

# FASTS AND FEASTS IN ESTONIANS' REPRESENTATIONS OF THE SETO CULTURE

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## ABSTRACT

Descriptions of Seto culture written at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries mentioned both exhausting Orthodox fasts and heavy drinking on church calendar holidays remarkably often. The incorporation of the Seto areas into the Republic of Estonia, established in 1918, soon revealed some conflict due to cultural differences. The religious rituals of the Seto came to be regarded with a fresh eye: traditional fasting was associated with the discourse of health care, food sacrifice with economy and religious feasts with criminal activities and alcoholism. Estonians measured the economic profit and loss of religious practices and their effects on health, but failed to understand that for the religious Seto, the observance of traditional ritual practices was the only possible conduct, and such practical considerations were irrelevant. Fasts and feasts were stigmatised in both popular and academic representations of Seto culture. Seto religious piety and feasts were regarded in the young Republic of Estonia as an attack on a common national identity, something that subverted the ideals of abstemious and secular nationalism.

KEYWORDS: religious fasting • village feasts • Seto culture • vernacular Orthodoxy • historical representation • Estonianisation of the Seto

In the following article\* I will present an overview of what Estonians wrote about the Seto celebration of religious holidays at the beginning of the 20th century, focusing on eating, drinking and fasting. Relying on folklore and reports on vernacular religious practices, gathered in the Estonian Folklore Archives, I will demonstrate the role of religious feasts and fasting in Seto self-representation on the one hand, and study the role of fasting, binge drinking and eating in the early external representations of the Seto, especially in connection with Estonianisation discourse, on the other. I will show how modern Estonian society, which emphasises secularity, temperance, and nationalism, has stigmatised the most conspicuous differences related to religion and the 'archaic' way of life.

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The Seto are an Orthodox Finno-Ugric group who live in the present-day border area between the Republic of Estonia and the Russian Federation. The Seto population, registered in a census for the first time in the second half of the 19th century, has never been large, reaching roughly 20,000 in the first decades of the 20th century. The historically documented area of Seto habitation covers roughly 1,500 square kilometres to the southwest of Lake Pskov (Kuutma 2006: 56–57). The Seto territory has been under the Russian, and thus Orthodox, domain of authority and influence. The Estonian national awakening did not transgress the governorate borders and it has been claimed that the ancient lifestyle, typical of medieval times, was preserved in the Seto region until the intense Estonianisation activities launched in the 1920s (Valk 2005: 128–129; Kuutma 2006: 60–61). Even in the first half of the 20th century, religion strictly separated the linguistically similar Lutherans from the Orthodox Seto in southern Estonia. The line between Seto and Russians has been similarly unyielding. Regardless of the fact that Seto and Russians shared a church, the Russians called them “half-believers” and mixed marriages were uncommon owing to the language barrier (Hurt 1904a: 190–191; Paas 1927).

When the Seto region became part of the newly independent Republic of Estonia in 1918, their integration and the elimination of the educational and economic backwardness of the area became the country’s official policy (see Lõuna 2003; Jääts 1998). After the giving of family names in 1921, the establishment of a network of Estonian-language schools, the separation of Seto and Russian church congregations, and various other intensive integration activities, the Seto region underwent radical modernisation and a shift into the Estonian cultural sphere (see Kuutma 2006: 209–210). While, at the beginning of the 20th century, the autonomy of the Seto was taken for granted and the more ‘enlightened’ scholars went to considerable lengths to explain to ‘regular Estonians’ that the Seto were their kinsfolk (Hurt 1989: 147); from then on the Seto became, little by little, Estonians with double identities (Jääts 1998: 126). Fearing that the Seto would be completely assimilated into the Estonian population, the Seto representative body declared that they were a separate ethnic group at the end of the 20th century.<sup>1</sup>

#### THE SETO AS OTHERS: ISSUES OF REPRESENTATION

The marginality of the Seto region and people has made them the perfect Other in Estonian culture. In light of the fact that the Seto gained access to written culture as late as in the first decades of the 20th century, those who wrote about them have assumed the position of a “ventriloquist”<sup>2</sup> (see Ritchie 1993), mediating the voice of the silent Seto, who have no control over representations of themselves. Ethnographic descriptions and other representations by Estonians carried colonialist ideology and often emphasised that the Seto were of primitive and inchoate nature, with folklore collectors flagrantly claiming that the Seto are either a hundred (Pöldmäe 1938: 3) or two hundred years (Hurt 1989: 42) behind Estonia. The rhetoric of the Seto as a backward and conservative group is often associated with Orthodoxy and Russian influence. Their religious practices have often been described in highly grotesque terms, emphasising this small nation’s irrational and savage disposition.

Descriptions of Seto culture written at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries mention both exhausting fasting and drinking binges remarkably often. Lutherans regarded the three days of fasting every week and the four longer fasts throughout the year held by the Orthodox Seto as an irrational and unhealthy practice, and apart from the general 'filthiness' of Seto, the anthropological and health-care related descriptions also emphasise the physical problems caused by malnutrition during fasting. Earlier descriptions of Seto culture criticise the multitude of Orthodox calendar holidays and excessive consumption of alcohol and, especially, of ether.<sup>3</sup> In the early 20th century, the so-called *gulyanyes*, 'wild' and 'irrational' feasts at which people ate, drank and had fun to the point where blood was shed, become the topos of representations about the Seto.

The Estonian pastor Jakob Hurt<sup>4</sup> carried out fieldwork in the Seto region as a stipendiary of the Imperial Russian Geographical Society and wrote a highly influential cultural description (Hurt 1904a).<sup>5</sup> According to Hurt, the most typical diseases affecting Setos are not related to the climate but to their "culturally backward lifestyle" and are mainly caused by their "unkemptness and malnutrition during fasting" (ibid.: 187–188). At the same time he explains how the plague of alcoholism had infected the homes "of our little Setos" and describes a wedding celebration at which six wedding guests died and many were badly burnt in an ether explosion (ibid.: 205).

