

“Stalin is a wise man, Lenin was a little bird.” On Creating Soviet Folklore in the Seto Region during the Stalin Era¹

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Abstract

The article focuses on the creation of songs about Soviet leaders and topical political issues by traditional singers of Setomaa (which is situated on either side of the border between south-eastern Estonia and Russia) during the Stalinist period. The first half of the article deals with the establishing of the concept and practices of creating folklore in the Soviet Union and the adaptation of these in occupied Estonia in the 1940s and 1950s. The cooperation of the singers and folklorists is analysed from the perspective of the “topography of the possible” in the context of a Soviet colonial matrix of power and the modernisation of Seto traditional culture, also including the oral singing tradition and gender roles. In addition to these general processes, details of particular singers’ individual experiences are also considered. The analysis of the song texts using the method of close reading focuses on religious and lament motifs, hyperbole, and the “incorrect” interpretations, the latter being based on the traditional religious worldview of the Seto as well as on formulaic language, which diverges from “normative” ideological discourse. The publishing history of the political songs is interpreted from the perspective of cultural appropriation.

The collections of the Estonian Folklore Archives and other memory institutions hold an astounding number of songs, recorded in the 1940s and 1950s, which were composed by Seto women to praise the Soviet regime, Stalin and Lenin, sing about topical everyday political issues, the radical changes that had taken place in rural areas (forced collectivisation, elimination of private ownership, etc.), rejoice over the end of the war and the arrival of peace and the reportedly improved standard of living, or express sadness about Stalin’s death.² A closer analysis of the origins of such songs reveals that they emerged mostly as a result of commissioning or in cooperation with folklorists or local ideology workers. The existence of these songs has been known, but the closer study of these songs and the context of their emergence has so far been neglected by folklorists.

Soviet journalism and academic literature attempted to give the impression that the political

improvisations of Seto women were the natural and free self-expression of the people. For example, folklorists talked about “the ancient Seto *leelo* which has sprung to new life” and adopted Socialist content. On the other hand, the free Estonian diaspora journalists approached the political improvisations of Seto women in the Soviet Union from the clear and straightforward perspective of exploitation. The newspaper articles mention exploitation, putting words in their mouth, and coercion (Fakt 1960: 5; Lte. 1967: 1).

It is worth noting that the communists have particularly exploited the old *leelo*-singers, among whom Anne Vabarna is the best example; they are told what to say and dragged around the country, all the way to Moscow. Anne Vabarna was already old when Estonia was independent. Now a decrepit person is commissioned to sing *leelos* to please the authorities (Kihnu 1951).

¹ The research has been supported by the Centre of Excellence in Estonian Studies (CEES, European Regional Development Fund) and is related to research project IUT 22-4 (Estonian Ministry of Education and Research, Estonian Research Council). This study was also supported by the Kone foundation’s research project “Omistajuus, kieli ja kulttuuriperintö – Kansanrunousideologiat Suomen, Karjalan tasavallan ja Viron alueilla”. The authors are grateful to their colleague Liina Saarlo, and to Ene Kuljus and Mihkel Roolaid from the Estonian Theatre and Music Museum.

² The article focuses mainly on the songs created by women because by this period Seto men’s singing had become a marginal phenomenon which could be found only in certain areas. Whereas women’s songs were performed by both spontaneous and organised choirs, and women’s repertoire included a wide variety of songs (laments, archaic ritual songs, lyroepic songs, work songs, etc.), the most dominant songs in men’s singing tradition were non-ritual feast songs, which were much less frequently sung. There were, indeed, some Seto men who improvised on political topics, but the focus of this article is the analysis of the rich corpus of Seto women’s political songs.

Later the songs were regarded as unambiguously ridiculous or perverse examples of the authorities exploiting less-educated rural women or even as shameful instances of collaborationism. At the same time, a close listening to the recordings and delving deeper into the song texts reveal that the majority of these political “improvisations”³ are more than simply political ideas converted to songs. Regardless of the fact that the singers had to follow highly specific discursive requirements, this did not mean that they lacked agency. In the cooperation project of political songs, the Seto women undoubtedly occupied the position of author, and despite the attempts of local ideology workers and folklorists to impose on the singers’ ideological education, the very specific Seto women’s voice still resonates in the majority of the songs. Even though selected formulas from the new ideological discourse (Stalin – Lenin, war – peace, kulaks – the oppressed, former poverty vs. current wealth, collective farms, cultivating virgin soil, innovative technology, electrification, equality, etc.) are used in the songs, most of the formulas derive from traditional Seto singing and they reflect the (religious) world view of these women.

In the following pages we shall explore the political songs created by Seto women in Soviet times, now archived in the Estonian Folklore Archives, focusing particularly on the period of Stalin’s rule. Our aim is to delve into the songs in the form in which they have come to us (audio recordings, hand-written notes), studying closely the context of their emergence and of developments in the folklore studies of Soviet Estonia. In our article we will refer to the improvised political songs of the Seto using the term “political songs”, or more specifically “political praise songs”.

In addition to the songs and the immediate fieldwork notes, the context is created through

the use of unique documents, focusing on public and private texts including, in particular, fieldwork diaries and overviews in newspapers as well as correspondence. The article first provides a brief overview of Seto political praise songs before the Soviet period, followed by outlining the developments in central Soviet folklore studies in the pre- and post-war period, and then analyses the influence of Soviet ideas and ideological instruction on Estonian folkloristics.⁴ The focus is on the cooperation of Estonian folklorists and Seto singers and the related context. The second part of the article discusses the content of the songs and attempts to explore how the world of Seto women is reflected in the texts using the method of close reading. A more in-depth analysis focuses on religious and lament motifs, hyperboles and the “incorrect” interpretations and errors in the political songs of Seto women. The article concludes with an overview of the publishing history of the political improvisations collected from Seto women that the authors have approached as a form of cultural appropriation.

Predecessors of and prequels to the political songs of the Soviet period

In the Seto region the singing of praise songs, which formed an important part of the political song tradition of the Soviet era, had already developed into a fairly common practice in the first half of the 20th century, before the Soviet period. The Seto used their improvisation skills to communicate outside their community, to make their voice heard and acquire benefits, whereas folklore collectors and other representatives of the urban elite exploited the skill of the Seto singers and forced them to create texts that would coincide with their (and, in more general terms, the modern society’s) preconceived notions and serve ideological purposes in various cases of col-

³ The terms “improvisation” or “improvisational song” have been used by Estonian folklorists to designate the songs that have eluded categorisation under any song “type” (the concept of type is derived from the historical-geographical method, according to which it was the researcher’s responsibility to identify the migration route of the songs by comparing texts of the same “type” collected from different places at different times) and are therefore clearly “new” and “authored” and thus effectively not part of the old tradition. The improvisations have usually been characterised as topical or autobiographical and the researchers who have been searching only for archaic songs of stable type have not perceived these as being as valuable as the songs in which the aspect of “creation” is overshadowed by “recollection” or “mediation” (see Kalkun 2015).

⁴ The current analysis is inspired by postcolonial Soviet area studies, which help to understand the folklore processes in the context of the colonial matrix of power in societies on the Soviet borderlands, the complex relationships between the centre and the colonised territory, and point out the diversity of subject positions, social experiences and cultural identities inside seemingly uniform social categories (Annus 2017, 2018).

laboration – not only in Estonia, but in Finland as well (e.g., Kuutma 2006).

One model of political praise songs is the register of prayer and gratitude, characteristic of the mythic-magical thinking that was used to communicate with the forces of the otherworld. The more or less improvisational texts targeted at the members of one's own community are associated, for example, with traditional rituals – like death and bridal laments – but also with more mundane communication through singing (Arukask 2003: 151–157). When a prominent outsider came to the village, and was furthermore interested in the songs, it was natural to reflect and interpret this unusual event in a song. For example, in 1887, Estonian folklore collector Hendrik Prants described his surprise when, after saying goodbye to the Seto singers, they started to sing “about my person and activities” (Prants 1937: 238).

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Finnish collector and researcher of folk music Armas Otto Väisänen (1890–1969) played an important role in asserting the value of Seto improvisational songs from the perspective of researchers, the general public and the Seto community; researchers before him had preferred to study traditional texts (Väisänen 1923, 1924; Kalkun 2015).⁵ Väisänen's focus was probably supported by his personal experiences from situations where singers addressed him in singing – individual communication through singing is emotionally highly impressive and, as such, is not present in modern Western singing culture. Madis Arukask, in his study of the Seto singing tradition, emphasised that improvisational praise songs are a genre that impacts the audience outside the community much more strongly than the traditional repertoire related to the community's identity (Arukask 2003: 152).

