmentary participation of poultry meat on lesser and great days of remembrance: in Vidin people who come to pay their respects the deceased also bring chicken (Sredogriv village AEIM № 613-II: 3), while poultry stew appears on the funeral table in Dobrudja (AEIM № 632-II) and in some villages in the Sredna Gora region, on the evening of the 40<sup>th</sup> day, they arrange a "dinner for the dead" at the grave, one of the foods brought being "seven or eight hens". (Slatina village, Plovdiv region AEIM № 852-II: 198). In the Razgrad region, if days of remembrance fall on a day

when meat consumption is allowed, lamb can be swapped for poultry (Osenets village AEIM № 613-II: 68), and on the anniversary of the death, in the Targovishte region it is “obligatory [to] slaughter a goose or a turkey” (Lilyak village AEIM № 615-II: 67). Although rarely, the meat of a bird is also associated with food on days of remembrance. For example, chicken is one of the foods given out in the Lovech region (Devetaki village AEIM № 617-II: 92), the Gabrovo region, where it is noted that it is boiled (Dobromirka village AEIM № 615-II: 89–89), and the Sofia region, where it is a fried hen. The researcher P. Petrov, who registered the practice in the latter region, specifically notes that this dish is an “interesting” local peculiarity on days of remembrance and that the practice dates from “older times” (Gintsi village AEIM № 614-II: 15–16). Locally in Dobrudja (AEIM № 632-II) and in the Petrich region, poultry appears on days of remembrance before the Easter fast (AEIM № 741-II: 16, 32–33, 49).

<sup>6</sup> In some villages in the Lovech region the belief that fish should not be given as a *kurban* for a dead is registered. Popov notes that here it is motivated by the danger that “in the other world the soul will run after the fish and drown” (Popov 1999: 280).

<sup>7</sup> Some accounts refer to the interchangeability of fish and honey as vegetarian equivalents of sheep *kurban*, for example in the Gabrovo region (Kormyansko village AEIM № 886-II: 30, 31) and the Razgrad region (Kostandenets village AEIM № 615-II: 39–40; 39), where “they spare nothing to feed the soul of the dead well”. In the Kazanlak region, the simultaneous function of the two foods existed at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when they were still found on the 40<sup>th</sup> day, sixth month, and one, six, and nine years’ anniversaries of death (Terzieva 2006: 192–193).

<sup>8</sup> In some places it does not matter, and according to availability a lamb or a sheep is slaughtered, for example in Kalipetrovo village, Silistra region (AEIM № 610-II: 81), Brestnik village, Plovdiv region, and Mogilevo village, Stara Zagora region (AEIM № 611-II: 31, 84).

<sup>9</sup> In the Lovech region, the head is separated and boiled and the meat taken out and chopped into pieces. This is left for the soul of the deceased so that “he may eat when he comes” (Vodenicharova 1999: 418–420, notes 30, 31). In the Veliko Tarnovo region they give it to the priest (Slomer village AEIM № 616-II: 71, 72), while in the Panagyurishte region, they take it to the cemetery where they break it up and give it away after the funeral (Smilets village AEIM № 5: 15). Locally in the Veliko Tarnovo region, they do a similar thing to the head of the fish: “if it is during a fast the *kurban* is either fish or honey, and in this case the head of the fish has to be given to the priest” (Duskot village AEIM № 616-II: 55).

<sup>10</sup> The meat is roasted only according to isolated information (Varbitsa village, Pleven region AEIM № 617-II: 34).

<sup>11</sup> Local evidence suggests that beef or veal functioned as an identity marker of the male sex and higher social status of the deceased: in places in the Gorna Oryahovitsa region, if the deceased was wealthy, they slaughtered a calf (Lyaskovets village AEIM № 695: 1), while in the Blagoevgrad region an ox was slaughtered for a man and a ewe for a woman (Pokrovnik village AEIM № 616-II: 39–40).

<sup>12</sup> A different method of preparation is used only on rare occasions. For example, materials from the Pazardzhik region explicitly state that if beef is used for a deceased man, “they cook it like normal meat, not like a *kurban*” (Patalenitsa village AEIM № 610-II: 48–49), thus making the dish is linked to the culinary technology of everyday life, not with that of the *kurban*.

<sup>13</sup> Vaseva considers this risk in mythological terms and interprets it as a threat to the birth–death–rebirth cycle in global terms (Vaseva 1997: 98).

<sup>14</sup> See also the observation of Troeva that demons in male hypostasis have a tendency to eat meat, and those in female to eat vegetarian food. Troeva concludes that gender differences are expressed at the mythological level through the culinary code and believes that “demons whose origin comes from a deceased person show a greater preference for foods that contain meat and blood. Since this is the substance of which they are made, eating it can be interpreted as an act of self-devouring”, and that “by attributing to demons the tendency to cannibalism, one of the basic prohibitions in human society is marked” (Troeva 2011: 162–163).

<sup>15</sup> M. Gabrovski and M. Benovska-Sabkova mark that the ghoul is also perceived as an incarnation of the spirit of the Christmas pig (Gabrovki 1985: 208–209; Benovska-Sabkova 2002: 156).

<sup>16</sup> Traditional Bulgarians mainly consume cooked or fermented dishes. Onions, garlic, leeks and salt are eaten raw (fresh fruit rarely). Bulgarians never associate garlic with the diet of the ‘asymmetrical’, and uses this as his main apotropaic against them.

<sup>17</sup> The hypertrophy of their organs, associated with consumption, is indicative: carnivorous creatures possess enormous mouths, bellies and teeth, and are described or conceptualised as large sacks (Markova 2011a).

## Material from the archive of IEFSEM–BAS

Used sources: AEIM (AEIM) № 5, 76, 200, 695, 776, 360-II, 361-II, 610-II, 611-II, 612-II, 613-II, 614-II, 615-II, 616-II, 617-II, 618-II, 619-II, 632-II, 741-II, 742-II, 851-II, 852-II, 886-II, 888-II, 62-III.

## References

Benovska-Sabkova, Milena 2002. Kolednata svinya – mezdu rituala I vseki dnevieto (The Christmas Pig – Between Ritual and Everyday Life). In: Zlatozara Gocheva & Dimitar Boyadzhiev (eds.) *Izsledvaniya v chest na prof. Ivan Marazov (Studies in Honor of Prof. Ivan Marazov)*. Sofia: Anubis, pp. 152–164.

Freydenberg, Olga 1978. *Mif i literatura drevnosti (Myth and literature of the antiquity)*, Moskva: Nauka.

Gabrovki, Minko 1985. Koledno kravno zhertvoprinoshenie (Christmas blood sacrifice). Damyanov, Simeon & Draev, Ivan (eds.). *Izvestiya na Natsionalniya istoricheski muzei*, tom V (Notifications of the National historical museum), volume V). Sofia: Nauka i izkustvo, pp. 199–214.

Genchev, Stoyan 1985. Semeyni obichai i obredi (Family customs and rituals). Stoyan Genchev & Margarita Vasileva (eds.). *Etnografiya na Bulgaria. Duhovna kultura*, III (Ethnography of Bulgaria. Spiritual culture), vol. III. Sofia: BAN, pp. 159–213.

Georieva, Ivanichka 1980. Obichai pri svadba (Wedding rituals). In: Veselin Hadzhinikolov & Maria Veleva (eds.). *Pirinski kray. Etnografski, folklorni i ezikovi pro-uchvaniya*. (Pirin region. Ethnographic, folklore and linguistic researches). Sofia: BAN, pp. 411–421.

Georieva, Ivanichka 1985. Mirogledat na balgarski narod ot XIX sredata na XX vek (The outlook of the Bulgarian people from the 19th century until the mid 20th century). Genchev, Stoyan & Vasileva, Margarita (eds.) *Etnografiya na Bulgaria. Duhovna kultura*, III. (Ethnography of Bulgaria. Spiritual culture), III. Sofia: BAN, pp. 35–57.

Gerginova, Vasya 2010. Pomenalna trapeza v dve pazardzhishki sela (terenen material – s. Ivaylo I s. Saraya) [Food during memorial days in two villages in the Pazardzhik region (terrain material – Ivaylo village and Saraya village)]. In: Angel Goev (eds.) *Hranata sakralna i profanna, tom I (Food – sacred and profane, volume I)*. Gabrovo: Faber, pp. 214–223.

Hadzhieva, Rumenya 2006. Pogrebalnata trapeza za zhivi i za martvi (Funeral food for the living and for the dead). Ratsko Popov & Angel Goev (eds.). *Obrednata trapeza. Sbornik dokladi ot XI-ta Natsionalna konferentsiya na balgarskite etnografi – Plovdiv, 2005*. (Ritual food. A collection of reports from the 11th National conference of the Bulgarian ethnographers – Plovdiv, 2005). Sofia: Etnografki institut s muzei, pp. 197–201.

Kableshkova, Rayna 2010. Obrednite hrani v Perushtitsa – nyakoga i sega (Ritual foods in Perushtitsa – then and now). Goev, Angel (eds..) *Hranata sakralna i profanna, I (Food – sacred and profane)*, vol. I. Gabrovo: Faber, pp. 39–44.

Koleva, Svetlozara 2006. Trapeza za zdrave (Food for health). In: Ratsko Popov & Angel Goev (eds.) *Obrednata trapeza. Sbornik dokladi ot XI-ta Natsionalna konferentsiya na balgarskite etnografi – Plovdiv, 2005* (Ritual food. A collection of reports from the 11th National conference of the Bulgarian ethnographers – Plovdiv, 2005). Sofia: Etnografki institut s muzej, pp. 306–311.

