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AS MUCH AS NECESSARY AND AS LITTLE AS POSSIBLE: THE INTERPLAY OF NATIONAL AND SOVIET IN A WEDDING PERFORMANCE AT THE 1960 FOLK ART EVENING OF THE ESTONIAN SONG FESTIVAL

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Abstract: This case study explores the political uses of folklore during the Soviet colonial regime through an examination of a traditional wedding performance at the 1960 Folk Art Evening of the Estonian General Song Festival. The aim of the study is to understand the multiple meanings of such folklore performances within the framework of post-Soviet postcolonial studies, drawing on archival material, published memories of the creator of the wedding performance, Laine Mesikäpp, and interviews with her contemporaries.

The wedding performance presented local pre-modern traditions and at the same time contributed to the articulation of Soviet ideology, exploiting the regime's broader and everyday political themes and agendas. The analysis demonstrates the political anti-colonial significance of the staged tradition for the participants, the possibilities for ambivalent interpretations of the wedding performance, and the hybrid nature of some of its elements. A closer look at the personality of the main creator of the wedding performance, Laine Mesikäpp, a prominent singer of traditional songs of the period, as well as the assessments of her contemporaries, reveals how the positions of colonial subject and active creator were reconciled and what strategies were used to cope with the inevitable compromises with the demands of the authorities.

Keywords: stage performance of folklore, Estonian runosong, traditional singing, wedding ritual, religion policy, Soviet regime, post-Soviet postcolonial studies, colonial subject position

This case study discusses the political use of heritage and the ambivalent meanings of stage performances of traditional customs and songs under a colonial regime. The focus is on the staging of a traditional wedding at the Folk Art Evening (Est. *rahvakunstiõhtu*) of the 15th All-Estonian Song Festival (officially

called *Nõukogude Eesti 1960. aasta üldlaulupidu*, 'General Song Festival of 1960 of Soviet Estonia').[1]

The staging of traditional wedding in 1960 is a vivid example of how, in an authoritarian system, behind the official, unambiguous political use of folklore lie greatly diverse and sometimes contradictory ideological meanings. Another reason to focus on the 1960 Folk Art Evening is that the staging of traditional songs and customs at this event can be considered, in a sense, a representative example of the modernised stage style of the mid-twentieth century, before the beginning of the folklore revival movement in Estonia in the 1970s (Kuutma 1998).

The author and lead singer of the wedding scene – as well as the most famous representative and creator of the modernised stage tradition of the older folk song – was Laine Mesikäpp, who performed at all the all-Estonian song and dance festivals of the Soviet era and earned the title "Hostess of the Festivals".[2] Laine Mesikäpp, as a central figure in the wedding scene, also raises issues regarding the themes of the colonial subject and the choices of an individual creator under an authoritarian regime.

The study is based on audio and film recordings, archival documents and media coverage connected with the song festival as well as on Laine Mesikäpp's life and activity. The post-Soviet memories of the festival participants were also used to understand the ideological undercurrents of the time.

HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To interpret the sources and the complexity of the historical reality they reflect, I have drawn on the post-socialist postcolonial studies framework (Annus 2018; Ķencis 2021, 2023). The concepts of ambivalence, hybridity, and mimicry, which are central to postcolonial theory, are well suited to understanding the mentality and practices of the politically complex period of the Khrushchev Thaw in Estonia (Kuuli 2002; Hennoste 2003; Kangilaski 2016; Saarlo 2017a, 2017b; Annus 2018; Kapper 2018). The Thaw eased the fears of the Stalin era and gave impetus to testing the limits of the possible by introducing decolonial ideas into public discourse. On the other hand, by that time Estonians had realised that the Soviet regime, established in 1940 and restored in 1944 after the German occupation, was not temporary but would remain in place and that they had to adapt to it in order to achieve self-fulfilment and ensure their livelihoods, and "the local modes of resistance became a hybrid coexistence with the new power" (Annus 2018: 100; see also Mertelsmann 2003; Kirss & Kõresaar & Lauristin 2004; Karjahärm & Sirk 2007).

Ideological ambivalence is apparent, among other things, in representations of the local cultural heritage. While striving towards and during the period of independence in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, folk song and dance had been associated with the ideology of national political sovereignty. Under the Soviet regime, folklore was supposed to express the idea of official Soviet nationalism, which supported the colonial system directed from Moscow. What makes the interpretation of staged folklore interesting is that, despite representing an official ideology, the practice of staging the tradition already had its own local decolonial meaning that dominated the perceptions of many people (Kuutma 2008; Herzog 2010; Brüggemann & Kasekamp 2014). Earlier ideas, norms and practices of national modernity merged with those of Soviet modernity, as was characteristic of the wider Soviet-influenced Central and Eastern Europe (Kołodziejczyk & Şandru 2012; Annus 2018).

One of the intriguing themes of colonialism is the position of the colonial subjects who inevitably participated in the practices that imposed and legitimised the system. During the Soviet period, many Estonians had to resolve for themselves the cognitive dissonance between their public practices and their personal values. Active creators like Laine Mesikäpp had to reconcile the positions of the colonial subject and of the creator. While the colonial subject is characterised by a willingness to compromise, a tendency to self-limitation and mimicry (Ashcroft & Griffiths & Tiffin 2013 [1998]),[3] the position of the creator implies creative energy, agency, and a desire to convey personally significant messages. The process of creation meant constantly testing "the limits of the possible" (Annus 2018) – Soviet ideas / ideological formulas had to be used "as much as necessary and as little as possible", as the common saying went. However, these limits may have been set not only by the authorities but could also be a consequence of internal censorship and adaptation. In order to understand the creator's choices at a given moment in time, it is useful to include a biographical perspective, in this case considering Laine Mesikäpp's life and experiences (see also Oras 2023).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND LAINE MESIKÄPP'S MOTIVATION FOR STAGING WEDDINGS

Staging traditional weddings was not unprecedented either in Estonia or elsewhere. It was facilitated by the theatricality of this long, varied ritual with its specific characters and activities and its wide range of emotions. In the Finnic wedding tradition, singing had a special place, accompanying all the main

rituals. An example of early performances of Finnic weddings can be seen in the wedding customs staged in 1896 at the ninth Sortavala General Song and Music Festival in Finland (Tenhunen 2006: 83). In Estonia, the wedding ritual of the Seto ethnic group from southeast Estonia was performed at concerts first organised by the Estonian National Museum in Tartu and Valga in 1912 and later in 1921 (Kalkun 2017: 12; Postimees 1912, 1921; Päewaleht 1912). Awareness of the spectacular nature of traditional weddings was definitely increased by the Finnish ethnographic film *Häiden vietto Karjalan runomailla* (Wedding in poetic Karelia), made in 1921, which reconstructed old local wedding customs, and which was also distributed with an English translation. Armas Otto Väisänen, the main director of the Finnish film and an ethnomusicologist who had collected Seto folklore, even proposed making a similar film about Seto wedding customs in Estonia (Päewaleht 1922). In the 1920s and 1930s, local courtship and wedding customs were demonstrated at several Estonian festivals, as well as at concerts in support of the music museum, organised by the cultural activist and museum founder August Pulst (Postimees 1923, 1928; Teataja 1923; Vaba Maa 1924; Päts 1935; Kermik 1983: 49; Kalits 1988: 49).

