

Comment to the Seto epic

Second part of the “Peko song” (4318 verses)

sung by setu folksinger Anne Vabarna

I believe P. Voolaine hoped that Anne Vabarna would include into the provided event scheme of the epic “Peko” [see: Paul Hagu & Seppo Suhonen (ed.). Peko. Setu rahvuseepos - Setukaiseepos - The Setu Epic. (Snellman-instituutin julkaisu A 18/1995.) Kuopio: Snellman-instituutti, 1995.] many additional storylines and details. Since this did not happen, P. Voolaine makes another attempt in 1929. He urges Anne to continue the Peko topic. This time, he does not provide the singer with a storyline but gives extremely general outlines: Anne could describe how the hero Peko rules over people, judges and takes part in their everyday life. However, he does advise her to include in the epic different Setu folk songs (in his review of the result, he makes only scant references about which songs: for example, “Ilolaul” [The Song of Joy], “Ilmatütar” [Daughter of the World]) and even fairy-tales.

This request gave Anne Vabarna a hard task as Setu lyric-epic song types include none that could be made the central compositional axis, with Peko as the main character. Anne finds a clever solution to how she can fill the request: she composes the whole out of different substories that allow her to include different Setu folk songs. Peko becomes the link between these - the advisor and controller, as suggested by Voolaine -, but is also demoted to the modest role of a bystander. To make it easier to follow the singer’s choices, her compositional strategy, I next present the

Content summary of the second part of “Peko song”

Preparing to continue singing about Peko, Anne dreams that Peko himself is urging her to it, sending a butterfly and a horsefly with the same message to her, and promising to give rain and a warm summer.

When the king of the meadows, Peko, proceeded to eternal sleep in a cave, he called many men to him. The wisest of them he gave his oak club for a year, teaching how it could be used to bring rain for the crops. Still, Peko kept the reins of the club – if somebody should call his name, he will move the reins and it will rain on the crops. Those that are of his blood, remember his advice and are diligent workers. Peko gives them his blessing, strength in hard work and abundant crops.

When those were sowing who were not “*seto suku, Peko jako*” (“of Setu blood, of Peko’s kin”), Peko was sleeping deeply and their work was unfruitful. Here is inserted a lengthy episode of two lazy brothers, Mate and Hirsam, who are fond of pipe and drinking. Peko is planning to punish them, but he starts to pity the brothers’ parents. The brothers promise to mend their ways, but do not keep their word – their fate is terrible. Devils take them to a drinking, and dying of alcohol, they become the Devil’s horses. The mother dies of grief, the father loses his mind and runs to the forest, where the devils try to lure him to hang himself. Peko interferes, throwing copper bullets at the evil spirits.

As a young man, Peko ploughs the field with a forked wooden plough and wooden harrow. The singer approves of this because iron makes the land numb. Peko’s great strength is mentioned – he pulls trees up together with their roots. Peko’s hunting trip and generosity are described – he gives the bear skins to the village men. Peko is also remembered as a great warrior. Anne adds: the beautiful Estonian law gives land to people. Those who receive their piece of land near the war graves should give his thanks to Peko!

The story continues with 692 verses based on “Ilolaul” [The Song of Joy]. When Peko was still a young man, Ilo [Joy] was walking the Earth. Peko hears Joy singing on a lake, calls her to the shore

and keeps his guest for several days. He sends Joy on her way with gifts and advice to prefer maidens to men and women for company. Meeting Joy, maidens place words underneath a big brooch, to keep them close and ready. The maidens sing a church onto the meadow and berries into the forest. The father of birds flies to Peko’s window and writes with its beak what the maidens have sung. Peko stops reading the bible, takes his oaken club and goes to the window. Here the club reads to Peko the letter. Peko hurries, laughing, to the maidens and praises them. Joy gives Peko an account of her actions and gives him as a present the church they sang into being, into the bells of which Peko sends his club to write golden and silver letters. Peko would like to marry one of the singers, but Joy reassures him that Nabra is waiting for him by the sea, under the apple-tree. Peko then pledges Joy to come sing in his wedding.

