

Information Transmission on the Border of *ingroup* and *outgroup* Groups

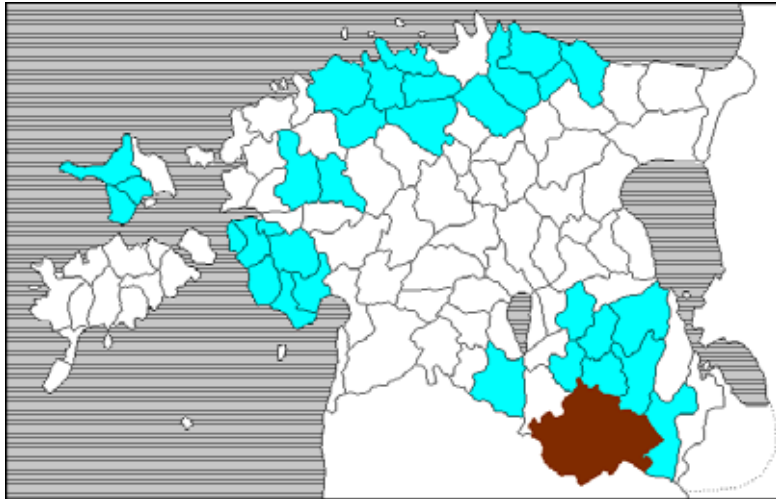
Opposition – integration

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1.

The following article is based on historical folklore, mainly on the collection of historical tradition compiled in the Estonian Cultural Archives in the 1920s-1930s. The collection was put to test in 1997 by the author and the students of Estonian philology as well as students of Estonian and comparative folklore who thematically worked through the texts for their pro-seminar papers at the University of Tartu. The current article focuses on the religious conversion movement in the 1840s and 1880s. The data from the cultural archives have been compared with “Talurahva käärimine Lõuna-Eestis XIX sajandi 40-ndail aastail” [“The Turmoil among Southern Estonian Peasants in the 1840s”], a study by Hans Kruus (published in Tartu, in 1930).

Narratives about religious conversion movement (i.e. the conversion to Greek Catholic/Russian Orthodox from Lutheran) are quite different from the descriptions of other religious movements (Moravianism, Baptism, the Awakening Movement, etc.). Firstly, because these stories present explanations for the conversion (the same thing is found in the descriptions of other conversions as well, but it is not the most prevalent feature). Secondly, economic-pragmatic considerations are discernable as compared to other reasons. Economical or other rational reasons for conversion have been known throughout history (e.g. the Christening of ancient tribes); however, such conversions did not take place by means of a change in one's *Weltanschauung*.



Areas that students have covered in their pro-seminar papers. Urvaste, Rõuge, Karula, and Hargla are the important areas from the aspect of religious conversion movement in the 1840s.

Hans Hattenhauer, a juridical historian, writes about the relationship between the religious conversion (Christenisation) and legal matters in Europe,

The Celtic, Germanic, and Slavic people were not prepared to change their archaic way of thinking yet. They understood conversion as replacing old and unstable values of well-being with newer and better ones. Adopting a new religion was not a matter of devotion and faith, but a legal transaction based on the benefits and risks involved (Hattenhauer 1995: 163).

The reasons for conversion might have been the profits and risks related to legal problems. This was prevalent among the other motives for adopting the orthodox religion in 19th century Estonia (Livonia). It is not a problem for a person to adopt a new religion, it becomes a problem when abandoning one's faith and not replacing it with similar beliefs (Geertz 1990: 2314).

In folklore, conversion is explained by the Russian Orthodox priests' promises of land and freedom, and tax deductions. For example, in the materials from Rõuge we read how

the ministers walked around the village and promised freedom, land, and a bucket of herring (or half a bucket of herring; or Baltic herring) (EKLA f 199 m 24, pp. 42–43; m 25 p. 7).