Listova, Nataliya. 1983. Pishta v obryadah i obichayah (Food in the rituals and the customs). In: Sergey Tokarev & I. Grozdova (eds.) *Kalendarnie obichai i obryadi v stranah Zarubezhnoy Evropy. Istoricheskie korni i razvitiye obichaev* (Calendar rituals and customs in the outside European states. Historical roots and development of the rituals). Moskva: Nauka, pp. 161–172.

Lozanova, Galina 1989. Osobenosti na obredite pri pogrebenie na detsa u yuzhnite slavyani v kraya na XIX – nachaloto na XX vek (Peculiarities of the rituals during funerals of children among the south Slavs during the end of the 19th century – beginning of the 20th century). *Balgarska etnologiya* (Bulgarian ethnology), kn. 1, pp. 17–30.

Lozanova, Galina 1991. Obredni trapezi pri pogrebenie u yuzhnite slavyani (Ritual food during funerals among the South slavs). *Balgarska etnologiya* (Bulgarian ethnology), kn. 1, pp. 3–12.

Lozanova, Galina 1997. Hlyabat na martvite (po materiali ot yuzhno-slavyanskata pogrebalna obrednost ot kraya na XIX – nachaloto na XX в) (The bread of the dead (according to materials from the South-Slavic funeral rites from the end of the 19th century – the beginning of the 20th century)). Yaneva, Stanka & Stamenova, Zhivka (eds.). *Hlyabat v slavyanskata kultura* (Bread in the Slavic culture). Sofia: Etnografki institut s muzej, pp. 37–47.

Markova, Maria 2011a: Hraneneto na redovnya i neredovnya pokoynik v balgarskite traditsionni predstavi (Nutrition of the regular and the irregular deceased in the traditional Bulgarian beliefs. Vlahovich, Petar & Petrovich, Sreten (eds.). *Etno-kultyroloshki zbornik* (Ethno-cultural collection), kn. XV. Svrlig: Etno-kul-tyroloshka radionitsa, pp. 45–64.

Markova, Maria 2011b. Chasovete ot denonoshtieto i harnitelnyat protses v predstavite na traditsionniya balgarin (Hours of the day and night and the nutrition process in the beliefs of the traditional Bulgarian). Goev, Angel & Markov, Vasil (eds.). *Godishnik na Regionalen etnografski muzej – Plovdiv, t. VI, Noshtta v narodnite vyarvaniya i predstavi* (Yearbook of the Regional ethnographical museum – Plovdiv), vol. VI, The night in the popular beliefs and imagination). Plovdiv: REM–Plovdiv, pp. 58–70.

Markova, Maria 2016: Prostranstvoto i sistemata na hraniteliya kod v balgarskite traditsionni predstavi. Mitologichni aspekti (The space and the system of the culinary code in the traditional Bulgarian beliefs. Mythological aspects). Zhu-

nich, Dragan (eds.). *Traditsionalna estetska kultura Proctor* (Traditional aesthetic culture Proctor). Beograd & Nish: SANU, pp. 101–116.

Mihaylova, Ganka 2002. *Maskirani li sa Maskiranite personazhi v balgarskata narodna traditsiya* (Are the masked personalities in the Bulgarian popular tradition really masked). Sofia: Nov balgarski universitet.

Milcheva, Magda 1997. Obredni hranitelni zabrani (po materiali ot Haskovsko) (Ritual dietary restrictions (according to materials from the Haskovo region)). *Balgarska etnologiya* (Bulgarian ethnology), 3–4: 145–151.

Popov, Ratsko 1999. Naroden svetogled. Kalendarni praznitsi i obichai (The outlook of the people. Calendar holidays and rituals). Mihaylova, Ganka & Popov, Ratsko (eds.). *Loveшки краи. Materialna i duhovna kultura* (Lovech region. Material and spiritual culture). Sofia: Prof. Marin Drinov, pp. 268–320.

Prop, Vladimir 1995. *Istoricheski koreni na valshebnata prikazka* (Historical roots of the magical story). Sofia: IK Prozorets.

Terzieva, Katya 2006. Trapezata na martvite – milost za zhivite (po materiali ot Kazanlashko) (The food of the dead – compassion for the living (according to materials from Kazanlak)). Popov, Ratsko & Goev, Angel (eds.). *Obrednata trapeza. Sbornik dokladi ot XI-ta Natsionalna konferentsiya na balgarskite etnografi – Plovdiv, 2005* (Ritual food. A collection of reports from the 11th National conference of the Bulgarian ethnographers – Plovdiv, 2005). Sofia: Etnografski institut s muzey, pp. 192–196.

Tolstaya, Svetlana 2000. Mir zhivih i mir mertvih: formula sosushtestvovaniya (The world of the living and the world of the dead: formula of co-habitation). *Slavyanovedenie*, 6: 14–20.

Troeva, Evgeniya 2003. *Demonite na Rodopite* (Demons of the Rhodopes). Sofia: MTSIMKV.

Troeva, Evgeniya 2011. Demonizirane obrazi na drugosta (The demonized images of the otherness). Anchev, Anatol & Popov, Ratsko (eds.). *Etnografski problemi na narodnata kultura*, 3 (Ethnographical problems of the popular spiritual culture), vol. 3. Sofia: Prof. Marin Drinov, pp. 151–176.

Vaseva, Valentina 1994. Zadushnitsata kato obredna deynost (The Day of the Dead as a ritual day). Popov, Ratsko & Grebenarova, Slavka (eds.). *Etnografski problemi na narodnata duhovna kultura*, t. 3 (Ethnographical problems of the popular spiritual culture), vol. 3. Sofia: Club' 90, pp. 152–172.

Vaseva, Valentina 1997. Obredni hlyabovе pri pogrebenie i pomen (balgaro-rumanski paraleli) (Ritual breads during funerals and memorials (Bulgarian-Romanian parallels)). Yaneva, Stanka & Stamenova, Zhivka (eds.). *Hlyabat v slavyanska kultura* (Bread in the Slavic culture). Sofia: Etnografski institut s muzey, pp. 94–113.

Vodenicharova, Anastasiya 1999. Obichai i obredi pri smart i pogrebenie (Customs and rituals in death and funerals). Mihaylova, Ganka & Popov, Ratsko (eds.). Loveshki kray. *Materialna i duhovna kultura* (Material and spiritual culture). Sofia: Prof. Marin Drinov, pp. 405–422.

**Maria Markova**, PhD, is an associate professor at the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic Museum, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Bulgaria. Her research interests are related to the study of culinary codes (technology, ideas, everyday life, ritual), communities and identities, anthropology of the border, Bulgarians, refugees, western Thrace.

E-mail: [maria.markova@iefem.bas.bg](mailto:maria.markova@iefem.bas.bg)

ORCID: 0009-0004-1070-421X

# Why There Was No Grunge Breakthrough in Estonia

**Aimar Ventsel**

*University of Tartu*

*E-mail: aimar.ventsel@ut.ee*

**Abstract:** Grunge is the term used for a type of music that appeared after the sensational breakthrough of American alternative rock band Nirvana with their album *Nevermind* in 1991. As is usual in the music business, record companies started to promote similar bands. This article is about the grunge subculture in Estonia in the early 1990s and is based on personal memories and discussions with people who embraced the style. The aim is to show that grunge in Estonia was a vivid example of glocalisation, where a globally known phenomenon becomes a local variation with significant differences to the way in which it is understood and interpreted in the country of origin. Simultaneously, I discuss why grunge was never so popular in Estonia. The reason for this was that the early 1990s were a time when a lot of Western pop culture – both clothes and music – was suddenly available and young people faced multiple choices. Grunge, as a downshift culture, did not fit with the post-Soviet ethos and rush towards consumerism.

**Keywords:** grunge, subculture, Nirvana, Estonia, youth culture, glocalisation.

Grunge is the term used for a type of music that appeared after the sensational breakthrough of American alternative rock band Nirvana with their album *Nevermind* in 1991. Suddenly the album and especially the song “Smells Like Teen Spirit” was broadcast extensively on radio and received frequent air play on the television music channel MTV. As is usual in the music business, record companies started to seek similar bands and promoted them. Because Nirvana was from the Seattle, on the northwest coast of the USA, record companies,

music producers and talent scouts focused on the alternative music scene there and found several bands who became famous in the first years of 1990s. So the expression ‘Seattle sound’ was created, which was later equivalent to the term grunge with both terms often used simultaneously. This article is about grunge subculture in Estonia in the early 1990s and is based on personal memories and discussions with people who embraced the style. The aim is to show that grunge in Estonia was a vivid example of glocalisation, where a globally known phenomenon becomes a local variation with significant differences from the way in which it is understood and interpreted in the country of origin. Simultaneously, I discuss why grunge was never so popular in Estonia. The reason for this was that the early 1990s were a time when a lot of Western pop culture – both clothes and music – was suddenly available and young people faced multiple choices. Grunge, as a downshift culture, did not fit with the post-Soviet ethos and rush towards consumerism.

The idea to write this article was born in the Subcultures, Popular Music and Social Change Facebook group. On 20 November 2021 I posted a video to that group titled “WHAT \*ACTUALLY\* KILLED GRUNGE? (It wasn’t Courtney Love)”<sup>1</sup> that had been uploaded to the YouTube channel The Punk Rock MBA, a channel run by Finn Mckenty where he posted short videos explaining the rise and demise of certain music styles or bands, among other things. The reason I posted this video was that Mckenty’s explanation of the style and popularity of grunge was very Western-centric. I commented on the video, writing that grunge was never a big movement in Estonia and initiated a discussion on the glocalisation of subcultures, marketing strategies of music and style and the political meaning of youth subcultures and their music. The idea that the fate and transformation of grunge style and subculture in early 1990s Estonia serves as an example of the difference between youth subcultures in East and West Europe then circled in my head all these years and is presented in this paper. I will come back to that video and discussion below.