It can be assumed that the idea of staging a wedding at the 1960 Folk Art Evening came from Laine Mesikäpp herself. She had probably seen at least one of the concerts organised by Pulst where wedding customs were performed – for example, in her home community of Hageri (e.g., ETMM M234:1/19:447). Laine Mesikäpp may also have been motivated by the knowledge that her grandmother had been a wedding singer. In media interviews, Mesikäpp interpreted her singer's career as a continuation of her grandmother's activity. She had several other reasons for proposing a wedding performance. One of these may have been a vivid experience of the power of old rituals in a real wedding situation. In 1957, the wedding of Laine Mesikäpp's niece, Õilme Krell (Vasari), was held, following the historical wedding traditions. In addition to relatives, Õilme's fellow musicians and dancers from the University of Tartu Folk Dance Ensemble took part in this memorable wedding.[4] The wedding singers were Laine Mesikäpp and Muia Veetamm (legal name Elts Ventsel), a poet who had previously sung runosongs with Mesikäpp on stage (Krell 2019, 2022).

Laine Mesikäpp was probably also influenced by the work of folklorists.[5] Folklorists from the Folklore Archives visited the island of Saaremaa in the 1950s and 1960s, and documented, amongst other things, the local wedding tradition of Mustjala parish, which was still alive. At Laine Mesikäpp's niece's wedding in 1957 the wedding guests went to the wedding house in the *Mustjala pulmarong* (Mustjala wedding procession, literally 'wedding line') – a traditional procession with dance movement.[6] There are also other indications in archival sources that Laine Mesikäpp was inspired by Mustajala's living wedding

tradition, which had been performed on stage by the locals.[7] The singer was apparently also aware that folklorists were currently working on contemporary Soviet rituals based on the old wedding tradition (see further details below).

The successful wedding performance at the 1960 Folk Art Evening provided the impetus to continue with the theme. The performance was repeated at the jubilee concert of Ullo Toomi, the grand old man of Estonian folk dance, in 1962 (ETMM T503:1/2:24). The 1960 Folk Art Evening wedding performance obviously provided additional inspiration also for the wedding performances of the regional folk-art evenings in southern Estonia in the 1960s, where Helju Mikkel, the leader of the University of Tartu Folk Dance Ensemble, played an important role in preparing the programme (Mikkel 1999: 344; Tee Kommunismile 1968; Punalipp 1968; see also Vaba Eestlane 1968; Vaba Eesti Sõna 1969).

THE WEDDING PERFORMANCE AT THE 1960 FOLK ART EVENING

The folk-art evenings of the all-Estonian (general) song festivals, later called dance festivals, are large open-air concerts focusing on folk dance, which take place during the song festival (later known as the Song and Dance Festival). Alongside folk dance, folk-art evenings have also featured gymnasts, folk musicians, folk singers and, before 1960, also choirs. In 1960, the Folk Art Evening was held for the first time at the Komsomol Stadium.[8] There were around 4,000 performers and, at every performance, an audience of around 11,000 people. In order to be accessible to all, three performances were planned. As one of these was interrupted by heavy rain, it was repeated, so that in fact there were (almost) four full performances altogether.[9]

As was customary, the folk-art evening began with a manifestation of Soviet ideology. The Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Estonian SSR, Johan Eichfeld, gave a long political speech in both Estonian and Russian, with the anthems of the USSR and the Estonian SSR played in between (Rahvakunstiõhtu 1960, 01). The first performance of the dancers was the unrolling of a big slogan written on a piece of cloth: "We will fulfil the 7-year plan in agriculture in meat production in 4 years and in milk production in 5 years". Next, they arranged themselves in the stadium to form the letters "Salute", then "ESSR" and "XX" – in Soviet times, the song festival was held every five years and always coincided with the anniversary of the annexation of Estonia; this time it was the 20th anniversary. Then Laine Mesikäpp stepped up to the podium and presented the opening song. She started with a call in traditional style: "... Hey! Come sing, come dance! Come, my dears, come, my brothers, come to

celebrate our jubilees! Come, all our Union brethren, come from far and near!" Laine Mesikäpp's calls were answered by a small female choir singing in two parts (Rahvakunstiõhtu 1960, 01: 44:45–47:05). The folk dances followed.

The wedding performance, entitled "Wedding in the Kolkhoz", took place in the middle of the evening (Rahvakunstiõhtu 1960, 02: 21:10–41:29). The script and lyrics for the staging were compiled by Laine Mesikäpp, while the entire folk-art evening was directed by Leo Kalmet, a well-known producer and theatre professor. He chose as the bride and groom for the wedding the newly graduated actors Linda Kuusma (later Olmaru) and Rein Olmaru, who actually got married shortly after the song festival. Laine Mesikäpp played the role of the wedding singer and mother of the groom. The wedding was performed by professional actors Lembit Anton and Johannes Rebane, as well as amateur actors, dancers and singers.

The wedding procession drove in on horse-drawn carriages. Traditionally, weddings have been held first at the home of the bride, then at the home of the groom. On stage the second part of the wedding was performed, with the bride being brought from the bride's home to the groom's home. As the wedding train pulled in, the announcer would recite the words in old, runosong style,[10] informing everyone that the wedding of the kolkhoz was coming and that the young people were as old as their home republic.[11] The names of the collective farms were mentioned: "The groom takes the bride home, / from 'People's Victory' to 'Future'."

An enormous beer tankard was driven in on one of the wagons, from which men emerged holding ordinary tankards. The crowd had risen to their feet as the wedding procession entered – as was the custom for both contemporary church weddings and secular wedding registrations. The announcer shouted the old wedding call "*Hõissa, pulmad!*" ('Hurray, wedding!') many times, and from the recording it seems that the crowd cheered along, although such traditional calling was generally no longer practised at modern weddings.