On Sunday, a lot of people gather to Peko’s church. On his way from the church Peko sees young men playing *kurn*². Peko dislikes playing on money. When he joins the game, some of the *kurn* stones made of the knee bone of an elk roll to Hungary, and some even as far as the American continent. In Hungary, Peko’s *kurn* stones grow into a tree that bears sweet pods, eaten by ministers and kings who visit the Hungarian king’s castle (Anne means grapes). Next, P. Voolaine observes: “Though the song mother has, on the influence of yours truly, sang even too much about the evil of vodka and tobacco, she truly releases her Setu instincts in depicting Hungarian wine.” (Voolaine 1930: 382). The *kurn* stones thrown to America grows into a tree, the fruits of which are brought to us by the shiploads.

The associations with Hungary and America need to be commented. At the end of the 1920s, there were plans for Anne Vabarna and her leelo group to visit Hungary, but the plans remained only plans. Anne met American Estonians at the 1928 song festival in Tallinn, the experience resulting in the following verses: “*Mi om õks ka sugu Meerkamaal,/ vögimehe vereline,/ Peko saiva^d õks ka suust suurõ^d herra^d,/ kalenjast kaubamehe^d”* (We also have relatives in America, / of the blood of hero, / the offspring of Peko have become gentleman / his kin to merchants).

The next episode, 770 verses, is based on the Setu lyric-epic songs “Luuda minek” (Going for the brooms) and “Ilmatütar” (Daughter of the World).

When a maiden plans to wipe the yard with threads, Peko disapproves of the idea. The maiden decorates herself and goes to bring the branches for brooms from the hill. On the way she meets Peko, who warns her that her way is perilous and tells her to call for his help when in need. The maiden is cutting branches, when she is attacked by a black man. The maiden calls Peko for help, the club rushes there carried by the wind and knocks the man dead. The club tells the maiden to go home and calls ravens and bears to eat the body.

Despairing, the girl goes to court, where she is to account of the event. On the way Peko encourages the maiden, sends petitions to the court, teaches her how to obtain the support of the overseers by giving them fish and in the end sends his club to be her defender in court. The maiden is ruled innocent.

On the way home, the maiden meets Peko again. Peko thinks that the girl will not make one to live at home. On his orders, the club takes her to sit on the edge of the sky. Daughter of the World is, by turns, asked to come perform different tasks by her mother, father, brother and sister, but naturally to no avail. To her younger sister, Daughter of the World gives a bread bag that turns golden and that never empties of gold. With this, the sister is bought clothes and jewellery from the town, and the brother a posh coat and horse.

In a couple of months the sister reaches marrying age. When she comes from the church, she is surrounded by groups of boys. The sister does not care for the young men and instead goes home with her brother. Peko meets them on the way and promises to send the Son of Sun the next day as a suitor. Seeing the girl sadden, he takes his words back, but recommends himself as the host of the wedding feast for when the wedding takes place.

² A game played with wooden or bone pins which are knocked down by a thrown cudgel.

At home, there are suitors already waiting: scribes, office overseers and millers. The choice falls on the miller’s son who, among other things, is a virtuous man. Wearing the red bride’s hat, the maiden bows at the meadow’s corner to the Moon and the Sun to let Daughter of the World come home from the sky. But the elder sister replies that she cannot do that as otherwise the Moon would wane and the children of Day would disperse. Though her elder sister is missing, the weddings are wonderful, as Peko himself is the host of the wedding feast. Whenever there should be a wedding, one can be sure of Peko’s good-natured participation as “Peko’s spirit walks the parish, the (soul) butterfly flies to everywhere”.

The introduction of the epic [1-480], the episode of two lazy brothers [481-1852] and the descriptions of Peko’s farming work and hunting [1853-2207] are the part of Anne Vabarna’s work that has no counterpart in the Setu lyric-epic folk songs. However, next the singer aims at fitting traditional songs into the epic storyline. She proceeds with “The Song of Joy”, as suggested by P. Voolaine.