The Seto identified themselves through religion and thus Orthodox fasts and church calendar holidays were important elements of being a Seto. The fasting and the mystery of the Eucharist, and also food sacrifice, almsgiving and stressing the importance of commemoration feasts, all characteristic of Orthodox piety, played an important role in the popular Orthodox interpretations of the Seto. Preparing food, sharing it and abstaining from it was particularly important for Seto women. A belief that the food given to the poor could influence the welfare of the departed or the giver of the food shaped the food-related practices and customs of Seto women (see Kalkun 2008). Beliefs connected to eating and fasting were clearly part of women's lore, much as preparing food was exclusively a women's chore in Seto culture.

To provide some context, I will introduce the unique characteristics of Seto religious practices at the beginning of the 20th century and offer an overview of how important Seto religious feasts and fasts were perceived and interpreted by Estonians. I will analyse the ethnographic descriptions and accounts of the Seto tradition published in newspapers, but also in academic literature. By contrast, in order to balance the external representations and perceptions I have attempted to find the Setos' own voice from the texts held in the Estonian Folklore Archives.<sup>6</sup>

#### SETO RELIGIOUS LIFE: FORMAL TRADITION OR DEEP FAITH?

Regardless of the fact that the Christian mission and Christianisation had already arrived in the Seto area of settlement centuries before,<sup>7</sup> the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century representations of the Seto emphasise their religious ignorance and Orthodox practices as formal rituals that have not managed to destroy their pre-Christian beliefs. In his chrestomathic article, Jakob Hurt (1904a: 192–193) refers to the form of Orthodoxy practiced by the Seto as one "of external nature", a set of ritual ceremo-

nies and customs the meaning of which is beyond question. According to Hurt, the Seto ardently observed church traditions (for example, they fasted and made pilgrimages) but a church service was for the Seto like a play, the meaning of which, as well as the actual content of the Scripture, remained locked with seven seals for them. A Lutheran pastor expressed his despair over the rare knowledge of the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer, as well as true belief from one's heart among the Seto.<sup>8</sup>

Throughout the 20th century, the same motifs keep recurring in the texts of those who write about Seto religious life – stressing how the Setos' faith has remained superficial because of the language barrier, and that a rich pre-Christian belief system is still very much alive under the poorly adopted Christianity.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, in the early 20th century, Setos could hardly read or speak Russian; therefore, studying the Scriptures at home, as Protestants did, was out of the question. Then again, the situation was not even as straightforward as that: clearly, the priests and the Seto who lived in the same village had to communicate with each other one way or another, and some managed to acquire either the Seto or the Russian language. The rules for confession translated into the Seto language in 1776 by Anikita Yakovlev, the priest for Värška (Laur 1928), indicates that communication in the church and religious education may have been carried out entirely in the Seto mother tongue. In 1885, there was reportedly only one priest who could communicate in the Seto language (Tammekann et al. 1928: 89). In addition, in 1919, before the Russian and Estonian congregations were separated, there were Estonian-speaking priest in two congregations (Lõuna 2003: 43).

At the end of the 19th century there were very few Seto who had attended a Russian-language school, and a few who had received some religious education. According to the 1885 census, 80 Setos (of about 13,000) were registered as literate (Tammekann et al. 1928: 92). Some wealthier Setos could send their sons to schools to give them a chance at a social career by learning Russian (see Jääts 1998: 32). At the same time, several Russian-language church schools were established and the number of children attending school in the Pechory (Petseri) region reached 150 (Tammekann et al. 1928: 92). Russian-language education may have meant assimilation in some cases, but there were also Setos who never forgot their ethnic Seto identity despite a career in Russian-language society. For instance, Father Arkadi, the Seto-born head of the Velikiye Luki (later also Pskovo-Pechersky) monastery, collected Seto folk songs and sent them to Jakob Hurt (Hurt 1904b: xi).

#### FASTING AMONG THE SETO: MEDICAL OR RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE?

Preparing food, eating and abstaining from it have all functioned as powerful cultural metaphors in Seto culture. It is possible that restrictions connected with food have served to strengthen the Christian identity for the Seto (see also Grumett, Muers 2010: 35), and clearly have isolated the fasting Us from the non-fasting Others.<sup>10</sup> The texts stored in the Estonian Folklore Archives in which Setos contemplate their traditional fasting reveal that even in the 20th century, fasting was an important part of being a Seto. The sources emphasise the traditionality of fasting, claiming that it has been practiced from time immemorial and that the ancestors of the Seto have always upheld

this tradition. Setos contrast themselves, either explicitly or implicitly, with Protestant Estonians, who do not fast. According to a traditional tale, only the endless mercy of Jesus Christ has saved non-fasting Estonians from doom.

In the olden days, God wished that there were no Estonians, because they don't fast. But Jesus Christ said that there are also so many of them, so let them be for now.<sup>11</sup>

For the Seto, eating or abstaining from food has been marked as an ethical and moral choice. Fasting as a desirable, although physically and mentally demanding state, has been weekly practiced by many religious Setos.