The traditional request for documents ("passports") followed: the path of the wedding procession was blocked by the "villagers" and the possibility to proceed had to be redeemed with alcohol. The old custom of blocking the road had survived in the tradition of the time and acquired new elements over time (Kalits 1968). Upon arriving at the "groom's home", the bridal couple came through a gate made of birch trees to sit on a small stage in the middle of the stadium (green branches were also used in traditional weddings). The rest of the ceremony followed – in general, but not in detail – the old marriage ritual of putting on the wife's headdress. These practices had mostly disappeared from modern tradition. Laine Mesikäpp first greeted the daughter-in-law, alternately reciting and singing the text of a wedding song. This was followed by

the "farewell song" sung by a group of women – a song consisting of two vocal parts accompanied by a *kannel* (Estonian traditional plucked string instrument, psaltery) in a newer style, which was not part of the old tradition. The bride was then given a wife's headdress, an apron and a ladle, accompanied by the singing and reciting of the runosong. The groomsmen brought a bridal chest, the custom of giving bridal gifts was explained by the announcer reciting verses of the song. The distribution of gifts was again accompanied by the singing of a traditional song in a newer style by the choir – in the older tradition, ritual runosongs were also sung at this time.

This was followed by the throwing of the newlyweds into the air and then "the patching of the apron" – a traditional money-gathering ritual in which families tried to outdo each other. The performance here turned into a "song fight" between the wedding singers representing the families mocking each other in song. Song-fighting was one part of the several stages of the ancient wedding ritual. On the stage, it took place with lyrics in traditional style created by Laine Mesikäpp, which were gentler and less rude than the older mocking song tradition. At some stage of the fight, the parties started to outdo each other with the achievements of their collective farm and their grand work plans.

Laine Mesikäpp, singer on the groom's side, in response to mockery:

"Ohkan oma lehma poole!	"Ah I sigh at my cow!
Aga kes on me kolhoosis	But who is in our collective farm
kõige kangem karjanaine?	the most powerful cattle woman?
Kes on üle Eesti lüpsja?"	Who's the all-Estonian milkmaid?"

The wedding singer on the bride's side:

"Aga kes on kõige kangem,	"But who's the strongest,
kangem loomakasvataja,	the strongest cattle breeder?
ja kui meie seda poleks,	And if we weren't,
kas siis vabariik saaks anda	could the republic give
100 000 tonni liha?	100,000 tons of meat?[12]
Meil on jõudu, meil on jaksu!"	We have strength, we have stamina!"

The bride's party repeated the last verse in chorus.

Laine Mesikäpp:

"Ah on jõudu, ah on jäksu!	"Ah there's strength, ah there's strength!
Aga kes on tõotand lüpsta	But who has promised to milk
550 000 tonni piima?	550,000 tons of milk?
Meie jõud käib ikka üle!"	Our strength is still the greatest!"

The groom's party repeated the last verse.

Organised bursts of laughter and the repetition of the lead singer's final verses demonstrated the support of the wedding guests in both parties for their lead singer.

The fighting sides then decided to use a series of traditional games of strength and skill to find out who was better. In the end, the parties settled on a consensus that they were equally strong. There was a shout, "The guests are coming!" A Russian troika (a carriage drawn by three horses) drove in, followed by cars. A Russian dance group from northeast Estonia came out and performed a Russian dance, after which they handed over a traditional Russian salt and bread. The "dear guests" were asked to show off their skills, followed by another Russian dance. After that, the groom's mother Laine Mesikäpp invited the bride to see the pastures; during this the wedding parties left the stadium.[13] The festival continued with dancing.

PRESENTING WEDDING TRADITION ON A MODERN STAGE: DISTANCE AND INVOLVEMENT

Compared to a traditional wedding, where all the guests were familiar with the traditions and were active participants in the rituals, the stage situation and the performance of historical customs included both a spatial and temporal distance between the performers and the audience. To explain customs that have become unknown, they were introduced by verses recited by the announcer. The fact that the setting was a stage was underlined by explicitly theatrical details, the most impressive of which was the huge beer tankard. Both in contemporary media reports and in later memories this tankard was a detail which was frequently referred to: it played an important role in creating a special mood. The theatricality, in effect, created a modern affinity between the stage and the audience.

Most of the audience would have experienced the marriage ritual as one of the most important events in life, and this emotional connection created a sense

of real participation in the wedding. Besides this, the fascination of the audience was probably enhanced by the fact that some of the old customs performed were also still used in the modern tradition. As one newspaper report described, the performance awakened in participants as well as in the audience emotions that had been experienced at a real wedding. A heightened ritual energy and the fact that the spectators felt like participants is also shown by the spontaneous standing up of the audience as the wedding procession came in, as well as by their shouting along with the wedding calls: "The wedding procession rushes to the stadium. The spectators are excited, waving... Everybody feels like they are part of the celebrations" (Noorte Hääl 1960a).

The enthusiasm of the participants and spectators was not diminished by a downpour of rain which interrupted the performance of the folk-art evening on 20 July, right during the wedding performance. As Laine Mesikäpp recalled in newspaper interviews: "The party in 1960 came with a big 'Hurray, wedding!' scenario, which so fascinated the crowd that even the heaviest downpour, which started just as I was putting a [symbolic married woman's] cap on the bride's head, didn't matter" (Haan 1987); "The rain was so heavy that she [LM] almost couldn't see the bride's face as she sang to her, took the wreath from her head and replaced it with a cap. No one left. A dance was made around the bride and groom, as the script had intended. Barefoot" (Vainu 1997).

Looking more closely at the vocal side of the wedding performance, it can also be summarised as bridging the aesthetic distance between the old traditional song – the runosong – and the modern audience, using a modernised performance style. Having learnt from traditional singers, Laine Mesikäpp knew the traditional performance style well. The use of a modernised style was a conscious choice on her part, but was partly influenced also by her work and training as an actress. The reason for her choice was the common understanding of the time that the short, repetitive melodies of the runosong, consisting of one or two phrases with a narrow range, had no aesthetic value in themselves.[14] According to the aesthetics of the first half of the twentieth century, the melodies were monotonous and suitable only as a basis for musical composition. The traditional "untrained" chest voice, the "imprecise", varying pitches and the similarity of such singing to speech intonation was also deemed aesthetically "poor" (e.g., Särg 2012; Oras 2017).