Academic literature includes published research on Eastern European subcultures. On Yugoslavian DJ culture have written Zubak (2016), east German punk, blues and rock culture Westhusen (2005a, b), Estonian punk and Estrada (Ventsel 2016, 2019), or music journalism in the East Block (Reti 2016). There is also abundant research on subcultures in Eastern Europe after the fall of Socialism showing how the socioeconomic and political environment after the transition to capitalism and democracy also affected local subcultures. These

studies are great examples of glocalisation, i.e. how local forms of subculture do not automatically repeat the ideologies and practices of Western, mainly Anglo-American, subcultures. There are several academic schools that are engaged with theorising youth subcultures. The subcultural school of the 1980s argues that youth subcultures are an expression of the class conflicts then present in society (Hall and Jefferson 1986; Hebdidge 1979). In the 1990s a post-subculture theory was developed that states that youth subcultures are less class based resistance than just a consumer choice (Williams 2006, 2011). As I demonstrate below, there is certain element of truth in both schools. Nevertheless, consumption was very important in identity building for post-Soviet Estonian youth.

## Punk and grunge

There is a debate among those with an interest in Anglo-American punk as to where this phenomenon was born. Americans tend to argue that it was in New York, British punks are convinced that it was London. Either way, punk as a style, music and subculture appeared in mid-1970s and spread quickly globally. Already from the beginning the punk scene was divided into subscenes. One of the first big divisions, which came in the 1970s, was between the working class and art school punks. The USA became the birth place for fast and aggressive hardcore punk music, with post-punk, Oi!, ska-punk, etc., appearing in the early 1980s. It seems that stylistic and regional variations were especially big in the USA. From the early 1980s there were regional sonic divisions between the east and west coasts, which both had distinctive sounds. Moreover, in the USA, many big cities have their own sound, for example New York City hardcore (NYHC), Washington D.C. hardcore or Los Angeles and San Francisco punk. In the USA, the understanding of punk, especially punk music, has always been broader than in the UK. While in the UK punk bands tended to blend in Jamaican music like soul, reggae or ska, American bands mixed in also jazz, swing or African music. In the 1980s and 1990s Seattle was a not very wealthy, somehow isolated industrial city on the northwest Pacific coast. The city's alternative culture is deeply rooted in and influenced by punk, and local punk music developed its distinctive depressive and aggressive undertone, with noisy distorted guitars and subtle usage of guitar effects. Song lyrics were often about alienation, or social or psychological issues and the problems of young people.

One of the big contributions of punk to youth culture has been focus on the do-it-yourself (DIY) ethos. Since many record labels either did not show interest in punk artists or wanted to dictate their sound and appearance, or music magazines did not cover punk music or events at all, punk artists started to establish their own small record labels to release music, and enthusiast started alternative subculture journals, known as fanzines (a portmanteau of ‘fan’ and ‘magazine’). DIY already existed in the sixties, but was made into a conscious strategy by the punk movement. This was not different in Seattle. In the 1980s the Seattle punk/alternative scene was small, close knit, and centred around a few small clubs and one small alternative independent music record label, Sub Pop. Sub Pop mainly released music from the north west of the USA and promoted it nationally as well as at the local level, for instance through local college radio. Although the record label apparently started to use the term grunge as a definition of the Seattle area alternative bands, this music was known, at least in Europe, as ‘northwest coast hardcore’ or ‘northwest coast punk’. Sub Pop producer Jack Endino described grunge as “seventies-influenced, slowed-down punk music” (Kallen 2012: 73; Azerrad 1992). Simultaneously, grunge’s sound was distinctive because “it killed the guitar solo (Buyers 2008). In the abovementioned video “WHAT \*ACTUALLY\* KILLED GRUNGE? (It wasn’t Courtney Love)” Finn Mckenty argues that grunge music combined indie rock’s melancholy, punk’s energy and metal music’s power. Indeed, the sounds of pre-*Nevermind* Seattle grunge bands had different influences. Alice in Chains had more indie influences, Soundgarden’s music was faster, more robust and powerful, and in Pearl Jam’s music one hears more hard rock influences. Nirvana’s debut album *Bleach* (Sub Pop 1989) and early Hole (fronted by Courtney Love) has influences from early punk and new wave, whereas in some of his early interviews Kurt Cobain (Love’s husband) described Nirvana as a punk band.

What distinguished grunge from prior youth styles, was its clothing. The clothing commonly worn by grunge musicians were a “mundane everyday style”, in which they would wear the same clothes on stage that they wore at home. This contrasted sharply with punk style with its leather jackets, chains, semi-military outfits and mohawks. The grunge look typically consisted of second-hand clothes or thrift store items and the typical outdoor clothing (most notably oversize flannel shirts which became a symbol of grunge) of the region, as well as a generally unkempt appearance and long hair (Misiroglu

2015: 343). In the US grunge style, according to Finn Mckenty, Dr. Martens boots, band T-shirts and ripped jeans were popular. Women sported a look that was called 'kinderwhore' or a sexualised look where girls combined different clothing they picked up in the second hand shops – underwear, old fur coats, heavy make-up, 1970s leather boots, so-called Peter Pan collared dresses. It was a combination of a childlike appearance and a somehow tattered and worn down outlook. Simultaneously, this kinderwhore look was a feminist statement where young women refused to dress 'modestly' or as 'good girls'. Grunge initiated a feminist movement called 'riot grrrls', including a wave of feminist all-women bands such as Babes in Toyland, L7, Bikini Kill or early Hole. Both male and female grunge musicians and fans wore long hair, often unkempt and dyed. Another element that was part of the grunge style were piercings, especially nose and ear rings.

After the massive breakthrough of Nirvana's *Nevermind* the commercialisation of grunge began. Most major grunge bands such as Soundgarden, Alice in Chains, Pearl Jam, and Nirvana were signed to major record labels. Grunge fashion began to break into mainstream fashion in mid-1992 for both sexes and peaked in late 1993 and early 1994. I agree with Finn Mckenty that in one-and-a-half to two years grunge lost its rebellious subcultural nature, was watered down by the mainstream music and fashion industry and lost its appeal as an 'authentic' youth style and anti-consumerist movement. The final demise of grunge was Kurt Cobain's suicide in April 1994 when the subculture lost its frontman and style icon.

## **Grunge and Estonia: Why did it not happen?**

In Europe, in the early 1990s, grunge took the youth by storm. I remember going to Denmark in the early 1990s, and then moving to Berlin in 1994, where most young people dressed in the grunge style sporting Dr. Martens boots, nose rings, flannel shirts, ripped jeans and long hair. I recall talking about the popularity of grunge later with one of my friends who is originally from Seattle. When he moved to Germany in the early 1990s, he was surprised by the popularity of the 'Seattle sound' in Europe. As he told me, the grunge scene remained marginal in Seattle even in the years when grunge bands performed globally in stadiums and sold millions of albums. In Seattle, few people were aware the

success of Nirvana in the ‘outside world’; the most popular music of the region was rock and more commercial metal such as Metallica.

The failure of grunge to become a mass movement in Estonia is related to the post-Soviet reality, the transformation of society and the socioeconomic situation, and the very different ideologies that existed in Estonia in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Although grunge was modestly popular in Estonia, there were never the grunge bands or distinct subculture that we know from Western Europe.

Western fashion was not unknown to Estonians, especially the young people. I heard in the Soviet era from visiting Western relatives that Estonians tend to dress with more fashion consciousness than people in the West. The reason for that was most likely easier access to Western goods than in other parts of the Soviet Union, and the will to stress Europeanness as a form of passive resistance to the Soviet regime. In 1986, new Soviet leader Gorbachev began his *perestroika* policy which also included slow but progressing liberation of the private economy. Suddenly private entrepreneurship was allowed and the opening of private cafes, shops and other enterprises followed. Travel to Western countries also became incrementally easier. Western private companies and institutions showed more interest in being active on the other side of the Iron Curtain and more and more of them gained ground in the Soviet Union, including Estonia. Apart from education and political institutions, who created their networks and opened offices in Estonia, several Western charities also appeared. This is a very important factor to take in account because many Western initiatives that entered Soviet Estonia were charities, often Christian associations. Some of the humanitarian help delivered to the people of Estonia was used clothes collected in Western countries. What was for Western people a gesture of humanitarianism and help for people who struggled with late Socialism and early post-Socialism, was welcome access to fashionable Western clothes for Estonians.

When Estonia declared its independence in 1991, the work and activities of Western charities intensified. Simultaneously private entrepreneurship increased and clubs and discotheques appeared, along with private ownership of radios. This was the time of increasing popularity of Polish pirate audio cassettes, which were sold in every market. Private television channels and providers also appeared at this time enabling access to music television channels, especially MTV and VH1. I recall how young people were glued to their TV screens when MTV showed an alternative music programme titled “120 Minutes”, in which

punk, grunge or new wave videos were shown. This programme was recorded to VHS tapes and watched later or distributed among friends. This meant that finally young people in Estonia had access to Western youth culture, both music and clothes. Here lies the reason for the modest reaction to grunge in Estonia.