Väisänen actively used the singers' improvisational skills for contemporary political purposes – to shape a Finnish national and common Finno-Ugric identity. For example, in 1916 he had met the brilliant Karelian improviser Matjoi Plattonen from Suistamo, with whom he developed not only a manager-singer relationship but also a close mother-and-son relationship. One of the

highlights of political improvisation – but also of Väisänen's role as the manager – was Matjoi Plattonen's song to greet the King of Norway's in Helsinki and the following trip to the 1928 Congress of Finno-Ugric Culture in Hungary, where among other things she performed the song “In Gratitude to Hungary”, co-created with Väisänen (Tenhunen 2006: 131–141, 147). Väisänen also initiated the visits of the prominent Seto singers Hilana Taarka, and later Anne Vabarna, to major events in Finland. Taarka, whom Väisänen had already met during his 1913 trip to the Seto region, improvised at the 1921 song festival in Helsinki, addressing the President of Finland (Leisiö 1992: 163–164).

In pre-war Estonia, Anne Vabarna (1877–1964) became a semi-professional performer with a state stipend, and praise songs (including political ones) occupied an important place in her repertoire (Kuutma 2006: 209ff.; Kalkun 2015: 86). As a general community practice, the composing of political praise songs is reflected in a newspaper report of Estonian President Päts' visit to the Seto region in 1935: “you'll stop to listen to a *leelo* choir who, during the 'state father's' visit, quickly gathered at the side of the road to improvise songs of praise and greeting in honour of the rare visitor” (Vana ja uus ... 1935).

Political songs and Soviet folkloristics

Folklore, and especially new folk creation, was assigned special significance during the period of Stalin's rule. Along with this, folklore practices – like other creative activity – were subjected to extremely strict guidance and censorship. The political songs of the Soviet period are distinguished from those of the previous period in that they were created as a result of systematic commissions by the state, the aim of which was to produce creations that would support the ruling regime.

As early as in the 1920s, there emerged political folklore on topical themes in the Soviet Union. The first wave was the emergence of folklore about Lenin after his death, which was created (fabricated), at least partly, in cooperation with experts in tradition and folklore researchers (Panchenko 2005). Such new creation showed

⁵ Since Väisänen's interests diverged from the ideas of previous folklore researchers (see footnote 3), he felt that he needed to justify these. He emphasised that a singer's individuality is revealed in the improvisation and this allows observation of the creative process of traditional poetry (Kalkun 2015: 82).

the support of “the broad folk masses”, including the politically “immature” peasantry, for the country’s politics. Since the position of folklorists in the early days of the Soviet Union was rather unstable (Miller 1990: 6; Olson 2004: 35–37), this new folklore had the potential to justify the work of folklorists. In his study *Folklore for Stalin: Russian Folklore and Pseudofolklore of the Stalin Era*, Frank J. Miller has quoted a remarkable sentence from a 1931 article by Russia’s leading folklorist Yurii Sokolov, which formulates the idea of imposing control over folklore and giving political direction to its creators: “In putting into practice the systematic class direction of literature ... it is necessary that, in the oral creations also, proletarian consciousness should subordinate to itself the elemental process” (Miller 1990: 7).

In 1932–1934, folklore was elevated to a special status in the Soviet Union.⁶ It is argued that among the reasons for this was the need to strengthen patriotism among Russians in relation to the developing political situation (during this period, Russians became the “leading” nation of the Soviet Union), as well as the need to enhance agricultural productivity (Olson 2004: 38; Slezkine 2012: 89–92). At the All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934, Maksim Gorky, head of the Writers’ Union of the USSR, introduced the principles of socialist realism and emphasised that folklore is the paragon of literature in its simplicity, its accessibility for the masses, and its optimism (Oinas 1973: 46–48 et al.).⁷

The creator of folklore, defined as such, was equated with that of a non-professional author – for example, singers and storytellers were accepted as members of the Writers’ Union.⁸ Folklore and the creators of “new folklore” received much attention in society: they were written about, their creation was published in country-wide newspapers and books, and they were awarded medals and personal pensions. The state supported

large-scale folklore collecting, as researchers and specialists in rapidly developing centres (“houses”) of folk creation (*dom narodnogo tvorchestva*) began practical work with non-professional creators and performers, and the activity of folk choirs and folklore groups performing specific staged folklore flourished (e.g. Olson 2004: 41–49).

Estonian folklore studies in the early years of the Soviet occupation

After the annexation of Estonia by the Soviet Union in 1940, Estonian folklorists had to adopt the centralised approach and practices of folklore. Estonian folklore studies of the Stalin era could be tentatively divided into two phases – the relatively superficial adaptation to the folkloristics of the centre up to 1949, and the active attempts to follow the prescribed regulations and direct folklore in the years 1950–1953 (cf. Saarlo 2017b: 29). These phases coincide with the general socio-cultural processes in the Soviet Union and Estonia. The centralised cultural policy was characterised by the tightening of ideological control associated with the Cold War and East-European politics, the beginning of the so-called *zhdanovshchina*, or Zhdanovism, in 1946. In Estonia, the post-war purification was followed by years of relatively lenient regime, which gradually turned into a period of extreme repressions in the years 1949–1951 (e.g. Karjahärm 2006; Kulbok-Lattik 2016; Olesk 2003; Tannberg 2007, 2015).

The post-war years have been referred to as a “post-Estonian” period, when the changes in culture were still relatively superficial. Folklorists adjusted their collecting and research topics to the Soviet ideology, referring to “acceptable” authors, but they relied on the folklore conceptions and research paradigms that had been in use before the occupation (Saarlo 2017a, b, 2018; Kulasalu 2017). Depending on the prescribed rules of action, folklorists tried to collect ideologically ac-

⁶ In 1932, the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers was dissolved and the Writers’ Union was founded; 1933 marked the start of the second five-year plan; and according to F. J. Miller, articles about folklore began to appear regularly in newspapers. Early in 1934 the 17th Party Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was held and the 1st All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers was organised in August the same year.

⁷ Quotations from this highly influential speech later became the compulsory element of the works of folklore researchers in occupied Estonia (e.g. Laugaste 1973: 5–6, 1977: 87–89; Tampere 1956: 3–4; Viidalepp et al. 1959: 15–17 etc.).

⁸ Folklore was directly associated with literature. According to the conception of folklore, introduced in 1934 by Yurii Sokolov, “the oral poetic creations of the broad folk masses” and folkloristics was a “branch of literary scholarship” (Miller 1990: 7).

ceptable contemporary folklore in addition to the traditional repertoire, which implicitly remained the main focus of collecting. The important keywords were proletarian folklore, descriptions of the class struggle and revolutionary events of the recent past, and “the Great Patriotic War” folklore. Fieldwork was carried out in industrial areas and in the organisations of war veterans, and appeals were published in newspapers, but the results were relatively modest (Oras 2008: 62–63).

A separate research stream was the “discovery” and recording of new poetry that glorified Soviet leaders and the regime.⁹ Collecting the new political songs proved to be easiest in those areas where the corresponding tradition had already been established – namely, in the Seto region. Anne Vabarna performed a political greeting song in Tallinn as early as in 1940, when Estonia was occupied by the Soviet Union:

Even though Anna Vabarna was already over 60 when the Soviet regime was established, she was very eagerly and actively involved in anything new right from the very beginning. In 1940, she performed at the “Estonia” Concert Hall in Tallinn with a topical greeting *leelo*, attracting wide attention (Viidalepp 1957; see also Goldschmidt 1948).

Owing to her improvisation skills, Anne Vabarna was invited to participate in the 800th anniversary of the city of Moscow in 1947, and the same year performed at the folklore event of the first Soviet song festival held in Tallinn. As well as Vabarna, many other Seto singers with corresponding skills and the position of a lead singer in

the community created political improvisations. For example, a *leelo* in honour of Stalin’s birthday by Aleksandra Leivo attracted public attention, and groups of Seto singers performing political improvisations were recognised at the local and country-wide amateur arts review contests (*kunstilise isetegevuse ülevaatus*, Rus. *smotr hudozhestvennoj samodejatel’nosti*) (Seltsimees ... 1949).

Conscious directing of folklore: the years 1950–1953

In the 1950s and the following years, the pressure of the centralised government and the wave of repressions related to the “Estonian case-file” (Zubkova 2001) left no room to sit on the fence with regard to the new extreme views towards folklore and folklore studies and those held before the occupation and during the Soviet period.¹⁰ At the end of 1949 and the beginning of 1950, the folklorist Eduard Päss from the Institute of Language and Literature (who was dismissed from his position in 1950) and Richard Viidalepp (who was deprived of his academic degree in 1950 and whose salary was considerably lowered) returned from conferences in Moscow with a clear message: collecting folklore needs a change in the course of direction, the focus should be on contemporary material – “we must decisively abandon chasing after old archaic memories” (Ahven 2007: 99). The collected material constantly needs to be popularised and “folklore has to be applied in the communist instruction of the masses”. Under the influence of the 1951 Moscow conference, it was decided to “highlight the conscious direction of folklore”, and folklorists from different institu-

⁹ In the Soviet Union, the main form of glorifying poetic folklore was the Soviet or new *byliny* – *noviny* (epic songs). In addition to epics, lament was widely used (Miller 1990; Panchenko 2005). As well as by Russians, this type of poetics was also created by representatives of many other singing traditions of the Soviet peoples. In Estonia, the new folklore and its creators were actively introduced in newspapers in the early years of Soviet rule. For example, on 21 September 1940, an article on the song creators of the Caucasus and Central Asia was published: “The folk singers of the Soviet Union. The fine artistic creation of the Ashugs and Aqyns. The old minstrels sing praise to the new life” (Nõukogude Liidu ... 1940; see also Feldbach 1946; Kõik nõukogude ... 1946; Vaarandi 1947). The newspapers also lauded the “creative achievements” of Soviet Karelian singers, who composed new songs in the Balto-Finnic runosong style (which also includes the Estonian and Seto oral song tradition) (Klimenko 1946; Laan 1948; Tedre 1953).

