

## THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE DEATH CULT OVER TIME: THE EXAMPLE OF THE BURIAL CUSTOMS IN HISTORIC VÕRUMAA COUNTY

*Marju Kõivupuu*

### INTRODUCTION

My scholarly interest in the funereal customs of Võrumaa County began in the late 1980s as I started to supervise student field-work in the parishes of the historic Võrumaa region. Although there were records in the Estonian Folklore Archives on the topics I was interested in (e.g. cross-trees, funeral customs in general, folk medicine, etc.), it appeared that the material had gaps and there was no consistency in how information about any given topic had been elicited. My own knowledge of Võru heritage also included details and motives not found in the archive. Because of this, I set my preliminary research task as describing and analysing the funereal customs characteristic of historic Võrumaa that have thus far not been recorded or that very little is known about. The folklore material I have collected in the 13 summers of field work has been deposited in the Estonian Folklore Archives and forms the basis of the current work.

Funereal customs are an area of interdisciplinary research. In the 1980s and 1990s the study of the relationship of folklore with different scholarly areas such as archaeology, religion history, theology, sociology etc. was also initiated in Estonia. In my collecting and research work I have tried to unite the current theoretical methods of archaeology, folklore and sociology. The latter strategy provided notably more precise results than the previous random methods of elicitation. In addition to such methodological improvements I have also consistently used basic methods such as comparative analysis of the data and cartography.

There is no contemporary overview of the Estonian culture of death. Focusing on the funereal customs of historic Võrumaa, I have at-

<http://www.folklore.ee/folklore/vol22/burial.pdf>

### *The Transformation of the Death Cult*

tempted in part to fill this gap. The current work gives an overview of the emergence and transformation of funereal customs in historic Võrumaa.

The current article attempts to provide a brief overview of the evolution, functions and transformations of several ancient funeral customs (ritual meals, burial goods, the traditions surrounding cross-trees, etc.) I shall also take a brief look at some new, marginal, still developing funereal customs.

In the ceremonies associated with death, the main theme has, on the one hand, been the integration of the deceased person with the community of the dead and, on the other hand, reorganization the surviving community by means of the funeral customs. *Funeral customs* (in archaeology: *burial customs*) are part of the rites of passage connected with death, the specific way of treating a corpse (Kulmar 2000).

Funereal customs consist of several different sub-customs like burial goods and sacrifices, funeral feast, mourning and taboos, etc. Funeral customs are ritual, traditional and they are followed precisely. The more archaic the funeral custom, the more it is based on the premise that a person or his/her soul will continue living after death in a similar manner (indicated by grave good which were later found placed in the coffin) and fear of the dead and death (magic to ward off evil, conciliation sacrifices). Thus, there are two goals united in the last rite of passage of a person:

1. to ensure a good position for the deceased person in his or her afterlife, and;
2. to protect the living from the supposed malevolence of the dead.

The focal point of the funeral as a rite of passage is not directly connected with the moment of death but rather with intermediary rites that function to separate the dead person from the living, transforming him or her into a member of the community of the dead and a new entity (e.g. a holy ancestor) who influences the life of people in a certain manner (Gennep 1909; Honko & Pentikäinen 1997; Sarv 2000). At no point in history have funeral customs been only for the sake of the deceased – they have always also had an

important role among people as a means of communication since funeral rites are in every society surrounded by a lot of attention. Funereal customs and the accompanying symbols and mythological concepts indicate that the concept of existence in the after-life was already known in Palaeolithic times.

Deriving from all this, I would define the term “culture of death” as follows: the culture of death is a set of beliefs, traditions and customs related to death and the handling of the dead body that are closely blended with changes in the human community.

Historic Võrumaa as a unique cultural region. The territory of historic Võrumaa covers eight historic parishes: Urvaste, Karula, Hargla, Rõuge, Vastseliina, Räpina, Põlva and Kanepi. These parishes cover almost the whole territory of three current Estonian counties: Põlva, Võru and Valga. In addition, the northern part of the Räpina parish currently belongs to the jurisdiction of Tartu county. The counties of Põlva, Valga and Võru comprise a little more than 14% of Estonian territory and their population is approximately 8% of the 1.5 million inhabitants of the country.

With great probability, the language and culture prominent in South Estonia have their roots in the culture of the earlier textile ceramic period (3000/2500–1800/1500 BC). Differences developed by the end of the Neolithic with the culture of the later textile ceramic period (1800/1500–1000 BC) and it is since then that we can talk of a separate South-East Estonian (or Võru–Setu) cultural region (Kiristaja 2000). The main factor behind the early cultural and linguistic differentiation in the whole of South Estonia is usually attributed to the dividing of the Estonian territory as a result of conquests and wars into two administrative regions – North Estonia or Estonia and South Estonia or Livonia (comprising South Estonia as well as modern-day North Latvia). This administrative division disappeared only in 1918 when Estonia became an independent republic. The administrative borders of historic Võrumaa have been changed at least three times in the political events between 1920–1990, forcing the locals to reorient at least twice to a new official name. Another factor to be considered in why historic Võrumaa maintained its linguistic and cultural uniqueness is the 17th century Catholic counterreformation movement in South Estonia and the fact that two written languages were developed on the basis of the spoken

### *The Transformation of the Death Cult*

language. The emergence of a common Estonian written language started with the translation of the Bible into North Estonian dialect in 1739. However, even at the beginning of the 20th century some parsons still demanded that the word of God be taught to children in the South Estonian language, even though the so-called Tallinn language had been accepted for teaching more mundane subjects.

In the Soviet era, as a result of language policies, the Võru language was demoted to the level of a “kitchen language”, outside the educational system as well as cultural and other institutions.

Today, the Võru language and culture are studied by the Võru Institute established in 1995 and within the state programme for South-Estonian development established in 1998.