The feelings of local public figures towards conversion and the people involved are quite remarkable. We see distinct regional characteristics, which are not dependent on economical situation alone. Mutual relationships influence the process as much as economics. The students involved in the project write in their papers that conversion was not very active in the regions where the people and the church enjoyed a friendly relationship (Põlva parish).¹ In the materials from Rõuge it is stated that unlike the Moravians the opposition of the Lutheran Church did not achieve anything (EKLA f 199 m 24 p. 41). The nature of the transmission of information depends on the relationships among people (groups). If the groups involved are in opposition, the information is transmitted incompletely or deficiently.

The article concentrates on how the information is transmitted (by whom, in what circumstances) and how it is understood, based on historical folklore about the religious conversion in Livonia in the 1840s. Although the area is not extensive, it still gives a good example of the social aspect of information transmission. Thus, we can compare the situation of that time to that of modern society.

2.

According to historical folklore conversion resulted from:

1. believing the false promises of the Orthodox priests (Rõuge: *the ministers walked around the village...*);
2. trusting that the Russian Orthodox faith as the religion of the state and the emperor would satisfy their dreams for a better and more promising future (Karula: EKLA f 199 m 27, pp. 29; 33; 66);
3. believing the rumours that those who adopt Russian Orthodox faith will get private land, those who do not, will stay

¹) For details see: The pro-seminar papers of the students of Estonian Language and Comparative Folklore at the University of Tartu, 1997. Janika Safjanov, 22; Merili Metsvahi, 19; Katrin Roodla, 22.

slaves for the rest of their lives. (Urvaste: *"The Setu bowl peddlers particularly told such stories"* EKLA f 199 m 30, p. 280).

Let us now compare folk tradition and the historical facts to those found in Hans Kruus' book. We will attempt to discern the economical reasons for conversion, the influence of public figures, the mutual relationships – everything concerned with historical folklore. In addition, we look at a historian's viewpoint on how the people could have reacted to it.

The reasons for the peasant riots in the 1840s were as follows:

1) the agrarian reform law passed in 1819 that set the peasantry free without land, increased the amount of work done for the estate which eventually led to the crisis of existing economical regulation;

2) weather conditions at the end of 1830s caused crops to fail making the situation of peasantry even worse;

3) the peasants heard rumours about favourable land deals available for buying land from the Russian Crown (Kruus 1930: 49 ff.).

It seems then that the peasant riots resulted in part from the uncontrollable physical environment (weather, climate), in part from the legislative or juridical environment, and in part from rumours associated with emotional attitudes and folklore. In order to find out whether the latter really is significant, we will clarify the definitions of emotional attitude and traditional climate, and will finally return to the study by Hans Kruus to examine the importance of emotional attitudes and folklore during the period under discussion.

3.

The principle behind the study of emotional attitudes lies in comparing simultaneously predominant world views. Different mentalities, standards, and habits form the basis for thoughts and reactions in various groups (Peltonen 1991: 572). Priit Pirsko has studied the buying (selling) of farms from the points of view of different groups (Pirsko 1995). He relies on German and Estonian newspapers and historical folklore when dealing with the attitudes of various groups. Which factors determine the starting point and persistence of the process? Priit Pirsko writes,

In the author's opinion when dealing with the problem under discussion, it is even more important to point out the fact that **in principle** it was possible to sell farms, at least in Livonia. The 1804 agrarian reform law allowed the peasant ownership of real estate and movable property. [---]. For a serf this did not actually mean anything, however. After the emancipation of the peasantry, few farmsteads were being sold here and there in Livonia. [---] Although several legal issues were clarified in 1849, it was still not enough to initiate the land trade process. The situation even worsened in 1856. Hence, legislative action is only one (albeit essential) factor towards the initiation (or elimination) of an event. The author thinks that it is as important to have an emotional state of mind set to accept such legal transactions. (Pirsko 1995: 103)

In principle, the peasants were able to buy land in Livonia in the 1840s; however, in reality it was not possible. As far as the historical process is concerned it is very important to understand how the regulation came into effect and how peasants understood it. P. Pirsko writes that in addition to legal and economical



Unlike the pictures of Lutheran churches, the photos of Greek Catholic (Russian or Apostolic Orthodox) churches appear very rarely in architectural collections. There are not many of them in the photo collections of the folklore archives either. A rare photo was found in Pärnumaa. On the photo: Uruste Russian Orthodox Church of the Resurrection of Christ (built in 1871–1873). Photo: "Eesti arhitektuur" 1996: 158.

