

Creating and retaining Seto identity: case study of a Seto choir existing outside Setomaa

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This study examines a Seto¹ choir based in a town outside the Setomaa region. It looks at the daily life of the choir and of Seto identity.

Setos are a small ethnic group of Finno-Ugric people living in south-eastern Estonia, near to the border with the Russian Federation. Historically, this region differs from other parts of Estonia because of its political, economic and cultural connections with Russia. Therefore the traditional culture of Setos differs substantially from that of other Estonians: in its religion (Setos are Orthodox), in its language, rituals, dress and, especially, music. Seto *leelo* (song) no longer forms the inseparable part of Seto life which it once did. Formerly, women would sing whilst working, as well as during festivities. The song tradition is now maintained primarily by choirs.

There are many such choirs in Setomaa, fewer elsewhere in Estonia. My study is based on one particular Seto choir whose Seto members come from one particular town and its surrounding.² Its singers are mostly ethnic Setos and their children, who now live outside Setomaa. During my period of fieldwork the choir consisted of about 12–14 singers. The choir aims to keep alive the authentic Seto style of singing, as well its traditions.

I gathered most of my ethnographic material during two periods of research, in 2009/2010 and 2010/2011 and during summer events in the intervening time. In addition to weekly rehearsals, there were three categories of performance:

- (1) New Year and Easter celebrations (*kirmas*) which are celebrated according to the Julian calendar and are organised by the choir I observed. These have become traditional gatherings for Setos living in and around the town in question;
- (2) Seto events both within and outside Setomaa, organised by other choirs;
- (3) public performances where the choir is booked through companies or individuals.

I participated in rehearsals, performances and other events, and conducted interviews with singers.

As is the norm with older Estonian folk songs, Seto *leelo* is performed responsorially, i.e. the chorus repeats the line of the lead singer. Historically, in each Seto choir, those women who were particularly skilled with words were able to improvise songs and to lead the singing. Today, as this skill is no longer so widespread, choirs have begun to draw on songs taken from archive collections, etc. The lead singers now tend to be those with most attractive and powerful voices. In the choir I observed, almost all of the members could potentially be lead singers. The traditional Seto chorus is divided into two functionally different voices: the lower main part (*torrõ*) is sung by a group of singers, while the upper subsidiary part (*killõ*) is sung by a solo voice. This part can be sung only by a person who has a strong upper register, who is able to project their voice well.

The main aim of my paper is to examine how 'being Seto' manifests itself externally. I analyse both the way a performance is performed and being Seto is performed. My analysis relies on different approaches to performance as described by Erving Goffman and Richard Schechner.

Weekly rehearsals prepare for the New Year and Easter celebrations, which divide the September to May period into two parts. During the first half of the season the choir prepares for the New Year celebration, and in the second half, for that of Easter. There are also other performances of lesser significance. Using the analytical method devised by Richard Schechner I studied one rehearsal period from the run up to the performance, to the performance itself and its aftermath. Although I concentrated on practical activities

¹ To name this ethnic group I use the dialect word *Seto* (not *Setu* as in Estonian standard language, as this can have pejorative connotations). *Seto* is the term which Setos apply to themselves.

² In the article I will not disclose the name of the choir, the name of the town, the names of the choir members or other information that could compromise anonymity, because my sources were unaware of how and where their comments would be used.

in preparation for a concert, I could not ignore the performances of being Seto. I also illustrate how the institutionalised Seto choir has evolved, and how it has succeeded in creating a new, living tradition.

In order to analyse how being Seto is performed, I have used the frontstage-backstage dichotomy identified by Erving Goffman (1959: 22–29). During performances and rehearsals I observed the use of Seto dialect. I observed which musical aspects of Seto songs are important to the singers and how these are learnt, as well as, for example, how Seto costumes should be worn. Most obviously, being an ‘authentic Seto’ member of a Seto choir results in the accurate and authentic performance of Seto songs (or at least, ‘accurate and authentic’ in the view of singers).

The singers in the choir which I observed considered specific aspects of Seto singing to be particularly important in order to achieve a convincing performance. These included clarity of dialect, *kergütämine*,³ lower *torrõ* and singing from memory. Being of Seto origin affects both overall behaviour and the singers’ adherence to certain traditions (e.g. the significance of religion and food culture). Although singers realised that it was impossible to translate every aspect of Seto village culture into an urban setting, and that compromises must be made, their aims are often more idealistic than practical.

While ‘being Seto’ and ‘performing in a Seto manner’ are seen as opposite ends of a scale, there are very many intermediate steps between them. It does not always follow that a performance is more Seto-like and the preparation for the performance less Seto-like.

Firstly, singers were influenced, and their understanding of singing and of the overall tradition affected by a number of external factors. These include: where and to whom (the song) was performed; whether there were *only* singers in the rehearsals, or also outsiders to whom ‘Seto idiosyncrasies’ needed to be pointed out. Being Seto has different meanings in different situations.

Secondly, being Seto and displaying this identity depends upon internal factors: the cultural experience of choir members, certain behaviours and beliefs (e.g. the selection of repertoire for Seto events or the situation of costumes) implicitly (but in some cases explicitly as well) required by the (imagined) wider Seto community affected the self-control of the choir members.

Thirdly, being Seto is combined with the recreational activity of choral singing whose goal is to provide a high standard of performance. This article, therefore, argues that performance takes place not only in formal contexts (one of the main activities of the choir) but also in other public situations (e.g. rehearsals).

However, there was one issue not discussed in the theories of Goffman and Schechner, which arose from my analysis and which seems important. The Seto choir as an institution influences the nature of ‘being Seto’: new meanings are given to some aspects as well as some other perspectives are added to the cultural framework which differs from the historical one.

³ *Kergütämine* is a phenomenon in the Seto singing tradition, where in the middle of the song the lead singer lowers abruptly the absolute pitch, it is preceded by the gradual pitch rise. The word means in dialect ‘lightening’, i.e. lightening of singing, when it has reached an uncomfortable tessitura.