Generally, the most successful direction of collecting activities in Estonia seems to have been the collecting of new songs. In his article “On the development of folklore in the Soviet era”, published in 1959, Richard Viidalepp argues that the new folkloric creation of the Soviet era is manifested mostly in songs in the Estonian SSR (Viidalepp et al. 1959: 473).

¹⁰ The degree of determination in going along with the concept of Soviet folklore is revealed in the response of the prominent Estonian folklorist Eduard Laugaste to a question, asked at a meeting held early in 1951, as to whether everything published in wall newspapers is folklore: “Poetry that appears in the wall newspaper is folklore if its author remains one of the people and has not taken on the professional responsibilities of a writer.” (Ahven 2007: 98–99).

tions came together to discuss how to direct and supervise amateur artistic creation (*ibid.*). Active work in all these directions followed.

The House of Folk Creation in Tallinn operated in the field of folklore in parallel with folklorists. In 1951, a position of folklorist¹¹ was established there and filled by Aino Strutzkin, who had graduated the Tallinn State Conservatoire in musicology, and who had studied folk music and participated in folkloric fieldwork. In addition to collecting and popularising folklore and regularly assisting non-professional (amateur) authors, Aino Strutzkin set out to organise a workshop of folk singers that would correspond to the Soviet model. The aim of the workshop was to educate the creators of new folklore – among them Seto singers – in politics and art because of the singers’ poor orientation in politics. As the workshop for 18 participants was organised in a rush and at an inconvenient time on 17–21 December 1951 in Tallinn, the performers of the oral singing tradition were unable to participate, even though prior agreements had been made with Seto singers. Among the participants mentioned, however, was the Seto poet Paul Haavaoks (Raadik 1951). Five singers from the Seto choir of Haudjasaare, with their lead singer Agrepina Pihlaste, took part in the second workshop, held on 1–4 December 1952.¹²

The turn after Stalin’s death

Stalin’s death brought about a major turn in Soviet folklore studies, in which a constant hidden, or not so hidden, struggle between different schools of thought and researchers and different views on the concept of Soviet folklore scholarship had persisted (Miller 1990: 95–101). Articles published in the journals *Sovetskaia etnografia* and *Novyi Mir* by Vladimir Bakhtin and Nikolaj Leontev triggered a series of critical public discussions (Bakhtin 1953; Leontev 1953a). The lengthy summary of Leontev’s essay “Sorcery and Shamanism” (Rus. “Volkhovanie i shamanstvo”) was also published in Estonia (Leontjev [Leontev] 1953b).

In 1953, debates on the subject of what is and is not folklore also started among Estonian folklorists, and the first publicly critical approach was the article “Reflections on Contemporary Folklore” (“Mõtteid kaasaegsest rahvaluulest”) published in 1954 by Ülo Tedre. Tedre mentions the criticism towards Estonian folklorists, who collected too little new folklore, and points out the “rather energetic steps taken to collect contemporary folklore” as a response to this. He describes as one of these steps the situation in the Seto region: “As a last resort, they travelled to the Seto region and had the ‘mothers of song’ improvise on various modern topics, only to present these later

¹¹ Already at the Moscow conference at the end of 1949, the lack of folklore workers and departments of folklore in the houses of folk creation of the Baltic countries was indicated as a shortcoming (Estonian Folklore Archives of Estonian Literary Museum, materials on the history of Estonian folkloristics, ERA, EFAM). In January 1951 the House of Folk Creation of Estonia sent to the local Ministry of Culture a longer instruction to invite the general public and especially cultural workers to create, collect and write down contemporary folklore, because “Despite the success achieved, we are still behind other Socialist Republics, especially in the area of creating and collecting Soviet folklore and folk songs” (National Archives of Estonia, Archives of the Committee of the Arts of the Council of Ministers of the Estonian SSR, ERA.R-1205.2.727.27). In a Russian-language document of assignment to a post, issued on 15 June 1951 by the State Committee of the Arts of the Council of Ministers of the Soviet Union, Aino Strutzkin’s position is named *muzykoved (folklor)* (Estonian Theatre and Music Museum (ETMM), Collection of Albin and Aino Strutzkin, M 293:1/1:32). Strutzkin closely cooperated with folklorists, especially with Selma Läht from the Literary Museum and the supervisor of her studies Herbert Tampere, who had worked at the Estonian Folklore Archives before WWII and became head of the archives in 1952 after being dismissed from the Tallinn Conservatoire the year before for political reasons.

¹² Composer Anatoli Garšnek has written in connection with the workshop held in 1952: “For example, a song about the Volga-Don Canal was created in a fishing village [Haudjasaare in Setomaa], but the theme’s resolution is constricted, narrow. In order to avoid such mistakes, lectures on the international situation, major construction projects of the Stalinist period, the artistic creation of kinsfolk, etc. were held for the workshop’s participants” (Garšnek 1952). These topics are similar to the working plan devised before the 1951 workshop. Alongside more general lectures the plan of the first workshop also includes classes for representatives of different types of participants (ERA, EFAM). According to the plan, Herbert Tampere was to work with the Seto group (which did not participate) on two days and, in addition, the singers were given two voice placement lessons from Aleksander Arder, professor of singing at the conservatoire. The idea of giving instruction in vocal placement may have been inspired by similar workshops elsewhere in the Soviet Union – the form of a Soviet folk choir required a unified and controlled sound, modelled after 19th-century Russian professional ethnic music.

as contemporary folk songs." Tedre arrives almost at Leontev's view in his arguments: "we cannot view amateur artistic creation and the so-called original creation as folklore, as it is still individual creation" (Tedre 1954; cf. Viidalepp 1954). He also categorises among the latter the improvisations of Seto singers, even though he acknowledges that the Seto new "creation exploits the form, style, stylistic devices and even melodies of the old Seto folk songs" (Tedre 1955).

The main point in Ülo Tedre's articles – that only the legacy of the past can be considered as truly valuable non-professional creation, and thus worth studying – conformed well to the devoted dedication to historical folklore in Estonian folklore studies after the Stalin era (Oras 2008; Saarlo 2018). The collection and study of historical folklore, which had its roots in the folkloristics of independent Estonia, had not been interrupted during Stalin's years – even during the peak time of focusing on the Soviet (kolkhoz) folklore, half of the collected material still represented older tradition. The continuous study of historical folklore can be interpreted as merely a routine, but also as an instance of resistance or of decolonial strategies on the part of local scholars (Annus 2018).

The fact that answering the question about whether the creation of performers of oral tradition was folkloric or not was not an easy task for folklorists is indicated by Selma Lätt's comment in her letter to Aino Strutzkin in October 1953. The comment is about the discussion of the articles by Bakhtin and Leontev:

[We'll be discussing] on the basis of our existing material. This is the reason why Tampere speaks about the issue of contemporary Seto folk song. True, a whole series of folkloric phenomena has emerged these days that cannot be denied. There really is no need to make another 180 degree turn in our views, whereas

serious revision and editing is definitely required.¹³

The issue of the folkloricity or otherwise of this part of Soviet folklore which had been created by representatives of the oral tradition remained unambiguously unresolved even in the central discourse of folklore (Miller 1990: 100, 105–106).

The turn in folklore studies decisively ended the intentional co-production of Soviet folklore on the part of folklorists and the corresponding demand from the "top down". In the another letter from October 1953 to Aino Strutzkin, Selma Lätt apologises for not having sent her the songs on contemporary topics collected from the Seto region that summer, while noting that "it's hard to believe that you'd have anyone interested in these at this point".¹⁴ The correspondence reveals that a workshop for folk singers was also planned for the year 1953, but the plan was cancelled. In 1954, Strutzkin was forced to leave the Central House of Folk Creation.¹⁵

The genre of political song continued after the Stalinist period, both in Estonia and in the wider Soviet Union (Miller 1990: 107). The authorities and cultural workers commissioned political songs for amateur arts review contests and official events. In 1956 Hemmo Mast, the lead singer of the Obinitisa Seto choir, described to Veera Pino, then a student of folklore, the complexity of being requested to create a song, as the commissioning would be a better option for younger singers who read newspapers:

Finally, Hemmo also complains about the local authorities from the district centre, who reportedly have gone too far in "commissioning" improvisations on topical subjects. The Seto singers are given all kinds of topical political news to create a song about, but these are foreign and incomprehensible for the

¹³ ETMM, M 293:1/8:52.