(financial) matters, in reality the individual persons and their attitudes also play a role. All these factors combined will influence the process, therefore it is interesting from the human perspective to observe the subjective elements in history.

The study of folklore shows the changes of tradition over time and space. And we are faced with the question: why does a specific folklore motive thrive in a particular time and location, while it does not adapt well in a neighbouring area (see Sarmela 1974). The way the motive is adapted, received and elaborated on is associated with the regional style, the so-called traditional climate, where the traditional motives are shaped by the following factors:

1. natural environment
2. artificial environment
3. accepted folklore of the period
4. the emotions and experiences of the bearer of a tradition

The traditional climate that prevails determines one's activities and life style. However, folk tradition does not reflect pure and simple nature, but rather a life style. Folk tradition does not emerge from the objective world, but from a subjective world view. Environment restricts one's life style, but not folk tradition directly (for details see Honko 1972).

The same problems can be observed in the conversion movement. Why the need to adopt a new faith? Why the regional differences? How was the process connected to other areas of culture (economy, church, peasantry-nobility relationship, etc.)?

4.

Hans Kruus argues that the first written records about rumours circulating among the peasantry about the possibility to travel to Russia in order to get a good bargain on land, date back to June 9, 1841, when some peasants were interrogated in Riga Province (Kruus 1930:51). The first phase of the peasant riots had started a month earlier which resulted in the religious conversion (the third phase, at the end of the movement) started a month earlier. At the end of May and the beginning of June the peasants turned to the provincial government in Riga to confirm the rumours and ask for permission to leave the country. At first, the provincial government respected the peasants, in turn-

ing to them they displayed a certain expression of trust. They did not pay attention to the fact that the peasants had broken the law by coming to Riga without electing their representatives or consulting their landlord. The peasants were informed the rumours were groundless and were encouraged to resume their responsibilities at home. The provincial government also issued a statement – the edict of June 2 which the local priests had to introduce to the peasants from the pulpit (Kruus 1930: 51–52; 59–60). It was clear that the rumours of land in Russia were not true, however, they did not stop. In H. Kruus's opinion this was due to the lack of language skills on the part of the priests and, consequently the contents of the June 2 edict was not properly conveyed to the peasants. He adds,

It is, however, even more plausible that the peasants excited at the prospect of leaving the country unconsciously misinterpreted the announcement heard in the church (Kruus 1930: 60).

Midsummer's Day marks the beginning of the second phase of the movement and reached the linguistic border of Estonia and Latvia. Many of the first peasants interrogated were Latvians, three peasants interrogated on July 2 were supposedly Latvians;

	16.07	18.07	1.08	4.08	5.08	7.08	8.08	9.08	11.08	Total
Hargla	22	2	3							27
Rõuge	4	2			1			4	1	12
Karula					5					5
Vastseliina				1	1	2			1	5
Urvaste						2	1	2		5
Sangaste						3		2		5
Rõngu						1				1
Nõo						1				1
Helme								1	1	2
Total										63

Table. 9.07–18.08.1841 Estonian peasants interrogated in Riga. Based on: H. Kruus. The Turmoil... Tartu 1930: 82–84. Date, parish and the number of peasants

four peasants were questioned on July 7 in Hargla parish (Kruus 1930: 53–57). The treatment of peasants became more severe, they were forbidden to appear in front of the provincial government of Riga, and were punished. On July 10, a new edict stating the unsubstantiality of the rumours were translated both into the Latvian and Estonian languages. After the issuing of the edict, the peasantry lost confidence in the provincial government and turned secretly to the Russian Orthodox bishop in Riga.

