

Transborder Routes and Rituals: Between Global, Local and Niche

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Abstract: Setomaa is a region where borders, identity, and place intersect in complex and dynamic ways. Historical shifts in political borders have deeply influenced cultural practices, social memory, and everyday life. At the same time, the Seto community has demonstrated remarkable resilience, maintaining and reinterpreting its identity through language, religion, and cultural expression.

In the contemporary context, tourism – especially in its slow form – offers both opportunities and challenges for different niche experiences. It provides a means of sustaining local economies and promoting cultural visibility, while also requiring careful balance to avoid commodification. When approached thoughtfully, slow tourism can support the preservation of Seto identity by fostering meaningful encounters between visitors and local culture.

The article describes legends, rituals (Malyi/Myla, Värskä, Saatse) and newly invented events that exemplify how peripheral regions can become central in understanding the relationship between place, memory, and identity.

Keywords: boarder area, cultural turism, identity, legend, Pious Onuphrius, ritual, St Paraskeva Piatnitsa, St George

Local history, Cultural Values in Border Area

The Setos are a distinct ethnic and cultural group inhabiting south-eastern Estonia along the present-day border with Russia. Their population has been subject to notable fluctuation depending on criteria of identification: while approximately 12,000 Setos were recorded in 2011 (Kommel 2013), the 2021 census showed that 25,800 people identified as Seto (Population Census 2022). This increase reflects not only a demographic change but also a growing willingness to self-identify with local heritage and cultural distinctiveness, and to find out more about one's ancestral roots.

From a cultural theory perspective, Seto identity can be understood through the lens of collective memory and place. As Maurice Halbwachs (1980: 43) and Pierre Nora (1996: 5–23; cf. Lowenthal 1998: 121) have emphasised, collective identity is reconstructed through shared symbols, narratives, and memory practices, while individual identity also operates within this framework. At the same time, place understood in the sense developed by Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) and Christopher Tilley (2006: 21–22) – is not static but relational, combining spatial and temporal dimensions. Setos in Setomaa exemplifies this dynamic: it is a region deeply rooted in historical experiences yet continuously redefined through changing political contexts and cultural reinterpretation.

Historically, the question of belonging and administrative affiliation emerged in the early 20th century. Efforts to integrate Setomaa administratively into Estonia culminated in the Tartu Peace Treaty of 1920, which defined the borders of the newly independent Estonian state. However, subsequent geopolitical developments reconfigured these borders, leaving parts of historical Setomaa outside Estonia (Lõuna 2003, 2024). This has had lasting consequences for identity formation, as the perception of 'one's own' and 'foreign' territory remains deeply embedded in cultural consciousness.

Language has been one of the central markers of Seto identity. Although the number of local language (dialect) speakers has increased overall in Estonia (17% of the population in 2021), the proportion of Seto dialect speakers remains relatively small (1.8% in 2011, 3% in 2021 (Kommel 2013: 69; Population census 2022). At the same time, the symbolic value of the language has increased. Local dialect movements, education initiatives, and media representation have contributed to a renewed appreciation of linguistic diversity (Pajusalu 2024). Nevertheless, migration trends – especially since the mid-20th century – have shifted everyday language use toward standard Estonian, particularly in urban contexts.

Cultural resilience among the Seto has been supported by community practices such as choral singing, gatherings, and the establishment of new cultural institutions (for example a centre built by pop singers such as Lenna Kuurma from Vanilla Ninja, or Jalmar Vabarna from Trad. Attack!). The traditional polyphonic singing

style known as *leelo* has become a key emblem of identity and is recognised internationally. In recent decades, local cultural production – including poetry, literature, and festivals – has further strengthened the visibility of Seto culture (Jääts 1998; Velsker 2021; Kõiva 2025).

Religious affiliation provides another important dimension. Orthodoxy has historically played a central role in Setomaa, reflected in both material culture (church buildings, icons) and ritual practices. The 2021 census confirmed that about 20% of Estonia's population is affiliated with a religious denomination, with Orthodoxy representing a significant proportion. For the Seto, however, religion is not only a matter of belief but also an integral component of cultural landscape and identity. Restricted access to churches and sacred sites across the border has therefore had profound cultural implications.

A distinctive feature is formed by Seto *tsässon*, village chapels, which have been restored over the past decades, with new ones also built. Since this is a unique phenomenon in Estonia, it has given Setomaa a characteristic and attractive appearance for nearly a century. The local Orthodox church – where general Orthodox saints and rules intertwine – has over time been one of the region's markers and sights of interest (Loorits 1934; 1949; Kuusing 2009; Benfoughal *et al.* 2021), as have local feasts (Hagu 2022; Valk *et al.* 2021; Valk 2011, 2019; Loorits 1959). The census confirmed that 20% of residents aged 15 and over in Estonia are affiliated with a religious denomination (Population Census 2020). Based on all of the above, we see a distinct environment in which global and local opportunities for tourism development are interwoven. Setomaa is suitable for nature, cultural, and religious tourism. There are also favourable conditions for the development of so-called slow tourism.