The main working hypothesis of the articles comprising this work is the following: the characteristic features of funereal customs in historic Võrumaa probably emerged in prehistoric times and their continuity and persistence have been fostered by a lengthy separate development, a peripheral location, specific linguistic characteristics, an absence of urban culture and local variations in the dominant Christian funeral customs.

#### **THE HISTORY OF THE EMERGENCE AND RESEARCH OF SOUTH-EAST ESTONIAN FUNERAL CUSTOMS**

Neither in folklore studies nor in ethnography has it been fixed which parts of funereal rituals are an inseparable part of the church funeral, which should be treated as folk interpretations of Christian (mainly Lutheran) traditions, and which funereal customs are non-Christian in origin and come from prehistoric times.

S. Tokarev has given a schematic overview of the characteristics of the development of funereal customs in human societies. These include hiding (different forms of burying), destroying (burning the dead) and preserving (mummifying) the dead body (Tokarev 1969). In Estonia, archaeologists have recognized mainly two different methods of burial – burning and burying. However, archaeologists do not preclude the possibility of dead bodies having been exposed to the air or water, which are, due to these ways of dealing with the

dead body, difficult to determine. Assumptions can only be made on the basis of studying prehistoric settlement sites (Kiristaja 2000).

Estonian prehistory is divided into three periods: Stone, Bronze and Iron Ages (Kriiska & Tvauri 2002). The Development of burying methods can be observed in Estonia since the Mesolithic period. Burial sites from the Palaeolithic period have, unfortunately, not been found in the Baltic region.

Current archaeological findings allow us to maintain the following about burial customs in prehistoric Võrumaa:

1. Cultural and linguistic differentiation from the rest of Estonia started already in the period of the earlier textile ceramics (2500–1800/1500 BC), widening even more in the period of the older textile ceramics in the Neolithic era (1800/1500–1000 BC) resulting in a restricted Võru-Setu cultural region;
2. Already in the Neolithic period it was probably believed that dead relatives were able to participate in the life of the family and to influence it. Ancestor worship is one of the main features of Estonian folk belief;
3. The method of burying the dead underwent radical changes: corpse burial (land graves, possibly also bodies being exposed to air and water) was replaced by burning and later again replaced by corpse burial in the Palaeolithic era. The revival of the tradition of burying the body was obviously connected with conversion to Christianity.

In the 13th century, Christianity caused burning burials to cease and corpse burial becomes dominant for centuries. The church required people to be buried in holy ground, in cemeteries specified as such. But even in the 18th century there are peasants who buried their dead into barrows (Hupel 1777). At the same time, historical documents let us pose the question whether peasants were at all interested in burying their dead necessarily in the church yard, all the more as some parsons permitted peasants to bury near their homes if road condition were very bad. Pre-Christian belief concepts dealing with the handling of death and the dead body blend with Catholicism – resulting in “village Catholi-

### *The Transformation of the Death Cult*

cism” – and the situation remained unchanged until the end of the 18th century. When J. G. Herder became a parson in Riga at the end of the 18th century (1764–1769) and examined the folklore of the locals, ancient religious customs were very common among local peasants and were openly followed (see Kahk 1979). It was only in the middle of the 19th century with the influence of the Moravian movement that peasants started informing the church about “false religion” and related customs that in turn become authentic sources for burial customs for contemporary and future researchers.

Today, Estonian churches follow funeral procedures devised at the end of the 19th century (Kiivit 1983). However, in practice, parsons have observed that there were regional differences in Lutheran church funerals even at the end of the 20th century according to the historical traditions of North, West and South Estonia. Regional differences were caused by local characteristics, external circumstances and opportunities, unwritten rules and customs transmitted orally from one parson to another (Paenurm 1995).

In Soviet times, the parson was practically the only active member of the congregation and his role in conducting funerals grew. In Võrumaa, the practice was probably amplified by the so-called parson cult – the parson was to take part in all the undertakings of the funeral day. In South Estonia and on the islands where the parson was the one to initiate the proceedings with the sending off of the deceased from the home and officiated at the mourning feast, a funeral lasted almost a full day.

The following is the order of a typical South Estonian Lutheran funeral:

1. Blessing the coffin at home;
2. sending it off from home, and;
3. burial at the cemetery,

or typical of an urban funeral:

1. Blessing the coffin;
2. sending it off from the church or chapel, and;
3. burial at the cemetery.

*Marju Kõivupuu*



**Photo 1.** *The rite of sending off from home. Hargla parish. Priest E. Tanilas. Photo by Marju Kõivupuu, 2001.*



**Photo 2.** *The rite of sending off from home. Hargla parish. Sister saying goodbye to the deceased. Photo by Marju Kõivupuu, 2001*



*The Transformation of the Death Cult*



**Photo 3.** *The rite of sending off from home. Hargla parish. Carrying the coffin to the car. Photo by Marju Kõivupuu, 2001.*



**Photo 4.** *Mourning procession at the cemetery. Photo by Marju Kõivupuu, 2001.*



*Marju Kõivupuu*



**Photo 5.** *Saying goodbye at the cemetery by the open coffin. Photo by Marju Kõivupuu, 2001.*



**Photo 6.** *Saying goodbye at the cemetery. Covering the coffin with a home-made woollen blanket. Photo by Marju Kõivupuu, 2001.*

*The Transformation of the Death Cult*



**Photo 7.** *Covering the coffin with a special linen brought from a tradition agency. Relatives lowering the coffin to the grave. Photo by Marju Kõivupuu, 2001.*



**Photo 8.** *The ritual throwing of three handfuls of soil into the grave. Photo by Marju Kõivupuu, 2001.*

*Marju Kõivupuu*



**Photo 9.** Ritual offering of alcohol and snacks at the cemetery gate after the burial. Photo by Marju Kõivupuu, 2001.



**Photo 10.** Mourning feast table. The place at the head of the table is symbolically set for the deceased. To mark this and for commemoration, a mourning candle has been lit. Photo by Marju Kõivupuu, 2001.

