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# NIGHT WAILER AND NIGHT MOTHER IN ESTONIAN AND FINNO-UGRIC FOLK TRADITION

*Mare Kõiva*

In the current article I will touch upon a couple of beliefs concerning mythological creatures who could be associated with midnight (namely, ööitketaja (Night Wailer), südaöörahvas (Midnight People) and ööema (Night Mother)) in Estonian and its neighbouring people's folk tradition. Spooky midnight creatures, kidnappers, causes of longing and sickness, nightmares, restless souls, demons and creatures doomed to wander eternally could be found in the religions of different people. During the period of a more active recording of folk tradition, the tradition concerning several smaller or local mythological creatures was on the verge of dying out, unifying marginal creatures and similar or more commonly known phenomena.

## ÖÖITKETAJA

Ööitketaja was known in the Estonian, Votian, Ingrian and Karelian-Finnish folk tradition (yöitkettäjä). In 1974 Paul Ariste commented on the basis of his long-time expedition observations that Votes no longer believed in night wailing, it was cured by doctors, still they continued to believe in nari (Ariste 1974: 53). In Estonia, the notion "ööitk" (night wailing) was common in quite a limited area in the north-eastern part of Estonia, primarily around Vaivara. The spread of the word refers to the presumed parallels with eastern regions. In fact, the reports on beliefs, methods of folk medicine and incantations recorded in Estonia originate from the north-eastern region from the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century as well. One of the archive notes describes the phenomenon in the following way: Night wailing occurs when a child weeps a lot at night. In the western part of Estonia, weeping was caused by a nututaja and in South-Estonia by a tsisaja [both dialectal terms denote a creature who makes people wail at nights – trans.] and their description is identical with the phenomenon of an 'evil eye', just as falling ill was associated with a person

who sent or put a nututaja on a child. Also, the methods of curing and prevention were similar in nature.

If a child cries a lot, it is under the influence of the ‘nututaja’. Most often it is done by an old widow with dark hair. She comes to visit the family who has a child, asks: “What do you have there moving a bit on the bed?” She is told that they have a child on the bed, and she says: “Ahem, ahem, but he is lying so still, do others have to make things for him?” Then the child screams in his sleep and starts crying so that nobody is able to quiet him. Then they obtain a rag from the crone’s clothing, they smoke the baby with it and the screaming will go away. H II 18, 604 (7) < Kaarma church parish, Muratsi p. - T. Jakson (1890).

In addition to the people with an evil eye or an evil word the continuous wailing at night of children in Estonia was also associated with the influence of dead relatives, nightmares and congenital diseases supposedly caused by breaking a taboo. First and foremost, such diseases were thought to be caused by the wrong behaviour of a mother during her pregnancy or being startled by an animal. The latter conceptions were widely known to all the neighbouring people.

Let us observe the descriptions of curing from the last century which refer to the obsolete methods of curing and the archaic concepts that formed basis to it. Night wailing has been cured by reaching a child through a rope: The following method would help to cure that: an old rope was dunked into water and the child was whisked with it on a Thursday evening. After that the rope was coiled and the child was pulled three times through the coil. H II 1, 675 (33) < Vaivara parish., Küterküla - O.Kallas (1888).

A similar method of treatment was used for curing ‘snake disease’. As it usually is the case with popular terminology and aetiology of diseases, it is almost impossible to determine what disease we are dealing with. The only stable thing could be the explanation to the cause of the disease. The ‘snake disease’, a congenital disorder was believed to be the result of a mother being startled by a snake during her pregnancy, or she had broken an old custom which prohibited slaughtering an animal or attending the slaughtering while being pregnant. Reaching a child through the rope might be consid-

ered as a symbolical passing through the snake which relieves of the influence of damager, but also as a symbolical rebirth which results in the child's entering the world anew relieved of diseases. Most often the influence of the damager is shaken off by the contact with him/her or something representing him/her (hairs, footprints, skin, threads of cloth, etc.).

It could also be cured in another way: the child was passed through the collar of the horse which had drawn a dead man, namely at three Thursday nights. H II 1, 675 (34) < Vaivara parish., Küterküla - O. Kallas (1888).