The underlying driver of this different response to grunge was that basically all Western music, which had hardly been heard before, flooded in at once, so the distinctions weren't nearly such an issue. There was just too much coming in within a short time span. One suddenly had an abundant choice of music and styles, decreasing the overall presence and importance of grunge. Without any doubt, there were plenty of young people who enjoyed contemporary commercial music such as dance, pop, rap and some electronic music. Tartu became one of the epicentres of the Estonian alternative music and was overwhelmed with fresh and old music. There was a group of young people at the Pallas art school in Tartu who enjoyed contemporary alternative noise music such as Sonic Youth. Simultaneously a group of young people appeared dressed in black who were fans of Depeche Mode but also some dark music like Klinik or Front 242. They called themselves futurists but were actually part of global goth subculture. This time was also the beginning of the electronic dance music scene, as part of which some DJs started to organise the first raves, where they played acid house music. This all overlapped with the increasing popularity of folk punk and the introduction of British ska music. For metal fans new music styles appeared like trash and death metal; at the same time the Estonian metal scene was blooming and new bands mushroomed, releasing their music on cassette. Almost simultaneously to grunge the global popularity of the Brit pop started, and had echoes in Estonia. In the early 1990s several Estonian 'indie' bands (Dallas, Borax, etc.) sprung in front of the audience, finding their inspiration in shoegaze or Britpop. To make things worse, several Western libraries wanted to get rid of their vinyl collections and sent dozens of boxes as humanitarian help to the library at the University of Tartu. These boxes contained classic punk, jazz and reggae records, and suddenly young people were able to dig into music history and fill the gaps in their knowledge. It is not an overstatement to argue that in the early 1990s, young music fans had too much new and old music to listen to and make sense of.

One can argue that, culturally and historically speaking, people from the 'Eastern block' simply didn't have an awareness of the distinctions between different musical styles and their respective ideologies because the way these

differences had worked themselves out over time in the Western context wasn't experienced by people in Eastern European countries. The standard academic approach to Western youth cultures is that these groups had their own social bases. In early post-Soviet Estonia, society was still relatively egalitarian and social distinctions, especially among young people, were not big. The flow of these types of music and subcultures was massively 'compressed' for eastern audiences. It took a huge amount of time and energy to orientate oneself and make sense of the various music styles. Young people were mainly unaware of the background of the music they were listening to; its roots, its connections, history, meaning, context, etc. It took some time for nuanced understandings of differences to develop in Eastern Europe, and, of course, it happened in a different context.

Another aspect of grunge that absolutely failed to find any understanding was its anti-consumerism ideology. In 1991–1992 one was able to choose between some limited offer of new fashionable Western clothing in new private shops and boutiques. What turned out to be popular was buying second hand Western clothing either in charity shops or markets. For young people, it was more affordable and accessible. I mentioned above that Seattle youth bought their clothes in second hand shops as an anti-consumption political statement. In Estonia, in the first years of independence, buying second hand Western clothing was a sign of conscious consumption. For example there were places where one could pick up, if lucky, brand clothing for little money. Second hand clothing offered an opportunity to create one's authentic style because one could find items no one else had. Therefore, Polish pirate cassette tapes and Western second hand clothes stalls at the market gave to a young person an illusion of being part of global contemporary youth culture (cf. Luvaas 2009 and Hannerz 2015 on similar processes in Indonesian indie and punk music). In general, in Estonia being part of a subculture was not understood as an anti-system, anti-consumer statement but an elitist step to demonstrate one's knowledge of contemporary Western trends and styles.

In such a 'supermarket of styles' (Polhemus 1997) grunge did not succeed in finding its socioeconomic niche, although as a subculture grunge did form in Estonia. The music was played on the radio, videos were shown on music television channels and the print press published articles on grunge artists and style. One reason for the failure was that grunge offered very little in the way of a distinct authentic subcultural identity. Ripped jeans were hugely popular in

Estonian alternative circles, long hair on men was sported by metal and indie/Brit pop fans, Dr. Martens boots were either not on sale or too expensive for a young person to afford. The symbol of Grunge, flannel lumberjack shirts, were popular but were soon adopted by mainstream youth and TV personalities. Elements of the grunge look – the same flannel shirts – were popular among punks, as were jeans shorts, although these clothing items were also popular in the metal scene. The music was liked by punks, metal fans and indie youth.

In Estonia, US grunge existed in a very different context from its place of origin. Its protest appeal and outsider ideology were never understood by Estonian youth in the early 1990s. Logically, highly modernist, hedonist and escapist Brit pop gained more popularity because it directly addressed the thirst of Eastern European youth for Western consumer culture, a culture they had gained access to only a short time previously. The rougher side of punk and metal reflected the socioeconomic and political transition. Estonian punk still had a strong outsider/outcast ideology from the Soviet period offering social space for youngsters who did not fit in a society where everywhere seemed to be possessed with making money and buying new Western consumer goods.

## Conclusion

Finn Mckenty says in his abovementioned video that grunge was a reaction to boring mainstream pop music and rap. We can say that in Estonia, the massive influx of Western mainstream and alternative music in the early 1990s hindered the rise of grunge as a subculture. It is natural that all the small genres, movements, strains of expression, are inevitably turned into something else, generally something broader and less nuanced, in the perception of the people who didn't create it, and the further they are from its context in place or time, the more this is the case.

Estonian society was in transformation in the early 1990s. The Estonian Republic declared its re-independence in 1991, although many Socialist era structures and institutions still existed and shaped people's everyday lives. Simultaneously, in Estonia a wild entrepreneurial capitalism bloomed that expressed itself in an abundance of small kiosks, shops, clubs and cafes. These places were also a space for youth subcultures: one suddenly had places to

hang out and meet people who listened to similar music and looked similar. These new spaces were also places for the exchange of music and other trends.

Grunge, a short lived early 1990s alternative rock subculture from the northwest of the USA, gained huge popularity with the iconic album *Nevermind* by Seattle band Nirvana. The music as well as the clothing style established a subculture with a distinct identity. In the northwest of the USA the grunge scene was an anti-consumerist, feminist, slightly environmentalist subculture based on the DIY ethos and strategies. In the Seattle area, grunge was a scene for local non-conformist youth who lived in a rather poor industrial environment. Grunge music addressed social issues like disenfranchisement, suicide, rape, support of women or mistrust of authority. In Europe, after the breakthrough of *Nevermind*, grunge became a short lived popular youth trend as part of which many young people sported long hair, nose rings, Dr. Martens boots and flannel shirts.

In Estonia, grunge surprisingly never established itself as a subculture. The failure of grunge to gain ground serves here as an example of glocalisation. The late 1980s and especially early 1990s were a time when Estonia was opening its cultural space to Western youth and pop culture. The influx of the Western music and styles was enormous and grunge was just one of them at a time when new trends and music styles seemed to appear with a speed that one was hardly able to follow. Grunge as a music and style was well known in Estonia although it was not able to offer distinct social and political identity. Grunge's melancholy, addressing of social issues, anti-consumerism and feminism did not fit the Estonian youth world of cheerfulness as young people discovered new music and fashion. It is certainly not wrong to argue that Brit pop's hedonism better suited the zeitgeist of the era, which is one reason why grunge was just one music and fashion style among many. The weak resonance of grunge in Estonia was caused by the different context. Feminism and environmentalism were not important issues after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and an anti-capitalism stance would have been strange in a society that was rushing towards capitalism. The symbol of grunge, wearing second hand clothes, had a different meaning in Estonia. Charity shops and second hand market stalls were for young people a source of affordable Western clothing with which they could create a new identity that linked them to the West. In hindsight, one could argue that competition in the 'supermarket of styles' was too strong and grunge didn't gain ground. Instead of carving a subcultural niche, grunge was

annihilated between different alternative rock styles such as punk, indie and metal. Grunge in Estonia is a good example how a global cultural phenomenon is absorbed by other subcultures that already have stable scenes and networks.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TATBS3hV4Mo>.

## References

Azerrad, Michael 1992. "Grunge City: The Seattle Scene". *Rolling Stone*. April 16.

Byers, Will 2008. "Grunge committed a crime against music—it killed the guitar solo". *The Guardian*. July 30

Hall, S., and T. Jefferson (eds) 1986. *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*. London: Hutchinson.

Hannerz, E. 2015. *Performing Punk*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Hebdige, D. 1979. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. New York: Methuen.

Kallen, Stuart A. 2012. *The History of Alternative Rock*. Lucent Books.

Luvaas, B. 2009. 'Dislocating Sounds: The Deterritorialization of Indonesian Indie Pop', *Cultural Anthropology* 24(2): 246–79.

Misiroglu, Gina 2015. *American Countercultures: An Encyclopedia of Nonconformists, Alternative Lifestyles, and Radical Ideas in U.S. History*. Routledge, p. 343

Polhemus, T. 1997. 'In the Supermarket of Style', in S. Redhead, D. Wynne and J. O'Connor (eds), *The Clubcultures Reader: Readings in Popular Cultural Studies*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 130–133"

Westhusen, M.M. 2005a. *Zonenpunk. Punk in Halle (Saale) in den 80er Jahren*. Halle: Verein für erlebte Geschichte.

Westhusen, M.M. 2005b. 'Zwischen Händel und Chemie. Punk in Halle, Eisleben und Dessau', in R. Galenza and H. Havemeister (eds), *Wir wollen immer artig sein ...: Punk, New Wave, HipHop, Independent-Szene in der DDR 1980–1990*. Berlin: Schwarzkopf & Schwarzkopf, pp. 334–347.

Ventsel, Aimar 2016. Estonian Invasion as Western Ersatz-pop, in Ewa Mazierska, *Popular Music in Eastern Europe: Searching for a New Paradigm*, Palgrave, pp. 69–88.

Ventsel, Aimar 2019. Eastern Europe as Punk Frontier, in Ewa Mazierska and Zsolt Györi, *Eastern European Popular Music in a Transnational Context*, Palgrave Macmillan: Cham. 101–116.

Williams, J. P. 2006. 'Authentic Identities: Straightedge Subculture, Music, and the Internet', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35(2): 173–200.