The third phase of the movement started on July 9 when the desire for land resulted in religious conversion. Now, the movement becomes located in Estonia, mainly in Võrumaa (Kruus 1930: 86).

Whenever lists of names (punishment, conversion) were compiled in June–July 1841 by the provincial government and after July 10 by the Russian Orthodox bishop, the people thought of them as lists giving permission to emigrate to Russia (Kruus 1930: 63–80; 117; 161).

The important factors in the peasant movement in the 1840s are the rumours about getting land and the emotional belief in the *ingroup* (peasantry) rather than anything coming from representatives of the *outgroup*. Everything was interpreted from the *ingroup* point of view based on rumour, particularly informative folk stories.

The rumour supposedly originated in the areas close to the border of Russia, since those who went to Riga were from this region. The Mõniste (Võrumaa) peasants interrogated by the provincial government on July 16 explained that their reason for going there was influenced by the rumour,

[...] that in the inland region it was possible to sign oneself up in order to get land, explaining that they heard of it during hay-making from neighbouring Latvians, who also told them that “a Russian military cleric” (“ein Russischer Militair Geistliche”) from St. Petersburg had come to Riga and was signing up peasants to emigrate into the interior, and people were to show up three days before St. Jacob’s Day. (Kruus 1930:88)



Häädemeeste Russian Orthodox Church. Photo: the Estonian Folklore Archives. RKM RO photo 2760.

Obviously, in addition to the rumour, the peasant information included the whole system: where to go, why, when, and how. The people “knew” what they wanted to believe. The legislative texts being written by the *outgroup* were ignored by the peasantry in the 1840s.

5.

A belief that turns into real knowledge comes from actual experiences. It can be based on a similar historical event or a historical event interpreted in a similar way. This seems to be the case when describing the period under discussion.²

We might consider the peasants’ trust in *ingroup* information to be uneducated, foolish, etc. The choices about who and what to believe, are based on the group’s experience and reasoning.

²) The records of both getting land when emigrating and the rumour of such a possibility date back to the 1830s. Thus, the emigration request combined with religious conversion in 1841 was connected to earlier incidents. The aim of the peasant movement was to acquire land and freedom of location, demands which were legally fixed in the 1849 agrarian reform law. See: Vassar 1975: 29–43.

Similar decisions were not only made in the past, but are also being made today. To learn about the attitudes, we need to study them. If the attitudes are known, it is possible to use them and start a dialog.

To digress for a moment from the subject of folklore we can observe an example illustrating the attitudes and conflicts of groups from contemporary media.

On July 23, 1997, an article was published in the newspaper *Eesti Päevaleht* by Kalle Muuli as a reply to the memorandum of July 4 concerning the murder of actor Sulev Luik. In his article he shed some light on the problem of attitudes with the explanation that it is the result of cultural differences and their influence on history. He compared two similar events: the killing of actor Sulev Luik and fashion designer Gianni Versace.

These brutal murders are separated not only by the ocean, but also by the attitudes of the victims' friends and fans. In the US, the murderer, a half-crazy gay prostitute, was the guilty one; in Estonia, the police, the minister of internal affairs, the government, finally the media, the state, and society are to blame. (Muuli 1997)