Arch- or bridge-shaped horse collar are semantically quite loaded with magic and according to some beliefs, while looking through them all kinds of demonic creatures became visible for humans: the devil on the cart or on horse-back, an incubus of men and animals, haunting ghosts. Folk medicine applied the harness in the cure of quite a number of diseases, horse's sweat was scraped and added to the medicine. Passing a child through the collar was a common treatment for many diseases. The collar which had drawn the deceased enabled to establish a contact with death and the dead. Passing through the symbolic arch could be compared with other methods based on the analogous magic, where the sick person is passed through a hollow tree or connate trees, etc.

Generally, Votes have not been able to determine the cause of night wailing, sometimes, however, it is associated with witchcraft. In 1960s and 1970s storytellers have shared their personal experience with the disease with Paul Ariste. The methods of cure are similar with Estonian tradition: a child has been passed through the collar, and sometimes also through the coil of rope ([—] Ügs lazzöb, a tõin võtab vassa. Kõm kõrta laskötas läpi.(One reaches and another one accepts. Passing it for three times.) VE XII < Mati k. - P. Ariste < Olga Ivanova, 77 a. (1968)), asafoetida (piru pask) has been placed inside a baby's cradle. Similar treatments have been described by Aada Ambus in the article on the dialogic incantations of the Votes (Ambus 1962). In several cases people have not been able to say incantations, and if asked the reply is general saying that something was said for healing.

The ritual for curing night wailing in Estonia, Votia, Ingria as well as in Karelia included a dialogic rather than just any type of incantation. The ritual focuses on the archaic dialogue between the healer / knower and the patient. The witchcraft magic and the target of prevention is verbalised by the medium of this ancient and simple incantation. The demon of the disease, God, superior forces, people or creatures who thought to have caused to disease were made aware of the preventive ritual. Usually, the dialogic incantation consists of two or three phrases which are repeated three to nine times in the course of the magic ritual. As a rule, the text remains the same, but the preventive procedure might be altered. The alteration of the procedure is sometimes reflected in phrases, which verbalise the act. For example, the text refers to cutting if the symbolic cutting of the disease occurs in the ritual.; if the disease is symbolically chopped, the text also refers to chopping.

Dialogical incantations contained either two or three phrases. Two-phrasal dialogic incantations include questions and answers. The questions are very brief, asking what will be done. Answers refer to the procedure and are informative in nature. In three-phrasal dialogic incantation the confirmation or an imperative order to destroy the creature once and for all, end the process so that it will be finished, prevent the disease so that it will be gone for ever, is added.

Both two and three-phrasal dialogic incantations were common in Estonia. Three-phrasal incantation dominated in North-Estonia and in some South-Estonian parishes. Let us note that this structure occurs most frequently in Latvian (Straubergs 1939: 248), Lithuanian (Mansikka 1929), Votian (Ambus 1962, Ariste 198) but also in Finnish (SKVR 1908-1948), Slavonic healing incantations (Peskov 1980) and in those of other peoples (Kõiva 1983). Therefore, we could speculate that the three-phrasal incantation has been influenced by the neighbouring peoples. Nevertheless, such a simple text might not be under direct influences, it might be associated with a general custom to end the incantation with a confirmation. Moreover, the dialogues of the legends of incantations are often formed of three stages, and have spread in this form all over Estonia.

As for the structure of the text there is no major difference in the inner and outer dialogues.

The sc. inner dialogue is characteristic to the internationally spread legendary incantations. Historiola is based on a story where Jesus (Mary, or some saint, unspecified unknown person) meets three demons of illness, angels or other characters. He inquires for the destination of their journey and having heard the answer tells them to cure efficiently or disappear for good, depending on what they were going to do. The incantation with inner dialogue begins usually with the minimal formula of address or a brief introduction of the situation. The incantation ends with several orders and/or confirmation formulas which are meant to appeal superior forces. The incantation is closed with Amen or the Lord's Prayer.

Incantations with inner prayers have been recorded in witch trial protocols, a number of them have been recorded at the height of collecting folklore at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The inner dialogue has formed the basis to the internationally known 'sprain words' Jesus on the way to church or the sc. 2. spell words of Merseburg, recorded in Estonia in hundreds.