Williams, J. P. 2011. *Subcultural Theory: Traditions and Concepts*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Zsófia Réti 2016. 'The Second Golden Age': Popular Music Journalism during the Late Socialist Era of Hungary, in Ewa Mazierska, Popular Music in Eastern Europe: Searching for a New Paradigm, Palgrave, pp. 149–170.

Zubak, Marko 2016. The Birth of Socialist Disc Jockey: Between Music Guru, DIY Ethos and Market Socialism, in Ewa Mazierska, Popular Music in Eastern Europe: Searching for a New Paradigm, Palgrave, pp. 195–215.

**Aimar Ventsel** is Senior Research Fellow in Ethnology at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Tartu, Estonia. His main research areas are the Arctic cultural space, social anthropology, punk culture and underground music.

E-mail: aimar.ventsel@ut.ee

ORCID: 0000-0002-3242-5471

# From Windowsills to Rooftops: The Cultural History and Modern Uses of Domestic Plant Cultivation in Estonia

**Mare Kõiva**

*Leading Research Fellow, Department of Folkloristics, Estonian Literary Museum, Tartu, Estonia*

*e-mail: mare@folklore.ee*

**Abstract:** This study examines the historical development, cultural meanings, and contemporary practices of indoor, balcony and rooftop gardening in Estonia. Combining historical sources, folkloric data, horticultural literature and qualitative interviews, the research highlights how urban plant cultivation reflects broader social, environmental, and aesthetic transformations across the 19<sup>th</sup>–21<sup>st</sup> centuries. The study demonstrates that urban gardening in Estonia is shaped by intertwined cultural, ecological, architectural and personal factors.

**Keywords:** urban gardening, indoor gardening, balcony gardening, Estonia, cultural practices, sustainability, green infrastructure, qualitative interviews

## 1. Introduction

Gardens on balconies and windowsills have a long history, dating back to the nineteenth century. For example, in Philadelphia, USA, in the 1870s, the production of so-called plant boxes that were installed on windows began. By the late nineteenth century, windowsill gardening was valued as a form of mass activism that brightened life, taught the use of useful plants and even made suburbs—rarely invested in—more attractive. From the United States, the

movement spread to Europe as one of the initiatives of the women's movement for urban reform. Sonja Dümpelmann (2025) emphasized that this way of using plants fostered connections between people and plants, between interior and exterior spaces, between domestic and public spheres and between urban centers and the periphery. According to her, these innovations were evident but also served to conceal larger social problems.

Housing construction and the development of new, well-connected urban districts (such as Annelinn in Tartu, Mustamäe and Lasnamäe in Tallinn (Nerman 1998, 2012) also played a role. The first wave of apartment buildings lacked balconies, partly due to insulation requirements, but in the 1970s–1980s and later, most larger apartments (three- to four-room units) included balconies. Most of these have been enclosed later by owners with plastic windows to save heat (although the glass panels can be slid aside and opened).

In Estonia, the development of gardens and horticulture has undergone significant transformation throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, shaped by socioeconomic factors, environmental concerns and shifts in land use. From philosophical point of view these developmental trajectories reveal adaptability, creative solutions, and a gradual yet notable change in attitudes, including the consolidation of ecological perspectives (Alavoine-Mornas; Girard 2017; Dümpelmann 2025, 2023; Gorris *et al.* 2025). Alongside historical sources, surveys of older Estonian food cultures (Moora 1980, 1991), and the numerous horticultural manuals published throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Banner 2019; Viks 1985). At present, the analysis of vernacular plantcultivation practices remains somewhat preliminary, and a systematic examination of the available reports still lies ahead. Although it was initially planned to include folkloric accounts in the dataset, this idea had to be abandoned. For now, it can be noted that the existing folklore databases (containing material from the seventeenth century to the midtwentieth century) merit closer scrutiny. These sources reveal, for example, that both children and adults used plants as food, as light snacks and as a means of diversifying everyday meals. For example, an entry in the medicinal plant database *Herba* (2008–2012) notes:

*Toorelt sõime lapsena: põrknaid, kaalikad, kurke, kapstajuurika südamikke, sibula pääliseid; mõned lapsed sõid isegi toorest kartulit. Siis veel: ube, herneid, suhkruherneid, hiireherneid ja vikki; riivimise ajal kapsast jne*

As children we ate raw: burdock stalks, turnips, cucumbers, the cores of cabbage stems, onion greens; some children even ate raw potatoes. Also beans, peas, sugar peas, vetch, bird vetch, and clover; during shredding, we ate cabbage, etc.

Proverbs reflect suitable conditions for planting (cf Krikmann *et al.* 2023) (e.g., *Istuta kapsast, et lammas kahe tallega vahel magama sünnib* / Plant cabbage with rows wide enough for a ewe and her twin lambs to lie down between them, type 3201), observations about growth (the most widespread being the motif that cabbage continues to grow vigorously on Michaelmas night / *Mihklipäeva öösel kasvab kapsas veel villase lõnga katki*, type 6827), as well as comments on consumption and cultivation, such as the notion that cabbage needs horse manure to grow and pork fat for proper cooking (*Kapsas on hää asi toiduks küll, aga tahab ikka hobuse perses kasvada ja sea perses keeta* / Cabbage is good food, but it needs to grow in a horse's backside and be cooked in a pig's backside, type 3204). The requirement to add meat when preparing cabbage dishes appears both humorously and in a pragmatic, work oriented tone (*Parem sääse kints kapsas kui üsna ilma lihata* / Better a mosquito's thigh in cabbage than no meat at all, type 11198). The most popular motif (type 6827) highlights cabbage's long vegetation period and its continued growth even in the cool autumn months.

Several elements of earlier food cultures are reflected in sayings and idioms as well—people may be described as *grown together like cabbage and turnip* (EFKA 2004). Reports also mention ornamental plants and decorative shrubs; lilac, for example, is repeatedly noted as a plant belonging to the homestead environment. It is evident, however, that these sources form a complex body of material, with entries scattered across manuscript collections and distributed among folklore genres of different character, function and narrative structure. There are also reports concerning ornamental plants and decorative shrubs; for instance, lilac is repeatedly mentioned as a plant that “belongs” next to the home. Certainly, this represents a complex field of practices, the analysis of which is complicated by the fact that the collected materials are distributed across different folklore genres according to their thematic characteristics, whereas in manuscript collections they often appear randomly intermingled.

Only herbal medicine and plant names can be traced systematically through specialised card catalogues (see the Plant Name Card Index, *Eesti Taimenimed*,

*Herba*), as well as Gustav Vilbaste's manuscript collection (Vilbaste TN). Valuable information is likewise found in corpora of traditions associated with various mythological figures (for example, *lendva* ('witch arrow') and its remedies; *halltöbi* (malaria, or ague) and its treatments; the plague, as documented by Paal 2014, Hiiemäe 1997, Kõiva 2007), as well as within central narrative and belief genres. A preliminary overview suggests that no material has been collected specifically on indoor gardening; this represents a topic for future research. The cultivation of plants in urban space has similarly received little attention beyond that given by landscape architects. At the same time, folklore collections would allow us to examine whether, and in what ways, changes in plant use were recorded, since plant migration — including migration together with people — is a well-established phenomenon. Although the present topic does not directly contribute to the study of biological diversity, it nevertheless helps maintain awareness of "how it is known, how it is protected, and who should protect it, plants" (Corson & Campbell 2023).

Gardening practices have attracted increasing scholarly attention in recent decades, particularly with regard to architectural aspects, but also in connection with suburban home gardening, sustainability and lifestyle changes. Alongside the goal of preserving biodiversity, the cultivation of food plants is especially encouraged, though the aesthetic dimension of plants should not be underestimated.

Studies indicate that both Scandinavia and Estonia are able to produce only 16–24% of the fruits and vegetables they require, due to local climate, soil quality and other factors. At the same time, every effort is made to motivate people to grow more of their own food locally. For example, before the COVID19 pandemic, during it, and after it, Estonia saw an intensive campaign presenting new ideas — including hydroponics — and encouraging people to acquire plants and seeds with the claim that indoor and balcony cultivation offers significant potential, since even potatoes can be grown on a balcony, a windowsill, or in an apartment (Kartuli kasvatamise 2015).

In addition to the Scandinavian context mentioned above, similar tendencies can be observed elsewhere, for instance in cities in Udmurtia, for which statistical data exist. According to the Udmurt researcher Suntsova (2025), windowsill and balcony gardening accounts for approximately 24% of the population in the Volga region and the Urals.

Philosophical, aesthetic, and practical perspectives have changed several times over the past century, making these topics particularly compelling. They allow us to trace shifts in general cultural patterns and values, while interviews add individual polyphony and personal opinions to the overall picture. I provide a brief overview of the use of balconies, windowsills and small balcony gardens for plant cultivation in Estonia. I describe the types of green spaces found in Estonian cities and identify the main factors that facilitate or hinder indoor gardening. The respondents' answers reveal why and which plants are grown indoors and on balconies. A further research task is to determine what kind of stories and narratives accompany plant cultivation, how plants are represented in contemporary folklore, and to map more precisely the relationships that people develop with plants in interior spaces.

## 2. Method

This study seeks to explore what motivates individuals to engage in gardening and plant cultivation in indoor environments, as well as the perceived benefits of hobby gardening. By combining a review of scientific literature with qualitative interviews, the research aims to identify the changing functions of garden plots, the role of indoor and outdoor green spaces and the cultural meanings attached to gardening practices. The analysis draws on folkloristic approaches to interpret narratives and practices, offering insight into the interplay between tradition, modernity and personal agency in the management of green environments.

The literature review includes scientific articles and studies on Estonian gardens published between 2000 and 2024. Articles were retrieved via Google Scholar using keywords such as *balcony gardens, indoor gardening, plants in the flat, community gardens, school gardens, gardens, summer house, and youth*.