¹⁴ ETMM, M 293:1/8:15. Demand from the "top down" meant that the political songs had to be sent to the centre; for example, the archives of the Institute of Language and Literature reveal that three songs dedicated to Stalin were sent to the All-Union Central House of Folk Creation in 1949. In 1951, Richard Viidalepp visited the community house of the Vastseliina district to find the texts of new Seto songs, but discovered that "a representative of the central institutions of Tallinn" had been there and taken these away (Ahven 2007: 158; Estonian Folklore Archives of Estonian Literary Museum, manuscript collection of the Folklore Sector of the Institute of Language and Literature, KKI 17, 300).

¹⁵ According to the documents studied so far, the Central House of Folk Creation had planned a workshop for amateur authors in 1955 – "the more prominent amateur composers and poets" – but evidently this no longer included representatives of the oral tradition (ETMM, Collection of the House of Folk Creation, MO 128:1/6:5).

singers. Hemmo herself had created several improvisations on modern topics. She claims she can sing about the collective farm as long as needed. – The commissioned folklore is crafted here by some younger girls [Anne Lin-nupuu, Akulina Lumi]. They read newspapers and create all kinds of new songs.¹⁶

Besides events happening in the wider world, however, the Seto singers continued to sing about their daily lives. This draws us to the question about where the boundaries of a political song lie – for example, when people in a state farm sang about “slackers who idle at work”, “admonishing idlers and laggards”, though this related to an important Soviet propaganda topic, it also spoke about the singers’ daily life without embellishing it.¹⁷

The performance of political songs – official or spontaneous?

Was the performance stage of political songs limited to contests, song festivals, political events, singing to folklore collectors and other official performances, or were they also sung in spontaneous situations – at community gatherings or in everyday situations? Information available in the folklorists’ texts is by no means clear or straightforward on this issue. The image of the importance of new creation and the use of the new songs as presented in fieldwork diaries and newspaper articles are not compatible. Even though fieldwork diaries were publicly available at the archives, they were nevertheless a much less public genre compared to newspapers and therefore seem to be closer to reality.

An illustrative example of this is the article by Richard Viidalepp, published in 1951, where he paints a poetic image of singing during harvest:

Particularly uplifting were the songs of *leelo*-singers in the M. Gorky collective farm on the evening of August 13, when altogether 12 hectares of golden rye had been harvested, encouraged by the Socialist competition. After the strenuous work day, the joyful songs of kolkhoz women echoed far in the quiet even-

ing. And these were no longer the traditional “harvest songs”, but new, Soviet ones, where Comrade Stalin was thanked, the width of the fields and the happy life of collective farmers was praised. (Viidalepp 1951).

The fieldwork diary, however, reveals that people did not work on the fields that day because of heavy rain, and Viidalepp himself had left the Seto region by the evening of August 13. At the same time, on the day before (12 August), when he was searching for songs, the singers had told him to come back the next day to listen to people sing together. According to the diary, Viidalepp did not even hear singing at work during this fieldwork. Intriguingly, on the evening of August 12, he wrote down in his diary his dream about the expected singing of the collective farmers, which is very similar to the texts published in the newspaper:

It was somehow uplifting to imagine: the wide fields of the collective farm, active harvesting of rye (as part of the competition of the brigades) with many people working; it is a sunny day and at moments of rest, *leelo* singing is heard from here and there, new *leelo* songs, created right here, on the field.¹⁸

Folklorist Selma Lätt’s article gives the impression that she had happened to overhear a song sung at the end of communal spreading of manure, praising the foreman of the collective farm for giving good horses and workmen (Lätt 1953). Her personal letter to Aino Strutzkin, however, shows that the creation of the song had been inspired by the folklorist’s arrival: “The women saw me wandering there, at once grouped together and the song about manure spreading was improvised on the spot. I went to them and wrote down the song”.¹⁹

It sounds plausible that working together in the field helped the practice of singing on the fields to live on or even to revive. It was an old practice to embed improvisational motifs about current situations in the traditional texts. The motifs of gratitude characteristic of harvesting songs

¹⁶ Estonian Folklore Archives of Estonian Literary Museum, manuscript collection of the State Literary Museum, RKM II 51, 324/5.

¹⁷ RKM II 51, 355, Lätt 1953.

¹⁸ KKI 17, 304/5.

¹⁹ ETMM, M 293:1/8:9

(let's praise the Lord) could easily be adapted to show gratitude to the collective farm or state leaders. Whether or not the motifs were also used when folklorists were not around is difficult to say. Despite the atmosphere of the time of repressions in 1951, Viidalepp has put down quite a credible note in his fieldwork diary: "I am told that no one is interested in these new songs – these are needed only for the contests. But at local parties or official festive meetings – [these are] not performed."²⁰

Singing as an activity to empower women

Although the creating of Soviet folklore could be regarded as a kind of collaboration with the regime, we would rather draw attention to the way in which this practice empowered Seto women. In the context of the changing local singing culture after WW II, quite remarkable changes in the role and position of Seto singers took place. These changes were supported by the fundamental social processes of the Soviet period.

Perhaps one of the most radical changes in the Seto singing tradition was the gradual transformation of the previous practice of singing within the community and at home into performing for audiences outside the community, and, as a consequence, singing and the song tradition acquired new political dimensions that had not been seen before. An important aspect was also that Seto women, whose opportunities for self-expression or for escaping from domestic life had so far been limited in the patriarchal village, were given the chance to have their voice heard outside the Seto community. An increasing number of active women could communicate with the elite that was not part of their community and demonstrate their singing tradition outside the domestic circle. The active women who sang folk songs won recognition outside their village to an extent that had not occurred before. At the same time the Soviet regime turned Seto women into the same collective farm workers as men, and this brought about the disintegration of the former family structure, in which the man owned and

inherited land and female members of the family depended on him. Yet it must be considered that the old family models and the traditions regulating the behaviour of the women did not disappear overnight. The opportunity for many women to perform outside the domestic circle depended on whether their husbands gave them permission to do so or not. Some of the women still chose to follow the conservative family model and gender roles and remain silent in the presence of visitors.

Relying on the interview with Veera Hirsik (born in 1927), the long-term leader of the Seto choir from 1976,²¹ one could argue that the system of Soviet amateur arts, for its part, supported the emancipation of Seto women. It was advisable for all the citizens of the Soviet Union to participate in amateur artistic activity, as this was regarded as ideologically important and supposedly enhanced the workers' morale (see Olson 2004: 46; Kalkun 2004). The experience of Veera Hirsik suggests that participating in the ensemble performing traditional Seto singing was a perfect opportunity for less educated women in Soviet Estonia. Since all workers of collective or state farms had the obligation to participate, at least fictitiously, in some "amateur artistic activity" – and this activity had to be reported by leaders of cultural houses and ideology workers –, the folk ensembles were practically the only choice for the less educated women working in agriculture or cattle farming and for the older members of the community, and one that would also suit their skills and interests. The working women who sang in choirs performing traditional songs were probably motivated by free days or occasional rewards but also by opportunities for travel and access to television shows or major festivals.

Some singers among the Seto women who participated in choirs and sung the political improvisations were given special recognition. For example, Anne Vabarna, who had already been given a stipend for being a transmitter of the song culture during the first period of independence in Estonia, was granted a personal pension during

²⁰ KKI 17, 310.

²¹ The Seto women's choir Leiko came together in the mid-1960s through the merger of different village choirs that had formerly been active in the territory of the Väraska state farm. The choir operated under the state farm's cultural house and besides traditional songs they often had to perform songs commissioned from them on different topical political themes.

the period of Stalin’s rule.²² In 1947 Vabarna was awarded a certificate of honour by the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the ESSR for successful activity in folklore (Eesti ... 1975: 428).

The cooperation between folklorists and folk singers was, in a sense, a co-dependent relationship. In the Stalinist period folklorists needed the Seto singers, who could create contemporary political songs. The attention that folklorists, who were part of the town elite, paid to the Seto women working in collective farms changed the way the latter behaved. Some women were bold enough to demand that the cooperation be continued even later when there was no actual need for the commissioned songs of praise, so as to get glamorous new opportunities for performing (such as at song festivals and on television). For example Anne Vabarna, who was illiterate herself, sent letters by mediation of local literate villagers to Richard Viidalepp, who had worked with her in the Stalinist period well into the late 1950s and early 1960s.²³ In the existing seven letters, Anne Vabarna repeats her wish that he would organise performances for her and her choir in nearby towns, as well as in more distant cities. Evidently, Vabarna was trying to capture Viidalepp’s attention mostly with her political improvisations (as she had done in the Stalinist period), because in several letters (some of these in verse form), Vabarna promises to sing praise to the local and more distant authorities, if only Viidalepp would organise the performance.

