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Redakcijos adresas:  
Lietuvos istorijos institutas  
Kražių g. 5  
LT-01108 Vilnius

Tel.: + 370 5 262 9410  
Faks: + 370 5 261 1433  
El. paštas: etnolog@istorija.lt  
v.ciubrinskas@smf.vdu.lt

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# Outsourcing Culture: Establishing Heritage Hegemony by Funding Cultural Life in South Eastern Estonia<sup>1</sup>

*Aet Annist*

The following article compares the Soviet and post-Soviet processes of hegemony creation. Based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork, I describe how in Estonia, where highly formalised cultural sphere was a norm already in the 19th century, Soviet cultural hegemony was never properly established. The Soviet system of blanket-funding unintentionally enabled the perseverance of nationalist cultural counter-hegemony. In contrast, the current system of project based funding is more effective in creating cultural hegemony. I provide ethnographic examples of how such new practices of governmentality are outsourcing the establishment of emblematic hegemony of a small cultural group, Setos.

*Dr. Aet Annist, Chair of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Estonian Institute of Humanities, Tallinn University, Uus-Sadama 5, Tallinn 10120, Estonia, e-mail: aet.annist@ehi.ee*

The following article compares the Soviet and post-Soviet processes of institutionalisation of the cultural sphere, in the sense of committing to a formalised organisation of activities, and its effects on cultural hegemony. My article is based on field notes, interviews and life histories gathered during ethnographic fieldwork over the last 6 years. The main period of fieldwork took place in 2002–2004 in two villages of South Eastern Estonia; since 2004, I have returned to the village that is located in the Seto region, with the aim of studying the funding of Seto culture in particular.

First, I describe the historic background of institutionalisation in Estonia, demonstrating that the formal organisation of the cultural sphere was very high

<sup>1</sup> This research was supported by the European Union through the European Regional Development Fund (Center of Excellence CECT) and target financed project “Landscape heritage and practice”, No. SF0130033s07. I am very grateful to Triinu Mets for her comments and suggestions on the draft of this article.

already in the 19th century, and active and widespread participation lasted until the end of the Soviet period. Next, I show how within this formality, the Soviet cultural hegemony was never properly established; there was considerable room for informal and dissident maneuvering. This room was created by a system of blanket-funding, enabling daily corporeal practices of counter-hegemony. Further, I suggest that the new system of project-based funding requires the organisation, practical structuring and discursive establishment of voluntary associations that is more effective in creating cultural hegemony than was the case with the Soviet formal cultural groupings. I provide ethnographic examples of how this has facilitated the creation of emblematic hegemony of a small cultural group, Setos, in South Eastern Estonia.

### **Brief History of Institutional Cultural Life<sup>2</sup>**

Rural Estonians were remarkably highly institutionalised already at the end of the 19th century. Organising into scientific, agricultural, literary, and, music and singing societies in particular was commonplace, as well as officially constituted, and characterised this particular corner of Czarist Russia so much more than the rest of the empire that the Czarist officials report: “This feature of the peoples of the Baltic territory – to join for one reason or another into societies – becomes conspicuous because of the total absence of such a trait amongst the Russian nation” (Prozorov 1894, cited in Karu 1993: 154). Organising into formally registered cooperatives and associations was part of the national awakening since the 1860s and shaped the national self-perception of Estonians as modern, highly developed Europeans. As such, it contributed to the establishment of the period of independence<sup>3</sup> in the early 20th century and to the shaping of a particular type of Estonianness that was to acquire a hegemonic status.

The Soviet occupation destroyed many associations that had characterised the rural life of independent Estonia. These were replaced with new institutions: state and collective farms, work-centred but ideologically laden phenomena around which whole lives of people, including their cultural and associative activities,

<sup>2</sup>I am using the term “culture” (kultuur) and “cultural” (as in cultural sphere – kultuurisfäär – and cultural life – kultuurielu) as it is used locally. Emically, there are two main usages of the term: first, to refer to activities outside the economic, political and everyday chores, for instance singing and dancing (in organised, society based form, and the rehearsals and performances of such groups) and institutionally organised parties; secondly, the term is used in a slightly more “anthropological” sense, referring to the customs and practices of an ethnic group. In this sense, the term is in use particularly when talking about minority groups seen to derive from unique cultural heritage – as in omakultuur – “own culture”, which comprises of heritage-based local cultural activities.

