

THESIS DEFENCE: ANDREAS KALKUN

SETO SINGING CULTURE IN THE STUDIES OF ESTONIAN FOLKLORE: A SUPPLEMENT TO THE HISTORY OF REPRESENTATION

On 30 August 2011, Andreas Kalkun defended his PhD thesis *Seto singing culture in the studies of Estonian folklore: A supplement to the history of representation* at the University of Tartu.

It was a great pleasure to have the opportunity to read and think about Andreas Kalkun's stimulating examination of the history of representations of Seto song in Estonian folkloristics. Kalkun's thought-provoking and nuanced



study presents an overall theoretical history of folkloristic approaches to Seto song, particularly with respect to the important genre of improvisational songs. Focusing on three moments within the long and storied history of representations of Seto culture and music in Estonian folkloristics, Mr. Kalkun makes real and valuable contributions to the history of the discipline in Estonia. Kalkun's written text is clearly the tip of an iceberg regarding his knowledge of the topic, and I would have truly enjoyed hearing more about some of the topics that I touch on as questions below.

I hope that in time, Mr. Kalkun will produce a version of this fine study intended for a more international readership. And in that expectation, I have geared my comments below as suggestions for what might make the next version of this study (i.e., perhaps a monograph planned in coming years) optimally useful and comprehensible for a foreign audience. Mr. Kalkun's study examines and critiques the field of Estonian folkloristics, as well as the broader intellectual milieu in which the field developed within Estonia. In my comments, instead, I hope to suggest some ways in which Mr. Kalkun's work relates to broader trends in Nordic folkloristics, as well as in the international field of folkloristics in general. I mean my comments to accomplish two tasks: 1. to create some openings for clarifications or expansions that Mr. Kalkun may want to make in the defense, and 2. to make some suggestions for things to take into account in the eventual international versions of this research that will emerge in coming years. In the US, doctoral dissertation defenses tend to be more collaborative discussions than unidirectional interrogations, so I hope that my comments will stimulate and encourage Mr. Kalkun to share even more of his great learning with the assembled audience.

Chapter 1 of the dissertation presents Seto improvisational songs within the history of the discipline. Mr. Kalkun reviews his own work on Seto autobiographical songs and the issue of improvisation in the study of Estonian (and broader Balto-Finnic) folklore, particularly in the works of Krohn, Hurt, Väisänen, Honko, Timonen, and Kuutma.

Mr. Kalkun brings in the theories of a number of international scholars, including Egleton, Ó Giolláin, Clifford, Crapanzano, Ricœur, Foucault, White, Derrida, and Woolf to create a theoretical framework not only for the study of improvisational songs, but also for the dissertation's examination of the history of the discipline, i.e., the two main foci of the study.

One intriguing question that the chapter raises for me is why or how the fairly extensive research on the act of improvisation *within folkloristics* failed to be applied to Seto songs. In other words, folklorists have certainly looked at improvisation, e.g., in the study of African-American songs and verbal dueling, and in the North European examination of riddles, jokes, Sámi *joik*, and laments, yet these frameworks were clearly not applied to Seto songs, where improvisation, as Mr. Kalkun notes, came to be regarded as a problem rather than a strength. Part of this failure, perhaps, has to do with the preeminence of the historic-geographic ("Finnish") method in the field of folkloristics in Finland and Estonia during the early twentieth century, and its stress on performers who could be considered "faithful repeaters" rather than "innovators." As Mr. Kalkun's discussion makes clear, such analytical expectations selected for a particular *kind* of folklore — e.g., genres with seeming stability over time, like ballads and folktales — rather than genres that were/are strongly context-dependent and improvisational. However, part of the failure may also stem from the unstable, potentially ironic or even counterhegemonic potential of improvisation within oral tradition: when singers can make up songs about collectors, all sorts of things become possible that are not conceived of in a model of oral tradition as "memories of the past." It seems to me that Mr. Kalkun hints at some of these questions in this chapter, but I should very much like to hear/read more about exactly why or how this central aspect of Seto song tradition became so marginalized. It is a source of truly interesting irony to me as a foreign scholar that much of the early 1970s development of the "performance school" of folkloristics in the United States looked to the Soviet scholar Mark Azadovskij and his 1926 FFC study *Eine sibirische Märchenerzählerin*, as a model for the call of folklorists to attend to individual variation and the stylistic or personal agendas that may underlie improvisation. Yet this study and its insights on performer variation and improvisation do not seem to have been applied to Seto song within the Soviet Union itself.