*Kuulõ’ õks veerüs Viidalepp,
suurtõ kirju kirotaja.
Jätku-i õks minno kutsmalda,
Tallinna tahtmalda!
Kui jätät õks ti minno kutsmalda,
leina lüümä leelotaja,
sis om õks mul häpe rahvast,
ilõdu inemisist.
Sis ma koolõ kurva kätte,*

*süämehaigus hauda viis.
Kui saasi’ õks viil laulma Tallinnahe,
kuukma kunstiõdagul!
Illos om õks sis laulda’ Estoniah,
kulladsõh kontsertsaalih.
Sääl õks ma laula Hruštšovit,
perüs riigi peremiist.
Hruštšov käve õks ka partsi Prantsusmaal,
ausa miis Ameerika.
Kõik õks tä käve ilosahe,
armas Hruštšov ausahe.
Sääl laula ma kärmäst Käbinist,
laula mitond ministret.*

[Listen, kind Viidalepp, / writer of great books.
/ Don’t forget to invite me, / call me to Tallinn! /
/ If you won’t invite me, / you’ll be leaving a *leelo*
singer in grief, / I will feel shame among the vil-
lagers, / ugly among the people, / then I will die
of sorrow, / heartache will take me to grave. / If
[only] I could get to sing in Tallinn again, / sing at
the [song festival’s] folklore event! / It is nice to
sing in “Estonia”, / the gilded concert hall. / There I
would sing to Khrushchev, / the true master of the
country. / Khrushchev went to France, / an honest
man in America. / He went nicely everywhere, /
dear Khrushchev, honestly. / There I would sing to
Käbin,²⁴ / I would sing to many ministers.]²⁵

The fieldwork diaries of folklorists still reveal that not all singers who could improvise agreed to sing political songs on commission. Whether the singers improvised political songs or not seemed to depend on their social background and economic situation. For example, Marts’o Ujaots, who was well-off during the first period of independence and was also known as a singer, told Viidalepp in 1951 that she – like several other women – has stopped singing, and knows nothing about the new Soviet creation.²⁶ Several creators of new folklore (among them Aleksandra Leivo, who composed the song to Stalin and whose name appears in school textbooks) were close relatives

²² National Archives of Estonia, Personal files of grantees of personal pension, ERA.R-16.3k.1265.

²³ Anne Vabarna’s letters [7] to Richard Viidalepp, Estonian Culture History Archives (Eesti Kultuurilooline Arhiiv, EKLA) of Estonian Literary Museum, F 317, M 16:2 (1955–1960) & Richard Viidalepp’s letter to Anne Vabarna, F 317, M 2:44 (1954).

²⁴ Johannes Käbin (1905–1999) was a politician of the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic, First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Estonian Communist Party in 1950–1978 and Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Estonian SSR in 1978–1983.

²⁵ Anne Vabarna’s letter to Richard Viidalepp (1960), F 317, M 16:2, 7/18.

²⁶ KKI 17, 355/9.

of members of the local administration – a party organiser, foreman of the village council, head of the local community house. In connection with the songs praising the collective farm, sung by the women of the Haudjasaare village, Selma Lätt described the good economic situation of members of the fishing kolkhoz at Lake Peipsi (compared to agricultural farms), which was the result of more favourable tax policies and the opportunity to market their production in towns.²⁷

Optimistic laments and religious motifs in the atheist country

According to Maksim Gorky's influential definition of folklore, it had to be by nature simple, clear, optimistic, accessible and national in content (see Olson 2004: 40). Seto songs would often contain complex imagery, gloomy scenes, ambivalence and mystery; the traditional Seto songs enabled women to express even those feelings and thoughts that were found inappropriate to express in words, such as, for example, despair, anger, disappointment (see Kalkun 2008). Seto singing culture has also been called the lamenting culture (Sarv 2000), indicating the prominent position of bridal and funeral laments for the transmitters of culture. Seto laments and songs shared closely related poetics, and many formulas were used in both genres. Since the women who sang Stalinist songs represented the generation who had sung bridal laments, or had at least heard them, at weddings (a Seto lament was commonly performed by the bride with her four girlfriends), it is no wonder that several addresses are similar to those characteristic of bridal laments. In almost the same manner, the songs about war and death created during the Soviet time were clearly connected with the rhetoric and formulas of death laments, and through that, with the religious world view. The Seto religious world view was an amalgamation of popular Orthodox representations and highly archaic pre-Christian beliefs and traditions, as reflected, for example, in the texts of laments and lamenting rituals. For example, the songs about Stalin's death contain archaic and traditional lament motifs about frus-

tration and despair, which sound somewhat out of place when dedicated to leaders that were not known personally. The use of such formulas referring to close interpersonal relationships possibly indicates the Seto women's good ability to engage in the song and their sincere compassion, but, for example, also reveals that the women had not heard about Stalin's crimes. The recognised singer of the Obinitsa village, Hemmo Mast, sings upon Stalin's death how she would have wanted to fly to the Kremlin in Moscow to cure the suffering Stalin using traditional methods of sauna rituals.

*Kui ma saanu' sis kotkasta,
sinimutis saan' moonduda',
linnanu-ks ma Moskvahe,
kõndnu' sinnä ma Krõmlihe,
kütñü' sanna ma künneldega,
viha haudnu' ma vislapuista.
Ku Taalin meil tagasi jääñü',
ello jääñü' meil isakõñõ.*

[If only I could turn into an eagle, / transform myself into a bluebird, / I would have flown to Moscow, / I would have walked into the Kremlin, / I would have heated the sauna with candles, / put a cherry whisk to soak. / If only Stalin would live, / our dear father would survive.]²⁸

After Stalin's death, Hemmo Mast puts together the most dramatic formulas known in Seto singing tradition: mental despair and breaking of the heart "up to the top"; a grief that eating or sleeping would not take away, and mourning that would last until the singer's death.

*Äkki tulli meil surmasõna,
linnukõñõ tull' leinäsõna,
õt õks Taalin om ar'a surnu,
isakõñõ om lahkunu.
Kagoh meil ol' sis meeli haigõ,
meeli haigõ ol', süä rassõ,
süä lahes meil ladvuni,
meeli haigõ ol' mitmõst paigast.
Lää-s meelest meil maatõnna,
süvveneni lää-s süämestä.*

²⁷ RKM II 28, 348.

²⁸ Estonian Folklore Archives of the Estonian Literary Museum, collection of sound recordings of the State Literary Museum, RKM, Mgn. II 2a < Obinitsa village – Herbert Tampere < Hemmo Mast, 54 y/o. (1953).

*Ommõ-ks hallõ meil havvani,
ommõ murõh meil mullani,
leinäs tedä mi liivani.*

[A message of death suddenly arrived, / The little bird was informed about grief, / that Stalin has died, / our father has departed. / Look, how our mind was distressed, / the mind distressed, the heart sinking. / Our hearts broke up to the top, / the mind was distressed in different places. / It wouldn't leave our minds when sleeping, / it wouldn't leave our hearts when eating. / We are grieving until we are in the grave, / there will be sorrow until we are in the ground, / we will mourn him until we are put under the sand.]²⁹

The lamenting register is often used also in songs about war. Glorifying those who fought in war on the one hand and cautioning people about the atrocities of war on the other hand was common in Soviet rhetoric. For Seto women, who had specific recollections (and folklore) about the various wars that had passed over their land, the memories of war were painful and personal. It is possible that the anti-war rhetoric had such an impact on the women who had experienced war themselves that lamenting was a natural choice. For her anti-war improvisation, Anne Vabarna had chosen a rare melody of collective lament that had been used to sing at a young girl's funeral.³⁰ The lament makes use of highly poetic imagery borrowed from laments for young war recruits: “The heels won't be seeing these places, the soles will not be seeing these village streets.”³¹ The entire song text is actually Anne Vabarna's own emotional creation from the pre-war period, with no ideological clichés embedded in it, but which in the anti-war rhetoric was nevertheless found by the folklorists as representative of “the Soviet folklore”.

Elderly Seto women were able to continue observing their religious rituals also during the Soviet period, as they did not have to fear the repressions that threatened Orthodox women at their workplace. The prominent role of Orthodoxy in the Seto culture is reflected also in the political

songs of the Soviet period. Even though the Soviet regime was emphatically atheistic and persecuted religious organisations (see Froese 2008), the Seto women in their political songs sometimes use images clearly referring to religious practices. It is likely that Seto women associated the cult of personality during the Soviet times with Orthodox practices in the vernacular style – for example, all the bowing to Stalin's and Lenin's monuments and kissing their photos, described in the songs, are suspiciously reminiscent of the veneration of Orthodox icons.

*Taalin ommõ tarka meesi,
kullanõ kuningas,
illos om esepoiga.
Lääme' kui sinnä seldsimajja,
lääme' kui kokko kullakõsõ',
ütte majja marakõsõ',
sais Taalin saina päällä,
ommõ Taalin ussõ päällä.
Naase' jo läävä' kumardasõ',
mehe' mütsä kergütäse'.
Mia meil ommõ vika veerätellä,
kua meil om vika kulätõlla,
om õks Taalin tarka meesi,
Leenin olli linnukõnõ.*

[Stalin is a wise man, / the golden king, / a handsome son to his father. / When we visit the community house, / when we come together, dear ones, / to the same house, dear berries, / Stalin stands there on the wall, / Stalin is there on the door. / Women go and bow, / men raise their hats. / Why wouldn't we be happy, / why wouldn't we rejoice, / Stalin is a wise man, / Lenin was a little bird.]³²

The song commissioned for the 10th anniversary of the ESSR, performed by Irina Pino in 1950, recounts how collective farmers go to town to celebrate, but rather unexpectedly in the Stalinist context uses church as a parallel name to the kolkhoz centre. The imagery continues to combine the old religious and new Soviet discourses

²⁹ RKM, Mgn. II 2 a < Obinitsa village – Herbert Tampere < Hemmo Mast, 54 y/o (1953).