### *The Transformation of the Death Cult*

In historic Võrumaa, church funerals, as a rule, took place at the grave site, graveyard and the ceremony ended after the grave had been filled. If the state of the body permitted it, the coffin was left open at the grave. The ritual was halted and at this point the funeral participants threw three handfuls of soil into the grave. Then the grave was filled, decorated and the burial ceremony was concluded on a closed grave. However, in North Estonia the funeral ceremony took place in the church and the pastor did not come to the grave at all. In South Estonia, the church was for the living and the dead body was brought to the church only in the case of very prominent members of the congregation.

Pastors perceive the covering of the coffin with a linen, blanket, or other piece of textile as an expression of the caring on the part of the relatives and this tradition was further reinforced by the fact that coffin covers were offered by funeral agencies. Some have even maintained the opinion that if a white linen were laid on the coffin with the aim of providing clothing for the judgement day, as such this custom could even be propagated by the church.

With the Soviet occupation and annexation of Estonia on 6 August, 1940 the laws in connection with churches and religion that had existing in the Soviet Union since 1929 were now enforced in Estonia as well. According to these restrictions the church as a religious and national institution was to be liquidated and the Christian religion as opposed to the official ideology of atheism, was to be extirpated. The only permitted religious activity was the holding of sermons or services, which were allowed in expropriated church buildings subsequently referred to as “cult buildings”. Another permitted exception was the religious burying of deceased members of congregations in graveyards. During the critical moments of war in January 1943 certain changes had taken place in Soviet religious policy because of the need to garner orthodox Christian support in war against Germany. For the first time churches were officially granted limited autonomy of action. The results of the state’s anti-church policies became apparent in the early 1960’s. The youth abstained from church. The lowest point in church activities was reached in the 1970’s with the first signs of resurgence of interest appearing at the beginning of the 1980’s (Kiivit 1983; Gnadenteich 1995: 102–111). The following figures found in the statistical infor-

mation compiled by the EELK (Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church) provide an overview about church funerals in Estonia in general in the pre-war, Soviet and post-Soviet periods: in 1937, 11 997 people were buried in church funerals; in 1947 – 12 978; 1957–7002; 1966–5054; 1978–4277; 1983–3504; 1987–3339; and 1991–5006 people respectively.

The Soviet legacy left more or less obvious traces on the funereal customs and graveyard culture as well. Secular funerals were held by undertakers, who had passed Soviet training in ritual. They were commonly called secular readers or secular parsons (reader and parson were common names for religious undertakers). For example in Võru there were two well-known secular undertakers: Ojasoo (one of the original characters from a literary work by Juhan Smuul called “The Järvesuu Brigade” (*Järvesuu poiste brigaad*) and later comsomol functionary) and Ollino, who served the whole of the former Võru district. Secular funerals were not very different from church funerals. Local traditions (laying out, wake, ritual meals, cutting crosses into the trees) were still followed, but the word of God was replaced by appropriate secular texts and songs. Secular song leaflets were published in mass editions by undertakers’ offices. Secular funerals were often preferred not for ideological but purely pragmatical reasons. During the turbulent years following World War II and the subsequent period of Russification, many people ended up not having paid church fee for years and consequently a religious funeral was relatively more costly than procuring the services of a secular undertaker. In general people preferred speakers, who did not give credit to the ruling ideology, but remained neutral and humane.

The firms of Soviet undertakers also introduced the notion of secular Cemetery Sundays but in reality both church and secular holidays took place and whenever possible, cemeteries were visited on both occasions. A new custom originating from the early days of the Estonian Republic, which finally took hold among the people during the Soviet period, was that of going to the graveyard for tidying and decorating the graves of their relatives with evergreen branches (small fir-trees) and lighting candles. Here a certain emotional compensation replacing Christmas ceremony may be observed. Attending actual Christmas services could have resulted in punishment

### *The Transformation of the Death Cult*

for people on the part of particularly enthusiastic party functionaries, who could, for example, deprive them of some desirable material benefits (such as flats, permission to buy cars, package tours to the countries of the Eastern block etc).

In the case of church funerals it was also relatively complicated if not impossible to get special religious song sheets printed and designed in official printing shops, so they were often made at home as a kind of handicraft – typing them on the typewriter and reproducing them with carbon paper. The selection of texts was guided either by the pastor of the congregation or religious song sheets from the times of the Estonian Republic or similar leaflets. Similar examples were provided by other sheets typed at home and reproduced as they were able, which were distributed among family members and friends. It was characteristic of these sheets that there were no references to the Bible and religious and secular texts were interspersed. As an example of the spread of folklore in written form, the above-mentioned sheets belong to an area of religious folklore that unfortunately has not attracted the attention of Estonian researchers yet. In parallel secular song sheets were readily available. They were specially compiled for both cemetery Sundays and funerals and contained a selection of songs based largely on the creations of Estonian poets and composers.

In the Soviet period the traditional symbols connected with death and funerals were altered to some extent. This was reflected for example in the design of gravestones. Instead of quotations from the Bible, quotations from the prose and poetry of well-known and admired writers were used more and more on gravestones. Often they were chosen through a process of folkloristic interpretation. As a relatively new tradition designs on both front and back sides of the gravestone may be observed. Including photographs of the deceased on the gravestones also seems to have been taken over from Russians, who used to put them on both crosses and tombstones. A certain connection between the intensification of the Russification policy in the 1980's and a more frequent use of gravestones with portraits of the deceased can be discerned in the cemeteries of South-Estonia of that same period. The marble and granite gravestones with portraits of Estonian soldiers who perished in Soviet Army may be placed into the same era.