The discussion in this chapter of Seto singers' own views of the value of improvisation raises a further possibility of offering a folkloristic framework, which would actually take account of such variation and its meanings within a song culture. Mr. Kalkun's mention of intertextuality in particular suggests to me both John Foley's wonderful concept of *immanence* in oral epic (e.g., in his book *Immanent Art*), and Lotte Tarkka's dissertation and subsequent articles on intertextuality in Karelian song genres. In a future version or extension of this study, it might be valuable to look at these theories and what they can tell us about frameworks operating within improvisation as sources of overarching/underpinning meaning, which help singers produce new works that nonetheless draw on the song tradition for imagery, wording, or overall form. Foley's work adapts the Parry-Lord framework of oral formulaic studies in very useful ways, while Tarkka's work attempts to adapt Kristeva's notions of intertextuality to an oral tradition. I believe Mr. Kalkun's material would provide some very useful perspectives from which to view and possibly improve these frameworks, and it would be interesting to hear his ideas on how an appreciation of Seto understandings of Seto improvisation can improve folkloristic

understandings of the act of improvisation in general. Here, I believe, Mr. Kalkun has a great deal to offer the field, although most of it is only hinted at in this dissertation.

Chapter 2 examines the textual history of Jakob Hurt's *Setukeste laulud* (Songs of the Seto people). Mr. Kalkun locates his discussion within the intellectual milieu dominated by the brothers Grimm, and eventually by Kaarle Krohn. Mr. Kalkun's discussion focuses on Hurt's classification of songs in *Setukeste laulud* and the effects of evolutionary and historic-geographic theories on his perceptions of presentations of Seto song. This part of the dissertation is perhaps the most familiar to scholars from outside of the country. The intellectual framework – evolutionism and the historic-geographic method – are familiar to historians of the discipline, and Hurt fits into a category of “seminal early folklorists” familiar to scholars working on the Grimms, Lönnrot, Krohn, Moe, von Sydow, Olrik, Tang Kristensen, Qvigstad, and others. What I find most interesting about the chapter methodologically is the way in which Kalkun demonstrates the influence of such theories on the very classificatory framework Hurt used to organize his work. In this respect, Kalkun's study echoes on a level that Coppélie Cocq shows regarding J. Qvigstad's presentation of Sámi tales in her *Revoicing Sámi Narratives*. This chapter offers very solid data and interpretation and will prove useful to the international discussion.

I had several questions as I read the chapter that I would be grateful to know more about. First, in the fascinating discussion of the correspondence between Krohn and Hurt, I was wondering about the influence that this exchange of ideas had on Krohn in his planning for his series FFC. In a recent short article I did for FF Network, I had the opportunity to look at Krohn and his editorship of FFC over time. Clearly, some international scholars got published in FFC and some did not. The transplanted German Walter Anderson does get included with his *Kaiser und Abt* in 1923, and again in issue No. 141 (1951), perhaps chiefly because he so fully adopted the methods and agenda of Krohn's historical geographic method. (After Anderson, there is a monograph by Loorits (No. 139, 1954), and one by Felix Oinas (in exile; No. 205, 1969), and then more Estonians after the 1980s (Kippar, Hiimäe, Valk, Kuutma). It would be interesting to know the ways in which Krohn's dealings with Hurt shaped his expectations concerning the value of an international network of folklorists and the feasibility of more-or-less dictating the methodological frameworks of colleagues in different countries. The FFC became a major conduit for the international recognition of specific traditions (and folklorists) and Hurt's role as a model or precursor would be interesting to investigate.

A second question I had in reading the chapter was about the role of Oskar Kallas. Certainly he was involved in the events discussed here, both as Hurt's sometime assistant and as Krohn's brother-in-law, through his marriage to Aino Krohn Kallas. Kallas is discussed somewhat later in the dissertation, in connection with the purchase of Eisen's collection (216 ff.), but is there more to say about him in the relation of Hurt and Krohn? The discussion of Aukusti Niemi (p. 120) is also valuable, as he was yet another Finn who took an interest in Baltic song and published on the topic (i.e., particularly on Lithuanian *dainos* (songs) and wedding customs). Personally, I would have welcomed more discussion of Kallas, particularly as he so underscores the political significance of folklore research during this period, as Estonians look to their oral tradition as the basis constructing a self-consciously “national” identity, one which, as Mr. Kalkun shows, involves selectively coopting elements of Seto song tradition.

The small note (fn 211) on p. 111 on Barons, as well as the occasional discussion of Herder in the text, of course brings up the question of conceptual models coming from the south rather than only from the north. In a broader text aimed at an international audience, this Baltic context would be interesting to examine a little further to explain how or to what extent it was incorporated in Hurt's work or why it was not. It seems to me that Barons offers a very different way of looking at lyric songs than Krohn and that the contrast between these two conceptual models would be really fascinating to bring out further.