The descriptions of Seto culture made by Estonians mention fasting as a curiosity or an unhealthy and baffling practice. Jakob Hurt viewed fasting as a medical rather than a religious phenomenon, and the Orthodox priest of Estonian origin Karl Usstav (1908: 7–8), in his ethnographic account of Estonians in the Pskov region, as well as the left-wing intellectual Willem Buck (1909: 12) in his book on Estonians in Pechory, agree with Hurt on this matter. While clearly relying on Hurt, both mention that the poor diet caused by fasting has had a devastating effect on Seto health. Early twentieth-century secularised Estonian academic literature (in which science or medicine are opposed to religion) repeats the same idea. A report on healthcare in the Pechory region neutrally states that because of fasting, the “consumption of meat products is rather small compared to the population of other counties” (Rammul 1935: 50), while a description of the situation of healthcare in the county even mentions frequent malnutrition:

Their food diet consists mainly of potatoes, fish and cucumber. Long fasts restrict the consumption of even these foods properly, which often results in malnutrition. Alcohol and ether is consumed in abundance. (Tammekann et al. 1928: 107)

The Orthodox Seto observed their fasting on Monday, Wednesday and Friday every week, to celebrate the nativity, betrayal and death of Jesus Christ.<sup>12</sup> In addition, meals were not taken before the Sunday church ceremony. The four major yearly periods of fasting were Lent (lasting for seven weeks before Easter), Nativity (six weeks before Christmas), Dormition of the Theotokos (two weeks before the Feast of Dormition) and the Apostels' Fast (two weeks before the Solemnity of St. Peter).<sup>13</sup> In addition, there were one-day total fasts on the eves of major church holidays: the Eves of Epiphany (*viiristmine*), Nativity (*talsipühi*) and Holy Saturday (*lihavõõdõ*).<sup>14</sup> Some households even fasted on the eve of St. John's Day, the Feast of the Transfiguration (*paasapäiv*), the Exaltation of the Cross (*vissenja*) or the Beheading of St. John the Forerunner (*ivanaskorona*). Some villages also observed regional fast-days – either in honour of St. Nikander from the Pskov region (a week-long fast)<sup>15</sup> or of the Archangel Michael (lasting for two weeks).<sup>16</sup>

People who did not have the endurance to keep the weekly fast-days and the four longer yearly fasts changed their eating habits at least for Great Lent. Those who failed to keep the fast abstained from food during the first, middle and last weeks.<sup>17</sup> Apart from avoiding meat, dairy products and alcohol, fasting also meant the observance of several other restrictions. Setos considered all secular pastimes, such as singing and dancing, but also sex, telling fairy tales,<sup>18</sup> adding sugar to tea, washing their hair with soap,<sup>19</sup> etc., as sinful. Restrictions during fasts also prohibited talking about meat and

milk at the table.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the issue of fasting was not only about nutrition for the Seto but also symbolised a situation and state of mind that was radically different from daily life.

The large number of cautionary tales stored in the Estonian Folklore Archives, in which people express their fear of violating the fast and the consequences, show that fasting taboos were taken seriously.<sup>21</sup> In the following story the informant Evdokia Palo speaks about violating a fast (singing, drinking beer), which immediately resulted in serious consequences.

My brother's son enlisted in the army. It was the time of strict fast, the middle week of Great Lent, the Passion Week. They brewed beer and prepared for a feast. I was so sad! I thought that when they started partying and singing, I wouldn't know where to run. I definitely don't want to hear any partying during the fast. My sister-in-law went to feed the horse—the horse kicked her leg; God forbid, the bone remained intact. And there was no party anymore; nobody was in the mood for fun. Thank God, her leg healed.<sup>22</sup>

The Setos who fast, hold up as an example legends about the saints and reclusive fasters (Loorits 1959: 32; Grumett, Muers 2010: 4–8) who lived in the woods and ate only plants or prosphora.<sup>23</sup> Such stories were also told about several local holy men. Folklore about the Venerable St. Onuphry and Matvey the Blessed, who are associated with the Mõla church, and also the hagiographies of St. Nikander, include these particular motifs. There are also explications of fasting that identify it as *imitatio Christi*, an imitation of Christ's life and passion (Bynum 1987: 255–259). According to a Seto legend, the Child Jesus refused to feed from Mary's breast on Wednesdays and Fridays,<sup>24</sup> while the Lenten fast represented Christ's temptation in the Judean desert and his crucifixion.

The Wednesday and Friday fasting can be traced back to the Christ Child who refused the breast on Wednesday and Friday. Great Lent comes from Christ-God fasting for six weeks in the wilderness before his crucifixion, and the seventh week is the week of his execution. Other fasts, such as the Apostels' and Dormition fasts and the Nativity fast have been passed on to us to commemorate the saints. How else can we properly prepare ourselves for those days? For we have no books. Nor can we read. Wouldn't it be nice if they took the saints and fasting from us! Then we would be blind heathens. Fasting is from God, as the saints are from God, and from holy men. St. Elijah, St. Nicholas and all the other saints have fasted – but what about us? Mustn't we fast?<sup>25</sup>

Explanations about fasting found in the Estonian Folklore Archives demonstrate the interaction between Orthodox Seto and Lutheran folklore collectors. The informants often speak about fasting as if trying to justify themselves, as if fearing that the interlocutor may disprove of or forbid the practice. In the example given above, and in the one that follows, the Setos emphasise their "lack of education" and that fasting is one accessible way for them to serve God. In both texts, an Orthodox Seto tactfully discusses fasting with a member of another church who does not observe it. Many texts about fasting recorded from Setos juxtapose the priests who violate the fast and the Setos who honestly observe the fast,<sup>26</sup> as if stressing the strength of Setos' "simple" faith.

People used to say that one must observe the Great Fast, it is forbidden to drink milk and eat meat, one must suffer as Christ suffered for us and allowed himself to

be tormented. This is why we must fast and suffer and torment our physical body for the burden of Christ. We don't know any other way to pray to God than by fasting and suffering. The fathers of the fathers of our Seto people have said that one must fast. We cannot and should not look down on those who do not fast or refuse to fast. God wouldn't go and hit anyone on the head because he gluttons and steals and kills and robs or burns – He lets people do all that. But you will answer to God for that in the other world.<sup>27</sup>

In the early 20th century, the Seto region began to lose the strong reliance on religion, but women, often isolated from the outside world in a conservative and patriarchal Seto village, passed on the disappearing traditions, including fasting.<sup>28</sup> The fact that women fasted while men did not, does not mean that Seto women stopped preparing food during their fasting period. Women kept their dishes and cutlery separate from those of men, so as not to taint these with animal products,<sup>29</sup> and continued to prepare and serve food.<sup>30</sup> Women also made sure that children kept the fasts; the Estonian Folklore Archives stores a number of cautionary tales for children, the aim of which was to prevent them from violating fasts.<sup>31</sup>

For Seto women, fasting may also have been an explicit sign of establishing control over the body. As is the case with medieval female saints (Bynum 1992: 140) or contemporary anorexia nervosa patients (Bordo 2003), the absence of the menstrual cycle caused by fasting or hard physical labour may have been considered a form of triumph over the irrational body (cf. Kalkun 2008).<sup>32</sup> Seto women used to believe that the menstrual cycle is imposed on women as a punishment (Kalkun 2007: 7), and that a temporary relief from this potentially embarrassing and uncomfortable occurrence was definitely an encouragement to keep the fast.