Grinding the ööitk/ööitketaja on a hand-mill was popular in Ingria as well as in Karelia. The uniting of hand mill and dialogic incantation in preventive and protection magic was known even here. In Estonia, flies were ground on a hand-mill to keep them away during the summer. The procedure was carried out on St. Matthew's day or around that date. The magic ritual was also known in Saaremaa (Ösel) and West-Estonia, parallels could be drawn from the Finnish material. In Estonia, children having the 'dog disease' (atrophy) were also ground on a hand mill. This is one of the diseases which made children cry at nights. The dominant symptoms of the dog disease were puniness, lack of appetite, also crying, yawning, stretching oneself, etc. in the course of which the child grows thin, wails and is weakly, it may also entail serious disorders. Children with 'dog disease' were cured with magic, which seem quite impressive for people today, and probably had a remarkable effect on the small child: the child was symbolically weighed, hanged, boiled, ground, a dog was told to jump over him and the child was whisked together with a dog, etc.

On the procedure of curing with dialogical incantations the child was accompanied by a family member, most often his mother in Estonia as well as in Votia. Two people went to cure the child. No

specific regulation on the tradition of curing the dog disease exists on the other person, supposedly it was someone who was acquainted with the tradition and an acknowledged healer.

The Votian dialogue of night wailing published by Aada Ambus has three phrases:

The night wail of a child. Then they go and grind on the hand-mill. Supposedly there are two of them. Then it as if asks his mother: “What are you grinding?” – “I grind the night wail!”—“Grind it so that it would be ground!” (It was repeated) three times. (Ambus 1962: 226). A number of identical variants have been recorded in Ingria as well.

The closer analogues of night wail in the Russian tradition is bessonniitsa (insomnia) and polunotëitsa (midnight elf). The longer chants reveal that nututaja and the sower of longing comes as a pretty girl or a young woman, who is often wearing a red dress. Both of the characters of incantations are associated with the image of a guardian elf of the house, but also with images of (mid-)night mother, personified midnight hour, mythological disease but also with the cult of the dead (Vlassova 1995: 285). Bessonniitsa and polunotëitsa with their numerous modes of origin were kept away mostly with chanting and preventive behaviour. As far as the magical methods of treatment are concerned there are similarities to Estonian materials. Night wailing (Nachtweinen) which was associated to the falling of moonlight upon a baby (Handwörterbuch VI) was known in a limited area in Germany. In general, the image of night wail in Germany appears to be based mostly on the concept of an evil eye and an evil witch, still, analogues can be found in the concepts of the night mother and midnight people.

I would briefly like to point out that several curing methods and domestic herbs were applied against wailing in Estonia. Besides curing with herbs (tobacco leaves and bark of bird cherry was placed on the navel; an egg baked on charcoal in a rag; boys were given tea made of field horsetail to drink; a compress soaked in spirits and wormwood was placed on the stomach; valerian and camomile tea was given to drink, etc.), magically significant substances were used for whisking and smoking the disease out of the body. A sick person was smoked with the smoke from wheat root or linseed, with bed-

ding straw; he was given a drink made of humus scraped from under the threshold, or a bread of nine families, he was whisked with three birch rods cut from the crossing of the land borders of three men, or with a water filtered through the stones on top of the sauna oven with three horseshoes dipped inside. During the whisking a child was passed together with the whisk through ladder spokes; smoked with hair which had stuck in a comb, etc. The ancient methods of treatment include also the magical washing, thrashing and terminating of the disease. In the ritual process of treatment, objects which carried an important analogous magical significance were used (e.g. a cudgel used for thrashing snakes, a smoke from a tree to which an ox had been butted in, a soap used for washing the deceased, etc). Quite often the curing was performed through the contact with the causer of disease or with its belongings (whisking together with the dog, manipulated with clothes or footprints of the damager of child's health).

## **FROM NIGHT PEOPLE TO NIGHT MOTHER**

The phenomena described above are in close relations with the concept of the Night Mother. Once again we can find information about it mostly in reports on beliefs – and even those are medical reports – and in chants. Koivalgus, ehavalgus (dawnlight and evening twilight) can not fell on the child's swaddling clothes or the child itself, because according to the popular explanation the child will have a stomach disorder and the child will start crying at nights. The disorder is described as following:

The child's disorder was that of dawnlight. If a child had fallen asleep in dawnlight, it started to scream and there was green foam all around. Then a spoon with mother's milk inside was placed on the window ledge so that dawnlight would fall on it, and the substance was given to the child, it then served as a medicine. EFA II 189, 36/7 (108) < Emmaste parish, v, Tärkma village – E. Ennist < Aet Niit, b. 1858 (1938) The rite of curing reveals that the hope for remedy resulted from milk that was left under dawnlight during the critical period of transitory time and from other information. This could also be interpreted as the communal sacrifice of sharing things with dawnlight or evening twilight. The belief in a disease

caused by dawnlight or evening twilight is somewhat lapidary and nebulous, besides the name of the disease mostly descriptions of methods of treatment have been preserved.