In recent decades, tourism has become a significant economic and cultural factor in Setomaa. Estonia as a whole receives several million visits annually (including both international and domestic tourism), with rural and nature-based tourism gaining increasing prominence. Setomaa forms part of this broader trend, attracting visitors interested in heritage, music festivals, handicrafts, and local cuisine.

However, the tourism model in Setomaa aligns particularly well with the principles of slow tourism (Robinson *et al.* 2011). Slow tourism emphasises: deeper engagement with local culture, longer stays and reduced mobility, authenticity and sustainability, respect for local traditions and environments.

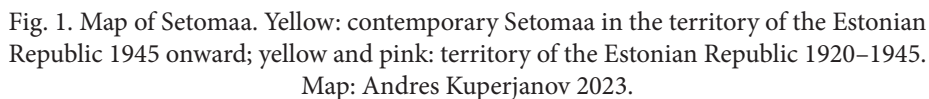
Setomaa offers a unique setting for this approach. Instead of mass tourism, the region provides small-scale accommodation (guesthouses, farm tourism), local cultural festivals such as Seto Kingdom Day¹ and Leelo Day², and tradition-based experiences including crafts, singing, and Orthodox calendar rituals.

At the same time, tourism dependency creates vulnerability. As noted by local leaders, visitor numbers can fluctuate significantly (for example, reduced attendance

at festival events), reflecting both external conditions and broader changes in travel behaviour. This makes it necessary to rethink tourism strategies in a sustainable and resilient way.

Jalmar Vabarna, elected chief in 2025, comments: “But in Setomaa, we still rely very heavily on tourism. In the old days, a thousand people used to come on Leelo Day, but this year there were 300. So you do start to worry, what’s going on. But the weather was poor too...” (Väärtnõu 2025).

Tourism statistics indicate that visitors to Setomaa are predominantly domestic tourists, but that their numbers have declined, especially in Võru County and Setomaa (Population Census 2024). Because several important religious centres are located in Setomaa (on both sides of the border), and the saintly narratives and related celebrations connected to them are still known today, we present an overview of three centres along with selected practices and legends associated with them: Saint Paraskeva Piatnitsa, Saint George, Pious Onuphrius. We also present some distinctive local events that take place in the surrounding area. Stories of saints and traditions connect these sites to global Orthodox practices, yet they also display unique features. How these are manifested in Setomaa is examined.



Mõla (Malyi) and Pious Onuphrius

The Mõla (Malyi) Valley, about 20 kilometres from the Estonian border, and the cemetery on its slope, are a symbol of the history of Petserimaa. Mõla Church has two altars, the older of which was used to conduct services in Estonian for the Seto congregation between 1920 and 1951 (Raudoja 2020–2022). Pious Onuphrius (? – June 12 1492) from Mõla is an Orthodox martyr about whose life is little known. The church and monastery are located on the bank of Lake Mõla near Izborsk and were founded by Onuphrius in the 15th century.³ We know that this was an important sacred place, destroyed by Bathory's forces in the 16th century and subsequently rebuilt despite being located in an area covered by forest and of little economic value. What is special about this church is that it has been operating almost continuously with only some short interruptions. The Seto and Estonian populations became sparse after the Second World War, but it was customary to visit the church and graves on Mõla Day (the Sunday after *Piitrepäiv*, St. Peter's Day, 12th July). In this way Mõla Day maintains strong family bonds and bonds between people and locations.

Between 1920 and 1944 several churches received support for reconstruction or the establishment of Estonian congregations, as the Estonian and Russian congregations were separated by a border law passed in 1934 (Piho 2012) and people had to start attending the church in their own language. Mõla Church also received money for reconstruction, and news about the church building process was reported in local newspapers as well as in general Estonian newspapers (*Päevaleht* 1936). *Päevaleht* describes the construction and the laws behind it:

The inauguration of the Church of the Nativity of Christ took place in Mõla Village near Izborsk on Friday. The Church was built in the 16th century and in recent years was dilapidated and abandoned. A new Estonian congregation was founded in Mõla during the congregation reform carried out in Petserimaa. The new congregation needed a place of worship, for which the old historical church was repaired and arranged for religious services. *Postimees*, June 1, 1936.

In 1938, a religious service in the church was reported, from where a procession led by a cross went to the proposed location of the new vicarage (*Postimees*, 03 May, 1938). The following are reports on the progress of the construction of a vicarage that would have room for both the priest and the sacristan on a beautiful hillside opposite the churches of Mõla (*Postimees*, 14 June, 1938); the opening took place in August 1938.⁴ According to the article, the separation

of the congregations had both good and bad aspects, with one problem being that people could no longer invite their parson to funerals.

