

“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).

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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.