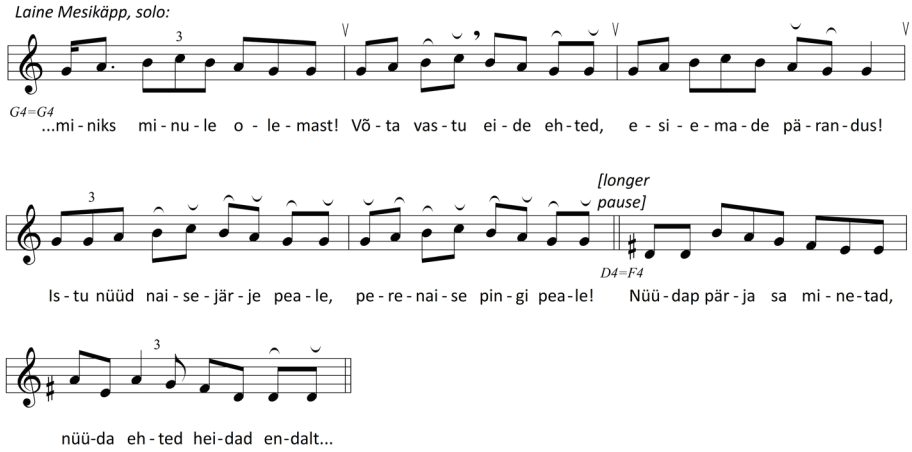
Laine Mesikäpp's style in the 1960s had been developed over 20 years. She used her own lyrics in the style of the runosong, with (sometimes slightly modified) traditional verses and formulas. Her lyrics used a simpler language than traditional songs. There was a very frequent alternation between reciting and singing the lyrics, probably with the aim of conveying the content of the text as clearly as possible. Each sung section used a new melody, supposedly

in an attempt to avoid the "monotony" of runosong (see Example 1). One of the identifiable melodies is a wedding tune by the traditional singer Anna Lindvere, who was one of Laine Mesikäpp's musical models, the other is a wedding tune of Tõstamaa parish (Tampere & Tampere & Kõiva 2016 [2003], no. 74, 45, 46). Some of the tunes seem to have been improvised on the basis of runosong melodies. Only once during the performance were some lines sung according to the older tradition: Laine Mesikäpp sang a line and then the other singers repeated it. Two songs in the modern style, sung by a multi-part women's choir, were probably added to provide additional musical variety and "real" music alongside the runosong – it would have been possible to use the old traditional songs in these parts of the wedding ritual.

Example 1. Wedding song performed by Laine Mesikäpp in 1960 wedding performance (Rahvakunstiõhtu 1960, 02: 23:05–25:55).

[reciting] *Tere, tütreks mul tulemast ...*
Hi, you've become my daughter ...

[singing]



... you came to be my daughter-in-law! Accept the jewellery, the heritage of the foremothers. Now sit on the woman's bench, on the mistress's seat! Now you'll be left without a headdress, throw away your maiden jewels ...

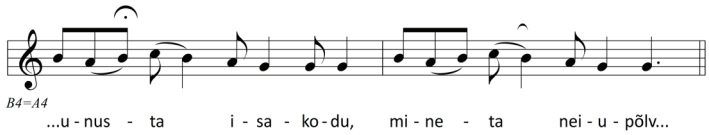
[reciting] *…tõused tanukandijaksi,*
astud noorikute hulka,
jätad hüvasti õeksed.

... you will become a woman's cap wearer,
join the ranks of young married women,
say goodbye to your sisters.

[multi-part choral song]

[reciting] *Võta vastu naisetanu ...*
Take the woman's cap ...

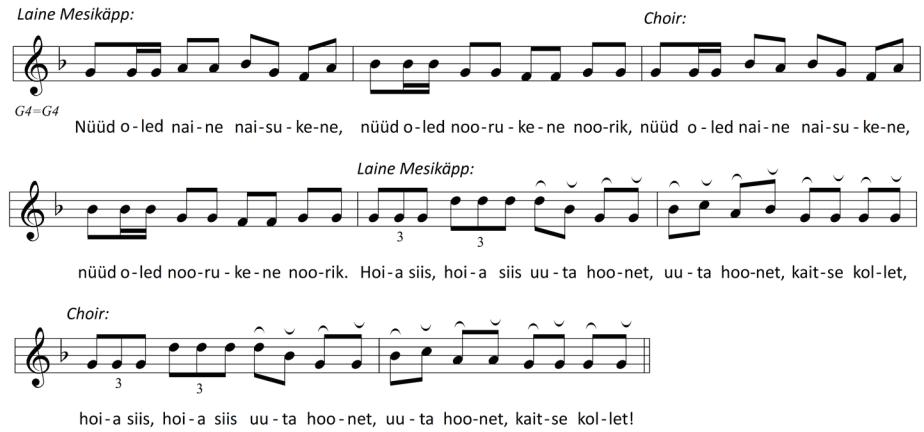
[singing]



... forget your father's home, let go of your girlhood ...

[reciting] *...pea oma kaasakest kalliks!*
... cherish your dear husband!

[LM ties an apron on the daughter-in-law and hands her a bowl, reciting runosong lines.
Singing in alternation with the choir, the choir repeats each two lines.]



Now you're a wife, now you are a young wife. Now keep your new house, keep the house, protect the fire!

Laine Mesikäpp's singing followed the modern stage aesthetic: she sang with a trained voice, with a more precise, controlled intonation, higher vocal register and clearer articulation than traditional singers, and used the expressive gestures characteristic of an actor, filling the stage with her presence. Thanks to her modern aesthetics, a link can also be seen with the distinctive theatrical style cultivated throughout Soviet folklore performance, which was modelled on professional stage traditions (Olson 2004; Rolf 2009; Smith 2002; Stites 2004). In the wedding performance itself Laine Mesikäpp did not use the kind of expressive singing-calling recitation characteristic of herding songs, in which the groups of verses recited end with a call on the final vowel. She made use of this latter technique, however, especially in the opening songs of the party, also in 1960 (Rahvakunstiõhtu 1960, 01: 44:43–47:18).

