

# Traditional Culture in Estonia

Ingrid Rüütel

*In prehistoric times the Finno-Ugric tribes, including ancestors of the Estonians, populated vast areas between the Ural Mountains and the Baltic Sea. Estonian culture developed in close contact with the Balts (ancestors of the Indo-European Latvians and Lithuanians) and other Indo-European peoples: Scandinavians, Germans, and later also Russians.*

*In the 13th century the Estonians were conquered by the Danes and Germans. In time, the German landholders took possession of the entire territory of Estonia, and most Estonians were reduced to serfdom.*

*In 1721 Estonia became part of the Russian empire. Estonian*





## The Baltic Nations: Estonia

peasants remained serfs of the German landholders until the feudal system was abolished in the middle of the 19th century. The antiserfdom movement was accompanied by a national awakening with emphasis on Estonian-language education and publications and collecting folklore, as well as on political rights. On February 24, 1918, following the Russian Revolution, the independent Republic of Estonia was proclaimed. The war of independence against Russia was ended by the Tartu Peace Treaty on February 2, 1920, when Russia agreed forever to relinquish claims over Estonia.

Nevertheless, the secret agreement in 1939 between Hitler and Stalin, the notorious Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, resulted in the Soviet invasion of Estonia and its

annexation to the Soviet Union in 1941. This was in turn followed by the Nazi occupation. Both occupations were accompanied by political repression and deportations; Estonia lost one-fourth of its population. These losses were “replaced,” in accordance with the Soviet resettlement and russification policy, by hundreds of thousands of colonists from Russia.

The perestroika led by Gorbachev sparked a unique movement, known as the Singing Revolution, in Estonia and other Baltic states. The efforts by Estonians to restore their independence succeeded; on August 20, 1991, the independent state of Estonia was restored.

Estonia's folklore today falls into three basic categories. There is a repertoire of contemporary folklore — anecdotes, children's games and rhymes, student songs, etc. — which is orally transmitted. Traditional music, dances, and tales, which live in the memories of older people and continue to be practiced, are orally transmitted and also preserved in archives (the central archive for folklore and traditional music being the Estonian Folklore Archives in Tartu at the Estonian Literary Museum). The third form, the so-called secondary tradition or folklorism phenomenon, consists of traditional heritage that has been transmitted through written sources, tapes, radio and television programs. It takes on a “second” life in modern society, in a new context, and is a resource for contemporary amateur and professional art practice.

The preservation of national culture and identity has been a vital question in Estonian history: nation-building as well as our very persistence as a nation have been extremely difficult under various occupations and subordination to

Russians and Germans for hundreds of years. It continues to be vital in the present, because of the large Russian population in Estonia and because, as UNESCO's “Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Folklore” (1989) describes, small nations are always more threatened by cultural assimilation in the situation where the adherence to one's own culture “is often eroded by the impact of the industrialized culture purveyed by the mass media.”

In two regions of Estonia the living tradition of folk song, dance, and music has managed to survive with its integrity intact up to the present time. These are the small island of Kihnu, off the western coast of Estonia, and the southeastern corner of Estonia, Setumaa.

In Kihnu, people have preserved the ancient wedding ceremonies, singing old alliterative verses in Kalevala meter (the *regilaulud* or *runosongs*), and dancing traditional folk dances. Such weddings derive from clan wedding ceremonies that confirm the contract between two lineages. They have pre-Christian origins and are essentially similar to 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; the old ritual songs are performed at the main events in which both clans participate.

An important wedding rite is the distribution of the dowry. The bride's dowry chest has to be filled with items made by her and her friends, and this tradition has supported the persistence of handicraft skills. Also worth noting is that the wedding ceremony includes dancing of old folk dances, which in other settings were long ago replaced by modern dances. Only in the last decade have old folk dances regained their place alongside contemporary dance forms in Kihnu's public social events.