#### RITUAL OFFERING OR A WASTE OF FOOD?

There were several other food-related religious practices that authors writing about Setos found interesting. Like fasting, which remained largely incomprehensible for the Protestant and increasingly secular Estonians, housekeeping and general dietary habits of Seto were not understood. Outsiders were baffled by the hospitality and economic impracticality of the Seto in light of their general poverty. Censor Georg (Yuri) Truusmann presented a comparison in his ethnographic report, claiming that, “while Estonians in the Baltic area appear stingy, the Seto are far from being economical” (Truusmann 1890: 32). When the Finnish ethnologist Ilmari Manninen, the then head of the Estonian National Museum, carried out fieldwork among Seto in 1924, he also wrote in connection with food culture that the Seto have a “primitive culture”, they are sloppy and unable to think even a day ahead (Manninen 1924: 40). Manninen writes that he has never seen greater wasting of food than among the Seto in the summer. Visiting the Seto region in winter (probably during a fasting period), he was shocked to witness the overall food shortage and hunger.

When I visited the Seto region in summer, I was left with the impression of abundance. There's probably no need to mention that guests were offered everywhere the best and the finest food. The hosts themselves mercilessly wasted the most

expensive foodstuff. It was funny to see them eating butter with a large spoon. Often even a large heap of cottage cheese in the middle of the platter was covered with an excessively thick layer of butter. Wasting butter was what stood out the most. Sometimes fat was fried with eggs. [...] But what about winter? Then a traveller wandering in the Seto region would probably go hungry. [...] The shortage was unexpected, unreasonable. Cows were not giving milk, hens were not laying eggs, all meat had been eaten, cottage cheese had been used up, butter churned in summer had been used up long ago; there was no fish, no sugar, even no tea. Even in large farms a guest was offered nothing but rye bread. The contrast with what was seen in summer was extreme. (Manninen 1924: 41)

In addition to the differences in everyday diet and in managing households, Seto religious practices involved various rituals that were unaccustomed and astonishing for the Lutheran Estonians. The Seto custom of taking food offerings to icons and chapels was viewed by those writing about them as a remnant of paganism that related to an archaic developmental phase (Loorits 1959: 5; Hagu 1999: 87–88). At the end of the 19th century, several authors described the veneration of the sculpture of St. Nicholas of Mozhaysk in the Pskovo-Pechersky monastery (see Bome 2006). In addition to the traditional touching or kissing of the sculpture, kneeling or bowing before it on St. Nicholas' Day in spring (May 22), Setos reportedly smeared the sculpture's lips with butter, fat, blood and honey, and apart from ordinary candles and paper flowers sacrificed so much pastry, butter and cottage cheese at the sculpture that it could be barely be seen underneath. In addition, next to the widely practiced egg sacrifice during Easter and Whitsuntide (Loorits 1959: 25), Setos 'fed' the icon of St. Anna with mutton on her feast day (June 25) in the Pelsi, Sulbi and Väiko-Rõсна village chapels (Tammekann et al. 1928: 90; Mägiste 1977: 168–170; Saarlo 1996: 116). While in some village groups people brought lamb heads and wool to the icons of St. Anna, in others Setos sacrificed a pig head to St. Anthony in the village chapel on January 17 (Piho 2011: 39). Georg Truusmann claims that on church calendar holidays Setos traditionally brought various farming and agricultural produce to the churches. On Trinity Sunday villagers reportedly brought eggs, butter and cottage cheese, and on the Solemnity of St. Peter (July 12) some cheese to the church of Pankyavitsa. The offerings were placed in front of the icons and heads were bowed in prayer (Truusmann 1890: 39–40; Loorits 1959: 32). On the feast day of St. John the Forerunner (July 7) butter, curd cheese and cottage cheese were taken to the St. John's chapels in the Treski and Miikse villages, and because of that these chapels came to be called dairy chapels (Valk 2011: 85). Butter was delivered as a sacrifice at St. Paraskeva church in Saatse (on a Friday after St. Elijah's Day, June 20) and after the ceremony it was left for the beggars (Loorits 1959: 27).

Food offerings at icons or chapels were, in turn, associated with almsgiving to priests, the monastery, poorhouses, widows and the crippled. The offering of food to the poor has been a tradition related to the commemoration of the dead, religious feasts and sacred places for Seto women and has also had a clear religious, as well as practical, significance. In the early 20th century, cripples and beggars gathered near churches and cemeteries in large numbers, and Seto women gave them food and alms because they knew that their good deeds would be rewarded in the next world (Kallas 1898: 181; Manninen 1924: 17; Kirss 1998: 114). In some parts of the Seto region it was customary to donate food to almshouses in order to atone for sins before the only communion of the





Photo 1. Ritual feasting on graves on St. Paraskeva's day. Satserinna village, July 16, 1937. Photo by V. Egorov. ERA, Foto 746.

year. Interestingly, when the Pskovo-Pechersky monastery was incorporated into the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church in the 1930s and reforms were carried out to make it 'more Estonian', the monks were no longer allowed to give food to the poor (Lõuna 1999: 64; 2003: 82). The Estonian written press of the time began to show beggars loitering near the Pskovo-Pechersky monastery as comical, showing them as improvident and disorderly (see, for example, *Petseri* 1937).