SOVIET POLITICAL MOTIFS AND THEIR AMBIVALENT MEANINGS

A number of the political motifs used in the wedding performance were common to heritage performances and, more generally, to public cultural discourse throughout the Soviet era. They legitimised the Soviet regime in Estonia, idealised socialism and its economy, introduced the idea of friendship between "brother nations" and the special position of the Russian people, the "elder brother". Obvious Soviet motifs in the wedding performance were the Estonian SSR-aged newlyweds; the kolkhoz representing the family or lineage as the main party at the wedding; the kolkhoz names "People's Victory" and the (bright) "Future"; the wealth of Soviet people, their success in fulfilling economic plans and the element of socialist competition in this; the inclusion of "dear Russian guests" in the local family ritual. In addition to these, there were themes more specifically related to the politics of the late 1950s / early 1960s, such as the campaign for animal husbandry development and the anti-religion campaign.

Some of these Soviet motifs may have taken on a critical or ironic meaning in the eyes of the participants, compared to their original intended political message. For example, the political kolkhoz names "People's Victory" and the (bright) "Future" were typical at the time of the establishing of the collective farms. Combining them in the wedding performance created a powerful image – the 20-year-old children of the 'people's victory' have a bright 'future' ahead of them. However, such kolkhoz names may also have had an ironic connotation for the participants, as 'the people's victory' stood for the annexation of Estonia, and optimistic kolkhoz names such as 'future' may have been associated with the real poverty and misery that characterised the rural economy in the years

following the forced collectivisation of Estonian agriculture, which took place mainly after the mass deportations of 1949.

The Russian dance troupe's arrival may also have aroused unpleasant associations – the intrusion of representatives of another culture into the course of an inter-family celebration may have been associated with the Soviet invasion of Estonia. The inappropriateness of the guest scene was pointed out in one of the speeches at the closing conference of the folk-art evening: "The Russian group seemed like an alien body in our wedding customs. In the future, the idea of friendship between peoples should be treated differently" (ETMM MO268:1/4:3). One of my interviewees, who did not remember the episode of the Russian guests without asking, said with great irony: "Yes, yes, it comes to mind now. Well, friendship between peoples was always, always a must" (Krell 2024).

One issue that was obviously open to controversial interpretations was the "song fight" between the two wedding parties – the boasting about the production of meat and dairy products on their collective farms. The issue was linked to Nikita Khrushchev's campaign, launched in the spring of 1957, to catch up economically with the United States. The first area in which to catch up was agriculture, and the Soviet Union's abundance of meat and dairy products was supposed to be a sign of this (Scherrer 2014). Campaigns dominated the entire Soviet economy, and in the absence of any significant economic levers, there was a constant "socialist competition", the aim of which was to motivate people to work harder (Miklóssy & Ilic 2014). On the one hand, everyone knew that data and figures were manipulated, and that success in the socialist competition was in part the usual Soviet camouflage. On the other hand, after the total collapse of agriculture as a result of forced collectivisation, the collective farms were slowly beginning to recover from the worst of the economic depression, and people had learned that their wellbeing ultimately depended on economic indicators. All amateur cultural activities were also supported by farm resources, as participation in them was controlled by the state and was also an indicator of socialist competition. The universal emotions of the competition also had an impact: "It's still like a kind of highlighting of their homestead. What happened on a state level was ridiculous. But if you think about it in a narrower sense and in a specific situation, people were still cheering for their own people" (Krell 2024). Thus, although the rhetoric of socialist competition used in the "song fight" was a political cliché, it was still linked to the excitement of competition and to people's quality of life, and people could thus identify with it, at least to a certain extent.

Some of the issues that represented Soviet ideology in the wedding performance can be traced back to the earlier pre-Soviet discourse of modernity. One episode of the wedding scene was the debate about the customs of collecting money. The best man starts to collect money ("the patching of the apron") and according to the preliminary handwritten wedding script the representative of the bride's family calls it old-fashioned: "Look at the fool! [You] started to practise a bad custom, the custom of ancient, poor people ... We don't need a poor people's custom, our kolkhoz is big and rich" (ETMM T503:1/25:66; Rahvakunstiõhtu 1960, 02). Such a statement fits in with Soviet ideology – there is no need to collect money for "rich" young kolkhoz workers. In fact, the argument that the ritual collecting of money has to be avoided as a shameful form of begging had already been used before the Soviet era, in the period of the modernisation of society during the second half of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century.

Another topic that can be traced back to pre-Soviet Estonia was the secularisation of society connected with the development of non-clerical customs. The policy of the Soviet regime was in principle anti-religious, although there were periods of leniency. Nikita Khrushchev's policy, especially since the consolidation of his power in 1957, was strongly anti-religious (Remmel 2011). Among other anti-clerical measures, the replacement of church rituals associated with major events in human life with secular ones became important. One reason for this was the increasing popularity of religious rituals in the 1950s due not only to the increased prestige of the church as a result of Stalin's wartime policies and the decreasing fear of repression, but also to the solemnity of the existing Soviet family ceremonies with their lack of emotion, avoidance of symbols (e.g., veil, ring), and the drab, non-festive offices used for the ceremonies (Kalits 1988: 52–53).

In order to diminish the role of the church, something akin to church rituals had to be proposed. As early as June 1957, the first "secular confirmation school" – a camp for young adults – was organised in Estonia. It became a tradition of "summer days for young people", which lasted throughout the Soviet era (Värv & Järs & Anepaio 2008).[15] In 1958, committees for the establishment of secular ceremonies, including a wedding committee, were formed in the government of Tartu (by the Executive Committee of the Tartu Soviet). In addition to politicians, the committee included representatives of several cultural institutions. Ethnologist Vilve Kalits and folklorists Selma Lätt and Herbert Tampere contributed significantly to the creation of the new rituals (Kalits 1988). In 1959 the first book with recommendations for secular ceremonies was published (Tähistagem 1959; Kalits 1960).

In Estonia there was a rather fertile ground for the adoption of secular ceremonies based on historical traditions as an alternative to church rituals. Firstly, society had gradually secularised during modernisation, especially in the decades before the Soviet occupation. For example, while in 1922 only a little over 6% of all marriages were registered in secular form, by 1938 this percentage had risen to 40% (Kalits 1988: 11). Also, the old wedding rituals can be characterised as non-clerical until the end of the nineteenth century: the church ceremony played a marginal role in long weddings lasting several days; the actual marriage took place in the family, with rituals characterised by elements of magical thinking and the preservation of many pre-Christian religious elements (Rüütel 2011 [1995]).