For more detailed analysis, I conducted qualitative interviews. The questionnaire addressed the presence of a garden plot, its changing functions, ways of managing domestic green spaces and major transformations. Subsequent questions focused on indoor gardening, including the cultivation of decorative, medicinal, and edible plants on balconies and windowsills, as well as growing seedlings for one's own garden and sharing them with friends and colleagues.

All respondents were informed about the purpose of the interviews. The interviews were conducted between 2023 and 2025. Each respondent owned

either a house suitable for yearround living or a summer cottage used only during the warm season, and all also had a permanent apartment in Tartu. Distances from their workplace in Tartu ranged from 6 to 280 km. Most respondents kept houseplants both at home and at work and cultivated decorative, food and gourmet plants. Transcriptions and responses are preserved in the Estonian Literary Museum's research archive EFITA. The aim of the interviews was to gather baseline material for several studies.

### 3. How Green Are Estonian Cities and Settlements?

For today's urban residents, living spaces are typically located in multi-storey apartment buildings or private houses. In such cases, parks, green corridors, and private indoor gardens provide a unique experiential environment for interacting with plants. Urban green spaces encompass but a wide range of forms: various types of parks; gardens surrounding single-family or multi-family dwellings and higher buildings; school gardens; orchards; and community gardens. They also include green areas such as small forests, agricultural and grassland plots; green barriers such as hedges and tree fences; and spaces associated with specific activities—squares, playgrounds, hiking areas, song festival grounds, stadiums, botanical gardens and green zones around historical buildings or on hillsides. Other shared spaces include cemeteries, churchyards, military areas, and more. The scope of interaction with greenery is thus broader than it may initially appear. Urban landscaping is further regulated by rules that determine the composition of plants. Based on ownership and location, gardens where food plants are cultivated or communal gardens are established can be divided into several main types; however, it also becomes clear that actual food cultivation remains modest in these contexts (cf. Kuperjanov & Kuperjanov 2025). At the same time, cities—following the example of other regions—display a noticeably greater abundance of flowerbeds, hanging baskets and greenery.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, several experimental horticultural stations were founded, and their output reached both fields and household gardens. The Polli and Jõgeva breeding stations played a central role in local plant breeding and consumption, offering varieties adapted to Estonian conditions. Ornamental plants were also acquired from fairs, where local growers, collective farm nurseries and other producers sold their plants. One such cultural landmark is the

Türi Flower Fair, now held for 46 years, where people travelled both to sell and to purchase plants. Through this and other fairs, new varieties developed by private breeders, ornamental plants, clematis hybrids adapted for Estonia (see Vaigla 1982)<sup>1</sup>, and seedlings of fruit and berry bushes spread widely.

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, seeds and plants became easily accessible through gardening shops. Later, construction and homeimprovement chains added small garden sections selling seeds and seedlings ranging from ornamental plants to berry bushes and fruit trees. Some grocery stores also sell similar assortments. Plants can still be purchased directly from nurseries and greenhouses, ordered for home delivery, bought at openair markets, or obtained within local communities — especially neighbourhoods. Neither seeds nor plants are prohibitively expensive. However, one major change in the market has come from increased imports from Western Europe, particularly the Netherlands, whose plant stock often does not tolerate the local climate.

One distinctive feature of Estonian home gardening is the significant presence of cultivated wild berries — lingonberries, bilberries, cranberries, dewberries, and others — in balcony boxes and garden plots. Historically, intensive breeding to improve local forest and bog berry varieties continued until the final decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, because distribution was tied to the Soviet Union and eastern markets (Vilbaste, Raal *et al.* 2021), the situation changed radically in the 1990s: Western European and Scandinavian markets were already saturated, and largefruited but less flavourful American cultivars began arriving in Estonia. As a result, American and Western European berry seedlings pushed local varieties into niche production. This shift indirectly affected domestic plant breeding: several development programmes and centres were discontinued, and some vocational schools, including Tihemetsa (founded in 1925), ceased operation.

To this picture must be added the substantial and understudied sphere of homebased, doityourself plant cultivation — a highly polyphonic and culturally rich domain that reveals the subtle structure of human–plant relationships and embodied horticultural skills. Interviews show that people carefully select the varieties they wish to grow on their windowsill, balcony, in their apartment, garden plot, or summer cottage. The bestperforming plants are used for seed saving, and new seedlings are grown from them for future seasons.

## 4. General Conditions for the Development of Indoor Gardening

**Architectural transformation** over the past century has been rapid. Traditional peasant dwellings remained conservative well into the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Port 1930, Pärdi 2021, Viires 2008, Viks 1985, cf Henderson-Wilson *et al* 2017), typically featuring small windows; even when newer house types emerged, windowsills suitable for plant placement were still uncommon.

In summer, our windowsill was somewhat wider, and it was typically used for placing a vase with flowers. It may be important to note that these were usually cultivated plants; wildflowers were not used indoors. They were certainly brought home — wood anemones (*Anemone nemorosa*), globe flowers (*Trollius europaeus*), bird's eye primroses (*Primula farinosa*), cowslips (*Primula veris*), oxeye daisies (*Leucanthemum vulgare*) — but the flowers kept in the house were generally cultivated varieties. Wildflowers were considered a different category, and so-called “weed plants” were not brought indoors. Some of the flowers listed earlier might be considered such today, but ours was a modest household, and anything beautiful was acceptable. (Interview 1)

The selection of plants changed at some point in the 1970s — I believe around that time. In autumn, a second pair of windows was installed for insulation, leaving a narrow space between them. During my childhood, some people placed cotton or paper in that space and arranged strawflowers (ölelilled)<sup>1</sup> on top. In newer buildings, windowsills are wide, and people place aloe, cacti, primroses, and other seasonal plants there. (Interview 3)



Figure 1. Plants on a kitchen windowsill in Annelinn. Photo by M. Kõiva, 2025.

#### 4.1. Balkonies, windowsills

Gardens on balconies and windowsills have a long history, dating back to the nineteenth century. For example, in Philadelphia, USA, in the 1870s, the production of so-called plant boxes that were installed on windows began. By the late nineteenth century, windowsill gardening was valued as a form of mass activism that brightened life, taught the use of useful plants, and even made suburbs—rarely invested in—more attractive. From the United States, the movement spread to Europe as one of the initiatives of the women's movement for urban reform. Sonja Dümpelmann (2025) emphasised that this way of using plants fostered connections between people and plants, between interior and exterior spaces, between domestic and public spheres and between urban centers and the periphery. According to her, these innovations were evident but also served to conceal larger social problems.

The main drawback of such balconies is their limited load-bearing capacity. The 21<sup>st</sup> century marked a new period, with efforts to maximize balcony space and introduce rooftop gardens. Beginning in the 1960s, the celebration of International Women's Day triggered an explosive development in floristry (Helsloot 2007, Kõiva 2013). Although the season was still cold in Estonia at that time, the widespread custom of giving flowers—both in workplaces and in the more private sphere of family life—created favourable conditions for the

expansion of the flower trade. This included commercial exchanges between socialist countries as well as local breeding efforts. Alongside forced early spring flowers (daffodils, tulips, hyacinths and others), the cyclamen was particularly valued. It was kept on household windowsills and used to decorate institutions, and it also formed part of family-related customs—all of which contributed to its increased cultural value.

Several exotic holiday plants (such as poinsettias and amaryllises) reappeared as opportunities and traditions of festive decoration expanded. In Estonia, balconies began to appear slowly on brick apartment houses, initially as narrow, half-metre-wide open platforms or enclosed structures integrated into the façade and functioning as practical extensions of the apartment.

Interview excerpts reflect these changes:

I moved various flowerpots to the balcony. I did not want to keep plants indoors, except in the kitchen. I grew up in a detached house with a garden in Tallinn; there were flowers both in the garden and inside the house, but not nearly as many as today. Now people grow far more.  
(Interview 7)

At times, concerns circulated about allegedly harmful exotic plants—such as Sansevieria and certain cacti—which led people to give their plants away and switch to seasonal balcony flowers instead of permanent houseplants.

Balconies extending outward from the façade began to appear during the 1960s–1970s. A common practice was to attach flower boxes to the balcony railing and change the plants according to the season.

In spring I planted early spring flowers—daffodils, then pansies, then other colourful flowering plants—and in autumn I replaced them with heather. They never survived the winter. I always bought new plants. Our flowerbox wasn't very long. Other apartments had boxes as well, though not all. (Interview 12)

With the introduction of new building materials and the spread of reinforced-concrete apartment houses—and only from the early 21<sup>st</sup> century onward—the construction of large balconies and rooftop gardens began as a new architectural approach, first in Tallinn and later in Tartu.

Interviews also reveal a wide range of balcony-related problems, such as unsuitable temperatures for plants, the need for effective irrigation systems, and design constraints:

I love my large balcony very much—I call it my private solarium. But since it faces east, the sun burns everything there. All the plants get scorched. An open balcony also receives rain and storms. I keep a swing there for reading, many plants too, but most of them dry out in summer despite watering. (Interview 22)

My parents eventually had the problem that although they had a large open balcony full of greenery in a quiet area, and it was accessible with a wheelchair, they simply did not care about it. They weren't used to going out onto the balcony. When ill, it requires mental and physical effort. Their caregiver took them there a few times a week to get fresh air. (Interview 5)

We have a closed balcony with shelves for plants, and even a few berry bushes. Not for the berries, but because they are nice and green, and the cats like to lie on the soil. There are also tools, a drying rack, winter tyres. There is practically no room left for us. (Interview 2)

Garden magazines and horticultural advice encouraged people to grow grapes, tomatoes, peppers and similar plants on balconies, but many respondents found these experiments unsuccessful:

We tried repeatedly to grow grapes, tomatoes, peppers and more. The gardening press recommended it, but nothing came of it. Only cherry tomatoes grew there more or less reliably. (Interview 10)

Another practical factor is related to the age and structural limitations of Sovietera apartment buildings: Many apartment buildings are now over 50 years old. Although they have been insulated and fitted with new ventilation systems and utilities, balcony structures still require that plant boxes and other loads be placed along loadbearing walls.