The sacred topography and Mõla Church rituals are typical to orthodox feasts: There is a procession, and later some food at the graveside, and after that *kirmas* (*Kirchmesse*), a type of village party with songs, music and dance. In 1990 contemporary explanations demonstrated the integration of secular and sacred views. Orthodox people divided the sacral landscape as with the church environment, while others divided it into the secular (the natural environment, lakes, springs, hillsides, the cemetery) and the religious (man-made sacred buildings) (interviews, Mõla 1990).

The Mõla Church was built on a holy spring, and from the back wall of the basement under the altar, its water flows through a pipe to Lake Mõla. The spring is believed to have miraculous powers. There is a cemetery near the Church, which is located on the hillside. The Optjoki River flows through the lake, which receives water from lake Linnjärvi below Izborsk fortress and flows into Lake Pskov.

Living folk customs and manifestations of vernacular religion in Mõla are recorded several times over more than a century. Mare Kõiva remembers the Mõla feast in 1990 as an exceptionally crowded and emotional holiday. The central events were the procession around the Church led by icons, and the religious service in the Church. Anyone interested could pass under the icon to ensure health or donate to the icon. During and after the service, families sat at the graves of relatives, where food and bottles of vodka were placed. Everyone sat close together on the narrow burial plots because the cemetery was located on a hillside. The feast starts after the service and visiting the graves of relatives. Seto singers from Värskä and Tartu were in national costume and performed old style folk songs (cf Valk 2019a)

About 15 years later, ethnographer Anu Ansu's diary from 2013 confirms the same:

There are already many cars, very many with Estonian number plates. We pack food and then we hike to the church... There are a lot of people in the church, ... In the interim, we sit at the grave, then we move around. Since there are a lot of people, we can only observe the procession led by a cross from a distance. At almost all graves, there is eating in memory of relatives. ERM, field diaries 2013.

Mõla cemetery has also an old stone cross, a symbol of its long history.



Fig. 2. Food on a grave in Obinitisa in 2009. Photo: Merlin Lõiv.

There are some recordings of legends that speak mainly about the lives of St Onuphrius and Peter:

Anuhvri (Onuphrius) and Peter fasted in Mõla, one on one side of the stream, the other on the opposite side. One was upstream, the other downstream, neither knew the other. To the one who was on the side of the mountain, a turnip came in the river every day. When the turnip arrived, it whirled in the water until it was caught. This fasting person ate the turnip and threw the peel into the water, which went to the other fasting person. He who ate the peel became even more blessed. No one knew anything about these two until one day they were both found dead, with an inscription on their chest saying that a monastery must be made in that place. One man had a beard to his toes, the other had hair to his heels. ERA II 209, 24 (13) < Setomaa, Risova, 1939.

hair burned. “Where were you these three days, why didn’t you stay in one place? The one who built the bridge was dead through vodka and is on his back in the fire at the bottom of Hell. I was driven there for him.” The storyteller continues, giving an evaluation. “See how lucky the drunkard was – the Saint remembered him, but the angel punished the saint immediately. ‘Look now,’ said the Angel to the saint, ‘now fast for another thirty years because of the drunkard!’” ERA II 209, 11/2 (2) Setomaa, 1939

This 1939 legend shares several common motifs with other religious and hagiographic legends. In the Setomaa version, the ascetic fasts for thirty years, and the ‘merit’ gained through his fast is used for the benefit of a sinful (drunkard’s) soul. The narrative has four key points: (1) solitary asceticism and spatial isolation; (2) regular support from an angel as a supernatural helper; (3) a liminal crossing (over the stream) as a sign of a shift in the sacred regime, and the blessing uttered at that moment for the bridge-builder; (4) a three-day interruption in the arrival of the supernatural helper, which opens the narrative’s climax: the salvation of the soul from hell and the transfer of merits from the drunkard to the bridge-builder.

The closest motif match in Stith Thompson’s index (Thompson 1955–1958) is Q (Punishment and reward: The transfer of a good deed to another soul). In a minority of East Slavic religious legends, an angel or saint frequently brings food to a hermit (sometimes the angel is replaced by a bird; parallels can be found primarily in the lives of Elijah or the hermits), while in the majority the transfer takes place through prayer, or in later texts even through the liturgy rather than a brief prayer of thanksgiving, as in the Seto tale. The pattern of the sufferer in hell and the intercessor is similar in folk narratives: the sufferings of the sinful soul are visually marked by being ‘in the fire’: hell is eternity in the fire, boiling in a cauldron, etc., which is interrupted by the intervention of the saint or an intercessor. What distinguishes this story is the precise number: for three days the angel works to save the drunkard (hagiographic ‘three’ cycles of fasting, silence and trial, or three as a symbolic counterpart to the Resurrection and other significant events) and ‘thirty years were spent on that drunkard’. Such a direct and quantitatively formulated rendering is absent elsewhere, but it makes the structure and function of the Seto text transparent. The moral message of the story is twofold: holiness serves others, yet salvation also requires ongoing, personal, effort.