Secondly, the local historical wedding ritual had already acquired a national value in the stage representations of the independence period. Considering the national meaning of tradition, the creation of Soviet wedding customs was an ideologically ambiguous process. Since the need for ritualism in weddings is natural and the use of tradition had modern national connotations, the traditional ritual, with some elements practised until modern times, had potential beyond the Soviet political order – as, for example, in the case of the wedding of Laine Mesikäpp's niece, mentioned above. Soviet national policy required the use of the "national form", but at the same time, some commission members may have interpreted the offer of an alternative to Christian ritual not (only) as a Soviet innovation, but also in a politically nationalist way.[16] If one of Laine Mesikäpp's ideas with the 1960 wedding performance was to popularise the recommendations of ethnologists and folklorists for the use of old customs, she may not have seen it in terms of the implementation of Soviet religious policy.

It should be noted that, as time went on, it became clear that in fact most of the old customs proposed for revival were not being used. The original ritual meaning of the customs and the beliefs behind them were not in line with modern thinking. Of the customs proposed, people continued to actively use mainly those that had anyway survived in the continuous tradition, adapting over time to the changing world (Kalits 1968, 1988).

COMPROMISES, SELF-CENSORSHIP, AND THE POSITION OF THE CREATOR

Despite adapting to the colonial system, anti-colonial ideas still persisted in society throughout the Soviet period. This was strongly supported by the song festivals, despite the strict direction and control of these events by the authorities (Annus 2018: 150–158, 2019c; Brüggemann & Kasekamp 2014; Kuutma 1996).

One striking example of the mindset of the participants of the 1960 Song Festival is the story of the symbolic song "My Fatherland is My Love" (Rahi-Tamm 2022; Labi 2011). The lyrics of the song come from Lydia Koidula, one of the most famous poets of the national awakening of the nineteenth century, and it was sung at one of the central events of the beginning of the awakening, the First All-Estonian Song Festival in 1869. Composer Gustav Ernesaks created a new melody for the lyrics during World War II and it was performed at the first Soviet-era song festival in 1947, which was less restricted than the festivals that followed (Lippus 2006). During the repressions, on the eve of the All-Estonian Song Festival in 1950, this song was banned. In 1960, the song was initially included in the repertoire but was removed before the festival. The choirs started singing it on stage outside the official programme on their own initiative, without a conductor. The whole festival was characterised by an atmosphere of resistance and has been called "a small singing revolution" (Rahi-Tamm 2022).

Several elements of the wedding performance were also interpreted in an anti-colonial perspective. Linda Olmaru, who played the role of the bride in the performance, remembered that after the last performance of the Folk Art Evening, the excited audience spontaneously took the "newlyweds" on their shoulders and carried them for more than a kilometre to the Estonia Theatre, which is a nationally symbolic object (Olmaru 2021).[17] She explained this as an opportunity to show the "Estonian mentality", the anti-Soviet political mentality, characteristic of the entire 1960 festival. Linda Olmaru repeatedly stressed that although the wedding performance was a kolkhoz wedding in name, it was in fact about "ancient Estonian wedding customs" and it is reasonable to assume that quite a large part of the audience interpreted the event in the same way. The spontaneous procession was certainly an expression not only of the general heightened festival mood that had accumulated by the time of the closing ceremony, but also of the anti-colonial sentiments of the participants.

As the memoirs of contemporaries working in the field of tradition attest, the inevitable compromises with the authorities did not prevent heritage performances from being interpreted as expressions of political nationalism, although most of the formal national elements also fitted in with the discourse of Soviet nationalism and the concept of "nationalist in form" of socialist realism. Wearing Estonian folk costumes at social gatherings and events, as well as performing the "wedding customs of the ancestors", was interpreted in this way, as were the self-created new customs based on traditional elements, as long as these contained no elements of Soviet ideology (ERA, EV 510; Olmaru 2021; Krell 2024; Herzog 2010; Kapper 2018). Even the props for the wedding performance, including the large beer tankard, could be described as something national and

opposed to the Soviet. A parallel can be drawn with the Estonian-language press, where journalists tried to offer an alternative to listing all the Soviet political elements of the wedding performance by stressing that it was the old Estonian tradition, "the wedding customs of the foremothers" (Säde 1960; see also Kreegipuu 2009).

In all her post-Soviet interviews, Laine Mesikäpp emphasised the politically nationalist aims of her activities (Oras 2023). In view of the political motifs of her Soviet-era lyrics, one may wonder whether her later statements were influenced by the changed political situation or whether she was expressing her internal motives, which previously had to be concealed. According to the memories of people close to her, Laine Mesikäpp's political views were clearly anti-Soviet. Her interviews show that she tried to avoid political issues in her performances, but she had to submit to constant pressure from the authorities (Haan 2007; Roomets 2012; Vainu 1997). This was probably aided by self-censorship, underpinned by a persistent sense of fear – Stalin-era repressions in Estonia that also affected her family were traumatising for her.

The delicate balancing act on the borders between the use and avoidance of Soviet elements in her performances is illustrated by the story about the "forgotten" political message in one of her songs. The authorities kept demanding that she include data on agricultural production in the opening song of the festival. She had to explain repeatedly that it was not possible to include the names of the best milkers, the figures for the grain harvest and the amount of milk milked in the opening song because it did not fit in with the traditional style of singing (Klaats 1997). At the Jubilee Song Festival in 1969, she had agreed to the request to sing about the "promises to the Party", i.e., the planned milk and meat production figures, but, while singing at the festival, she "forgot" to sing these verses and later apologised for her poor memory (Sikk 2008). She told a friend how worried she was about the consequences of breaking her promise: "For several weeks afterwards I thought they [the captors] might have come for me when someone knocked at the door" (Oja 2020).

Another example is Laine Mesikäpp's notebook which contains the main points of her memoirs, apparently for media interviews. She wrote about the song festival in 1955 or 1960: "I was invited to the Central Committee [of the Communist Party]. Percentage of meat and milk". This note has been crossed out and an earlier note in the same manuscript about the Stalinist repression of her theatre colleagues begins with the question "Should I talk about deportation?" (ETMM T503:1/2:17, 20). It seems that Laine Mesikäpp chose not to mention politically sensitive issues in interviews. It is possible that such self-censorship continued even after the end of the Soviet regime.

Laine Mesikäpp's recollection of the choice of title for the 1960 wedding performance suggests that the contradiction between the desired and the imposed consciously or unconsciously "cancelled out" reality in her memory. The authorities wanted the event to be presented as a collective farm wedding, and the official title of the performance was "Wedding in the Kolkhoz". In a newspaper interview from the post-Soviet time Laine Mesikäpp recalled: "Again I was asked from above to call the whole story 'Wedding in the Kolkhoz'. Then I got angry and told them that in that case I would do nothing. Of course there can be weddings in a kolkhoz, but at the song festival I only do folk things" (Klaats 1997; see also ETMM T503:1/2:9; Haan 1987, 2007). Here "folk" as an indicator of the (politically) national is contrasted with "kolkhoz", representing the Soviet system.