³⁰ Estonian Folklore Archives of Estonian Literary Museum, collection of sound recordings of the Folklore Sector of the Institute of Language and Literature, KKI, RLH 49:13, 17; cf. AETM no. 54.

³¹ *Kundsä, kundsä nä-i imp näidä kotussida, / jala-, jalatalla imp näidä tanomita.*

³² KKI 4, 157/62 (22) < Audjasaarõ village – Veera Pino < Agrepina Pihlaste, 55 y/o & choir (1948).

and the singer describes how people bow deep in front of the state leader's pictures.

*Pia tulõ-ks tuu aokõnõ,
pääso tuu päväkene,
kütse-ks tulõ kümnes aastapäiv,
jouhus julgõ riigi juubõl.
Ara-ks sis keerä mi keškohe,
ara astu alõvahe.
Sääl õks mi, kulla', kumardõllõ,
pardsi', maalõ paintõllõ.
Sääl mi-ks tehä Taalinat
umma armast avustammõ.
Pääle-ks mi taha pikka ikä,
pallõ pall'õ aastakko.*

[Soon the time will come, / the day of the lark, / the mature tenth birthday, / the country's jubilee. / Then we will go to church, / step into the town, / there we, the dear ones, will bow, / bend down, dear ducklings. / There we will thank Stalin, / pay respect to our dear one. / We also wish him a long life, / pray for many years.]³³

Similar integration of the old religious world into the new Soviet discourse can also be found in other political songs by Irina Pino. "The War Song" performed in 1948, which merges traditional lyroepics and political improvisation, concludes with a celebration of peace and an expression of gratitude to the Soviet leadership that defeated Hitler. The final verses of the song are in memory of the widely honoured dead Lenin. The Seto woman sings about how Lenin has left us, on earth, a beautiful and peaceful life. Irina Pino's choice of words indicates her belief, which is quite inappropriate for an atheist ideology, that Lenin leads his afterlife somewhere in the higher spheres.

*Edo-ks, edo meillä tarka küll viil Stali- Stalinata,
maía, mar'a hüvvä meil küll Malatovva!
Sedä-ks, sedä suurta taad viil Šuukoveta!
Aiva-ks nä siist šaksa poisi',
Hitleri-ks ar hirmutevva'.
Tulli-ks, tulli rahu meil küll maa, maa pääle,
ara meil küll tulli illos elo.
Liiga, liiga hüvvä meil sedä Leeninetä,
õga-ks timä elä-i imp ilma pääl,
elä-i, elä-i maía-ks inäp maa, maa pääl.
Meele-ks jätnõ maalõ ommõ ilosa elo,
Maa pääle om jätnõ kalli kasumise.*

[Look, our wise Stalin, / our fine berry, Molotov, / the great Zhukov! / They drove the German boys out, / they frightened Hitler away. / Peace came upon us on this earth / good life came upon us. / Our Lenin, too good, / he no longer lives on the earth, / the dear berry no longer lives on the earth. / He has left us a fine life, / for us to grow well on the earth.]³⁴

Incorrect interpretations and errors

The improvisations created by Seto women on given topics proved in their rhetoric and tone far too different from the imagined folklore of collective farmers or the Soviet period, so that folklorists criticised them as being politically inadequate.³⁵ The songs contain very politically incorrect lines of thought and – in view of the harsh political environment of the 1940s and 1950s – even dangerous verses which, in a worst case scenario, could have resulted in punishment or even in the arrest of the singers. The opening of the song by Aino Lillemets dedicated to Stalin reflects the moments before the recording of the songs: the singer refers to her impoverished status as a widow and how she had been fearful when the

³³ RKM II 33, 323/8 < Usenitsa village – E. Normann, S. Lõhmus < Irina Pino (1950).

³⁴ KKI 5 187/201 (7) < Usenitsa village – Veera Pino < Irina Pino (1948).

³⁵ For example, in 1951 Richard Viidalepp expressed his views, which were typical of the time: "The folk singers have had some guidance and direction, especially in terms of competitions. Still, assistance of this kind has been very scant and random up to now. There should be much more of it. Modesty in this area is partly rooted in the out-dated view that folklore should be born out of itself, without any "interruptions" or assistance. It is high time to publicly discard this misconception and organise the assistance of talented folklore creators on a much larger scale than before" (Viidalepp 1951). In the fieldwork diary from 1952, Selma Lätt argues for the need to educate Seto singers in order to improve their ability to create improvisations that would be better suited in the modern day: "At the same time, they need to be instructed and their perspective broadened, which is especially important for creating songs on contemporary topics." (RKM II 28, 349; see also Oras 2008: 63, 2009: 709, and footnote 14 here). In addition to political "mistakes", it is worth mentioning the impossibility of matching two established registers: the Soviet "(hyper)normalized" ideological discourse (Yurchak 2005) with its strictly controlled formulas, and the historical formulaic language of traditional song which rendered even politically correct ideas into a "wrong" verbal form.

sinister-looking men who had come from Tartu to record folklore had driven to her yard in a car. Since cars were quite a rare sight in Seto villages, and the villagers associated (black) cars with terrifying institutions of punishment and control (see Kalmre 2013), these verses reflect the atmosphere of collecting the songs, where even folklorists coming from the city could elicit fear and misconceptions in the country people.

*Sinnä ti tullit targa' Tartu mehe',
tullit hüä' seldsimehe'.
Ait massina morolõ,
ait auto akna ala.
Oh, minno, vaesta läskä naista,
ilma meheldä elänü.
Oh, õks targa' Tartu mehe',
küll läts kurvast mino süä,
küll jäi haigõst mino miil.
Mis õks siiä auto aias,
kulla, olõ-i midä kurja tennü,
hani, midä halva tennü.*

[There you came, wise men from Tartu, / you came, good comrades. / You drove the car to my yard, / parked the car under my window. / Oh, poor me, the widow, / living without a husband. / Oh, wise men from Tartu, / my heart became so sad, / my mind so distressed: / Why is the car coming here, / darling, I have done nobody harm, / goose, I have done nothing bad.]³⁶

In the songs, Lenin and Stalin are often called by “incorrect” names of endearment. When the singers called Lenin or Stalin the master, lord or king (of the state), it was probably simply part of the rhetoric of praise songs, but it did not consider the conflict between such images and the “remnants” of feudalism and ideology fighting against the class struggle. In addition to the names of endearment, the songs also contain more ambivalent or clearly incorrect names for the heads of state. In a wedding song, recorded from Lukerja Linamaa, where the groom describes his travels, Stalin and Lenin are called “the Jews”, probably reflecting the anti-Semitic belief widely spread in the Soviet Union that both Stalin and Lenin were Jews (Gerrits 2009).

*Lindsi ma velõ Leningradi,
veeri velõ Vinnemaalõ,
tahtsõ ma nätä' Leeniniid,
tahtsõ ma kaia Taaliniid,
Leniniga teretädä',
Taalinaga trastutõlla,
om õks seto siiä joudnu,
velõ siiä viirdünü.
Jäti ma juudi jumalaga,
jäti maalõ Mariaga.*

[I took a flight, young man, to Leningrad, / I took a train, dear brother, to Russia, / I wanted to see Lenin, / I wanted to look at Stalin. / I wanted to greet Lenin, / I wanted to say hello to Stalin: / The Seto has arrived, / brother has rolled in. / I said farewell to the Jew, / I left them, with St Mary.]³⁷

Honest ways of expression or a game and irony?

Listening to or reading the political songs of Seto women often elicits the question of the extent to which they included sincere self-expression, and how much it was a conscious game of creating a song that would suit the needs of those who had commissioned it, but in a manner that was at odds with reality and not based on the singer's personal emotions. There are definitely songs that represent sincere self-expression, in which the head of state is addressed in (naïve) faith as a deity to whom personal problems are confessed or who is praised to get help.

*Kuulõ' õks sa tark Stalin
kuulõ' hüä riigiese,
usu' sa minno osalist,
kae' minno kaiholist.
Olõ õks ma vaenõ läskä naane,
ilma meheldä elänü.
Kulla om mul kuustõist aastat
pardsi om palõ aigo.
Kui õks ma ilma meheldä jäi,
kallis ilma kasalda jäi.
Oh Teid õks tarka Stalinit,
armas ka esi arvu saat,
tuvi ka eis toimu võtat,
annat õigut õgalõ,
kannat kõrda kõigile.*

³⁶ RKM II 33, 305/7 < Mikitamäe village – Aino Lillemets, 45 y/o (1949).

³⁷ RKM II 14, 476/8 (37) < Tsältsüvä village – Liis Pedajas < Lukerja Linamaa, 57 y/o (1947).

