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# TRADITIONAL MUSIC IN ESTONIA TODAY

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## **Culture and Nation**

The Estonians, as well as the Latvians, Lithuanians and many Central European peoples, began to form as a nation in the nineteenth century as a national minority within a multi-national empire. Unlike the situation in Western Europe, the bases of their national self-consciousness did not lie primarily in associating themselves with an existing state, but with their language and native culture. Music, especially collective singing, has been one of the most essential means of constructing, preserving and expressing the national identity of Estonians.

Their striving for education, the participation of large masses in the process of culture creation, and a relatively high cultural level enabled the enslaved peasantry to become a nation, and to create and later re-establish a state that maintained its inner sovereignty even under the pressure exerted by different occupying powers. The survival of a particularly Estonian mentality and of an Estonian cultural tradition is due to mass participation in cultural activities, including collective forms of folk culture, that have become an integral part of the national way of life. Estonian traditional culture is rich in original cultural dialects, and, just as we discuss nature conservation or protection of the monuments of material culture, the values of local culture should be preserved and protected. In a supplement to UNESCO's recommendations of 1993 concerning the protection of traditional culture, it is noted that special attention should be given to the preservation of specific cultural phenomena that are characteristic of a certain area, particularly if they are in danger of decay. In Estonia, such unique cultural phenomena are primarily represented by the Setu and Kihnu cultures, and also by the Estonian culture in North-East Estonia, Ida-Virumaa, whose native culture is in danger of extinction because during Soviet times this industrial area was populated by Russian immigrants. In a wider context, Estonian traditional culture can be regarded as a specific indigenous cultural phenomenon of the Baltic area that is in danger of decay and needs protection.

## **Folklore Today**

Traditional songs, music and dances occur in different forms in today's Estonia. These are: (1) orally transmitted traditional heritage, preserved in an unbroken tradition; (2) contemporary folklore (children's games and rhymes, student songs, and so on); (3) so-called folklorism: pieces of genuine folklore

transmitted through printed matter, tapes, radio and television programs, enabling them to have a new life in modern society in new forms, in a new situation and context while being used in contemporary amateur and professional art. Each of these categories is examined separately below.

### *Living Traditions*

In two regions in Estonia, the living tradition of old traditional song, dance and music has not been broken. These regions are (i) the small island of Kihnu, off the western coast of Estonia; and (ii) Setumaa, the south-eastern corner of Estonia. The people there have also preserved their own dialect, traditional handicraft skills and the tradition of wearing national costume. These cultures represent an entirely unique phenomenon in Estonia and in Europe. Until the past decade, the people of Kihnu celebrated weddings by following ancient wedding ceremonies, singing old alliterative verses in Kalevala metre, and dancing folk dances. The traditional Kihnu wedding originates from an ancient tribal community, and concurs in its basics with the ancient wedding rites of other Baltic-Finnic peoples. The “two part” wedding is celebrated separately at the homes of both the bride and the groom, while the main event has both clans participating and is accompanied by old ritual songs. These are performed to a very archaic melody that has several versions and is also varied during performance. The old rites and songs lost their religious and magic connotation ages ago, but retained symbolic significance for much longer. They promoted the importance and the festive nature of the event, helped prepare the bride for her new social status, new role and environment, and reminded the newly-weds of their duties and responsibilities.

Rituals initiate an inner balance in people, and regulate relations inside the community. The last traditional Kihnu wedding was held in 1995. Nowadays young people prefer to live together without the official registration of marriage: this is one reason why the traditional wedding is gradually dying out. However, the main reason lies in a change in lifestyle. On the St Catherine’s Day festival, young people singing a special ritual song make masked rounds from farm to farm, where they are presented with gifts and in return wish the household good health and luck with its herd. At night they gather for a common celebration (*kadripulm*, meaning “Catherine’s wedding”) to eat the donated food, to sing and to dance. In 1997 this authentic tradition was videotaped. The ritual, having had a magical origin, has today evolved into a joyful social event: many young people studying on the mainland come home especially for the occasion.