In the case of a close relative's death, the Seto attached significance to the offerings given to widows, the poor and the crippled, and believed that their prayers for the dead were heard before others. When someone died, food or clothes were taken to the almshouse in Pechory to prevent the dead appearing hungry or naked in a dream.<sup>33</sup> People also believed that alms and donations made within forty days of death may improve the position of the deceased in the next world<sup>34</sup> and popular legends tell of a wealthy but avaricious man who had only three bread crusts or a muddy loaf of bread on the table of his soul – which is all that he had given to the poor during his life<sup>35</sup> (Loorits 1959: 43). An important part of Seto funerary tradition was feeding the guests. Upon someone's death, a farm animal (sheep, calf, or rooster) had to be slaughtered in the dead person's name. Funerals were not held without slaughtering an animal, which guaranteed continued herding luck.<sup>36</sup> The pragmatism of this ritual action ensured the survival of traces of this ancient sacrificial rite even up to the mid-twentieth century.

A belief in the direct connection between giving food away, thus taking care of the less fortunate, and a person's status in the next world was very much alive in Seto families in the middle of the 20th century. For example, in 1976 Matriona Suuveri, the daughter of the famous Seto singer Anne Vabarna, lamented at her mother's grave<sup>37</sup> how she was shown in a dream that her mother had been welcomed in heaven, where she was fed by Jesus and Mary as a reward for her God-fearing and virtuous life on earth. In her lament, Matriona enumerates her mother's good deeds, including raising nine children, and mentions that her mother had, remarkably, always fed beggars and the crippled and offered them shelter (Pino, Sarv 1981: 27).

The hospitable Seto probably remembered the popular legends about Jesus visiting a rich and a poor family as a cripple or old man. Many legends that were popular among the Seto highlight the need to show kindness to beggars and wanderers, for example *A Man Invites God to His House* (ATU 751A\*), *The Judgments in This World* (AT 840B\*) (see also Loorits 1959: 20; Salve 1993: 2609).

#### RELIGIOUS FEASTS OR DRINKING BINGES?

The active tradition of village feasts that is closely connected with church calendar in the Seto region is still very much alive (Lõiv 2008). A feast day is celebrated in every village or a group of villages on a church calendar holiday or on a saint's feast day. Setos themselves call these celebrations *kirmask*, *kirmas* or *külläpraasnik*.<sup>38</sup> The celebration usually starts with a service held in the church or chapel and the commemoration of the dead in the cemetery and continues with a less formal party in the public village space and in family circles. In some regions a fair was held during the village feast. For the younger generation these celebrations were traditionally a place to get acquainted with others and for the parents to arrange marriages. *Kirmask* feasts involved singing and dancing and were accompanied by ritual meals and drinking binges. The feasts were not held during the fasting season, which is why many village feasts took place in summer and autumn.

While the nineteenth-century accounts of *kirmask* feasts sound rather romantic and positive, after the integration of the Seto region into the Republic of Estonia at the beginning of the 20th century the tone of representation radically changes. The nineteenth-century descriptions of Seto women and maidens who danced and sang and floated around like the whiteness of swans in their white outer garments, wearing tinkling silver necklaces (see, for example, Veske 1877: 4), are replaced by drunks and stabbings in the twentieth-century accounts. The abuse of alcohol and ether and the economic damage that the numerous old calendar holidays seemed to have made to the country became the source of dozens of negative news pieces on Seto drinking binges and related criminal activity in national newspapers in the 1930s. Journalists replaced the word *kirmask* with the Russian *gulyanye*, a term unknown to the Seto, to strengthen the allusion to the Russian nature of these feasts.

After the Seto region joined the Republic of Estonia, the authorities tried to push through several reforms in the Orthodox congregations. The most radical of these was the separation of mixed Seto and Russian congregations (Raag 1938; Lõuna 1999: 68–69; 2003: 111–112) and the adoption of the Gregorian calendar. This met fierce opposition even in non-religious institutions, let alone the conservative church (Lõuna 1999: 59). In

1924, newspapers reported that in Pechory people went to church on the day of Epiphany according to the old calendar and demanded that service be held. When the priest refused to do this, the people began to sing Epiphany hymns and make much noise, disturbing the regular service (*Petserimaalt* 1924). Priests who were forced to hold services according to the new calendar often had to summon the police to calm the crowds. At the same time, many of them, among them Father Joann, head of the Pskovo-Pechersky monastery, objected to the adoption of the new calendar in church (Risch 1937: 128; Lõuna 1999: 59). Traditional religious rituals were still often performed according to the old calendar, but they were given partly false or new names. For instance, in 1933, the traditional St. Elijah's Day procession was held in Pechory according to the old calendar, but it was called the "feast celebrating the wiping out of cholera and plague" (*Petserimaa* 1933). A similar incident took place in Kulye, where the St. Elijah's Day service held according to the old calendar was called "the commemoration of laying the cornerstone to the church" (*ibid.*).

The discussion in the Estonian written press in the 1930s highlighted the differences in the work ethics and lifestyle of Seto and Russians from those characteristic of Estonians. The numerous Orthodox feasts and the major importance attached to celebrating them seemed to conflict with the Protestant work ethic of the Estonians. In addition to depicting the popular singing, dancing and eating feasts as Russian, vulgar and criminal, they were also shown to be causing great economic damage and instilling moral nihilism. More active opponents even took trouble to calculate the loss of such celebrations to the country. Reports began to mention the increasing number of *kirmask* feasts: in the 1930s, for example, their number was reported to have been 245 and more (E. 1933; *Petseri* 1937; Lõuna 2003: 85). In addition, the number of people who participated in these feasts grew. While Mihkel Veske estimated that there were 80 to 100 women at the *kirmask* of 1875 in Miiukse (Veske 1877: 4), the number of people at the *kirmask* of Vär-ska in 1932 was said to have been 2000 (Ed. 1932) and a year later, in 1933, there is mention of *kirmask* feasts bringing together a crowd of 10–18 000 (E. 1933; *Petserimaa* 1933).<sup>39</sup> Below is an example of a hyperbolic and figure-manipulating description from 1933.