Although the old wedding rites and songs have lost their religious and magical connotations, they have retained their



*A region where traditional culture has persisted without disruption is Setumaa. Pictured is a Setu wedding.*  
Photo by Kaido Haagen





*ABOVE* In 1989, to protest Soviet occupation, Baltic people joined hands to form a human chain that stretched from Estonia, through Latvia, to Lithuania. Photo by Peeter Langovits



*RIGHT* St. John's Day celebration on Kihnu Island, Estonia. Photo by Veera Nazarova

symbolic significance. They promote the importance and festiveness of the wedding for the bridal couple and their families, help to prepare the bride for her new social status, and remind the newlyweds about their duties and responsibilities.

The main bearers of tradition in Kihnu have been women. Kihnu men long ago discarded their traditional attire and songs, and the playing of traditional musical instruments, which used to be men's domain, has today been adopted by women (mainly young girls). Seafarers since time immemorial, the men have brought innovations back home. The openness of modern society has fur-

ther influenced the culture on Kihnu island. Radio, television, tape recorders, and recently also video have become a part of daily life, disseminating the global commercial culture; passive listening has replaced active participation. Many Kihnu youth study on the mainland, where they take up residence after they graduate. In summertime they visit their native island and bring forms of contemporary urban culture with them. Nevertheless, when at home in Kihnu, girls wear traditional striped skirts (the fabric is always woven at home, even if the looms are borrowed) and sing and dance old Kihnu songs and dances. One of the

remarkable characteristics of Kihnu culture is its ability to integrate various elements over the course of time without losing its basic substance. The new has not completely superseded the old.

Performing groups on the mainland have adopted some Kihnu songs, dances, and instrumental melodies in their repertoire. Kihnu folk songs have also inspired professional composers. Thus Kihnu culture, though mainly in its newer forms, is perceived as an integral component of Estonian national culture.

Organized folklore groups have become important mediators between traditional and contemporary culture; young people accept such a medium for learning and perpetuating the cultural heritage of their parents. The most famous such group today is Kihnumaa, directed by Katrin Kumpan. Performers in the group represent a mix of generations. Members of Kihnumaa are frequently invited to weddings to perform the role of traditional wedding singers. Wedding songs are led by the older women in the group; girls sing as a chorus and assist the brides.

Another region where traditional culture has persisted without disruption is Setumaa, a relatively isolated area whose population is Eastern Orthodox. Its ancient folk song style has been preserved, and the elderly women are still masters of their local singing language to the extent that they are able to improvise new songs in the traditional manner. Also important in Setu are the village feasts — *kirmased* — which sometimes coincide with a traditional calendar celebration such as Easter. Setumaa is the only region of Estonia where death laments and rituals of ancestor cults, such as a commemorative meal on a grave, have been preserved.

Setu singing deviates considerably from other Estonian folk singing, particularly in its polyphony and performance style. The Setu dialect is likewise unique, even incomprehensible to a northern





Estonian. While being an essential bearer of identity for the Setus, Setu folk songs, like the culture as a whole, strike other Estonians as strange. This strangeness is sometimes a source of embarrassment to Setus and has caused serious problems for those who have migrated to towns and tried to maintain their identity.

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, there occurs desperate aspiration to mold 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. There are a lot of people like me in Tallinn [the capital of Estonia] and elsewhere, who are not satisfied with the present situation but wish to preserve their ancestral culture, in order to transmit it in turn to their own children. Those phenomena which in the past functioned naturally and implicitly should be attended at present consciously... (Sarv 1994:69).

*National song festivals are large affairs with the participants numbering in the tens of thousands, and the audiences in the hundreds of thousands. Pictured is the 1990 All-Estonian Song Festival. Photo by Gustav German*

Organized amateur cultural activities have provided urban Setus with such an opportunity to consciously practice their heritage. Setu ensembles of singers are active both in Setumaa and in cities where Setus have settled. They come together at the *leelopaev* festival every three years and various other events. Their main objective is not to perform for an audience, especially for outsiders to the community. More important is the interaction and communication that take place among members of the community and foster the preservation and maintenance of cultural identity and unity.

The attitude that was cultivated in the Soviet period, and that unfortunately is gaining ground in the current open-market society — the degradation of local cultural heritage, and traditional culture in general, as something obsolete and worthless — gives an enormous impetus to the bearers of the culture themselves, the young especially, to underestimate it. What is promoted via mass media chan-

nels is always more popular.