What is special about the Kihnu culture is that cultural layers from different eras have existed side by side, with new phenomena not having completely replaced old ones. It has integrated various elements over the course of time; it has changed while retaining its substance throughout the centuries. Today, when folksongs are fading along with an old and traditional lifestyle, organised folklore groups have become important mediators of traditional art to contemporary culture, including in Kihnu. The most famous of these groups is *Kihnumaa*, led by Katrin Kumpan. It brings together various generations.

There is also a children's group, and a group consisting of young girls on the island of Kihnu. In actual fact they have no fixed and constant membership, and there are no strict borders between the groups. The latest group is a youngsters' music band. Organised amateur groups prove to be useful as a way for the youth and children to learn about and develop the cultural heritage of their parents. They perform at local events and they are often invited to different kinds of festivities in Estonia and abroad. In recent years they have been performing for tourists.

The openness of modern society has influenced even Kihnu Island. The altered social and economic situation, changes in lifestyle and world view, and closer contacts with the outside world have likewise caused a change in forms of culture. The mass media now disseminate a global commercial culture. Radio, television, tape recorders, video and recently also the Internet have become a part of daily life, with passive listening having replaced active participation. Many of the young people of Kihnu study on the mainland. In summer they visit their native island, and bring contemporary urban culture with them. However, when at home on the island, the girls wear traditional striped skirts, and sing and dance old songs and dances. Ancient alliterative songs and round dances are not practised any more; strophic songs with end rhymes and couple dances deriving from the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries are still in use.

Another region where traditional culture has been retained is Setumaa, where a different ancient folk song style featuring a very peculiar polyphonic singing has been preserved. Elderly women still master their local singing language to the extent that they are able to improvise new songs in the traditional manner. Improvisations on current topics have been an important component of older village celebrations, *kirmas*, and at *leelopäev*, a festival of a recent tradition that every two years gathers together numerous traditional Setu choirs from different regions. Setu singing differs considerably from other Estonian folk song styles, particularly in its polyphony and performance style. The Setu dialect is likewise unique, incomprehensible even to a northern Estonian. Setumaa is the only region in Estonia where death laments and rituals of ancestral cults have survived up to recent decades. While being an essential bearer of identity for the Setus, Setu folk songs appear strange to the ears of the rest of Estonians, as does the entire Setu culture. This has brought about serious problems for the Setus, who have migrated to the towns and have attempted to establish an identity there. Many of them have tried to assimilate into their surroundings, but treasure their roots and culture even in an urban milieu.

Organised amateur activities have provided the urban Setus with an opportunity to consciously practise their heritage. Thus a performer and researcher of Setu culture, Õie Sarv, who is the granddaughter of a great Setu singer Anne Vabarna, writes:

In the environment where I live [Tallinn], there occurs desperate aspiration to mould all people alike, to level any deviation. The inside wants to fight against it, but unfortunately I miss the helping and caring support of my own culture . . . Those

phenomena which in the past functioned naturally and spontaneously should be attended to at present consciously.<sup>1</sup>

Setu folksong groups are active both in Setumaa and in the towns where the Setus have settled. The main objective is not to perform to an audience. More important is interaction and communication, and the maintenance of cultural identity and unity. Due to general changes in social and cultural life, the growing influence of modern industrial mass culture, and the disdainful Soviet attitude towards local cultures as something old-fashioned, these authentic traditions began quickly to withdraw. Later on, especially during the past decade, local cultural dialects have become more recognised and this has increased appreciation of native culture also by the bearers of that culture. The Setu folksong groups have even made some common projects with modern rock bands. Today a special national programme supports Setu culture, and we hope also to proclaim Kihnu and Setu cultures at UNESCO as masterpieces of humanity's oral and intangible heritage.

### Folklorism

In other parts of Estonia, folksongs, music and dances have spread mainly in secondary forms as a revived tradition. Most Estonian children do not actually know their musical mother tongue and grow up in a cultural environment created by the mass media, in which modern mass culture and alien cultural values predominate. Traditional lullabies and children's amusement songs are practised in most Estonian families everywhere, even in big towns. However, nowadays mothers and grandmothers prefer to sing the native repertoire spread by mass media. Some traditional musical instruments are also continuing their existence in an unbroken tradition (first and foremost, the hand harmonica, the *lõõtspill*). Most folk music instruments (bagpipe, *kannel*, etc) are practised as part of a revived tradition. Thus folk songs, dances, and instrumental pieces derived from traditional (oral) culture are today learned via archive collections, from musical notation, or from sound and video recordings or other fixed sources. They may exist in authentic forms, in arrangements, in stylised forms, or be used in new professional or amateur creations.