## 4.2. Rooftop Gardens

The major innovation was the introduction of flat roofs (with a slope of up to 5%), which began to be used on buildings constructed from concrete blocks. Until the 1970s, and for some time thereafter, construction practices largely favoured pitched roofs, including mansard roofs (Metslang 2014, 2016). Flat roofs, which started to be used on highrise residential buildings, were initially approached with considerable caution (especially with winter snow loads in mind).

Ongoing scepticism has been reinforced by newer recommendations to convert existing roofs into rooftop gardens. The ageing of older buildings and the limited load-bearing capacity of their roofs—meaning that their use would require additional investment, technical expertise and regular maintenance of any garden established—has prompted both curiosity and hesitation. The establishment of rooftop gardens has taken root slowly, despite strong promotional claims that they can cool buildings, extend their lifespan and provide additional recreational space and areas for growing food plants.

Nevertheless, the development of various types of green roofs has begun, especially in connection with sustainability goals, concerns regarding climate change and the broader promotion of biodiversity; similar developments can be found in other cultural contexts as well (for different arguments, see Jia *et al.* 2024; Babnik & Unetic 2020; Mesimäki *et al.* 2019; Laanemets 2025; Zimmermann 2020; Ortí 2025).

Respondents also expressed their own concerns regarding these new types of gardens:

Our household cellar, built in the 1960s after pre-war models, has a naturally formed rock garden on its roof. No soil has been added, yet various plants grow there. The advantage of the cellar roof is that it has so far maintained itself and offers an attractive appearance. We have occasionally cut down a few maple saplings. (Interview 4)

Questions also emerged about unintended plant growth on roofs:

I must say that the roofs of my buildings with different coverings began to develop moss within a few years. At the moment, it is still rather

modest. I try to clean the roof regularly. Or perhaps these are algae that people refer to? (Interview 8)

Newspapers have published photos of flat roofs covered with moss and bird nests, with other plants developing around them. But whether it is worth cultivating such growth intentionally—I do not know. I enjoy, from time to time, being in a city café together with friends. Twenty years ago there was already discussion that solutions where everyone in a building is a writer or a physicist are not ideal, because people remain in their small circle and lose broader social belonging. Relationships also wear out. In short—this does not seem purposeful to me. (Interview 3)

Honestly, I still don't understand the idea of "grow potatoes on your roof." Perhaps those early zero-energy house concepts and images of cabbage-covered walls were interesting, but beyond that—pure utopia. (Interview 15)

Respondents additionally expressed scepticism about whether southern European rooftop practices could be applied in Estonia:

Of course, it is delightful to sit in a café on the 23rd floor, for example in Spain or Italy, where bushes provide shade and sunshades are used. But would plants survive on our roofs in these winds? Or would storms simply carry them off into the city streets? (Interview 12)

The answers and the personal reflection suggest that rooftop gardens may not suit every lifestyle, and that older roofs may not be ideal — are fully aligned with what research shows: that green roofs require regular maintenance and ongoing cleaning, especially to prevent moss and algae buildup. They require a structurally strong, modern roof designed for added load. Spontaneous moss growth is a sign of moisture problems, not a good foundation for a garden.

Also wind uplift is one of the most significant risks for rooftop vegetation. Without engineered layers (drainage, stabilising edges, properly weighted substrate), plants can indeed be torn off by high winds; light-rooted plants would be far more vulnerable. Flat roofs in northern climates must meet strict requirements to prevent wind damage.

## 5. Results of survey

An interesting aspect of indoor plant cultivation concerns the contrast between the official distribution and purchase of plants and seeds on the one hand, and selfpropagation practices on the other.

Decorating window sills with balcony boxes planted with seasonal plants, flowers, and sometimes even berries (such as strawberries and blueberries) became common in the twentieth century, spreading especially in the 1970s and afterwards. For apartment dwellers, balcony boxes provided an opportunity to personalize their urban homes, while for gardening and market trade they meant the addition of a new product category alongside goods intended for flower beds. Research does not indicate attempts to prescribe which flowers should be grown on balconies; this has always remained an individual choice, depending on the owners' tastes.



Figure 2. Surprisingly tasty garden cress. Photo by M. Kõiva, 2025.

Houseplants and balcony plants are purchased from shops or grown from seed (especially herbs, specialty plants and seedlings intended for outdoor planting), and this is an activity that continues almost year-round, because planting takes place practically continuously. Creating suitable conditions—additional lighting, managing and maintaining watering systems—is a task each person handles in their own way. It is noted that some plants remain indoors or on window sills on balconies, some are moved to the garden, and some are shared with acquaintances and friends.

Today the windowsill has a much more practical meaning than it did in my childhood – it is a place where food plants and herbs are grown. (Interview 5)

These herbs add freshness to food and improve its quality, but it is clear that one cannot harvest from the windowsill every day, only occasionally. Therefore, onions, dill and other herbs for daily use are usually bought from the store. (Interview 9)

The reasons for self-cultivation stretch back further into the past than the respondents remembered. According to them, this was used by their relatives who were born at the beginning of the 20th century or even earlier. Today choosing the seeds and cultivating the plants oneself entails the power to choose oneself whether the plants were worthy and whether the fruits were tasty and of the proper size.

We used to grow everything from seed for a long time; my grandfather collected seeds – at some point we also bought plants. But generally, the seeds were saved for the next year. A plant had to be very special for us to buy something additionally. (Interview 17)

Besides my own flowerbed, I don't really plant much else. But in spring I have seeds on the windowsill, and soon I'll put them into soil so that something can start growing. ((Interview 10)

Buying plants from garden sections in grocery stores, from markets, or from nurseries isn't more expensive than growing from seed. Growing from seed requires energy, watering, and other resources. The condition of the plants must be monitored — they have to be repotted and constantly cared for. I don't have that much time, so I prefer to buy larger seedlings. (Interview 4)

I prefer perennial plants that bloom for several years in a row, but such plants are rarely offered for balconies and apartments. In winter, plants left on the balcony usually freeze. (Interview 16)

The biggest disappointment has been growing peppers, tomatoes and grapes— they don't survive on Estonian balconies. And even if they did, grapes would

need to be the kind of plant with roots in the ground, growing up to higher floors—but they have a height limit. It's acknowledged that mainly hanging plants succeed (though they are often intended for just one season) and small cherry tomatoes, which are mostly decorative. However, local varieties of watermelons, melons and grapes have been bred for open ground.

It became clear that many people began expanding their plant cultivation on balconies and windowsills even before the campaigns of the 2000s, when broader use of balconies for growing plants started to be recommended. The plants grown indoors and on balconies include the following:

**Table. Locations and Corresponding Plant Types**

Location	Category	Plant Types / Examples
On the windowsill	a)	Green plants – no exact data
On the windowsill and balcony	b)	Leafy vegetables without large root systems: lettuce, spinach, Swiss chard, etc.; potted vegetable varieties: tomatoes, cucumbers, zucchini, as well as peas, beans, potatoes.
On the windowsill, in the room, and on the balcony	c)	A wide selection of flowers, including primroses.
Berries on the balcony	d)	Strawberries, blueberries, gooseberries, red currants, and others.
On the balcony, including indoors	e)	Trees and shrubs: mallow or hibiscus, palms, lilacs, small varieties of bird cherry, juniper.

Among herbs, some are traditionally grown in gardens (onion, chives, garlic, dill, mint, parsley), but others—such as bay leaf and pepper—can be bought year-round in any large store, and their cultivation is a new trend. There are also plants that can be grown outdoors but die from frost in autumn (lavender). The reasons given for growing plants independently include aesthetics, comfort, freshness, confidence in growing conditions, the desire to create an original green zone in the apartment and on the balcony and interest in experimentation. At the same time, some plants have acquired new uses: for

example, peppermint, recommended for tea and as a medicinal plant, is now used in smoothies, meat and fish dishes.

The question of when edible berry shrubs and miniature apple trees, as well as lilacs and all kinds of small tree and shrub forms known in Asian culture, migrated to apartment balconies still awaits further research. The initial hypothesis suggests that those who have a large garden around their house or outside the city are unlikely to plant shrubs and trees on a balcony.

## Conclusion

Historically, balcony and windowsill gardening emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as part of international urbanreform movements, designed to improve living environments and foster connections between people and plants. In Estonia, these practices developed alongside shifts in housing architecture—first modest balconies in Soviet apartment buildings, later larger glazed balconies and, recently, experimental rooftop gardens.

Folklore and historical sources reveal rich earlier traditions of plant use, including wild-plant consumption, seasonal food practices and ornamental plants associated with household identity (e.g., lilac). While folklore collections contain extensive plant lore, they provide little information on indoor gardening; this remains an unexplored research area.

Plant procurement and horticultural development changed significantly during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Polli and Jõgeva breeding stations played central roles in developing locally adapted fruit and berry varieties. Later, gardening shops, markets, nurseries, and international imports diversified plant availability, though Western European (especially Dutch) stock often proved unsuitable for Estonia's climate. After the 1990s, American berry cultivars supplanted many local varieties, reducing domestic breeding capacity.