There are other explanations to the phenomenon of dawnlight or evening twilight in folk belief than just that of the critical period of transitory time, to which probably all the nations in the world attributed infective qualities. The German folk belief recognised ehaema (Twilight Mother) and keskőöemand (Midnight Matron) as well as keskőörahvas (Midnight People). The characteristic features of all these three was beside all other things making not only children cry but also making adults sickly and crying. The tradition of Midnight Matron and Midnight People is multifaceted: generally it was believed that they are elves, but the belief of restlessly wandering dead on a critical midnight hour was also quite popular (Handwörterbuch VI). In Estonian belief the midnight ghosts, dawn or evening twilight elves could (similarly to other less supernatural creatures) take the shade of meaning of a house-haunting ghost or a spook in the course of assimilation of different mythological concepts.

Few reports include references to Twilight Mother as the promoter of personified duties (Twilight Mother encourages working). Twilight Mother as such might be associated to the belief of an idle woman who peeps into the room on Ash Wednesday as well as with other personifications encountered on certain days of popular calendar and which religious potent could not be easily determined.

In Russian chants dawnlight appears parallelly with polunotëitsa and it is noted that midnight or even dawnlight ‘tied’ the child down or looked at it, and the disease got powerful by that. One description goes as following:

Tow must be placed under the child’s bed, a spinning wheel next to a maiden and pray: “Polunotšitsa, polunotšitsa! Do not play with my child, play with the tow! Start spinning the spindle, weave the bast!” (Peskov 1986).

O.Loorits considered the concept of Midnight Mother to be influenced by German culture, as in many other cases we can say that it is so and it is not. German Night Matrons have been characterised

as good and evil elves of nature, but also as witches who fly around. Analogues to our belief might be found in reports about (small, pretty) women who come and spin flax on winter nights (Handwörterbuch VI). Spinning is one of the characteristic activities of Estonian Midnight Mother and many more information could be found on her than of ööitketaja. These are stories with more concrete aspect of personification, they could be considered as folk legends or memorates, which reveal that the creature was considered worth believing. Reports originate mainly from the northern and central parts of Estonia.

In the 1930s children were asked about and information recorded on hundreds of children's nightmares, mostly fictitious creatures with no deeper background. That the information concerning a number of elves is laconic and lapidary, it is hard to determine whether they were known as independent religious creatures during the last 100 years. The Midnight Mother is not just a fiction, a child's nightmare, because information about her is multifaceted: besides the direct personified stories and shorter religious reports, much more interesting indirect parallels with other supernatural creatures may be found.

our religious reports warn that the strings should not be forgotten on the spinning wheel or a bunch of flax or tow to the distaff overnight, which could attract a nightly visitor to spin there. This part of religious reports sounds as a regular admonition of a worker, as a didactic lecture according to which no tool could be left lying around or a half-done work leave out of order. The sanction side of the religious reports warns that otherwise evil forces might have an access to use them.

As I was a child, I was with a light sleep. I come from school and [- -] It was so hard to study and I often thought at night. "Sister, stepmother and my own mother always said that you can not leave strings around the spinning wheel, for the Midnight Mother will come and spin."

I hear at night that the spinning wheel was revolving, so that it rumbled. – The Midnight Mother is really there. She really is a woman. EFA II 30, 83 (33) < Torma Parish, Mustvee – P. Ariste < Leena Mänd, 90 y. (1930).

[ - ] My mother herself said that [she] had to get up several times and take off the strings. EFA II 14, 633 (14) < Torma parish, Mustvee – P. Ariste < Liisa Sepp, 75 yrs. (1929).

An opposite belief to that says that whoever catches the visiting spinner will become better at spinning (she must get more spinning strength. H II 28, 889 (11) < M-Magdaleena parish, Kaiavere village – A. Vuks (1889).

Another type of reports describes auditive experience: the sound of Midnight Mother spinning in the wall. Meeting her or hearing the spinning sound predicted death.