A new phenomenon in Estonia as well as in Europe is the existence of professional folk musicians educated in high schools such as the Viljandi Culture College<sup>2</sup> in Estonia. However, amateur groups have become the main mediators of traditional art in contemporary Estonian culture. There are many of these groups all over the country, both in towns and in the countryside. They bring together people of different ages and of different social groups to perform traditional folk songs, music and dances at contemporary festivities. In

1. Õie Sarv, "Connections between Family and Folk Culture in Modern Times", in *Nordic-Baltic-Finno-Ugric Conference The Family as the Tradition Carrier*, edited by Ingrid Rüütel (Tallinn: Folklore Department, Institute of the Estonian Language; Nordic Institute of Folklore, 1994), 69.

2. [Since 6 November 2003 Viljandi Culture Academy, and since 1 July 2005 the University of Tartu Viljandi Culture Academy. —*Editor*]

the Soviet period, folk music and dance groups that performed highly stylised arrangements and new creations in a folk style were officially preferred, corresponding to the conception of art at that time as being “socialist in content, national in form”. Folklore arrangements and new compositions with folklore elements, especially folk dance shows, were staged with a high degree of stylisation and modelled on Soviet standards with the aim of demonstrating the friendship and prosperity of the Soviet peoples in the “fertile conditions of socialism”. In the Soviet period it was forbidden to express openly one’s national self-consciousness, since this was regarded as an expression of “nationalism”, which was considered to be something extremely negative and dangerous. It was to be replaced by “Soviet patriotism”, which had to be demonstrated at all official festivities. The traditional folk art was forced into alien frames, and the essence and meaning of folklore were greatly distorted. Nevertheless, even the officially-accepted forms of folk culture served for the people as a means of national self-expression, providing a possibility for engaging with one’s native culture, for wearing national costume (which also has a symbolic meaning), and so on. This applied also to our all-Estonian song festivals, with numerous amateur choirs from all over the country. Tens of thousands of singers participated, and hundreds of thousands of people attended as audience.

This tradition has a long history (the first song festival in Estonia was held in 1869). The feeling of national identity and the need to manifest it has been carried through the course of history in all these festivals, regardless of to what and whom they had to be devoted officially. The song festival that was arranged in 1990 during the process of restoring our independence (the so-called “singing revolution”) concluded with a true folk festival where barriers between performers and audience were broken: they all merged into one rejoicing mass of people who sang old and new popular songs, danced spontaneously and exulted without any restrictions.

The first folksong arrangements, from the nineteenth century, were made in the German *Liedertafel*-style, as Estonian art music and literary culture in general were born under the strong influence of German culture. Today, rock, pop and disco music have become the dominant musical styles for the younger generation of Estonians. Some ensembles and composers have tried to connect rock music with Estonian traditional music. This original synthesis sounds very modern and very Estonian at the same time. They include songs by our young composer Alo Mattiisen. These songs have been performed alongside old national songs during the “singing revolution”, and became very popular at political rallies, where the lines sung by the soloist were repeated by thousands of people, the majority of whom had never before sung old folksongs or previously been fans of rock music.

Authentic folklore groups, which started in the 1960s, were rather rare in Estonia as well as in the whole Soviet Union, and were for a long time in opposition to the dominant and officially-preferred policy on the folklore movement. The folklore festivals started some fifteen years ago, and represent a considerably new trend in Estonian folk culture. The organisers of the festival *Viru Säru* at the Lahemaa National Park describe the aims of their event as follows:



- to develop folklore activities
- to restore the memory of folklore among young people
- to acquaint people with traditional customs, songs, dances, instrumental music, games, tales, and so on
- to acquaint local people with the traditional culture of the peoples around the Baltic Sea, in order to preserve and protect not only nature but also the native culture.