*Sinno taha üks kittä' ma viie võrra,
armas pallo avvustõlla.
Tulõ-i mul sõnno puuduvat,
õga lõpõ-i lõigahusõ'.
Midä üks tahat, sedä laula,
esi olõ ma sõnasõsar,
sõnasõsar, laululatsi.*

[Listen, wise Stalin, / hear me, good state father, / believe me, poor one, / look at me, wretched one. / I'm a poor widow, / living without a husband. / Dear me, sixteen years have passed [from husband's death], / much time has passed for the little duck, / when I lost my man, / dear me, when I lost my husband. / Oh, you wise Stalin! / Dear one, as you know, / dove, as you understand, / you pass justice for all, / you keep everyone in check. / I wish to praise you fivefold, / dear, I wish to respect you. / I will not run out of words, / my verses will not end. / I will sing what you like, / I myself am the sister of words, / the sister of words, the child of songs.]³⁸

At the same time, quite a few songs that are dedicated to Stalin or praise life in the collective farm are clearly built upon hyperbole. Instead of singing about the newly founded, poor post-war collective farms, the norm days, the ridiculously low salary paid in kind, the high taxes, confiscated private property and poverty, the songs tell of abundant riches. Since the descriptions are so hyperbolic and stand in such stark contrast with reality, it is evident that the singers and collectors of these songs were aware that these were poetic exaggerations and fiction. Some of these political improvisations full of hyperbole seem to resemble the traditional song type "Wonders", which lists absurd things that the singer has witnessed in the neighbouring village (pigs sleeping on perches, hens grunting in the straw, hens laying eggs from the neck, dogs barking from their back-sides, women fighting over butter and eggs, etc.). This association makes some songs describing the flourishing life at the collective farm sound clearly humorous or ironic. On the other hand, the listing of abundant riches could be related to a subcategory of productive magic, which has been used to summon prosperity and happiness recited in the songs into real life. In the following

example describing kolkhoz life, Hemmo Mast lists all the expensive meals (wheat pastry, semolina porridge) that collective farmers could often not afford. This is preceded by an interesting stylistic device – the so-called negating parallelism (see Hagu 1980) – in which the song first speaks about unfavourable weather conditions but then assures us that regardless of these, the crops were not left in the rain, nor were the potatoes left unharvested (things which actually happened rather frequently on collective farms).

*Lätsi suurõ kui nurmõ pääle,
lasi laja mi välä pääle,
olli-ks suvi taa vihmanõ,
oll' üks suvi udujanõ –
jätä-s vilja mi vihma kätte,
kartohkit üks mi kaibõmalda,
viía vei kodo mi kuivaga,
tarõ mano mi tahega.
Saiõ rehe kui pissetüssä,
vili aita sai viidüssä,
saiõ normi' meil massõtussa,
pallo viidüs sai üle plaani,
vilja saie viil liina viiä',
leibä liina sai rahvallõ,
kulá pallo jäi kolõhoosi,
tuhat tonni jäi tüülisil,
sada sai puuta mi saiaatteri,
mitu kotti sai kulatskiterri –
saia süü õga mi sannapäävä,
puulkat õga mi puulpühäl,
kuukõ õga mi kolmapäävä,
maidsa riidi mi mannaputru.*

[I went as if to a wide field, / I went to a broad farmland. / The summer was rainy, / the summer was misty. / We wouldn't leave the crops in the rain, / we wouldn't leave the potatoes unharvested. / We took the harvest home in dry weather, / we brought them inside with solid soil. / We finished threshing grain, / took the crops to the barn. / We were paid for meeting the norms, / much of it exceeded the plan. / There were crops left to take to town, / bread to give to the townsfolk. / Dearest, much was left to the collective farm, / a thousand tons were given to the workers. / We made a hundred *poods* of pastry grain, / several

³⁸ RKM II 33, 265/71 < Mikitamäe village – Aino Lillemets (1950).

bags of grain for bagels. / We eat pastry on every sauna day, / white bread on every Sunday, / cakes on every Wednesday, / semolina porridge on Fridays.]³⁹

Cultural appropriation?

Historically, the Seto singing tradition has been studied as part of Estonian folklore. Folklorists have approached the Seto as the kinsfolk of Estonians, who are a hundred or even several hundred years behind in their “development” and whose folklore represents the more archaic layer of Estonian folklore. Until the mid-20th century, the Seto took part neither in discussions concerning the representations of their own culture nor in the study of their culture; rather they had the role of bearers of the old tradition in the Estonian cultural scene as language and folklore informants or folk singers (see Kalkun 2015, 2017).

The first academic publisher of Seto songs, Jakob Hurt, translated four lyroepic Seto runosongs into the Estonian language and published two of these, “Ilulaul” (“The Song of Joy”) and “Kalmuneid” (“Maiden of the Grave”) in Estonia and Finland. Through the mediation of various folk song anthologies and textbooks, these two translations of Seto songs became widely popular, especially in Jakob Hurt’s redaction (see Mirov 2002: 69). The Seto ballads translated by Hurt were adopted as “Estonian”, and the songs dedicated to Stalin or the Soviet regime as collected from the Seto women and categorised as “Soviet folklore” also became part of the Estonian tradition. Since Soviet folklore had to be present among all the peoples of the Soviet Union (see Slezkine 2012), it had to be present also in Soviet Estonia. The improvisations of the Seto women on contemporary themes, collected by folklorists at the end of the 1940s, were clearly commissioned, and made their way into school textbooks surprisingly quickly. In the textbooks, however, the songs un-

derwent changes suggesting cultural appropriation. Whereas in the early 1950s the songs of Anne Vabarna, Aleksandra Leivo, and Irina Pino⁴⁰ were published with translations (Vihalem 1950, 1951, 1952), after 1954 all the songs were published only in the Estonian language, without any reference to the fact that they were translations. After Stalin’s death, the 1954 edition of the anthology of Estonian literature (ed. by Linda Vihalem) was republished without Aleksandra Leivo’s “Greeting *leelo* for Comrade Stalin’s 70th birthday”. In the 1957 edition of the same anthology, the entire section of “Soviet folklore” was discarded, together with the political praise songs of the Seto women, but the collection still includes Estonian translations of Seto laments, no longer accompanied by their authors’ names and without any indication that they were translations from the Seto language (to represent the lament tradition that had not survived on Estonian territory).

The Seto political songs that were translated into Estonian and published in the school textbooks compiled by Linda Vihalem were certainly not the only ones of this kind,⁴¹ but they are an illustrative example of the process of how songs commissioned from Seto women were transformed into Estonian folk songs and at the same time incorporated into Soviet Estonian folklore.

Conclusion

The radical changes in Soviet folklore studies during the 1930s–1950s had a direct impact on folklore studies in occupied Estonia. The need to pay attention to modern phenomena proved a challenge for Estonian folklorists, who had been used to focusing on the study and collecting of classical folklore. In addition, they had to quickly redefine the nature of the folklorist-informant relationship and adopt several practices (instructing folk singers and commissioning songs about everyday politics) that had been previously considered in-

³⁹ RKM, Mgn. II 4 a < Obinitsa village – Herbert Tampere < Hemmo Mast, 54 y/o & choir (1953).

⁴⁰ In the 1950 version of the anthology, compiled by Linda Vihalem, Aleksandra Leivo’s “Greeting *leelo* for Comrade Stalin’s 70th birthday” was categorised under ritual songs, but after 1951 the editions contained a new section of folk songs entitled “Soviet Folk Songs”, which, in addition to Aleksandra Leivo’s song, included (in slightly different combinations in different editions) “The Return of the Red Army” and “*Leelo* to the Stockholm Peacekeepers’ Appeal” by Anne Vabarna, and “Before and Now” by Irina Pino. In addition to the Seto songs, after the 1952 edition the section of “Soviet Folk Songs” also included an improvisation by Kihnu singers, who represented another living oral song tradition in Estonia (initially in local dialect and with notations, in later edition as a translated text).

⁴¹ The materials of August Annist, for example, include Anne Vabarna’s song to the Red Army, translated into the Estonian language (EKLA F 218, M 65:27), and political Seto songs were also published in other textbooks (see Saarlo 2017b).

correct, or had taken place only marginally. Collecting and commissioning political songs may have served as a kind of camouflage which justified the recording and study of the old tradition in areas where the singing tradition was still alive and improvising new texts was part of the skillset of many singers anyway. On the other hand, the folklorists needed to find Soviet folklore to secure their personal position and ensure the successful continuation of their discipline, and the improvisation skills of Seto women offered a lifeline that could save careers and institutions.

The attention that folklorists paid to the Seto women and to commissioning special political songs from them created a new situation in the Seto community. The singers who could improvise had been officially recognised before, but now they attracted large-scale attention and public recognition. Owing to the controlled Soviet system of amateur activity, the singing tradition became institutional – spontaneously formed family and village choirs turned into the choirs of collective farms and community houses. The more spontaneous singing situations relating to family and calendar rituals were gradually replaced by organised performances at amateur arts contests and official events. Improvisations on contemporary issues constituted an important part of the carefully detailed repertoire of these events. The singers who were able to adapt to the changes may have been encouraged by the kind of attention they had never experienced before and by the redefinition the (gender) roles and opportunities offered to them in a Seto village. The fact of Seto women spending time outside their community and their communication with the elite may also have altered their family dynamics. The attention devoted to the great Seto singers in the Stalinist period was in a way a continuation of the early twentieth-century cult of the “mothers of song” (Kuutma 2006: 136). In the Seto culture of the post-Stalinist era, placing the “mothers of song” on a pedestal on the initiative of folklorists led to new forms of worship, which require further study.