Photo 11. A song leaflet from the 1970s Soviet secular cemetery day. Courtesy of M. Kõivupuu's private collection.



### *The Transformation of the Death Cult*

The five-pointed star (pentagon), that in Christian culture symbolized light and spirituality and that according to folk belief kept evil powers away from people and living spaces, became the red star within the context of Soviet culture – an ideological symbol uniting the workers of five continents. If in the pre-Soviet period the pentagon was an integral figure on iron crosses, then in the Soviet period the meaning had changed so dramatically that it was only used on gravestones of either “red” soldiers or party functionaries.

In contemporary Estonian culture a new tradition can be noted – the holding of so-called semi-Christian funerals for people who, often in old age or just before death (for example due to a severe disease), decided to let themselves be baptized, but who were never confirmed. In such cases clergyman will only conduct some of the rituals of the burial service (reading the Lord’s Prayer, a prayer on behalf of the deceased, selections from the Bible), but singing religious songs is omitted.

### **RITUAL MEALS IN THE FUNERAL CUSTOMS OF HISTORICAL VÕRUMAA**

An inseparable part of the traditional burial customs of historic Võrumaa is the ritual multiple offering of food that unifies all funeral rites. The funeral feast was not part of the church funeral rituals but a custom that had its origins in the pre-Christian custom of scarifying for the dead (or the dead person’s soul). This custom is still followed today in both secular and non-secular funerals, although the church has been against the custom for hundred of years. Holding an abundant funeral feast is characteristic of other Baltic and Balto-Finnic peoples as well.

The vigil and wake is an important leave-taking ritual. Due to practical and religious reasons, the body of the deceased was – and sometimes is even today – kept in the house for several days. At this stage of the rite of passage, the deceased is still a member of the community, and this gives community members the opportunity to say goodbye to him or her and to console the mourners. Keeping vigils with the dead involves ritual offering of alcohol and food. Over time, however, there have been changes, and even a lessening of what was offered. Traditional highly nutritious foods both cold and

warm (meat in aspic, pearl barley porridge, meat, cabbage) have become replaced with snacks (pies, sandwiches, etc.) or candy and cookies. As a rule, nobody was invited to keep vigil or to come see the deceased; it was a voluntary act. The number of people coming was an indicator of the late person's social standing.

It appears that in north eastern Estonia, keeping vigil was an event where salted peas were eaten with the singing of both secular and ordinary songs and the playing of social games taking place (Lang 1981). Oskar Loorits considered playing games while keeping vigil an older tradition than singing mourning songs (Loorits 1949); today, the latter is considered a vital part of funeral customs. Loorits' claim is supported by the fact that so-called merry vigils are known in the traditions of the Vepsians, South-Karelians (Pimenov 1960), as well as German and Slavic peoples (Gusev 1974). Such light-hearted activities on the part of the vigil keepers were justified in the belief that the deceased was also taking part in it and was thus leaving this world with a lighter heart (Gusev 1974). This in turn supports the hypothesis that at this stage of the rite of passage the deceased is still a member of the community of the living.

Another tradition still followed at Võru funerals is the collective contributions to the refreshments. The former mourning bag (Est. *peiekott* or *puhtekott*) with its relatively abundant contents has been replaced by a bottle of alcohol and lighter edibles (such as homemade pies, cakes, etc.) brought along with the mourning bouquet or wreath. Such collective contributing to the refreshments is also known among Finns (Vuorela 1977) and to a lesser extent in north eastern Estonia (Lang 1981).

Sending off from home has up to today been connected with many acts of avoidance magic, the main thrust of which was to keep death away from the family and community for as long as possible. If somebody died away from home, e.g. in a hospital, he was brought home at the latest on the night before the funeral, or alternatively, the burial was arranged so that the funeral procession would pass the home of the deceased, where a small stop was made. Ritual drinking of alcohol, generally accompanied by snacks, was a necessary part of the sending off from home.

### *The Transformation of the Death Cult*

The first person met. According to the traditional pre-Christian beliefs of both Estonians and kindred peoples, those who 'had left earlier' would come to meet the 'newly departed' on the way to the graveyard and take him or her to the 'other world'.

The sex of the first person met by the funeral procession and the distance of the meeting from the house of the deceased was one of the most keenly observed omens. According to the magic of analogues, the sex of the next person to die was thus determined. If it was a man, a male member of the village community or the same family would die next; if a woman, the next to die would be a woman. How far from the mourning house the first person was met foretold how far in the future the next funeral was to be expected – the closer, the sooner. Characteristically no exact time frame is stated in the folklore reports involved, rather abstract emotional terms "soon" or "fast" are used, which probably referring to in about one year.

However, the first person met is traditionally given a present: a bottle of vodka to a man and a home-made cake to a woman, or maybe both. If a child is met, then cake and candies are considered sufficient. But at the end of the turn of the 20th century a bottle of vodka cost a lot of money, so the bottle was not given away but a ritual gulp was offered. The custom was considered by South-East Estonians themselves to be the deceased person's last gift on his way to the new community. Recall that the deceased was at this stage still considered a member of the community. In Rõuge and Hargla parishes the omens concerning the first person met were maintained – meeting the dead brings death, the dead body carries death with it. Thus, the omens were evil – the next to die is of the family of the person met or even that same person. O. Loorits (1990) and I. Paulson (1997) have maintained that according to folk belief, the deceased would like to take relatives, friends and acquaintances with them. That is, after meeting the deceased people became melancholy, fell ill and died. Anybody, a stranger could meet the deceased on his way to the graveyard, making it all the more dangerous for the stranger. Unlike the mourners, that person had not participated in earlier stages of the rite of passage, where he or she would have paid respect to the deceased thereby gaining protection from his vengeance. To mitigate the supposed evil of the deceased,

*Marju Kõivupuu*

the vehicle carrying the dead was not the first one in the procession; even today, often the first vehicle carries a so-called neutral person, who performs necessary rituals, which following this line of thought, would present the first person met with a peace offering, or atonement.