Saatse (Saatserinna) and Paraskeva Piatnitsa

The patron saint of Saatse Great Martyr Paraskeva Church, Paraskeva of Iconium (Greek Παρασκευή; Russian Параскева Пятница, Парасковия, Параскева

Нареченная Пятница (Duhavin 2025), also known as Paraskeva-Piatnitsa or Holy Friday), lived in Asia Minor (Türkiye), in the city of Iconium. The young girl, who lived in the 3rd century and was orphaned early, was devoted to helping others, and the torments she endured before her beheading were horrific: her body was torn apart and she was burned with fire. Her relics were known for their healing power. St. Paraskeva is regarded as the protector of fields and livestock, the healer of spiritual and physical ailments, and the guardian of family happiness and well-being. In iconography she is often depicted as a tall ascetic figure with a radiant crown on her head.

In commemoration of the Great Martyr Paraskeva, her namesake church in Saatse observes two feast days. Paraskeva Day (*päätnits*), celebrated on the last Friday of July – the eve of St. Elijah’s Day (Iljapäev, Old Style 20 July), so-called Elijah Friday or Päätnits – is a living tradition to this day. Relatives and friends who live elsewhere customarily return home for the occasion. The feast is open to visitors to Setomaa as well as to guests from farther afield. The second feast day is the memorial day, known as rämmanipäiv, observed on 10 November (Old Style 28 October).

The Day of Rämman is connected with the Russian word *remen*, *remenie*, which allows us to consider the possibility that this tradition was introduced by Russian believers who called themselves, in Russian, *khlyst* (‘self-flagellators’). In the folk tradition of the region of Pskov, St. Paraskeva is also called *Remyanki*. There is a widely spread tradition that she is honoured on that day together with the martyr Neonilla. The name of the martyr Neonilla refers to flax in folk tradition; the memorial day of both saints falls in the period of the flax harvest, which includes beating and cleaning the flax with a swingle. The icons of St. Paraskeva depicts scenes of flagellations. It is possible that these scenes have influenced the traditional folk name of St. Paraskeva.

Saatse is today a church village on the Estonian–Russian border, with a mixed Estonian and Russian congregation. The earliest wooden church in Saatserinna was built in 1673. In the same year, a wooden church was erected in Saatse, and about 10 metres north, near a sacred tree, a small eukterion/chapel (*tsässon*) stood (Plaat 2011; Plaat & Maasik 2011; Raudoja, Mäkeläinen & Külvik 2011). From the first church, a bell cast in 1679 has survived. The site of the old wooden church is now marked by a stone column in the Saatse cemetery. A new stone church was built in 1801, and the present church dates from the same year.

A distinctive feature of the Saatse church is its association with two recently canonised saints: the parish elder Stefanus and Father Vassili, who were executed by the Bolshevik authorities in 1919 and canonised in 2004. Father Vassili is regarded as a saint who protects Estonian children and youth (Kuusing 2009).

In the Orthodox tradition, healing springs associated with saints are widely known; chapels (*tsässonad*) or churches are often built at these sites (as we have already seen at Mõla church), as well as other sacred natural objects such as stones and trees. The icon of Paraskeva appeared both near water and atop a tree (a spruce, pine, or birch have been mentioned), which was understood as a sign that a *tsässon* or church should be erected there. Wooden figures of Paraskeva-Piatnitsa spread across north-western Russia in the mid and late 16th century and were often located near sacred stones, springs, and trees, acquiring in the view of some researchers the status of a local *genius loci* (Panchenko 1998: 170–171).

According to Aleksandr Panchenko, stones bearing traces associated with the saint are numerous in northern and north-western Russia (Panchenko 1998: 169–171), including, for example, at the sacred site of Il'loša (Holy Elijah) in the Vod region (see Västriik 2007: 141).



Fig. 4. St Vassili. Photo: Andres Kuperjanov 2018.

The veneration of Paraskeva was already well known in the areas around medieval Novgorod and Pskov, where she was one of the earliest saints whose cult reached the region together with the adoption of Christianity (Kuusing 2005, 2009; Panchenko 1998). Her cult later spread to the centres of Moscow and the Volga region, to mention only part of the vast area in which she was revered.

In north-western Russia, her feast has remained relatively rare. For instance, among the Old Believers of Karelia she is known as the Holy Martyr Paraskeva (Paraskovija Piatnitsa), whose day (Old Style 28 October) was celebrated in only a few villages (Zabelino, Korgorka), which is why she has remained among the so-called “minor saints” (Fišman 2003: 157). At the same time, in contemporary Votic-Russian (formerly Ingrian Finnish-Russian) mixed-settlement areas there is a rich body of traditions and legends related to Paraskeva and her veneration.

Estonian-Seto legends and accounts provide an opportunity to examine the information about the saint that circulated in the late 19th century, and later during the 20th century. We see here a form of folklore that is interestingly syncretic and contains multiple universal motifs, for example, the famous motif of the nightly destruction of daytime work, which in the narrative is linked to an icon placed in a tree.