Nevertheless, upon closer inspection, the majority of the political songs commissioned from Seto women would fail to meet the requirements of either folklorists or ideology workers. At first, manipulating the statistics of folklore categorised

as Soviet folklore and publishing selected and adapted pieces as translations did not prove problematic. There were probably several reasons why none of the folklorists studied the corpus of political Seto songs in detail, even though there was clearly a need for this. Firstly, even the severest period of Stalin’s rule never lasted long enough to implement all the instructions that arrived, with the usual delays, from Moscow. The second reason was probably the implicit ambivalence and incorrectness in these songs. The voice and image creation of Seto women did not fit easily into a predetermined scheme without these being accompanied by their religious world view or the archaic formulas and imagery. In conclusion, although the cooperation project of folklorists and Seto women relating to political songs remained short-lived, it had a profound impact on the Seto singing tradition.

From the viewpoint of Soviet colonial studies we can interpret the activity of folklorists as a continuous balancing act on the boundary of the sphere of the possible, trying to stay focused on the traditional and internally acceptable topics and “adding” as much Soviet folklore as they felt was necessary. It should be remembered that for the Seto as well, in the prevailing atmosphere of coercion and fear, collaboration was not only a means to acquire benefits, but also a survival strategy. Since the relations of the Seto people with the independent Republic of Estonia exhibit certain colonialist features, and as the older generation, especially, was not familiar with the discourse of nationalism, there is no point in searching for deliberate anti-colonial counterdiscourse in their activity and creation. Yet in terms of Seto female singers, the most important boundary of the sphere of the possible seems to lie somewhere else. In the period of occupation, their “internal” modernisation, which had started during the first period of independence, continued – by expanding the personal sphere of the possible towards travelling, scenes of modern life, and communication outside the community, and, through this, by elevating their status within the local community and in their family. This compensated for the possible inconveniences encountered in playing by the ideological rules, even more so because these had certain points of convergence with the discourse of traditional singing.

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KKI, RLH collection of sound recordings of the Folklore Sector of the Institute of Language and Literature

RKM – manuscript collection of the State Literary Museum

RKM, Mgn – collection of sound recordings of the State Literary Museum

Estonian Culture History Archives / Eesti Kultuurilooline Arhiiv (EKLA)

F 317 – The Richard Viidalepp collection

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„Om üks Taalin tarka meesi, Leenin olli linnukõnõ.“ Nõukogude folkloori loomine Setomaal stalinistlikul perioodil

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Vaatleme artiklis seto laulikute poolt nõukogude ajal poliitilistel teemadel loodud laule, mis pidid kajastama riiklikku nõukogude ideoloogiat ja olid enamasti tehtud folkloristide või kultuuriametnike tellimisel. Nimetame käsitletavaid improvisatsioonilisi laule „poliitilisteks lauludeks“ või täpsemalt, „poliitilisteks pühenduslauludeks“, juhul kui tegemist on mõnele isikule või institutsioonile pühendatud tekstiga. Artikli esimene pool annab ülevaate nõukogude folkloori kontseptsiooni ja sellega seotud praktikate väljakujunemisest Teise maailmasõja eelses Nõukogude Liidus ning nende jõudmisest okupeeritud Eestisse. Eelkõige Stalini-aegseid (1940–1953), aga ka järgnenud aastate protsesse Eesti folkloristikas ja seto laulutraditsioonis on vaadeldud Eesti Kirjandusmuuseumi Eesti Rahvaluule Arhiivis ja muudes arhiivides ning ajakirjanduses leiduvate allikmaterjalide põhjal. Postkolonialistlikule uurimusele tuginedes küsime võimalikkuste piiride kohta folkloristide ja laulikute tegevuses ja loomingu. Laulikute poliitilisi, soolisi, loojanatuurist ja ühiskondlikust positsioonist lähtuvaid valikuid ja paigutumisi analüüsides näitame laulikute, aga ka folkloristide individuaalsete kogemuste ja tegutsemismotiivide mitmekesisust.

Nõukogude folkloori kontseptsioon kujundati Nõukogude Liidus välja 1930. aastatel, mil folkloor üldisemalt tõsteti ühiskonnas erilisele positsioonile – selles kui töötava rahva eneseväljenduses nähti kirjanduse ja muu kunstiloomingu peamist eeskuju, välja kujundati rahvakunstiansamblike ja folkloori lavaesituste üleriigiline süsteem. Nõukogude folkloori oluliseks osaks olid poliitilised laulutekstid, mida löid suulist traditsiooni esindavad laulikud koostöös folkloristidega.

Nõukogude Liidu ideoloogilisest keskusest lähtuv folkloorikäsitus koos vastavate praktikatega tuli üle võtta ka okupeeritud Eestis. Esialgsetele pealispindsematele muutustele järgnes kõige karmimal repressioonide perioodil aktiivne nõukogude folkloori kogumine ja populariseerimine, koos kaasaegse folkloori loojate praktilise juhendamise. Sellega tegelesid olemasolevad folkloristlikud institutsioonid, neile lisaks loodi 1951. aastal Rahvaloomingu Keskmaja vastav ametikoht, kuhu asus tööle Tallinna Riikliku Konservatooriumi lõpetaja, hilisem rahvamuusika-ajakirjanik Aino Strutzkin. Teadlased lõpetasid nõukogude folkloori alase tegevuse seoses Stalini surma järgse pöördedega folkloristikas, kohalikul tasandil aga jätkus poliitilise laulu tellimine isetegevusülevaatusteks ja ametlikeks üritusteks.

Seto laulikud, kes valdasid improviseerimiskunsti ja kellel oli juba Teise maailmasõja eel välja kujunenud (poliitiliste) pühenduslaulude traditsioon, kujunesid Eestis peamisteks nõukogude folkloori loojateks. Neilt tellitud kiidulaulud suurendasid aruannetes „poliitilisi sündmusi ja tööliste elu kajastava uuema folkloori“, „Suure Isamaasõja folkloori“ või lihtsalt „kolhoosi rahvaluule“ osatähtsust. Peamisteks poliitiliste laulude loojateks olid naised, vanema laulutraditsiooni peamised kandjad 20. sajandil. Naistel oli ka keskne roll juhuimprovisatsioonides ja rituaalses laulus, mille registritega sai nõutud ideoloogilisi teemasid sobitada. Näib, et poliitilisi laule ei olnud valmis looma kõik seto lauljad. Koostöövalmidus sõltus osalt laulikute (või nende lähedaste) sotsiaalsest positsioonist ja poliitilistest vaadetest. Veel olulisemaks motiveerijaks võiks pidada naiste isiklike loojaambitsiooni ja seto kogukonna ning ühtlasi ka laulutraditsiooni moderniseerumisega seotud vajadust väljuda traditsiooniliste soorollide raamest, avardada oma suhtlemis- ja esinemisareaali ja kasutada uusi esinemisformaate.

Folkloristide välitöömaterjalide põhjal võiks arvata, et poliitiline looming kõlas ainult spetsiifilistel üritustel ega kuulunud kogukonna spontaansesse laulurepertuaari – ehkki ajakirjanduses avaldatud tekstides püütakse jätta ideoloogiliselt õiget muljet nõukogude folkloori rahvalikkusest. Ideoloogilise tellimuse täitmine seto laulikute abiga aitas folkloristidel hoida varasemaid rahvuslikke uurimis- ja kogumistraditsioone, sest ka kõige karmimal repressioonide ajal koguti Setomaal poliitiliste laulude kõrval mitmesugust vanemat pärimust.

Ent ehkki poliitiliste laulude loojad olid allutatud väga konkreetsetele diskursiivsetele nõuetele, ei tähenda see, et neil oleks puudunud agentsus. Seto naised on poliitiliste laulude koostööprojekti olnud vääramatult autoripositsioonil ning vaatamata kohalike ideoloogiatöötajate ja folkloristide püüdele anda laulikutele ideoloogilist koolitust kostab suuremast osast lauludest väga spetsiifiline seto naiste

hää. Kuigi lauludes on kasutatud valitud vormeleid uuest ideoloogilisest diskursusest, pärineb suurem osa vormeleist seto traditsioonilisest laulukeelest ning peegeldab ka nende naiste (usundilist) maailmapilti. 1940. aastate lõpus folkloristide poolt kogutud seto naiste improvisatsioonid moodsatel teemadel jõudsid kiiresti ka kooliõpikutesse. Kooliõpikutes toimusid nende lauludega aga kultuurilisele omastamisele viitavad muutused, laulud tõlgiti ja neid esitleti eesti nõukogude folkloorina.