The political compromises for the sake of being allowed to perform the tradition, or to hold the festivals at all, were inevitable, and the need to make compromises shaped distinctive coping strategies (Aarelaid 1998, 2003, 2006; Annus 2018). The attitude towards compromises is illustrated by the comparison drawn by Lille Arraste, the folk-dance leader of the time, with the purchase of books in Soviet times: in order to buy the book you wanted, you also had to buy a volume of Lenin's works or a book of materials of the Communist Party Congress (ERA, EV 510). Most people never bought this "red literature": the bookshelf that held it, prominently placed in the bookshop, was largely ignored by customers. But since the sale of such literature had to be reported to the authorities, bookshops used the technique of adding a compulsory "red book" to books that were in short supply. Comparing the perhaps emotionally complicated situation of making political compromises with the buying of unusable and unwanted books in a sense makes the former a pragmatic trade.

Another side of this pragmatism was the strategy of "not seeing", which, based on an anti-colonial perspective, was designed to ignore everything Soviet and focus on the national side of the festivals. This "not seeing" was facilitated by the Soviet "highly normalized, fixed, and citational" authoritative discourse, which became steadily normalised under the Khrushchev regime – as a result the Soviet formulas lost meaning for people (Yurchak 2005: 37). All my interviewees remembered the wedding scene as a display of old national customs, without any recollection of Soviet elements, at least initially. I even felt a little embarrassed to recall and ask about them – people took it for granted that, as someone who grew up in the Soviet era, I understand how insignificant and inevitable the compulsory Soviet elements were:

> *"Young people today think and beat around the bush ... that this way and that way and: 'Think what was done then!' ... For us, it was important that it [national tradition] was actually preserved. What the text was there in*

> *the meanwhile, nobody remembers. And those slogans ... What you had to say, you said, and that was it. What was ordered had to be done to get our own thing done"* (Arraste 2024).

Laine Mesikäpp's vocation was to perform on stage as a singer of traditional songs and as an actor. She was motivated not only by abstract nationalism, but perhaps above all by her personal experiences and the values she got from her childhood home and from older performers of traditional music (Oras 2023). Laine Mesikäpp's childhood memories reveal her great passion for creative self-expression and performing on stage. The importance of past traditions and their preservation as a national endeavour bonded Laine Mesikäpp to her father, Hans Mesikäpp, who had volunteered as a contributor to the folklore archives during her childhood, as well as to her grandmother, who had been a traditional wedding singer. As a child, she had experienced the sense of togetherness and mutual support provided by extended family members and the whole village community.[18] A particular value was the ability to party in a traditional way, to create a heightened party mood, which Laine Mesikäpp learned both at home and later from older traditional musicians. In this way, her personal emotional experiences resonate with the general nostalgic gaze of Estonians towards the time of independence born of the sense of social and cultural rupture during Soviet time (Annus 2018: 125–126). All in all, being a performer of traditional songs gave Laine Mesikäpp the opportunity to combine her personal emotional values and the ideological values with her need to perform.

IN CONCLUSION

This study focused on the staging of traditional wedding customs and songs at the Folk Art Evening of the 1960 All-Estonian General Song Festival as an example of the political use of heritage under the Soviet regime. What makes the heritage performances intriguing is the way in which pre-Soviet national discourses and Soviet colonial discourses meet and merge within them, resulting in a remarkable multiplicity of possible interpretations. Due to the national meaning acquired during the period of independence, the elements that fitted in with the ideology of Soviet nationalism could at the same time be seen unambiguously as symbols of political nationalism – the wearing of folk costumes, the performance of folk songs and dances adapted to modern stage aesthetics, and the staging of the "traditions of the foremothers". As Epp Annus (2018) has pointed out, such paradoxes were typical in the implementation of Soviet colonial policy in those Soviet republics which had previously been modern nation-states.

The 1960 Song Festival with its Folk Art Evening, held during the Khrushchev meltdown, was in many ways distinctive of the history of Soviet-era song festivals (Rahi-Tamm 2022). The participants quite explicitly opposed the colonial regime, singing spontaneously on stage the nationally symbolic song "My Fatherland is My Love" which had been removed from the programme before the festival. One episode in the Folk Art Evening of the same festival was the staging of a traditional wedding. After the last Folk Art Evening performance, the bride and groom of the wedding scene were carried on the shoulders of the participants in a spontaneous final procession as far as the Estonia Theatre, one of the symbols of national culture, which can also be interpreted as an expression of the mentality of this festival.

The various possibilities for interpreting the official programme reflect the hybridity and ambiguity typical of colonial discourse. Several Soviet elements, such as the optimistic kolkhoz names or the arrival of the "dear Russian guests", could be interpreted ironically. However, in addition to the critical view, the participants could also become involved, for example, in the "song fight", which led to the counting of agricultural achievements typical of the discourse of socialist competition in the Soviet economy. Hybrid meanings could be given, for example, to the development of a Soviet secular wedding ritual based on the traditional Estonian wedding ritual which, on the one hand, was commissioned by Khrushchev's anti-religious campaign, but on the other hand was in line with the political nationalism and the secularisation of society that had already occurred in the pre-Soviet period.

At a stylistic level it is difficult to draw a line between the pre-Soviet and Soviet performance style of traditional songs and customs, especially as there is no direct material for comparison. The performance style of Laine Mesikäpp, the creator and lead singer of the wedding performance and singer at all the other Soviet-era song festivals, started to develop at the end of the 1930s. While it is possible that the Soviet model of stage performance of folklore underpinned the theatricality and professionalism of Laine Mesikäpp's performance style, it is clear that most of the modern elements in her 1960 Folk Art Evening performance had their origins in the pre-Soviet period.

One question in this study was how wedding performances and performances of tradition in general could be interpreted from the position of the colonial subject, and further, how the positions of active creator and colonial subject could be reconciled if the values of the creator did not coincide with the established norms of colonial discourse. It seems that Laine Mesikäpp's need to perform traditional songs, and to make compromises in order to do so, was not only based on political motives, but also on the values and emotional experiences

that she brought with her from her rural home and from her encounters with living singing traditions. Balancing on the borders of the possible and always with the fear that the next performance, work or festival "may not go through" – not to mention fears connected with the repressions experienced only about 10 years before – guided the choices of Laine Mesikäpp and the other creatives who made compromises with the authorities and who were willing to censor themselves. One of the main mitigating strategies used for everyday life was an extreme pragmatism involving the "not seeing" of the Soviet elements and, as if turning these into a barter commodity issued in exchange for their being allowed to create and perform and uphold their anti-colonial national values.