The hummers, rattlers, tickers and knockers in the wall – the insects, birds and other invisible ghostly creatures were considered as foretellers of approaching death (death tick, snipe or death watch, etc.). Spinning was a characteristic activity also for haunting ghosts and the restless dead. In folk legends and memorates they are heard spinning, seen turning the spinning wheel or tossing balls of yarn. Similarly to the reports about haunting ghosts. a sense of emptiness befalls on those who go and try to catch the Midnight Mother:

Night Mother. Night Spinner. The storytelling grandmother had heard once through her sleep that someone was spinning with her spinning wheel. She had gone to touch the spinning wheel and felt a human figure in front of the wheel. Fearing that the spinner will ruin the yarn in the dark, she lit a pine splinter and saw that the spinning wheel was in the exact same situation as she had left it in the evening. Also, there was no stranger in the room. Grandmother was not superstitious, although she conducted prayer meetings. Was a good spinner of sewing thread, at the estate she could make up a man's working day by spinning for a day. Grandmother thought the spinner was Night Mother. EFA II 196, 526/7 (10) < Tartu l. - P. Tammepuu < Ida Andrejeff, 49. yrs. (1938).

Leaving aside the reports on haunting ghosts where spinners are sometimes briefly described and experience was either auditive, visual or tactile, the Night Mother is associated with auditive experience while visual experience is mostly non-existent. An agreement that it is a female creature results from the fact that spinning

is women's activity, rather than form a specific visual experience. The reports rarely include statements that Night Mother is an (old) lady or even a naked woman.

Night Mother came to spin. I once fell asleep. Once wake up. The spinning wheel is whirring and someone is spinning on it. I jump up, nobody there. It must've been Night Mother or Night Mother-in-law. EFA II 30, 120/1 (19) < Torma parish., Lohusuu, Saare village. - P. Ariste < Kai Kivi, 73 yrs., Kai Pomm, 56 yrs. (1930).

As I was a child, I was with a light sleep. I come from school and... It was so hard to study and I often thought at night. "Sister, stepmother and my own mother always said that you can not leave strings around the spinning wheel, for the Night Mother will come and spin."

I hear at night that the spinning wheel was revolving, so that it rumbled. – The Night Mother is really there. She really is a woman. EFA II 30, 83 (33) < Torma Parish, Mustvee – P. Ariste < Leena Mänd, 90 y. (1930).

[ - ] And often the whirring of the spinning wheel was heard and when they went to check they saw a naked woman spinning on the wheel. EFA II 85, 680 (26) < Tartu < Palamuse parish., Kudina v. - H. Grossvald < from an acquaintance (1936).

There are fewer reports on the sound of Night Mother's spinning foretells the coming shortage of clothing or change of weather. Some records provide reasonable explanations to the Night Mother's spinning: it is thought that a long night time work caused visions and hallucinations, it was a certain bird or animal who made the sound (snipe, hawk, night-time warbler, rooster, cricket, purring cat).

O. Loorits make generalisations of the Livonian religious reports that the Livonian Night Mother (ieäma) wears grey clothes and does only good. The texts in "Liivi rahva usund" (The Folk Religion of the Livonians) leave an impression of a nice poetic single development, which function seems to be a mild reprimand of children. The Night Mother lifts her veil at nights and lowers it again in the

morning. The excuse for sending children to bed was that the Night Mother had already lifted her veil (Loorits 1926: 218).

There are not many mythological creatures who had maintained their position in live religion in the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century or who were associated with personal supernatural experience. Reports on öötketaja and Night Mother were not very common in Estonia and were influenced by the folklore of neighbouring people. Both concepts are based on a belief in Midnight People and the restless dead. The tradition of öötketaja is close to the explanations of illness and methods of treatment among the Votians, the Ingrians and the Karelians. Its closest counterparts in Russian are bessonitsa and polunotšitsa and on German folklore Nachtweinen. The latter was a quite unfamiliar term denoting a concept well known in Estonia as well as Germany by the explanation referring to the evil eye and methods of treatment. Besides connections with the world of the dead, the concepts mentioned above are interrelated with beliefs in the critical and risky (mid)night transition period. Similar vague and different connections could be found in reports on dawnlight and evening twilight, which seem to be based on the personified force (of evil), a mythological creature, not just the transition line of a critical period and its damaging influence on a child's health. There is no doubt that the features referring to Night Mother and Twilight Mother as patrons and promoters of spinning and handicraft skills are extremely fascinating. Possibly we are concerned with interrelated beliefs about two distinct mythological origins, different creatures, where beliefs associated with the cult of death meet the concepts of the promoter of handicraft.

Translated by Kait Realo

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