196 *gulyanyes* on specific days, and in addition 53 *gulyanyes* on movable days, making up the total of 249 feasts, are held each year in the Pechersky district. The number of people at these feasts amounts from 300 to 18,000. The *gulyanyes* that bring together the largest number of visitors are Satserinna with 10–12,000; Kulye with 2–4,000; Lavry with 7–8,000; Pechory with 3–4,000; Izborsk with 4–5,000; Tailova with 8–10,000 and Pankyavitsa with 10–18,000 participants [...]. The distribution of *gulyanyes* throughout the year shows that they fall mostly during the busy work period... If we count here the pilgrimages and movable *gulyanye* feasts, we'll see the toll of partying during the best period of work. Here we must not forget that a *gulyanye* never lasts for only one day, the more correct estimate would be that it lasts from two days to a week, counting also the hangover days. [...] Let's assume that an average number of participants at a *gulyanye* who waste their entire working day is only 300. Then 249 *gulyanyes* would sum up to 74,700 lost working days. If we estimate that the cost of each working day is one and a half kroons, then the loss in labour would make up 11,203,000 cents each year. I don't even dare to include in this list the ordinary weekly holidays and the time spent on cross-processions, etc. (E. 1933)

The 1930s descriptions of Setos partying on work days (see, for example, Põldmäe 1938: 5) conformed well with earlier rhetoric according to which the Seto were primitive and slovenly people with no regard for the future. Typically, both folklore researchers and journalists juxtaposed Russians and Setos who partied during the precious haymaking period, with the assiduous Estonians, who had already finished making hay (E. 1933; Põldmäe 1938: 5). Newspapers also wrote about how Estonian farm owners struggled with their Seto workers, who rushed off to their village *kirmask* feasts in the middle of the busiest work period (Ringi 1933) or taught Estonian youngsters celebration in the “Russian style” (Maa 1934).



Photo 2. Entitled in the Estonian Folklore Archives as “Drunken women dancing during the baaba-praasnik.” Värskä village, 1929. Photo by V. Säägi. ERA, Foto 646.

As the Seto village feasts involved ritual meals and drinking at the cemetery, in the village square and at home, drunken people (including women and children) and fights ending with murders became an inseparable part of the descriptions of the feasts. The temperance movement, which was started in the late 1880s, became strongly established in Estonia and was, by this time, closely associated with ideas of radical nationalism and racial hygiene (Kalling 2007).<sup>40</sup> In 1924, the Estonian temperance society began to cooperate with the Estonian Eugenic Society, Tõutervishoid (Racial Health) (*Eesti* 1924), and the gazette of the society discussed, among other things, the issue of the compulsory sterilisation of “second-rate” and “criminal” persons (Madisson 1925). The Seto village feasts and the binge drinking were discussed as a phenomenon that weakened the nation and has roots in “poor education, unfavorable social conditions and the old harmful ways” (Petseri 1925: 349). So it was agreed that the only way to salvage these ‘vodkaophile’ Setos would be to set down rules for complete prohibition, because

temperance propaganda would only be effective on the younger generation. They also criticised the Seto song festivals as “meagre” events from the educational perspective because the performers would take their fee and spend it at once at the tavern (Lind 1925: 317). Those who wrote about the drinking binges often employed the traditional rhetoric of the Seto being at a lower level of civilisation.

The Setos are far behind their Estonian kinsfolk in every possible way. The only thing in which they are a big step ahead of others is drinking. They all drink: men and women, young and old; even children are given their own shot of ether during the *praasdnik* (‘feast’), and if they refuse, it is forced upon them. The results of such terrible binge drinking can be seen everywhere: various illnesses of the mind and body, poverty and a desire to steal rule here beyond all limits. (Setukene 1907: 8–9)

In the 1930s, the authorities intervened in the tradition of the Seto village feasts and attempted to ban them altogether using police force. This was accompanied by constant assurances that celebrating *kirmask* feasts was a new tradition and had lost all ties with the church holidays (E 1933; *Petseri* 1933; *Gulänjed* 1933; Rammul 1935: 49; Pöldmäe 1938: 8). The spontaneous feasts that were not registered as official gatherings were not quite within the laws of the Republic of Estonia and caused complaints (E. 1933). Since the celebration of religious feast days could not be completely banned, the authorities first officially forbade *ninnikirmask*, the only known non-religious feast held on the second Sunday in July in the village of Kahkva, on the border of areas inhabited by Setos and Estonians (*Ringi* 1935). The feasts, however, were not abandoned but were quietly relocated: the very same Kahkva *kirmask* moved from ‘the Estonian side’ of the border to the village of Puugnitsa in the Seto area of settlement (Pino 1986). The authorities started to regularly use mounted police, batons, and pepper spray to disperse the crowds, and this violent practice was proudly applauded in the newspapers (*Petseri* 1937). The question of Seto village feasts was tackled at the highest level – for instance, in 1932, the Minister of Internal Affairs and Justice Ado Anderkopp reported on his actions to secure control in the Pechersky district.

Among other questions there was the issue of gaining control in the border areas, especially in the Pechersky district and the notorious “*gulyanyes*”. The minister explained that it is difficult to completely ban the traditional feasts in the region because they are, after all, the customs of the local population. But they definitely watch over the violation of laws at these *gulyanyes*. Recently, for example, there was a case of successful use of pepper spray at a *gulyanye* and this will be used in the future. (*Põrandaalustest* 1932)

Single voices tried to speak for the Seto and protect the tradition of village feasts. The Estonian novelist Friedebert Tuglas wrote in his travelogue that *gulyanyes* should not be wiped out. “The people must evolve and only then the *gulyanye* will lose its negative connotation. They won’t come together to start a fight but to be happy” (F. T. 1936). At the same time, a few years before Tuglas, the Estonian poet Henrik Visnapuu wrote a splenetic epigram, entitled “*Gulyanye and Baton*”, targeting the supporters of village feasts, ridiculing the *kirmask* tradition and its protectors and emphasizing the violent aspect of the celebration.