Still, during the last decade, recognition of local cultural traditions has grown and consequently enhanced the appreciation of the native culture by its bearers both in Kihnu and in Setu. But it is impossible to revive all the old forms, and noticeable changes have taken place in those that have been retained. Alongside and/or replacing the old rituals and customs, new feasts have arisen in which old songs and dances are used with changed functions and in changed forms.

In other parts of Estonia, folk songs, music, and dances have spread mainly in secondary forms.

Among amateur folk groups are those which directly carry on the primary tradition, i.e., at least some of their members are authentic tradition bearers and teach younger participants, as is the case with the Kihnu and Setu groups. Other folk music and dance groups perform the so-called secondary tradition. They either



## The Baltic Nations: Estonia

take examples from authentic folklore and try to perform them in the most genuine manner (although the primary tradition has been broken and the repertoire is learned through recorded sources), or they perform folklore

### *The preservation of national culture and identity has been a vital question in Estonian history.*

arrangements in a more stylized, up-to-date form.

Authentic folklore groups, which began to be formed in Estonia in the 1960s, were rather rare. The groups who performed stylized arrangements and new creations “in folk style” were preferred at official festivals and were also chosen to represent the national culture abroad. The ideology at the time aimed to merge the nationalities and create new entities — the Soviet people and the Soviet culture. Openly expressing one’s national self-consciousness and ethnic identity, even through the native culture, was regarded as “nationalistic” and was prohibited. “Nationalism” was to be replaced with “Soviet patriotism,” which had to be demonstrated at all official festivities. Every festival and even concert program had to be approved by appropriate state organs.

The new, choreographed “folk dances” were performed to the accompaniment of special folk music arrangements as well as new works by contemporary composers. The so-called folk instrument or folk music orchestras might contain tra-

ditional as well as classical musical instruments and always played from written scores. Later, especially in the 1970s, the so-called *külakapellid*, “country orchestras,” became popular, representing more spontaneous music-making and having stronger traditional roots. Many skilled folk musicians, true carriers of traditional music, participated

(and still participate) in such small orchestras; they were not able to perform as soloists at public festivities for a long time, because their style of music-making was not officially recognized. Only in the last decade have authentic folk musicians become appreciated anew. A new generation of folk musicians has appeared who follow traditional performing styles and teach them to other young people.

In spite of the fact that the inner qualities of traditional culture were not recognized during the Soviet period, that authentic folk art was forced into alien frames, its essence and meaning greatly distorted, even the officially accepted folkloric forms served as a means of national self-expression. The same has been true in the case of large song festivals — the first of which was held in Estonia in 1869 — at which numerous amateur choirs from all over the country — tens of thousands of singers — perform and which hundreds of thousands of people attend. A sense of national and cultural identity and the need to manifest it have been carried through the course of history of all these festivities, regardless of what and whom they had to be devoted to officially.

Professional composers such as Alo Mattiisen attempted in the 1980s to introduce into rock music elements of folk music — the monotonously repeated melody that lasts one verse line, performed by a lead singer and chorus —

while the arrangement, sound, and singing style of the singer were those of rock. These songs were performed together with old national songs during the recent “Singing Revolution” and became very popular at political rallies. The lines by the lead singer were repeated by thousands of people, the majority of whom had never before sung old traditional songs nor been rock music fans. (The singing of old folk songs by a lead singer and chorus had also been somewhat popular during the Soviet era thanks to folklore ensembles like Leegajus and Hellero, but also thanks to a well-known composer of a number of folk song arrangements, Veljo Tormis, who has promoted such a singing style while performing as a lead singer himself at various gatherings.) At the 1990 Song Festival, which was organized during the process of restoring independence, barriers between performers and the audience crumbled, and all the participants joined as one rejoicing mass of people, singing old and new popular songs and dancing spontaneously.

Festivals of authentic folklore — local, all-Estonian, and international — which started some 15 years ago, represent a new trend in the Estonian folklore movement. The first local festivals were Viru Säre in northern Estonia and Setu Leelopäevad and Viljandimaa Virred in southern Estonia. Their goal has been to bridge the ancient cultural heritage of their district and contemporary culture by acquainting people with authentic traditional customs, songs, dances, instrumental music, games, and tales, popularizing traditional handicrafts, and disseminating the folklore of other



## The Baltic Nations: Estonia

Finno-Ugrians and other cultures around the Baltic Sea.