Even today, many middle-aged and older habitants of Hargla and Rõuge parishes try to avoid meeting a funeral procession. They flee from it, turn (back) in the direction of the procession and are not keen on receiving the gift (to 'become marked'), or they start to cry when they get the gift. It is believed that the omen is negated if the person met joins the profession and does not accept the propitiatory offering. In other parishes of historic Võrumaa the belief has regressed to a simple custom of giving a present, the tradition followed for its own sake and the above-described attitudes and behaviour have become extinct. There are even cases when the local drunkards do their best to be the ones to receive the free bottle of vodka.

The fourth ritual offering of food takes place at the gate of the graveyard after the burial. Snacks and alcohol are offered to everybody, but those that came to send off the deceased but were not invited to or could not participate the feast later would be given a bite to take with them as they left. Each grave-digger got a bottle of vodka and the parson or conductor of the funeral ceremony received a special food pack. No food was taken back home from the funeral, everything had to be shared among guests.

The tradition of eating on the grave probably started 2000 years ago and is still followed among Orthodox Setus and Votians (Lang 1981). Pre-Christian sacrificial meal at the grave used to be characteristic of the burial customs of the whole of Estonia up to the 17th century (Viires 1995: 155–156). Today, among south eastern Estonians this custom has shrunk to a modest meal at the gate of the graveyard, but it is generally not followed in the small towns of Võru, Valga and Põlva. The 1998 survey confirmed that lately the meal at the graveyard gate is all that is left of this custom since many families can not afford an abundant table (Kõivupuu 2000: 78–79).

### *The Transformation of the Death Cult*

It was only after leaving the graveyard that the main festive ritual meal commenced, either in the deceased person's home or in a public catering establishment. Symbolically, the deceased person's soul also participated at the meal. A place was set for the deceased, marked off by candles with black mourning ribbons, and sometimes also plates turned upside down. If the feast took place in the home of the deceased, mourners were invited to return the next morning to remember the deceased sitting at the table until late afternoon.

Current funeral customs no longer include the magical sacrifice of a rooster for protection (Eisen 1996): the blood of the rooster was to propitiate the deceased and stop them from returning home. However, only half a century ago it was in some places still obligatory to kill poultry or a small domestic animal – although this more for the sake of tradition itself than any deeper religious meaning.

#### **WHAT MIGHT WE NEED AFTER DEATH?**

Coffin and grave goods are, beside the funeral feast, one of the oldest burial traditions that is alive not only in South Estonia but the whole of Estonia.

The religious nature of grave or coffin goods was briefly worded by O. Loorits (1949) who claimed the customs to be based on two separate world views: 1) in the Finno-Ugric understanding that the life of the deceased continues somewhere near the living where he/she might need objects from the earthly world; 2) in the Indo-German understanding that of chief importance was the trip to the "other world" and objects necessary for this.

African native people explained the need for rich variety of coffin goods with the rationale that in this way the living habitants of this world could send presents to those relatives and friends who "had left earlier". This belief seems to have some connection to the vigil wake where the living can turn to the deceased person with requests to forward their wishes to those who "had left earlier". At this stage of the transition ritual, the dead member of the tribe was granted an extremely important role as the liaison (mediator) between the habitants of this world and those passed on to the "other world".

*Marju Kõivupuu*

In current South Estonian funeral traditions coffin goods continue to be very popular and their range is extremely wide. Besides such old Christian goods as the Bible or a page from the hymnal, special goods according to the age, social standing and hobbies of the deceased are still valued. For children favourite toys and books are placed into the coffin, musicians get either their instrument, or cassettes with their favourite music or something similar, women who liked handicraft receive appropriate materials and tools, passionate smokers and those that like alcohol get a pipe, cigarettes and a bottle of vodka, the disabled are supplied with the devices necessary during the lifetime (dentures, glasses, hearing aid etc). Coffin goods have sometimes included bread and during period of deficiencies in the 1990's even coupons that allowed locals to buy vodka and sugar, because those goods were otherwise impossible to get.

Private communication with a German pastor revealed that the placing of favourite objects of the dead person in the coffin was also common practice among German congregations (especially in the countryside), which the pastor accepted even though it was not part of the church funeral ceremony.

Such behaviour implies on the continuing caring of the late person by the relatives and that the person has been accepted in the way he lived among the people close to him, moreover, the same temperament and favourite hobbies are even expected to continue in the "other world".

Perhaps the expectation of such changeless temperament in the future life is a stereotype of religious thinking.

### **CROSS-TREES IN SOUTH-ESTONIAN FUNERAL CUSTOMS**

In my opinion, cutting crosses into trees on the way to the cemetery was one of the most significant burial customs in historic Võrumaa. The phenomenon of the cross-trees has conserved both concepts of the tree as the residence of the soul; today, they are unique in the whole Europe if not the whole world

### *The Transformation of the Death Cult*

A cross-tree (a cross-spruce, -pine, -birch) was a big tree at a (cross)road or in a cross-forest, into which the dead person's godsons or closest male relatives cut a cross on the way to the graveyard. I have treated this custom more closely elsewhere, and consequently will only outline here the most prominent features with some additions.

The earliest reports on cross-trees or their analogues date back to the 17th century (Brand 1693; Olearius 1647). Systematic descriptions of the tradition were rather more recent, from the second half of the 19th century.