Truusman reports how the processions led by a cross around the Church start on Thursday and last until late on Friday. “Everyone attempts to touch the cross for a moment, especially those suffering with some malady. The elderly, the sick, mothers with babies, boys and girls crowd around it. Money, small crosses, items of clothing, ribbons are placed on the cross. On the north side of the Church, there is a person designated by the priest who collects these donations.” (Truusman 2002 [1890]). Texts, one from 1938, reports the wider notoriety of the Day, talking about the rituals: “On this last day a fair number of people will gather in Saatse. Not only from the southern corners of Estonia, but also from Latvia. To honor, there is a stone cross, which is worn on the shoulders around the church on this day, dipped in water and this water collected in bottles.” (ERA II 208, 34 (5) < Setomaa, 1938).

Most of the surviving legends about Paraskeva Piatnitsa concern the discovery of the site where the church should be built. When the icon is found in a tree, the story usually ends with a note about a healing stone cross located near the local church. Narratives about the building of the church have been recorded both from local Setos and Russians: the cross is found either in a body of water, in a tree or even inside a tree, and the discovery is understood as a sign that a church must be erected on that spot (Soolind 2013: 16; Kuperjanov 2019: 85). The same motifs are known in the traditions of Catholic saints as well as in Estonian folklore (Kõiva 1996; Valk 2011).

Another legend speaks of a stone cross that travels from its location to Saatse in order to indicate the precise place where the church is to be built. However, the

stone cross must travel three times for the discoverer to understand its message. This version was recorded from her parents in 1939 by the well-known folklorist and researcher of Seto folklore, Veera Pino:

In this way it disappeared three or four times and was always found in the village of Saatserinna. Then the person who found the cross thought that the village of Saatserinna was the most suitable place for building the chapel. And so a church was built in the village of Saatserinna, not a tsässon but a church. ERA II 248, 53/4 (7) Usenitsa, 1939.

The great Estonian folklore collector Jakob Hurt refers to the Saatse Paraskeva Day (*päänitsapäev*) in his description “Setoköstõ pühi’ ja tähtpäävä” (“Seto Feasts and Holy Days”). Here he highlights the sacred object – the wooden image of Paraskeva (Paraskeva puuslik) – as well as the stone cross, which is carried around the church, bringing healing to those who bear it, or to those who pass under or touch it (Piho 1990: 70–71; see also Loorits 1959: 27; Saarlo 1996: 119–120).

Leonid Zurov, drawing on his 1926 fieldwork and comparing his findings to earlier data from 1673, notes that “votive wax animal figures, candles and threads twisted into a figure-of-eight knot, threads with wax seals, wool, butter, cheese, and milk are brought to the sacred pine of Saatse as vows” (Benfoughal et al. 2021: 70–71). Ethnographer Mare Piho (2021: 534) also associates these wax figures – partly following earlier researchers – with survivals of Catholic practice. At the same time, it is known that wax votives were widespread in 17th century Livonia (Köpp 1959: 223) and in Estonia more broadly (The Chronicle of Russow). This reflects a broader domain, a phenomenon crossing ethnic and confessional boundaries, with parallels found in Orthodox contexts as well, for example in Bulgaria, whose archives preserve numerous wax and metal figures of animals, humans, and specific body parts, but also Greek and Roman (cf. Hughes 2017).

A similar thanksgiving offering for healing, made to a saint, appears in a legend recorded by Ello Kirss:

In Pskov there was a man with a diseased leg. “If my leg were to heal, I would give Saint Paraskeva a silver leg.” The leg healed. – Later I myself saw that this silver leg had been fastened to Paraskeva’s belt with chains. ERA II 286, 242 (221) < Setomaa, 1939.

Some legends focus on the icon, the stone cross, or the chapel/church, while others recount episodes from the life of Paraskeva. The Estonian scholar of religion Oskar Loorits (1934) noted that Seto religious narratives contain linkages to cultural texts beyond folklore, resulting in contemporary syncretic stories. One such connection is illustrated in the following life story, where a biblical motif (a father

and daughter set adrift at sea in a boat without oars) is skilfully combined by the narrator with Daniel Defoe popular literary figure Robinson Crusoe. Living alone on an island, Crusoe rescues the girl cast ashore by the sea and even finds some tools. The girl becomes Robinson's helper, and he gives her the name Friday after the day Paraskeva was discovered:

Piatnitsa (Päätnitsa) appeared like this: there were religious people, a daughter and a father. The daughter's name was Paraskeva. They were both tied up, put into a boat and pushed out to sea. The boat was wrecked at sea. Paraskeva dragged herself onto one piece of the boat and reached the other shore across the sea. Robinson lived there. He rescued Paraskeva from the sea and also got some tools found in the boat. But he didn't know what the girl's name was. He called her Friday because it was Friday. That's how it was. ERA II 286, 241 (219) Setomaa, 1938.