In folk tradition, the composition of the “Ilolaul” [The Song of Joy] is fairly stable: Joy (Song) rides by a river and meets on her way groups of men, women and young maidens, who all ask Joy to join them. Joy does not consent to join the men, as they forget to sing while working on the field, nor with the women, who have no time for common singing as they take care of small children, and only consents to join the maidens, who have yet no other cares and have the time and the will to sing and dance. Sometimes the end of the song is contaminated with lyrical motifs about the impact the singing of maidens has: their singing fells a forest without axes, cooks berries on the ground and even creates a church or a city for maidens. Usually the song is less than 100 verses long [see SL 1-8]³.

A. Vabarna, in her development of the topic, places Joy in the role of Peko’s advisor, who upon first meeting gives her useful advice (though in the traditional version Joy knows these things herself), on following meetings listening to Joy’s accounts. Though the change is not a principal one, this allowed A. Vabarna to considerably increase the number of verses in an episode and to make the development more epic [2208-2952]. Next she makes use of (referring to Peko’s actions) her newly acquired knowledge of the kindred nation Hungarians, and Estonians who emigrated to America [2953-3084].

In the last subepic, A. Vabarna unites two Setu lyric-epic folk songs. The traditional “Luuda minek” (Going for the brooms) [SL 80-93] that she uses for the beginning, is the following story: a maiden wakes up in the morning and notices that the others have wiped their yard clean, while hers is unwiped. She tries to wipe the yard with threads, but does not succeed. The mother teaches, that a broom is needed to wipe a yard. The maiden dresses according to traditions and goes to the forest to make a broom. On her way home, she meets a black man who wants to use violence on her. The maiden kills her attacker with a knife. At home, the parents approve of her action. Often the story is continued with the maiden taken to a trial where she is judged innocent. In any case, the song proceeds with description of the funeral. The black boy or man is buried into swamp and he is mourned only by wild animals. The maiden is buried into the church graveyard and she is mourned by relatives.

Since the end of this story is not suitable for the singer, she does not use it. Making a few unimportant changes in the traditional song type (Peko instead of the mother advises her to bring a broom; Peko is also a good advisor and helper in court) [3085-3455], Anne develops the plot further on the basis of the lyric-epic song “Ilmatütar” ‘Daughter of the World’. In folk tradition, the plot of this song type [SL 22-34] is the following: a maiden wakes up in the morning, dresses and goes

³ Here and further the abbreviation SL in square brackets denotes the publication “Setukeste laulud” (**Jakob Hurt**, Setukeste laulud. Pihkva-eeslaste vanad rahvalaulud ühes Räpinä ja Vastseliina lauludega I-III. Helsingi 1904-1907), the numbers following it indicating the numbers attributed to the songs.

walking in the forest. On the way, she finds a cluster of berries that she eats. This makes her change into Daughter of the World who sits on the edge of the world. She is asked to come home and work by the father, mother, brother and sister. The Daughter of the World refuses to come, telling each one which tools could be made to work instead of her, and remains sitting on the edge of the world, being a decoration to the world till her death.

A. Vabarna finds suitable transitions to continue the storyline (instead of a cluster of berries, Peko’s club takes Daughter of the World to the sky), using even fairy-tale motifs (giving her sister a never-emptying bag of gold, a motif not found in Setu folk song), adding to the plot episodes from different song types (motifs of buying the brother a horse or the sister jewellery with money obtained from successful sale of goods can be found in the song types “Kalapiük – hää müük” ‘Catching fish – good sales’ [SL 310-313] or “Põder põllalt – müügiks müüriil” ‘Elk from field – on sale on the wall’ [SL 298-304], etc.), and concludes the episode with a short description of the younger sister’s wedding, where, naturally, Peko participates. Thus, A. Vabarna compliments her version of “Daughter of the World” [3456-3852] with an end combined from different material [3853-4318].

A. Vabarna completed the second part of “*Peko song*” by Christmas 1929. P. Voolaine reviews the result in the journal “Eesti Kirjandus” 1930, No. 8, pp. 378-389.

As shown above, the second part of “Peko” is a loose compositional unit. It features new characters, Peko himself is in a fairly insignificant role and the storyline neither precedes nor continues “Peko” but connects with it at various points. Thus the conclusion should be: A. Vabarna’s second epic does not form a single unit with “Peko”; it is a new, separate work on the same topic.