The origin of the tradition must be sought in the animism of pre-Christian times when the afterlife was imagined to be a continuation of this life in the forest where the bodies were left or, in more recent times, buried. Such forests became sacred. Sacred groves were thus originally funereal places, and according to beliefs, the souls of the deceased lived in the sacred trees. This cosmologic belief is known also among, for example, Asian, African and Australian peoples (Frazer 1986). Thus, the cross-trees continue the ancient motive of the tree as a habitat for a soul. With the transformations of the cult of the dead, the concept of a soul living outside the body formed. Such a soul could also be vicious at times – in particular the soul of a suicide or a witch. According to Estonian folk belief, a soul did not get to the other world if no sacrifice had been made to the dead (Kulmar 1994). Therefore, the souls of the dead had to be propitiated with a sacrifice and protective magic (e.g. cutting a cross into a tree, the cross becoming a protective means that spread with Christianity and the belief that a ghost could not pass a cross sign) was used to stop them from returning home. In earlier times, coloured ribbons or threads were hung on the cross-tree in memory of the deceased. This tying of the ribbon was accompanied by a sip of vodka.

Analogues of cross-trees can be found in the funeral rites of the Orthodox Setus, who leave the boards that the deceased was laid out on, and the straw and birch whisks used for washing the deceased under the cross-tree to rot. Until the 1930s–1940s, cutting a cross into a tree was a living part of the funereal traditions in the western part of Saaremaa Island. The tradition was also known in Northern Latvia, which historically was inhabited by Estonians and

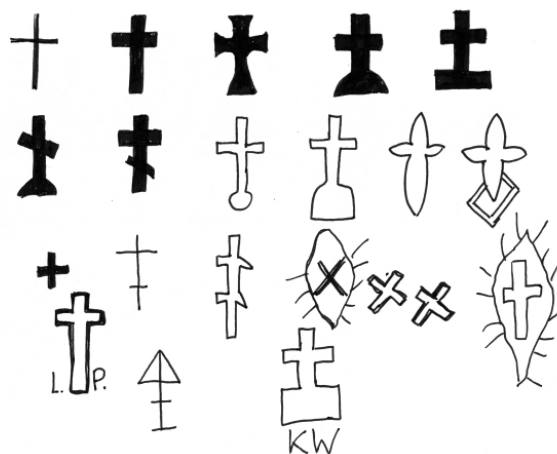




**Photo 12 (left).** Cross pine in Hargla parish.  
Photo by Marju Kõivupuu, 01.05.1996.

**Photo 13 (above).** Memory ties on the 100-year-old Laatre corss pine in Sangaste parish.  
Photo by Marju Kõivupuu, 01.07.2001.

**Photo 14 (below).** Different cross signs on cross-trees in the historical Võrumaa region.  
Copied from R. Viidalepp's collection by Marju Kõivupuu.



### *The Transformation of the Death Cult*

almost until the birth of the Republic of Estonia in 1918 formed a unified cultural areal – Livonia. J. Vilkuna (Vilkuna 1992) has written a monograph on the Finnish tradition of *karsikkos* and cross-trees, although this tradition fell into oblivion as early as the end of the 19th century.

In the second half of the 20th century the need to cut a cross was motivated (1) by religious conceptions (cross-cutting as part of prevention magic) or (2) simply as following an old tradition, and religious conceptions did not play any role (the cross was cut in memory of the deceased because it was always been done that way). Crosses were cut into trees also at places where people were killed in accidents.

The choice of the location of a cross-trees depends on the particular landscape, but generally it marks a conscious or unconscious border where the relatives bid their final farewell to the deceased for now the deceased was excluded from the living. Cross-forests (coniferous or mixed forests) were situated either in the immediate vicinity of the graveyard or on sc. church-roads – in a grove between the village and the graveyard. Usually the trees had more than one cross; if possible, the crosses of relatives were cut on the same tree. Village cross-trees were usually old pines situated at the first junction of the road leading from the village to the graveyard. The choice of individual (family) cross-trees was determined by religious conceptions. The cross or, if necessary, even several crosses were cut at consecutive junctions on the road to the graveyard in order to prevent the deceased from returning home. Although, in their appearance, the crosses made for these preventative magical purposes need not differ from simply commemorative crosses, the cross-trees connected with preventative magic are situated mostly in remote forest villages or on outlying single farms. The people residing there have retained a firm belief in the evil eye, goblins that return to haunt their homes, word -magic etc.

The Soviet period functioned as a factor conducive to the preservation of the tradition of cross-cutting as societal changes had disrupted the former way of life in the village community. If possible, the cross was cut on the border of a farm that had been expropriated by the Soviet authorities. By doing so, ancient traditions were honoured, and a protest was expressed against the violent and al-

*Marju Kõivupuu*

ien social order. The practice of cross-cutting was not limited to Lutherans living in rural areas. Whether a person was baptised and a member of a congregation was insignificant in the given context because during the Soviet period people's normal relations with the church had been severed. Cutting the cross was even regarded as compensation for the absence of a religious ceremony, even more so because atheist schoolteachers, party secretaries, and other functionaries, who had moved in from elsewhere, exhibited a negative attitude to it. Older local pastors, generally, had a neutral attitude to cross-cutting and participated in the ceremony themselves, motivating their behaviour by local customs and respect for the wishes of the deceased.

The ritual of cutting the cross consisted of (1) selecting the cross-tree, (2) cross-cutting, (3) offering a ritual glass of vodka and a snack. The cross-tree had to be aesthetically beautiful, alive and quite visible from the road. The preferred species was pine. Crosses cut in pine bark remain visible and beautiful for a long time; crosses cut into spruce or birch get scarred relatively quickly.

The cross was cut by the closest male relative or the godson. The shape of the cross depended on the skill and artistic taste of the cutter. Simple Latin crosses, so-called suffering crosses are most widely spread, and very often they are depicted together with a base for the cross (burial mound). Greek crosses and St. Andrew's crosses as well as so-called Russian crosses were considerably less frequent. The latter crosses indicate that Orthodox Estonians also observed the tradition of cross-cutting.