In the next legend, particular emphasis is placed on extraordinary piety: Paraskeva is chosen as the Bride of Christ, meaning an especially devout person. Even as an infant she refuses breastmilk on Wednesdays and Fridays – the holy days and suffers for her faith. The legend also includes the motif of discovering an icon in the branches of a tree:

[P]araskeva is the bride of Christ. Christ thought about life and sought a bride for himself, even though he knew that he had to go another way. Paraskeva was so devout that she was said to refuse to take her mother's breast on Wednesday and Friday. These were fasting days in the old times. The priest wanted to kill Paraskeva. Why does she stick to Christianity? In Saatse, there was an icon of Paraskeva found at the tip of a birch. It was taken from there but came back at night, so a church was built in that place. After *remnepäätnitsa*, winter holidays already come, then New Year, then water baptism and again candle day. ERA II 209, 247/8 (18) Setomaa, Lõkova, 1939.

The third example explains the miraculous healing performed by Paraskeva in Saatse and the healing power of the stone.⁵

Mother and daughter were alone. The daughter was very sick. Mother prayed vigorously to God. The daughter was immediately so sick that she smelled all over. Couldn't move in the bed. Her name was Paraskeva. The mother bowed and prayed before the image of God, and that very day she saw her daughter healed. And for the daughter, in Saatse, such a great church was made, where all the people go to pray

to God in her footsteps. There is one large stone cross that is carried around the church. Many sick people have been cured in her footsteps. ERA II 194, 346/51 (5.12) Setomaa, Palo, 1938

Värška, St. George

Värška settlement originated from the auxiliary Pskov-Pechory monastery, which was located near Värška Bay. The monks who started here supplied the monastery with goods that arrived by ship, and with berries and mushrooms, which were found in abundance in the local forests. From 1759, a congregation was founded for local Seto and in place of the auxiliary monastery, the first wooden church was built and an Estonian priest appointed. For centuries, Värška celebrated the memorial day of the local saint, St. Jüri (Georgius the Great Sufferer) on May 6, according to the old calendar. From 1922, the bishop regularly visited the parish on this day. The new church was built using the people's own money between 1900 and 1907.

St. George's Day marked the beginning of spring and spring work in the Estonian folk calendar. The Day came to Estonia through both the Western and Eastern Churches and contains common features with the tradition of nearby areas. St. George Day functions as a performative cultural system in which ritual practices, symbolic acts, and collective memory converge to articulate a philosophy of renewal and balance. The cyclical transition from winter to spring is not merely an ecological and natural phenomenon but is conceptualised as a preparation for rebirth in which harmony between human beings and nature is restored.

In older tradition visiting people, borrowing food and items, field work and bringing trees or branches home were forbidden otherwise snakes might come home with them. It was forbidden to look at or use household objects that were elongated in shape and resembled the body of a snake (spindles, rolling pins, needles, distaffs, ropes): "If on St. George's Day you see a spindle at home, you will see many reptiles in the summer" (Vinokurova 2006: 172). In some places, sewing and weaving were prohibited to prevent pests from attacking the plants. Making noises near the home, breaking trees, as well as washing clothes were also forbidden in order to avoid lightning (Kõiva 2004, Jüripäev).

St. George's Day as a horse holiday probably spread to Estonia from the Slavs and was quite usual in Orthodox areas; it was still an important holiday as late as the 1930s. In Värška, there was also a consecration of water in the church, with which the animals were later sprinkled (this custom was also known among Russians in nearby areas (Panchenko 1996; Vinokurova 2015, Egorinpäiv)). In the Northern Vepsian tradition, the custom of bathing horses on St. George's Day (when the spring was warm) was preserved (Vinokurova 1988: 8; 1996: 94). For

the Seto people, blessing horses at church was central and was one of the customs that could not be ignored. This important custom has disappeared today because people no longer keep horses, they have been replaced by cars.

George is the protector of horses. He also had a horse. A white horse, and St. George sat on its back as if he were born on it. There is also St. George's church on the beach. St. George's day is still considered a holiday. The horses are brought to the church yard. The priest brings out the icon of St. George and moves around the horses with the icon.

George is also the guardian of the herd. If someone had a St. George icon or a wooden statue at home, they went to the barn with it. Before St. George's day, do not go through the herd, do not stand on a stone. The first grass will become fodder for the animals starting from George's Day. ERA II 209, 242/3 (5) Setomaa, Jankino, 1939.

It was customary to put a candle in front of the icon for the success of the herd and ask for a blessing for the herd. Easter eggs were carried around the herd. Where possible, a priest was invited to consecrate the herd when it was released into the pasture. And the image of St. George was carried around the herd by the priest or by the farmer.

When we began to let out the herd at home, the shepherd and the master worshiped before God. Then they took a bowl, put an egg in a bowl, one icon and a candle also, lit in advance. Dad stood on the threshold of the barn, let the animals go out for the first time under the icon. Then the priest went around the herd three times with the incense pan in his hand. Dad went out of the gate in front of everyone, with the herd behind. The shepherd threw an egg over his head. It was observed that if the egg remained intact, then there was no need to be afraid of wolves. On the morning of St. George's day, the same protective ritual was held again. Mum put two more eggs in a bowl. One was given to the shepherd, but the other was taken to George. We always went to Pohomolova. They have George's *tsässon* there, the priest comes to them from Pangavitsa. ERA II 286, 93 (74) Setomaa, Mokra, 1940.