Oh, the terrible policeman  
Bans your gulyanye feast  
And strikes with his baton  
When a fight with your girl is on.

You want to try your knife,  
To wish your friend something 'nice',  
And, again, the baton comes,  
Makes you humble as a dove.

[...]  
The state exerts full force,  
The feast cannot be loud, of course,  
Can't even crack a skull,  
Oh, the good days of *gulyanye* are gone!  
What's a Seto party, right  
When you even cannot fight?  
You can drink ether, says the state,  
But the cudgel has to wait.  
'Cause over you backside the baton comes,  
And you're as quiet as a dove.  
(Tulihänd 1933: 2)

#### HOW TO UNDERSTAND THE FASTING AND FEASTS OF OTHERS?

After the Seto areas were incorporated into the Republic of Estonia, the differences in culture brought bitter conflict. While the modernised Estonians, when speaking about Setos, still employed the rhetoric of the noble savage and untouchable primal Estonians, they began more often to look down on them as their 'younger brothers' and tried to reform Seto culture and lifestyle as something out-dated and backward. Quite unexpectedly, not only were differences in socio-economic situation and educational background sources of conflict, but also phenomena connected with religion and tradition. Divergences in the understanding of religious practices and piety, healthcare and housekeeping were so remarkable that the conflicts were often irreconcilable.

The religious rituals of the Seto came to be regarded with a fresh eye: traditional fasting was associated with the discourse of healthcare, food sacrifice with economy and religious feasts with criminal activities and alcoholism. People measured the economic profits and losses of religious practices and their effects on health, but failed to understand that for the religious Seto the observance of traditional ritual practices, such as the celebration of religious feasts and commemoration of the dead, was the only possible way of conduct, and such practical considerations were irrelevant.

The alternation of fasting periods and feasts formed the structure of the Seto yearly cycle and determined the spiritually, physically and sexually more active and passive periods. When an attempt was made in the 1920s to modernise and secularise the Seto people, these so-far solid structures began to crumble. Faith and related religious practices, which had always formed the cornerstone of Seto self-identification, were now

being stigmatised as “the Russians’ religion” and an instrument of Russianisation. The Seto were to become a people like the Protestant Estonians as soon as possible. The official policy of Estonia emphasised that there were only three nationalities in the Pechory region: Estonian, Russian and Latvian.

Indeed, the population of the Pechory region became gradually more Estonian-minded and the attempts to Estonianise Setos began to be successful, especially with Estonian-language education imposed on them. The observance of ancient religious traditions began to fade after police intervention and the imposition of fines to sever the tradition of village feasts were initially unsuccessful (see Rammul 1935: 49). The more Estonianised population was suddenly embarrassed about their region being perceived as some open air museum (Manninen 1924), and in the late 1930s the *Petseri Žurnaal* (Pechory Journal) and nationwide newspapers started to write about the advances made in the Pechory region in modernising healthcare practices and silencing religious feasts (for example, *Setumaa* 1935).

Life is becoming more rational also in the Pechory region and the ‘golden calf’ of folklorists and ethnographers is losing its shine. In all areas of life you can see how the cultural influences of this century start to break through the walls that seemed so impossible to penetrate, such as the field of healthcare, formerly forced into backwardness and standstill by religious convictions. The number of people who make pilgrimages is decreasing and the former emphasis on religious life is returning to normal. We can notice that culture and awareness have come to balance life here as well. Everything progressive, acceptable and suitable for us remains. (Vahi 1936: 4)

The Seto practices connected with food and drinking, abstinence and excesses, were established within a clearly outlined religious, social, political and economic context. The emic and etic interpretations of religious practices were diametrically different and during this tumultuous time there was no understanding or cross-cultural interpretation. The representations of Setos in the media and elsewhere were controlled by Estonians, and the descriptions of fasting and feasts were transformed into grotesque ritual practices with an emphasis on their self-destructive aspects. By the 1930s these practices were removed from their original context and were relocated within the context of archaic folkloric and religious phenomena on the one hand, and pre-Modernist Russian discourse, on the other.

For an outsider, fasts and feasts as perhaps the most noticeable elements of Seto religious life were stigmatised in both popular and academic representations of Seto culture. Seto religious piety and traditional feasts were regarded in the young Republic of Estonia as an attack on a common national identity, something that subverted the ideals of abstemious and secular nationalism. The Seto had no choice but to become Estonian, and nobody asked their opinion. Setos’ views on their own religious life, which has become part of a disappearing tradition, were recorded only by the Estonian Folklore Archives.

## NOTES

1 The Seto Congress, which continues the work of a previous congress by the same name (originally organised by Estonians with its aim at that time being the Estonianisation of the Seto, see Jääts 1998: 51), adopted a declaration in 2002 which stated that the Seto are a separate ethnic group (Sarv, Sarv 2003).

2 This metaphor by Susan Ritchie is a criticism of approaches in cultural or folklore studies that represent an Other who presumes to speak for a voiceless or silent nation and to 'rescue' its folklore from being forgotten or eradicated.

3 The use of diethyl ether as a recreational drug was common in Estonia already in the 19th century. Advocates of temperance claimed in the early 20th century that the habit spread to the rest of Estonia from the Seto (Kalling 2004: 115). The Seto hold several traditional beliefs about the effect of ether and its use to this day.

4 Jakob Hurt (1839–1907) was an Estonian folklorist and linguist and one of the leaders of the Estonian national movement.