When the cross was ready, the ritual offering of vodka and a snack followed. Nowadays, it is no longer interpreted as a sacrifice but as a custom that must be observed. Generally no offerings are tied on the branches of cross-trees any more. Colourful ribbons and black ribbon tied to rowan-trees are attempts to revive the pre-Christian tradition and hint at a neomythological outlook on the world, which has gained some popularity in Estonian society in the 1990's.

The ethic principles of South-Estonians do not allow them to break branches from cross-trees or to fell these trees. If anyone violates these rules, either out of ignorance or on purpose, a punishment is believed to follow. There are rare reports of unpleasant experiences

### *The Transformation of the Death Cult*

(haunting) in the vicinity of cross-trees, and some people have been afraid to pass the trees in the dark because of some inexplicable emotions of fear.

The family later retained a passive relation with the cross-trees, When driving or walking past them, people tried to recognise the trees of their kin. The sign of the cross on a tree recalls the life of the deceased similarly to a tombstone in the graveyard. The only difference is that the sign (the cross on the tree) becomes informative only for those who know the context.

In connection with the so-called Võru movement, cross-trees have become the centre of positive attention as natural objects to be protected or as trees that would need to be protected. Similarly, studying the Võru language and cultural history in schools has increased children's knowledge of their heritage, it has pointed children to cross-trees and opened the semantics of the phenomenon.

### **CONCLUSION**

All living beings are mortal – from the moment of birth, our metabolism causes changes that end in the disappearance of harmony of synthesis and decomposition – the arrival of death. Death has always been treated as unnatural and knowledge of its inevitability results in the tragic perception of life, fuelling the philosophical and religious concepts of death, first of all of soul and immortality – that is, a state where there is no death. Christianity connects death with sin. Religion, uniting in sin and transience the living, the human as separated from God with his transcendental and ever-present basis (God, Creator), frees human from the fetters of death and gives him eternal life. Naturalist and materialist human concepts deny individual immortality. The continuity of a living being is only possible in its progeny and as a species, in an indirect sense also as the memory in the minds of the younger generation.

Estonia is a small nation that has a high proportion of middle-aged and old people and the question of how long can we survive as a nation is becoming a matter on national interest. While in 1986, births (24,106) exceeded deaths (17,986), in 1991 they were almost equal in numbers: 19,320 births and 19,705 deaths. Since then, the

gain has been constantly negative. For example in 1998, 12,269 children were born and 19,446 died in Estonia (Reest & Piller 1999: 9). In the Võru county of today, there are 352 villages where no children were born in 1999 and 247 villages with no preschool children. The whole gain of the Võru county is negative. While in 1995 it was -214, in 1999 it was already -286 (Krüspan 2000: 21–22).

Not only in historic Võrumaa but the whole of Estonia seems to have funerals as the main meeting point for relatives and community. There are also numerous more or less popular holidays dedicated to the memory of the dead: All Souls Day, Graveyard Day and Christmas. In 1998, the Graveyard Day was celebrated by 82.3% of those questioned and All Souls Day by 82%. These were only slightly less popular holidays than Christmas, New Year's Day, Midsummer Eve and Easter. According to data from the same survey, 21% also visited the cemetery during Christmas (Vesik 2000).

It must be taken into account that funeral customs remain the same even as the cultural patterns they were part of, change. In this case it would be more correct to talk not so much of conservativeness than traditionalism – customs and traditions transmitted from one generation to the next (see Honko 1998). Primary is not mechanical copying for the tradition's sake, but every new generation takes from the older generation what they think to be of value and important – that which is directly related to their cultural identity and social togetherness and fit it into their own cultural picture.

Based on the above, it would be more correct to claim that the funereal customs of historic Võrumaa are even today characterised by traditionalism. One factor beneficial to this is a population not subject to great mobility (so that people do not remember when their ancestors arrived in a locale) and the value placed on local traditions by the same inhabitants.

Estonians have considered the main bases of group identity to be their language, history and connection with the land. During the Soviet period, part of their identity was also made up of opposition to the Soviet (Russian) culture. During that period, acting according to traditional customs was prompted by the existence of an authoritarian socio-political dictatorship which by nature was fertile

### *The Transformation of the Death Cult*

ground for different sub-cultural phenomena and for the maintaining of the traditional.

In the ecclesiastic context, following traditional customs are prompted by the lack of a general system for conducting funeral ceremonies. There are noticeable differences in the way Lutheran ceremonies were conducted in North and South Estonia. This difference was maintained by the fact that pastors were expected to take into account local traditions and the contingency that gather for such an important occasion.

According to the 1998 survey, traditional funeral customs are followed more by people who have a secondary education and who speak the (local) Võru language. Local customs are also valued and followed by those people who have tertiary education, who are aware of their heritage and support the teaching of the Võru language and culture in schools.

One of the expressions of heritage awareness is the rejection of Christianity as a religion forced on the nation and an attempt to organise one's life according to pre-Christian customs and beliefs (so-called Earth Believers, Taara Believers, etc.) In historic Võrumaa there are to date family cemeteries that were established on farm land and where the dead are buried according to supposedly "good old Estonian' customs".

The working hypotheses stated in the articles collated here, that the defining features of the funereal customs of historic Võrumaa emerged in prehistoric times and their continuity and preservation have been promoted by the long-standing different development of the region, its peripheral location, linguistic differences, lack of urban culture and variance from the main theoretical church concept as to funerals, have in general been affirmed.

Surprisingly, many ancient customs have survived in this south-eastern corner of Estonia that have disappeared in the rest of Estonia and in neighbouring countries. One can only agree with the statements of those who convey the traditions today, that neither Lutheran church nor Soviet ideologists have been able to change the essence of local funereal traditions. Today's pastors in the south-eastern Estonian parishes, such as Hargla, Karula, Urvaste ja Rõuge,

are deeply convinced that local funeral traditions have to be respected even in the event they deviate from the accepted cannon, be it cutting a cross into the tree, opening the coffin both at the sending off from home and at the cemetery, confirming different rituals with a glass of vodka and snacks.