St. George Day absorbed the customs and beliefs of nearby anniversaries (ploughing and cattle release to pastureland). St. George's Day was the most important day for warding off wolves. Most often the ritual took place by a bonfire, and these visually striking rites included symbolically 'locking' the wolf's mouth, or driving wolves away with burning torches. The custom was known more widely in eastern Estonia and also, for example, among the Vepsians and the Komi peoples (Vinokurova 2006: 118; Konakov 2015).

According to belief and legend, the patron saint of wolves tied up the wolf's mouth on St. George's Day and thus they could not attack domestic animals (Mencej 2001; Kõiva 2019). The ruler or master of wolves is not only believed to fasten the wolves' mouths but, according to legends, also to feed them during times of food scarcity. This is reflected in tales in which a farmer, wandering in the forest, accidentally witnesses food being given to wolves. The twist in the story is that there is not enough food left for a wolf who arrives late, and the patron advises the wolf to eat the farmer hiding behind the bushes instead. A related motif appears in a longer Seto fairy tale, in which the son of a poor man undergoes many adventures and eventually becomes the fiancé of the Sun's daughter. He later takes revenge on all who have wronged him or caused him sorrow. One of his long-standing conflicts is with St. George, who repeatedly tells the wolves to eat the youth's only inheritance, a young foal. The young man paints the foal in different colours several times to trick the wolves, but finally St. George instructs them to devour both the foal and its owner. After becoming the Sun's son-in-law, the young man also takes revenge on St. George, among others (Kõiva, Kuperjanov 2022).

Back in the 19th century, St. George's Day was the end of service contracts with the manor, or the day of moving to a new rented household. Among these customs that have largely lost their original meaning, the longest survival has been enjoyed by local, gender specific festivals. Of these, *naistepüha* ('the women's festival') has been revived in south-eastern Estonia (or, according to some accounts, has been celebrated almost continuously (cf. Hagu 2022; Sarv 2000)).

Women and men celebrated holidays on St. George's Day in many Orthodox areas, with holidays also widely known among Baltic Finnic peoples (for example the Izhorians and Vepsians (Panchenko 1995)). Among the Orthodox believers of north-east Estonia, a special women's holiday was preserved until the early decades of the 20th century at which time married village women gathered either in a tavern or elsewhere to celebrate by themselves, men were forbidden from approaching the partygoers. The women's party was connected with milk magic. The same custom was known among the Vepsians and in north-western Russia. In north-eastern Estonia, St. George's Day used to be a men's holiday in some villages and a celebration of the ordination of shepherds, where, in turn, women were forbidden.

It has in addition to its status-related aspects, an important initiatory function in that only married women, usually younger women who had married during the previous year, were allowed to participate. Through participation, the young brides were raised to the status of full members of the married women's clan. A central axis of the Peko cult is the veneration of Peko as a fertility deity, a topic already discussed in scholarly literature in the early 20th Century (Eisen 1906, 1908, 1936; Ränk 1934; Loorits 1938), later by Paul Hagu (Hagu 1975; 1997) and Heikki Valk (Valk 2019b).

St. George's Day was a day to visit the cemetery and a village holiday celebrated throughout the 20th century despite different political situations. If the custom related to the herd has completely changed due to the change in the economy, visiting the church and graves and the party (kirmas) are still important today. Moreover, as the settlement area and places of residence of the local group have expanded into northern Estonia, larger cities, and even abroad, St. George's Day ('jüripäev') has taken on an important role in affirming kinship and tribal ties. For a dispersed community, this function has become even more significant, giving the occasion a special status.



Fig. 5, 6, 7. Food on a grave, Värskä, 2021. Photos: Andres Kuperjanov.

Branding Seto culture

Newly introduced and successfully established cultural ‘brands’ aim to engage different parts of Setomaa (the event is held in a different village each year), and with their open, humorous structure they have become distinctive and prestigious summer festivities.

Because the state border at Petseri was closed, Värskä emerged as a significant spiritual and cultural centre, as well as an economically important local hub. Värskä was and remains a place with a strong museum and folk song ensembles. The locality has always featured developed economic activity: mineral water production, a sanatorium, a high school, meaning that the custom spread among different generations with people arriving from other areas to observe it.

If the custom related to the herd has completely changed due to the change in the economy, visiting the church and graves and the party (kirmas) are still important today.