Contemporary interviews demonstrate that indoor and balcony gardening serves multiple functions: aesthetic pleasure, personal wellbeing, the desire for freshness and control over growing conditions and the creation of personalised green spaces in urban homes. Respondents cultivate a wide range of plants—from leafy greens and herbs to berries, ornamentals and small shrubs—using windowsills, balconies, or combined indoor spaces. Seedsaving traditions persist, though many prefer to purchase seedlings for convenience. It reveals

a dynamic field where traditional plant relationships meet modern sustainability discourse, and where individual experimentation coexists with structural limitations. The findings underline the need for further research into indoor plant traditions, plant migration and the cultural narratives that accompany contemporary gardening practices.

## Acknowledgements

The author extends sincere gratitude to all respondents who generously contributed their time, insights and personal experiences. Their reflections and narratives significantly enriched the empirical foundation and analytical depth of this study.

This research was supported by the project EKM 82/20/3 “Narrative and Belief Aspects of Folklore”, whose assistance made the collection, analysis and interpretation of materials possible.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> At the Türi Horticulture and Beekeeping Society’s annual fair, horticultural companies, nurseries, and private growers sell their products. The fair remains popular to this day.

<sup>2</sup> The common strawflower (*Xerochrysum bracteatum*) is a highly ornamental dried flower originating from Australia, blooming profusely from July until frost. For drying, the flower heads should be cut before they open fully.

## Sources

EFITA - Digital archives, ELM, Department of Folkloristics.

Vilbaste TN – Gustav Vilbaste taimenimede kogu, 1907–1966 (The Plant Name Collection of Gustav Vilbaste), ELM, Estonian Folklore Archives.

## References

Alavoine-Mornas, F.; Girard, S. 2017. Green belts in the hands and minds of farmers: A socio-agronomic approach to farmers’ practices. *Journal of Rural Studies* 56: 30–38.

Babnik, Ines & Unetic, Ines 2020. Historical Gardens as an Inspiration for the Future of Urban Horticultural Gardens. *Urban Horticulture – Necessity of the Future* DOI: 10.5772/intechopen.90350. Ljubljana: IntechOpen.

Banner, Anneli 2019. *Eesti aia ajalugu* (History of Estonian Gardens). Tallinn: Vabaõhumuuseum.

Corson, C. & Campbell, L. M. 2023. Conservation at a crossroads: governing by global targets, innovative financing, and techno-optimism or radical reform? *Ecology and Society*, 28(2).

Dümpelmann, Sonja 2023. Growing Houses: Fusing Nature and Culture in the Early Twentieth Century, – *Roadsides* 010 (2023): 48–55.

Dümpelmann, Sonja 2025. Planting Inside Out: Window Gardening and Civil Rights in Nineteenth-and Twentieth-Century Philadelphia. *Buildings & Landscapes Journal of the Vernacular Architecture Forum*, 32(1): 27–60. DOI: 10.1353/bdl.2025.a954733

*Index of Estonian Plant Names*. Botaanika terminoloogia komisjon koosseisus Toomas Kukk, Urmas Laansoo, Ott Luuk, Sirje Mäearu, Peedu Saar, Sulev Savisaar, Kersti Tambets. Tartu: Eesti Looduseuurijate Selts.

EFKA 2004 = Baran, Anneli, Hussar, Anne, Õim, Asta, Õim, Katre 2004. *Eesti kõnekäändude ja fraseoloogia andmebaas* (The Database of Estonian Proverbs and Phraseology). Tartu: EKM Folkloristika osakond. <https://www.folklore.ee/justkui/>

Gorris, Philipp, Bodin, Ö., Giralt, D., Hass, A. L., Reitalu, T., Cabodevilla, X. & Hannappel, I. et al. 2025. Social-ecological perspective on European semi-natural grassland conservation and restoration: Key challenges and future pathways. *Biological Conservation*, 304 art. 111038. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biocon.2025.111038>

Helsloot, John 2007. Vernacular Authenticity: Negotiating Mothers' Day and Fathers' Day in Netherland. Margry, P. J. & Roodenburg, H. W. (eds.). *Reframing Dutch Culture between Otherness and Authenticity*. Humpshire, UK: Ashgate Publishing Limited, pp. 203–224.

Henderson-Wilson, C.; Sia, K.-L.; Veitch, J.; Staiger, P.K.; Davidson, P.; Nicholls, P. 2017. Perceived Health Benefits and Willingness to Pay for Parks by Park Users: Quantitative and Qualitative Research. *International Journal Environment Res. Public Health*, 14.

Herba = Kalle, Raivo & Sõukand, Renata 2008–2012. *Herba. Historistlik Eesti Rahvameditsiini Botaaniline Andmebaas* (The Historic Estonian Ethnomedical Botanical Database). Tartu: ELM Department of Folkloristics.

Hiiemäe, Reet 1997. Mütoloogilised haigused I. Eesti katkupärimus. (Mythological illnesses I. Estonian plague lore). Tartu: Department of Folkloristics, Estonian Literary Museum.

Jia, S., Weng, Q., Yoo, C., Xiao, H., Zhong, Q. 2024. Building energy savings by green roofs and cool roofs in current and future climates. *Urban Sustainability*, Vol. 4, 23. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s42949 024-00159-8>.

Jüris, Hans 2024. *Rohelised katused magalarjoonis: kestlik linnaarendus Annelinnas* (Greenroofs in Residential Districts: Sustainable Urban Development in Annelinn). Tartu: Eesti Maaülikool, Põllumajandus- ja keskkonnainstituut.

Krikmann, Arvo 2023. *Eesti vanasõnad* (Estonian proverbs). Andmebaas, 2. ed. Tartu: EKM folkloristika osakond. <https://folklore.ee/eesti-utlused/vanasonad/est/>

Kartuli kasvatamise 2015 = *Kartuli kasvatamise ülim juhend potis: samm-sammult juhised*. (The Ultimate Guide to Growing Potatoes in Containers: Step-by-Step Instructions). <https://et.jardineriaon.com/potis-kartulite-kasvatamine.html>

Kuperjanov, Maris & Kuperjanov, Andres 2025. Horticultural Cooperatives in Estonia and Lifestyle Change: The Case of Ihaste. *Yearbook of Balkan and Baltic Studies* 8 (2): 100–117. DOI: 10.7592/YBBS8.2.05.

Kõiva, Mare 2007. *Eesti lendvapärimus* (The witch arrow). Tartu: EKM Teaduskirjastus.

Kõiva, Mare 2013. Calendar feasts: Politics of adoption and reinstatement. Laineste, Liisi; Brzozowska, Dorota & Chlopicki, Wladislaw (eds.). *Estonia and Poland: Creativity and change in cultural communication*. EKM Teaduskirjastus, pp. 187–210.

Laanemets, Desiree 2025. *Eesti Maaülikooli linnaku katuste rohehaljastus: mikrokliima, elurikkus ja puhkevõimalused* (Green Roofs At The Estonian University Of Life Sciences Campus: Microclimate, Biodiversity, And Recreational Opportunities). BA Dissertation. Tartu: Eesti Maaülikool, Keskkonnaplaneerimise ja maastiku-kujunduse õppekava.

Metslang, Joosep 2016. *Katuseraamat* (The Roof Book). Tallinn: Tammeraamat.

Moora, Aliise 1980, 1991. *Eesti talurahva vanem toit* (I 1980, II 1991) (The Traditional Foods of the Estonian Peasantry I, II). Tallinn: Valgus.

Nerman, Robert 2012. *Mustamäe ajalugu 1960. aastate alguseni* (The History of Mustamägi up to the Early 1960s). Tallinn: Robert Nerman.

Nerman, Robert 1998. Lasnamäe ajalugu (History of Lasnamägi). Robert Nerman.

Robert 2012. Lasnamäe ajalugu (History of Lasnamägi). Robert Nerman.

Ortí, Marta Alós 2022. *Urban Ecology: Novel Ecosystems, Novel Challenges*. A Thesis for applying for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Applied Biology. Tartu: Eesti Maaülikool.

Paal, Piret 2014. *Halltöbi. Eesti muistendid. Mütoloogilised haigused 2.* (Auge. Estonian legends. Mythological illnesses 2). Tartu: ELM Scholarly Press.

Port, Jaan 1930. *Talu ümbruse kaunistamisest ja taluaedade korraldamisest* (On decorating the surroundings of a farm and organising farm gardens). *Taluperenaine*, 2.

Pärdi, Heiki 1921. *XX sajand – murrang Eesti maa-arkitektuuris* (The 20<sup>th</sup> century as a Transformative Period in Estonian Vernacular Architecture). Tallinn: Eesti Vabaõhumuuseum.

Suntsova, N. 2025. Container Gardening and Windowsill Vegetable Growing: LittleKnown Pages in the Horticultural Practices of the Inhabitants of Vyatka Province. Popova, Elena (ed.). *The Vegetable Garden in Folk Culture: A Collective Monograph*. Izhevsk: UdmFIC UrO RAN, pp. 50–60.

Vaigla, Adolf 1982. *Elulõngad (Clematis Cultivars)*. Tallinn: Valgus.

Viires, Ants 2007. *Eesti rahvakultuuri leksikon* (Encyclopedia of Estonian Folk Culture). Tallinn: Eesti Entsüklopeediakirjastus.

Viks, Artur 1985. *Aiandus väikeaedades* (Gardening in Small Gardens). Tallinn: Valgus.

Vilbaste, Kristel 2014. *Jõhvikas* (The Cranberry). Tallinn: Varrak.

**Mare Kõiva** is leading research fellow of the Department of Folkloristics at the Estonian Literary Museum; her research area are charms, healers, and folk religion, she is currently focused on mythology and multilocal living style.

Email: [mare@folklore.ee](mailto:mare@folklore.ee)

ORCID: 0000-0003-3769-3878