Chapter 3 examines A. O. Väisänen's fieldwork among Seto singers and its influence in shaping Estonian approaches to Seto songs. Mr. Kalkun's discussion of Karelianism is excellent, particularly with regard to the questions of how this movement shaped Väisänen's assumptions going into Seto land, and molded the things he looked for and found. What excites me about this chapter is – in addition to what it shows us about Väisänen's influence on Estonian folklore research – how it points to forgotten topics within the history of Finnish folklore research as well. Väisänen, along with many other important scholars of Finnic folk song, has been marginalized or altogether ignored in many histories of the discipline of folkloristics in Finland. I think it is valuable to note that Väisänen's work was shaped by his knowledge of Adolf Neovius's important work on Larin Paraske from 1896: the latter created the idea of an improvising artist in Finnish Karelianist understandings of "the singer", one which influenced Väisänen, as well as later Väinö Salminen and Martti Haavio. Salminen undertook fieldwork among the "Finns" of Värmland (1905), and in Karelia and Ingria in the following decade. Salminen also undertook fieldwork in Estonian Ingria in the early 1930s. This song and singer-oriented research – of which Väisänen was an important part – differed markedly from the super-organic model of Krohn, and seems to have influenced Martti Haavio in his *Viimeiset runonlaulajat* (Last Runo Singers) (1948). Later on Finnish researchers have occasionally returned to the notion of the star performer, almost always in connection with female singers, e.g., Juha Pentikäinen's *Marina Takalon uskonto* (1971) and Matti Kuusi's *Maaria Luukan laulut ja loitsut* (1983). But what Väisänen particularly offered was attention to the specifically *musicological* and *interactional* aspects of singing. A. O. Väisänen offered a more ethnographic, less logocentric model of folklore research, and he used his representation of an idyllic Setomaa with its *laluemad* (mothers of song) as a symbol of what folklorists should be searching out and studying, just as he used his relation with Teppo Repo to suggest the questions that a scholar should ask in the study of instrumental music.

From a comparative, international perspective, two topics occur to me as particularly interesting about this chapter, and I suggest them as topics that Mr. Kalkun may have been thinking of already, or may consider including in future research aimed at an international readership. First, of course, is the notion of selecting a particular local culture as the eventual embodiment of a "national" culture, as in the case of both Karelianism and the Estonian appropriation of Seto culture as exemplary of the Estonian nation. Excellent international comparisons abound, including of course, Göran Rosander's classic article "The 'Nationalization' of Dalecarlia: How a Special Province Became a National Symbol for Sweden" (Arv 1986) and David Whisnant's *All That Is Native and Fine* about the use of Appalachia as a symbol of "American" folklore in the USA. In their anthology *Folk Song: Tradition, Revival, and Re-Creation*, Ian Russell and

David Atkinson include some interesting cases from England, Scotland, and Ireland. And this topic has its share of contemporary research as well, as for instance, Robert Kaiser's article "Homeland Making and the Territorialization of National Identity," in the anthology *Ethnonationalism in the Contemporary World*, edited by Daniele Conversi (2002). All of this has great significance for the story of Setomaa today in the context of the Estonian-Russian border, and I am certain that Mr. Kalkun would have a lot to say about these complex and interesting questions regarding the symbolic potential of a marginalized community, the politics of representation, and the question of who gets to determine the symbolic "spin" of a culture, something suggested very perceptively in the dissertation's final chapter.

The other comparative topic of interest from an international perspective here is the role of a specifically *foreign* ethnographer in shaping an internal, national view of a topic. In the history of American culture, of course the French essayist de Toqueville long shaped American understandings of American culture, and in connection with folklore research in particular, the role of the American folklorist Jacob Curtin in shaping Irish understandings of Gaelic lore has been perceptively examined by John Eastlake. I think an Estonian view of Väisänen's role would contribute interesting details to this study of international perspectives and the role of the Other in shaping the viewpoints used within a society to conceptualize itself.

Chapter 4 examines Samuel Sommer's collection of Seto songs and the fate of his archival material, focusing particularly on the roles of Sommer and Loorits in the dispute and the legal struggle that focused on national and personal ownership but that completely ignored Seto ownership of the materials in question. Here, of course, Mr. Kalkun's work holds tremendous interest to scholars of intangible cultural heritage and the process of cultural repatriation, serving as a valuable historical examination of the ways in which in-community interests were overlooked in past folkloristic practice.

In short, I found reading Mr. Kalkun's dissertation an exciting and interesting experience and I have learned a great deal. I look forward to his future contributions to our field, in which his insights into Seto improvisational song, as well as his analysis of the history of the discipline will be of great value. I encourage him to share some of this research with the international readership in some of the ways outlined above and I wish him all success and congratulations in a dissertation well done and deserving of much recognition.

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