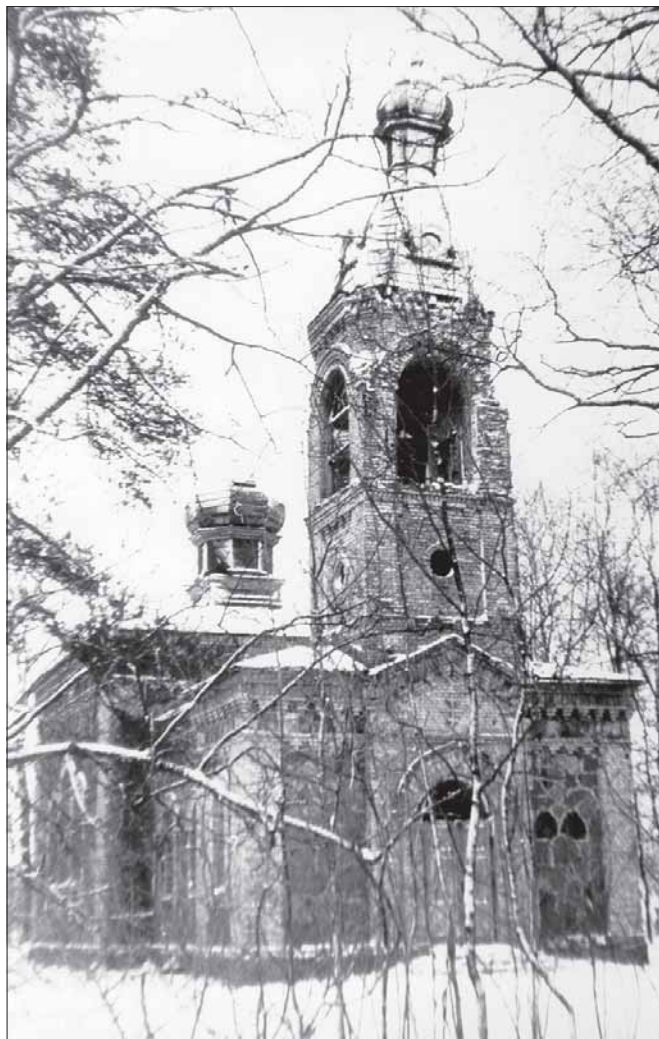
In the article titled *Sulev Luige tappis Mšša* [Sulev Luik was killed by Misha] he warns the readers of the advent of a police state, adding,

[...] people seeking simple solutions for difficult situations have from time to time voted for "firm-handed" men who, by trying to establish discipline, have murdered many more cultural figures than drunken stabbers.

6.

Decisions based on beliefs are in principle neither good nor bad. The judgements depend on certain aspects and time.

In situations where members of different groups do not communicate as equal partners, it is natural that the *ingroup* is blocked from the *outgroup* and a dialog is not started. The blocking group appears to act against itself; however, it is a form of



Tõhela-Murru Russian Orhthodox Church. Photo: the Estonian Folklore Archives.RKM RO photo 13214.

self-defence. As a rule, the blocking of a group is followed by a dialog with the opponent (the *outgroup*) and the parties take each other much more seriously. The *ingroup* has stated its purposes, which cannot be left unnoticed by itself and the others.³

The peasants in the 1840s wanted to get land, believed in it and saw the chance of getting it. The provincial government had to admit that the peasants who came to Riga were not merely there on a whimsy.

Neither the reproval of the peasants, the refutation of the rumours, nor the punishments were enough to solve the situation; it was necessary to revise the economy. The Russian Orthodox priests seized the opportunity to convert the peasants; however, mutual understanding, trust, or integration did not follow. The converters and the converts did not share the same goals. The latter were trying to solve their land problem.

Obviously, different groups communicate with and influence each other, even when they do not speak the same language. According to the historical tradition compiled in the 1920s-30s, it is clear that people cannot be tricked; the deception is not forestalled, but personally experienced and, thus, attitudes change. The problem of such attitudes is still present nowadays. Experience is connected to the character of the reciprocal relationship of the various groups: blocking means self-defence, dialog means equality and understanding. At the same time, we must bear in mind the number of cultural forms in tradition groups and the multitude of groups and folklores.

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EKLA = Estonian Literary Museum, The Estonian Cultural History Archives

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³) See e.g. the closed groups in Kohtla-Järve after WWII and the choices of local Estonians in the conflict between groups. Jaago 1996: 186–189; Jaago 1997: 52–53.

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Media & Folklore. Contemporary Folklore IV

Edited by Mare Kõiva

Tartu 2009

How to cite this article:

Tiiu Jaago (2009). Information transmission on the border of *ingroup* and *outgroup* groups. Opposition – integration. *Media & Folklore. Contemporary Folklore IV*. Edited by Mare Kõiva. Tartu: ELM Scholarly Press, pp. 390–402.

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