Today, sixteen local as well as international folk music and folk dance festivals take place in Estonia. Special events are held for children, including children's games festivals. The greatest folk event in the Baltic States is the international folklore festival "Baltica". The three Baltic states take turns in organising the festival: the first took place in Lithuania in 1987. In 2001, "Baltica" took place in Estonia for the fifth time. More than a hundred Estonian folksong, folk dance and folk music groups (including children's groups) participated, and foreign groups from several countries were invited. The festival took place in different counties of Estonia, and ended with final concerts in Tallinn. The aim of the "Baltica" festival is to preserve, revive and develop national and regional cultural traditions as well as to promote contacts with other countries and cultures. The revival of traditional music is apparent not only in rehearsed presentations of performing art but also in spontaneous forms. In fact, there are no firm borders between them, and a stage performance may evolve into spontaneous singing and dancing. The final concert of the "Baltica" took place in the big Sakala Concert Hall in the centre of our capital, Tallinn. The concert ended with the signature song of the festival—the ancient traditional song "Gold left in the traces of the ancestors". Everybody joined in, including the audience, and repeated verses sung by a young performer, as people used to do in old times.

### **National Identity and Postmodernist Society**

Most of the world's small ethnic groups have vanished from the map not because of physical extinction but as a result of a change of language and of cultural assimilation. The reason for this is not only political, but also stems from the fact that assimilation has been socially prestigious and has created better perspectives for development, which in turn is a result of the economic and political inequality of small nations as compared with big ones. However, despite globalisation, for many people collective forms of folk art (choirs, folk dance and folk music groups) are still an essential way of constructing and manifesting one's identity and as a way of expressing it aesthetically and emotionally.

I distributed a questionnaire among the participants of the Estonian groups of the last "Baltica" folklore festival in order to find out who the people are who participate in folk music and folk dance groups, and what motivates them to do it. I also asked why we should preserve and develop our traditional culture nowadays, and how we should go about it. Folklore groups exist both in big cities and in the countryside. However, small towns prevail. A quarter of participants are children, most of the rest have secondary special and higher

education. Why do people participate in amateur groups practising folk music and folk dance? Twenty options were provided in the questionnaire. People were asked to underline the options that they considered essential, to choose three priorities and to add comments if they wished. The answers concerning priorities might be summarised into four categories:

1. artistic self expression prevailed (people like to sing, dance, make music, and folklore groups give them possibility to do it in an acceptable way)
2. cultural communication (people like to participate in festivities, to communicate, to belong to a community sharing common values)
3. participation in folklore amateur groups brings joy to life and improves its quality
4. it allows people to ensure and express their national identity.

Whether and why the traditional culture should be preserved and developed nowadays? No options were offered beforehand. The responses (noted below) demonstrated that knowledge of traditional culture instils confidence, allows distinction from the other nations and lets one maintain one's individuality while respecting other cultures: who does not remember the past, lives without a future! Here are some of the answers given:

Answer from Maali, 17, Tallinn: Knowledge of roots allows Estonians to discover their place in the changing world, provides confidence.

From Ülle, 24, Tartu: A tree with its roots deep in the soil can never be broken by a gust of wind. Knowing the history and heritage of my people, I should have enough confidence and respect for myself. Then I can understand other cultures as well.

Many people remarked upon the necessity to know their ancestors' culture, and to transmit it to the next generations. The main idea in the mind of most people is that the traditional culture must be preserved, as it is the basis of the nation:

Kaie, 22, Tartu: If we do not know what our ancestors did, believed or valued, we will not know ourselves. Without knowing ourselves we cannot live in full harmony with the surroundings.

Sirje, 53, Ülenurme: As long as there will be traditional culture, the nation will last; it should be treasured and protected.

The young were very concerned about the role of folklore in shaping the spirit of the nation. They said that the traditional culture underlies intellectuality, identity and cognisance of the world:

Janika, 23, Tartu: This [folklore] is an intellectual attribute, and no regime, war or destruction can deprive us of it. Human beings should know who they are, where they come from and what links them to their native land. However, it is not that easy to express this in words: it is one of the underlying pillars of world cognisance. In a unified Europe people will lose identity unless they remain aware of their cultural origin. We can develop and create further what we have only if we still have the underlying substance to create upon or develop, if we are aware of the TRADITION.