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NOTES

[1] For the history of Estonia, one of the Baltic states occupied by the Soviet Union in 1940, and for information on the all-Estonian song festivals see, for example, Kasekamp 2010; Annus 2018.

[2] Laine Mesikäpp, born in the northern Estonian parish of Hageri in 1915, was the ninth child of a peasant family. She trained as a saleswoman and worked in retail until 1942. After moving to Tallinn in 1939, Laine Mesikäpp joined an amateur drama group and a folk dance group, where she also began to perform older traditional songs. Her song performances received positive reviews during World War II and continued after the war. She became famous after performing at the General Song Festival in 1947, influencing many traditional song enthusiasts. Under Stalinism, she was also presented as the creator of "Soviet folklore" (Miller 1990; Ziolkowski 2013; Ķencis 2017; Kalkun & Oras 2018; Oras & Kalkun & Saarlo forthcoming). In 1942 Laine Mesikäpp was invited to work at the professional theatre in Pärnu, and from 1944

until 1992 she worked as an actress in Tallinn. She joined the Communist Party in 1964 in order to keep her job and served in various public positions. At the age of 80 she joined the folklore ensemble Leigarid, which was founded during the folklore revival. She died in 2012 (see Oras 2023).

[3] On the complexity of possible subject positions, especially in the context of Soviet colonial discourse in the Baltic countries, see Annus 2019a.

[4] The University of Tartu Folk Dance Ensemble and its director from 1953 Helju Mikkel became one of the important initiators in staging traditional wedding rituals at folk dance festivals. Her ensemble also created a modern marriage ritual for the members of their group, using elements of the traditional wedding ritual in the secular marriage ceremony at the State Registry Office (Mikkel 1961: 29; Kalits 1988: 88). Following the example of the Tartu ensemble, the Karksi-Nuia folk dance group directed by Lille-Astra Arraste also used similar rituals for the marriage registrations of its members at the local Viljandi Registry Office (ERA, EV 510).

[5] For example, Laine Mesikäpp visited the Folklore Archives (at that time the Folklore Department of the Estonian State Literary Museum) on 25 July 1959, and the subject of the consultation is mentioned as wedding customs (folklore department visitors' guest book 2.03.1959–2.07.1962, entry no. 657). Of the folklorists, Laine is said to have had the most contact with Selma Lätt, who was an expert on traditional customs and who also participated in the development of modern secular rituals.

[6] *Pulmarong* is a ritual dance at Mustjala weddings in which all the wedding guests participate, holding each other in a line (Rüütel 2018: Films IV, 02:35).

[7] The wedding customs of Mustjala had already been staged locally in 1940, and Laine may even have witnessed this or some of the local weddings (Teataja 1940a, 1940b; RKM II 75, 486). One of the scripts (the first script?) of the wedding performance found among Laine Mesikäpp's manuscripts has the title "Wedding in Mustjala Kolkhoz" written on it (the title has been crossed out and "Hõissa, pulmad! ('Hurray, wedding!' has been written next to it – ETMM T503:1/25:14). The minutes of the committee meeting of the 1960 Folk Arts Evening in March 1959 mention a *Pulmarong* from Mustjala (ETMM MO268:1/10:19), and at the July meeting the *Pulmarong* dance was removed from the repertoire (TLA.R-1.15.233: 111) – perhaps the original plan was to perform (an episode of) a wedding from Mustjala.

[8] Currently Kalev Central Stadium in Tallinn.

[9] The Folk Art Evening was due to take place on the evenings of 19 and 20 July and the morning of 21 July. Due to rain the performance on 20 July was curtailed and was held in the evening of 21 July (Sirp 1960; Noorte Hääl 1960b). The participants have mentioned four performances, and this is referred to in the title of the newspaper article "The Fifth Wedding", which describes the official, legal registration of the real marriage of the bride and groom of the folk art evening performances, which took place shortly after the song festival (Valdma 1960; EFA.203.f.1264).

[10] Runosong (in Estonian *regilaul*) originated from nearly 2,000 years ago as a common singing style of most Finnic peoples, and was turned into a symbol of Estonian culture by the national movement in the nineteenth century (Saarlo 2017b). It is characterised by the simultaneous use of ancient linguistic forms that are no longer used in modern language, alliteration and parallelism, the absence of stanzas and rhyme, and a peculiar poetic metre. In the second half of the nineteenth century it was gradually replaced in oral tradition by a more modern or newer folk song style characterized by

end rhyme, stanzaic structure, and syllabic-accentual metre (Rüütel 1998; Sarv 2009; Oras 2017).

[11] Of the young couple, Linda Olmaru (Kuusma) was born in 1940, Rein Olmaru in 1939. Estonia was occupied by the Soviet Union in 1940.

[12] In accordance with the economic plan, the Estonian SSR undertook to "give" (produce and market in the Soviet Union, largely outside Estonia) a certain amount of meat and milk.

[13] In southern Estonia, visiting the pastures was traditionally associated with a fertility ritual and joke, a symbolic peeing, during which the wedding guests imitated peeing and put money into a bucket brought by the women carrying out the ritual (cf. Tedre 1974: 318).

[14] Samples of runosong recordings can be heard in Tampere & Tampere & Kõiva 2016 [2003].

[15] Young people aged 18 spent a few days in a camp in the summer, where they worked in the fields and attended political and other lectures. For the young people, it was important to have the opportunity to party together and summer days were popular among them.

[16] For example, commission member Herbert Tampere is known to have had a nationalist mentality (see, e.g., Hiiemäe 2009a, 2009b).

[17] The Estonia Theatre originated from a society of the same name which was active during the nationalist movement of the nineteenth century. Built at the beginning of the twentieth century, the theatre building was the main cultural centre during the independence period.

[18] The peasant model of life and the special relationship with the land were very important in the Estonian cultural imagination, especially in the first half of the twentieth century (Annus 2018: 208; 2019b: 429–430). Rooted in Estonian history, however, such an attitude may have been influenced to some extent by the romanticising, anti-urbanist view of pre-modernity that was characteristic of the era.

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