A new and successful part of the brand is Seto Kingdom Day, one of the most important events in today’s Setomaa, the largest gathering of Setos (Seto Kunin-griik, ‘Seto Kingdom’) and a huge attraction for visitors. Modelled partly on the forest Finns’ traditions in Sweden, a national event symbolically reenacting the closing of the border with Estonia has been held since 1994. The epic by the Seto singer Anna Vabarna, created in the 1930s and first published in 1995 (Hagu & Suhonen 1995), is the inspiration for the celebration. This is an occasion on which the Seto anthem and the use of Seto money play an important role. At the same time, the so-called Seto army is a theatrical and light hearted performance rather than a military institution. The competitions held during the event are likewise colourful and engaging: there are competitions for the title of master of wine, beer, Hansa (home-made vodka), doughnuts, bread and pies, in addition to which there are needleworkers, musicians, dancers and singers. As in any proper Kingdom, the Setos have their own king, Peko, the titular hero of the Seto epic (Honko 1984; Hagu 2022; Vesik 2019). According to legend, Peko rests in Petseri monastery, in the sand cave, and cannot rule the kingdom himself, so the Seto are ruled in his name by an *ülembsootska* (Chief Herald), who is elected during the Kingdom Day. In 2025 this was the internationally known musician Jalmar Vabarna. Particular scholarly and popular fascination has been directed toward material representations of Peko (Hagu 1997). It was precisely these material figures of Peko that sculptors redesigned for Seto museums and sacred sites, since when they have become one of the models of modern culture (including new spiritualities).

Local competitions include the Seto lace days in May (held at the Värskä’s Reegi House visitor centre) promoting Seto coloured lace. Local food is also presented as part of the Seto brand by museums such as the Farm Museum in Värskä, the

Reegi House in Värskas, Saatse Museum, Obinitsa Museum and the Seto Tsäimaja (Seto Tee House) National Restaurant.

From June to August there are folklore festivals in various villages. The festivals cater to every type of music from folk to rock, with young people from Setomaa taking to the stage alongside top Estonian artists. Guests have the opportunity to listen to good music in archaic local styles or to new music, taste local delicacies in temporary home cafes, look around the beautiful countryside or stay in one of the local campsites.

Sõirapäiv (11 June) introduces the traditions of Setomaa's signature food, sõir (a homemade cheese). On the day of the feast, Setos teach the preparation of sõir, and with the participation of visitors masters are selected. The event is combined with the Open Farms movement in which a number of farms are opened to visitors. Setomaa also celebrates Kosti Days when villages open their own cafes for one day, allowing visitors to experience a taste of local food.

Within the framework of this annual festival, a new singing stage will also be opened in Saatse, where the New Obinitsa Theatre will perform, as well as the band from Nedsaja Village.



Fig. 8. Kirmas, Värskas 2001. Photo: Andres Kuperjanov.

Conclusions

Setomaa is a region where borders, identity, and place intersect in complex and dynamic ways. Historical shifts in political borders have deeply influenced cultural practices, social memory, and everyday life. At the same time, the Seto community has demonstrated remarkable resilience, maintaining and reinterpreting its identity through language, religion, and cultural expression.

The most recent research concludes that heritage tourism in Estonia is a field with significantly underutilised potential. This could become an important source of income at the levels of the state, region and municipality, as well as for entrepreneurs and local communities. The research pointed out that there are numerous untapped opportunities for developing heritage tourism in Estonia, and that it could play a very important role in regional development and in sustaining life in Estonia's rural areas (Valk et al. 2021). At the same time, foreign tourists were highlighted (with the largest groups coming from Finland, Latvia, and Russia) although they are currently excluded from consideration.

Our analysis indicates that there is potential to increase domestic tourism further. The share of legends and rituals that remain relevant to this day, along with new attractive cultural forms and the rapid rise in the importance of Seto identity can play a part in the future of Setomaa.

In the contemporary context, tourism – especially in its slow form – can offer both opportunities and challenges for different niche experiences. There is ongoing potential in the interweaving of distinct Orthodox forms and local specificity.

This type of tourism could provide a means of sustaining local economies and promoting cultural visibility, while also requiring careful balance to avoid commodification. When approached thoughtfully, slow tourism can support the preservation of Seto identity by fostering meaningful encounters between visitors and local culture.

Ultimately, Setomaa exemplifies how peripheral regions can become central in understanding the relationship between place, memory, and identity.

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Data availability

The original data are archived in Estonian at the Estonian Literary Museum. Access is electronically restricted, with use only on an authorised archive computer that requires permission from the project manager.

Notes

¹ Seto Kingdom Day – <https://kogukond.setomaa.ee/seto-kingdom>

² Leelo day – <https://kogukond.setomaa.ee/leelo-and-unesco-status>

³ Mõla monastery has been mentioned as early as the 14th century (KNR 2017).

⁴ In 1960 Mõla church received support from the Russian SFSR and from the Russian church authorities.

⁵ Miraculous healing is one of the most popular motifs in the local folklore.

Archival sources

EFITA – Estonian Literary Museum, Department of Folkloristics, scholarly repository and tool

ERA – Estonian Folklore Archive, 1920–1944, manuscripts ERA, RKM.

ERM – välitööde päevikud (Field diaries), *Ajaveeb*. Estonian National Museum. Field diaries, A. Ansu, 2013.

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