Both young and old answered that folklore brings delight, is interesting and valuable. It provides added value to our lives, and adds self-esteem as well as power:

Kadri, 26, Tartu: Traditional culture allows understanding oneself and others better. It creates a feeling of unity. It is a hobby and a way of life. Going in for traditional culture is a sound activity.

Maarja, 16, Elva: This is extremely valuable and unique.

Katrin, 19, Tartu: It is nice. And quite specific.

Respondents often said that traditional culture is an alternative to global mass culture and to its uncultured attitude, underlying preservation of cultural identity.

Kadi, 41, Tartu: Traditional culture allows us to remain Estonians in the globalising world.

Elvi, 43, Tallinn: Without culture uncultured attitude would thrive, without traditional culture [there would be] imported mass culture.

My last question was: What should be done to maintain and develop traditional culture? Here it was noted that children should be exposed to folklore in early childhood—they should be told about ancient times, but even more important would be direct contacts to folksongs, games and dances. Family traditions, hobbies, grandparents' knowledge are significant in the process. Children should be taken to folklore events. Here are some of the answers:

Merly, 16, Tõrva: Songs should be sung to babies from the moment of birth. Grandparents could share their knowledge with others in the family.

Jaarika, 19, Loksa: It is wonderful that people go in for such an activity. This makes them more interesting; they join the past and the present in themselves. I like old things and their time and traditional culture does not allow me to forget it. Even if parents do not like it at home or are not interested, they should be slightly more impartial for the sake of their children and introduce this to their children. There are so many various events where to take the children, let them make their choice.

The general opinion was that teaching of folklore should be more significantly represented in curricula, and that there should also be more hobby groups and events for children. The role of the teacher was stressed:

Sirje, 37, Nõo: In the kindergarten, the young can be significantly influenced while singing, playing, explaining. This is one of the places to instil interest. There are few talented teachers who can transmit traditional culture to children without forcing it upon them, who radiate it and do not teach it as a mandatory subject. Anything can be included in the curriculum but teaching it is a skill in itself.

Several of the respondents, primarily teachers, singled out personal initiative and the role of a personality in folklore activities: society can be changed only through ourselves!

Ülle, 24, Tartu: Society can be changed through ourselves. No one will do anything in my place. There is not much sense in sitting at home wailing that traditional culture is disappearing. I have gathered around myself people with similar interests and together with them I try to preserve traditional culture, in the folklore group and in various courses as well as at our concerts, involving the public. What else can I do?: continuously learn and disseminate my knowledge to others. Setting a good example is the best teaching method.

It was also noted that it is essential to arrange different folklore events (song and dance festivals and clubs, festivities connected with traditional calendar rites, and so on) where amateurs, professional musicians and visitors, including children, adults and the older generation could participate and communicate. The general opinion was also that state and local authorities should better appreciate and support local folk culture. Many people underlined that the media had played a more negative than positive role *vis-à-vis* the promotion of traditional culture. The media could considerably change attitudes if they wanted and considered it necessary.

Jaanika, 19, Loksa: If there is a public event in each corner of Estonia on the weekend, folk music events are the last to get a visit. The media could display at the end of these events how wonderful and interesting and rich is Estonian and other nations' traditional culture.

I'd like to add here that European TV channels and the EU should support the richness and uniqueness of the native cultures of European nations through cultural projects.

In brief, the prevailing response was that knowing about one's roots adds confidence in today's world, and allows one's identity to survive in a globalized world. People should know their ancestors' culture and transmit it to the young generation, in order to preserve the continuity of culture and to connect generations. It underlies our survival as a nation, our national identity and world cognition. The respondents noted also that our traditional culture is something very special, beautiful and interesting, and that practising it helps raise the quality of life. It is a basis for creating new art. It is also valuable to introduce it to other peoples and at the same time it creates a basis for understanding other cultures. Cultural traditions, including traditional songs and music, are essential as common goods and may serve as a valuable basis for developing future culture, in order to ensure the cultural diversity of the world and to avoid its uniformity. I want finally to cite the words of a young Estonian folk musician from Tartu, who observed:

Traditions have to be preserved, and should be adapted to new context and realities. Traditions carry ancient mentality and power, they have accumulated memory of tens of generations, and they can help us as long as the local populations survive.