5 The report was published first in Russian in 1903 and a year later in German in the author's translation.

6 I am well aware that the texts stored in the archives have passed through the filter of an Estonian folklorist or collector, as the questions and emphases in these texts have clearly been provoked by the researcher. At the same time, regardless of this mediation, it is possible to detect the Setos' own 'voice' in lengthier language samples or in a close reading of longer oral texts recorded from Seto informants. As the Seto were largely illiterate, recordings are often the only available source of information about the worldview and beliefs of the Seto of the time.

7 Written documents about the St. Nicholas Church in Izborsk (Irboska) date back to 1340, but the church is estimated to have been there since the 12th or even the 11th century. The Pskovo-Pechersky monastery was founded in 1473 (Piho 2011: 13).

8 Researchers of Russian peasant culture have noticed how the non-Orthodox or especially Lutheran background of the researchers has too easily affected consideration of the vernacular and lived Orthodoxy to be a formal fulfilment of customs. The fundamental principles of Protestantism expect individual faith, knowledge of scripture, and understanding of the dogmas, and therefore illiteracy and vernacular piety may seem as the lack of faith or as dual faith (a mixture of paganism and Christianity), cf.: Lewin 1990: 166–167. Although the Russian peasants may not have known the dogmas, they were still devoted participants in the rituals. Although the religious practices may not have been in accordance with official dogmas and rules, it does not necessarily imply that religion was not taken seriously, see Heretz 2008: 8–9.

9 See, for example, Usstav 1908: 7–8; Rammul 1935: 49; Hagu 1999.

10 Religion has drawn a clear line between the Seto and Lutheran Estonians. Even in the 19th century, Setos referred to themselves either as Russians, because of their religious adherence, or as "country folk" (Sarv 2000: 62).

11 ERA II 286, 160 (132) – Ello Kirss < Ode Palo, born in 1869 (1940).

12 More often, though, the weekly fasting was limited to Wednesday and Friday. As in other regions of the Russian Empire, fasting on Monday was also known to the Seto, which undoubtedly is a vernacular imitation of pious convent residents' *sukhoiadenie*. Enriching the official church calendar with another day of fasting and in that way excluding another day from profane week-time and making it a feast-day and therefore part of vernacular piety, see Heretz 1997: 71. A detailed overview about fasting customs and the vernacular calendar in Russian Orthodox Karelia has recently been made by Marja-Liisa Keinänen (2012).

13 The two latter were often called lenient fasts, since they were not observed quite so strictly, H II 63, 481/2 (1900).

14 ERA II 209, 156/7 (9).



15 ERA II 209, 122/5.

16 Michaelmas fast was reportedly observed in the Meremäe region, and in Usinita village, where people believed that it would prove helpful for the treatment of rabies, see ERA II 286, 126/8; ERA II 155, 394/5 (187). Leonid Heretz (1997) also describes the Russian peasant custom of adding fast days and making them more strict.

17 ERA II 209, 122/5.

18 ERA II 194, 354 (2).

19 ERA II 286, 126/8 (93).

20 ERA II 296, 449/50 (12).

21 My studies on singing restrictions during fasts among members of the Värška church choir and the village choir "Leiko", both situated in the Seto region, show that some of the fasting taboos are still observed (Kalkun 2004; Kalkun, Ojamaa 2009).

22 ERA II 286, 159/60 (131a) – Ello Kirss < Ode Palo, born in 1869 (1940).

23 The Seto believed in the miraculous healing powers of proshpora. Proshpora were used in several healing rituals, and was also useful for treating children or animals who had been cast the evil eye. People also believed in its magical nutritive value (Loorits 1959: 18).

24 Similar beliefs were associated with St. Paraskeva, who was honoured in several parts of the Seto region, see ERA II 209, 247/8 (18).

25 H II 63, 454/5 (5) – Jaan Sandra (1900).

26 L < Petseri – O. Loorits < K. Usstav (1940).

27 S 88625/8 (33e) – Grigori Karulaan < Anton Täht (1934).

28 H II 63, 452 (5).

29 ERA II 286, 159 (131).

30 Caroline Walker Bynum (1992: 141; also 1987), who has analysed the motifs that emerge in medieval hagiographies of female saints, shows that fasting (or abstinence from earthly food) is often connected with heightened interest in feeding others.

31 It is likely that the dietary habits of Seto children were also influenced by the traditional fright tales told during fasting seasons (the priest will cut out your tongue if you dare to eat dairy products or meat; you'll go blind if you eat butter or eggs, and so on).

32 In different cultures, fasting has been associated with exercising control over one's sexuality; see, for example, an approach to the topic based on the example of Russian agrarian culture (Heretz 1997) or another on American culture (Griffith 2004: 120).

33 ERA II 248, 665/6 (2) (1939).

34 ERA II 194, 424 (26) (1938).

35 S 57778 (7) (1933); ERA II 194, 270/1 (3) (1938).

36 H II 69, 825/6 (1) (1903).

37 Seto funeral laments represented communication with the next world and often entailed addressing the deceased, see Pino, Sarv 1981. I have previously discussed the use of food symbolism in Anne Vabarna's Seto epic *Peko* (Kalkun 2008).

38 The Seto word *kirmask* probably derives from the Russian *kirmash*, and etymologically stems from the German *Kirchmesse*.

39 The wide range of estimates is probably caused by the fact that researchers of the late 20th century only counted Seto village feasts, whereas the news articles of the 1930s also include Russian village feasts.<sup>40</sup> Similar developments took place in the Finnish temperance movement; see Mattila 1999; Apo 2001: 209–12.

## SOURCES

Manuscript collections of the Estonian Folklore Archives at the Estonian Literary Museum  
ERA – Folklore collection of the Estonian Folklore Archives (1927–1944)  
H – Folklore collection of Jakob Hurt (1860–1906)  
L – Folklore collection of Oskar Loorits (1900–1961)  
S – Seto folklore collection of Samuel Sommer (1922–1936)

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