The same philosophy lies behind other local festivals (in recent years their number has noticeably grown) as well as the international folklore festival Baltica, the largest folklore event in the Baltic states. This annual festival, begun in 1987, is organized by the Baltic National Committee of CIOFF (Conseil International des Organisations de Festivals de Folklore et d'Arts Traditionnels) and is held in the three Baltic states on a rotating basis. Organizers first and foremost value inner freedom and naturalness in presentation, not stage efficiency. In addition to preserving, reviving, and developing national and regional cultural traditions, the Baltica festival aims as well to promote contacts with other countries and nations.

The folklore movement in Estonia and in other Baltic countries is one of the reflections of the worldwide folklore movement of the last decades. On the one hand it is connected with the ideals of national identity, of retaining the historical and cultural memory of nations; on the other, with the ideals of cultural pluralism.

Today the international exchange of folklore groups has become rather extensive, as there are numerous festivals in different countries where Estonian groups participate, and foreign groups often visit local festivals arranged in Estonia. One of the new international festivals was started in 1993 in Viljandi by young graduates of the folk music department established at the Viljandi Cultural College in 1991. Their folk music groups, folk music summer schools, and festivals have become very popular, especially among young people.

The essential purpose of international festivals, as we see it, is to widen the cultural competence of the Estonian audience, to learn to understand different cultures, and through all this to create a more tolerant society. This way we may also better comprehend the values of our

own traditional culture. Understanding and respect towards strangers together with preserving and ensuring of one's own identity helps to create harmony; it guarantees the right of all nations and cultures to permanent existence in a linguistically, culturally, ethnically diverse, and interesting world.

## Work Cited and Suggested Reading

- Kõiva, Ottilie, and Rüütel, Ingrid, eds. and comps. "*Kihnu regilaulud*" (Kihnu wedding songs). In *Vana kannel* (The ancient *kannel*). Monumenta Estoniae Antiquae, vol. 7, part 1. Tartu: Eesti Keele Instituut, 1997.
- Pino, Veera, and Sarv, Vaike. "*Setu surnuitkud I-II*" (The Setu death dirges). *Ars Musicae Popularis*. Tallinn: Eesti Keele Instituut, 1981-1982. (with Russian and English summaries)
- Rüütel, Ingrid. "Estonian Folk Music Layers in the Context of Ethnic Relations." Paper presented at Congressus Octavus Internationalis Fenno-Ugristarum Jyväskylä, 10-15 August 1995. In *Orationes plenariae et conspectus quinquennales*, part 1, ed. Heikki Leskinen. Jyväskylä, Finland, 1995, 117-141.
- Sarv, Õ. "Connections between family and folk culture in modern times." Abstract of paper presented at the Nordic, Baltic, Finno-Ugric Conference: Family as the Tradition Carrier, Võsu, Estonia, 25-29 May 1994. Tallinn: Folklore Department, Institute of Estonian Language, 1994, 68-69.
- Vissel, Anu. "*Eesti karjaselaulud I-IV*" (Estonian herding songs). *Ars Musicae Popularis*. Tallinn: Eesti Keele Instituut, 1982-1992. (with Russian and English summaries)

## Suggested Listening

- Pänapuu, Veera. *Setukeste laule* (Setu folk songs). Comp. Vaike Sarv. Forte FA 0084 (Tallinn). Cassette.
- Setu Songs*. Global Music Centre, Mipu Music MIPUCD 104.
- Suu laulab, süda mureteeb...* (an anthology of Estonian folk songs). Comp. I. Rüütel. Forte (Tallinn). CD (with English and Russian summaries)

---

*Ingrid Rüütel, director of the Folk Music Department of the Institute of Estonian Language, holds degrees in folklore, traditional music, and philological sciences. She has studied and collected the folk music of Estonians and other Finno-Ugric peoples and published 200 scholarly works. She is a member of the scientific board of the International Institute of Traditional Music in Berlin and a liaison member of the International Council for Traditional Music.*