## References

- Brand, Johann Arnold v. 1693. Der Liefländer Begräbniss-Ceremonien. Laugaste, Eduard (ed.). *Eesti rahvaluuleteaduse ajalugu. Valitud tekste ja pilte*. Tallinn: Eesti Riiklik Kirjastus 1963, pp. 77–79.
- Eisen, Matthias Johann 1996. *Esivanemate ohverdamised*. Tallinn: Mats.
- Frazer, Dzheims 1986. *Zolotaia vetv*. Moskva: Politizdat.
- van Gennep, Arnold 1909. *Les rites de passage*. Paris: Noury.
- Gnadenteich, Jaan 1995. *Kodumaa kirikulugu. Usuõpetuse õpperaamat*. Tallinn: Logos.
- Gusev, V. 1974. Ot obriada k narodnomu teatru (evoliutsia sviatochnykh igr v pokoinika). Putilov, B. (ed.). *Folklor i etnografia. Obriady i obriadyi folklor*. Leningrad: Nauka, pp. 49–59.
- Honko, Lauri & Pentikäinen, Juha 1997. *Kultuuriantropoloogia*. Tallinn: Tuum.
- Honko, Lauri 1998. Folklooriprotsess. *Mäetagused* 6, pp. 56–84.
- Hupel, August Wilhelm 1777. *Topographische Nachrichten von Lief- und Ehistland = Topographical Communications from Livonia and Estonia* 2. Riga: Johann Friedrich Hartknoch.
- Kahk, Juhan 1979. Eesti talupoegade religioosetest tõekspidamistest ja kultuuritasemest kahe sajandi eest. *Keel ja Kirjandus* 1, pp. 11–19.
- Kiivit, Jaan 1983. *Jumalateenistuse ajalugu. Matmistavad. Laulatus*. Manuscript in the library of the EELK Usuteaduste Instituut.
- Kiristaja, Arvis 2000. *Võromaa muinasaig*. Manuscript in author's ownership.
- Kriiska, Aivar & Tvauri, Andres 2002. *Eesti muinasaeg*. Tallinn: Avita.
- Krüspan, Kristiina (ed.) 2000. *Võru maakond 1998–1999: [Aastaraamat]*. Võru: Võru Maavalitsus.
- Kulmar, Tarmo 1994. *Eesti muinasusundi vanima kihistuse väe-, jumala- ja hingekujutluste teoloogia*. Doktoriväitekiri. Tartu Ülikooli usuteaduskonna võrdleva usuteaduse õppetool. Manuscript.
- Kulmar, Tarmo 2000: *Üldine usundilugu I. Õppesõnastik*. 2., täiend trükk. Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus.
- Kõivupuu, Marju 2000. Pulma- ja matmiskombestiku hetkeseisust. *A kiilt rahvas kynõlõs: Võrokeste keelest, kommetest, identiteedist*. Võro



*The Transformation of the Death Cult*

Instituudi toimõtiseq = Publications of Võro Institute 8. Võro: Võro Instituut, pp. 57–85.

Lang, Merike 1981. *Endisaegsed matusekombed Ida-Eestis*. Diploma work at the history department of the USSR of TRÜ. Tartu.

Loorits, Oskar 1949. *Grundzüge des Estnischen Volksglaubens* 1. Kungl. Gustav Adolfs Akademien för Folklivsforskning 18: 1. Uppsala & Köpenhamn: Lundequistska Bokhandeln & Munksgaard.

Loorits, Oskar 1990. *Eesti rahvausundi maailmavaade*. Tallinn: Perioodika.

Olearius, Adam 1647. Von den Unteutschen oderr alten Lieffländischen einwohnern. Laugaste, Eduard (ed.). *Eesti rahvaluuleteaduse ajalugu. Valitud tekste ja pilte*. Tallinn: Eesti Riiklik Kirjastus 1963, pp. 44–52.

Paenurm, Peeter 1995. *Luterliku matusetalituse kord ja praktika Eestis*. Diploma work at the EELK Usuteaduste Instituut. Tallinn.

Paulson, Ivar 1997. *Vana eesti rahvausk. Usundiloolisi esseid*. Tartu: Ilmamaa.

Pimenov, V. V. 1960. K voprosu o karelsko-vepsskikh kulturnykh sviaziakh. *Sovetskaia etnografia* 5.

Reest, Vesta & Piller, Meelis 1999. Üks surnu toidab sada suud. *Luup* 23 (106), pp. 8–14.

Sarv, Väike 2000. *Setu itkukultuur*. *Ars Musicae Popularis* 14. Tartu: Eesti Kirjandusmuuseum & Tampere University.

Tokarev, Sergei 1969. *Religioon maailma rahvaste ajaloos*. Tallinn: Eesti Raamat.

Vesik, Liisa 2000. Tähtpäevad tänapäeva Kagu-Eestis. *A kiilt rahvas kynõlös: Võrokeste keelest, kommetest, identiteedist*. Võro Instituudi toimõtiseq = Publications of Võro Institute 8. Võro: Võro Instituut, pp. 87–104.

Viires, Ants (ed.) 1995. *Eesti rahvakultuuri leksikon*. Tallinn: Eesti Entsüklopeediakirjastus.

Vilkuna, Janne 1992. *Suomalaiset vainajien karsikot ja ristipuut: kansatieteellinen tapatutkimus*. *Kansatieteellinen arkisto* 39. Helsinki: Suomen muinasmuistoyhdistys.

Vuorela, Toivo 1977. *Suomalainen kansankulttuuri*. Helsinki & Porvoo: Söderström.