<sup>3</sup>Between 1918 and 1940, today also known as the First Estonian Republic time.

started to revolve. Associating had to take place within the new institutional frames, as well as within the ideological frames of the Communist Party. However, the formal system created and sustained structures that could take on informal functions against the system's intentions and will. Aarelaid (Aarelaid 1996) offers examples of organisations that had become locally more important than the Soviet system would have liked and often acquired a "dissident" function beneath their apparently official, top-down outlook. Especially in the later years of the Soviet rule, there were hobby-groups that appeared apolitical but would spread nationalist mentality; environmental movement and amateur genealogy study groups; various voluntary drama, singing, dance, poetry, and film clubs etc., which tended to be of "limited loyalty" to the Soviet system.

One of the clearest examples of unintended effects of potentially disloyal free time activities that existed throughout the occupation were various cultural groups of rural Soviet Estonia: choirs, drama clubs, folk-dancing-and-music groups etc., in practice, descendants of societies of the First Estonian Republic. Organised officially for providing the necessary performances for official parties, cultural activities at the *sovhoosid* (state farms) and *kolhoosid* (collective farms) were financed via Cultural Departments of Executive Committees of the Rayons (districts), providing a sort of "blanket-funding" that financed the activities of the so-called culture houses (*kultuurimajad*) of the *sovhoosid* and *kolhoosid* and the various societies registered within these institutions. In addition, funding was acquired by the more enterprising heads of the the *kultuurimajad* by pestering the *sovhoos* directors or *kolhoos* chairmen:

We [the *kultuurimaja*] were serving the workers at the *sovhoos*, isn't it, so I marched into the office of the director and told him that I won't leave until he has given [us] money, I just followed him [everywhere]. Finally he gave [us money] (Female, 55, former head of the culture house).

As this woman noted, the director gave no conditions for what could be done with the money put at the disposal of the *kultuurimaja*. This characteristic is particularly important: the groups did not need to prove in advance their potential achievements in the socialist front. Control was rather executed in the case of outright deviation recognised by someone close to the ideological rule in spirit and/or in position. The system of reporting on disloyalty to the regime as well as mutual distrust appears to have been a lot less notable than, for instance, in East Germany. According to some of my informants, visitors from other Soviet republics had often noted that

the atmosphere was freer in Estonia; our visitors from Moscow and elsewhere in Russia were surprised to find that people did not shackle their tongue as much as elsewhere (Female, 73, former head inspector for export documents).

Another informant rejected the fear discourse by noting:

We always knew who the snitchers (*nuhid*) – the KGB informers – were. Some had been made snitchers and the day after they had signed papers they came to their work collective saying – I am now an agent, please be aware and be careful *when I am around* (emphasis by the interviewee) (Female, 70, former worker at research institute).

Although the opportunities to practice anything directly opposing or undermining the totalitarian regime were slim, in such conditions, suspicion and fear did not dominate every aspect of people's public self-expression and the specific activities and daily practices of cultural groups were neither fully controlled nor even controllable. Thus, even though the choir or music group performances, theatre productions, etc., were often geared to reproducing and representing the official ideology, people could come together for drama clubs, folk dancing clubs and choirs partly out of the sheer joy of practising their skills and enjoyment of each others company, and were able to ignore the Soviet aspects of the resulting performance.

The singing or music groups practised at the *kolhoos* or *sovhoos* grounds and, occasionally, ventured to events outside their own village, municipality or district. This added an additional layer to the cultural life of that era. Cultural life, especially its least controllable musical forms created a bridge to the days of the National Awakening in the 1860s by celebrating the Singing and Dancing Festivals that had become the symbols of Estonianness and the quest for self-determination. Choirs and dance groups often worked very hard to attend these nation-wide events that occurred every five years. These groups provided the necessary framework for Estonian cultural nationalism by connecting the cultural groups all over the country, allowing them to work for the same goal and sustaining its vital historic nationalist meaning for the Estonians. Even if it was not officially recognised, the tradition of dancing and singing groups remained connected to the memories of the First Estonian Republic.

The state could not fully contain the elements of disloyalty and alternative hegemony in these institutions, although it was, occasionally, defiantly obvious. Many singing festivals, most famously the 100th anniversary singing festival in 1969, concluded with the choirs, regularly comprising of roughly 25 000 singers, and the public, singing nationalist songs. The unofficial Estonian anthem of those years, "Mu isamaa on minu arm" (My fatherland is my love), was presented to the standing public, spontaneously, at the end of almost all the singing festivals, while the party officials present were clearly uncomfortable in their inability to react to such performance of nationalist pride.

To some degree, the permissiveness towards the folk cultural groupings<sup>4</sup> was a trade-off: the Soviet officials could demonstrate their benevolence towards local interests and cultural variety and in turn, gained entertainment for the masses which kept them out of outright rebellion. In the end, even participating at such activities of limited loyalty could be seen to direct people towards a certain new collective identity and accepting the Soviet rule. Alexei Yurchak (Yurchak 2006: 203) has argued that the Soviet system allowed the Western influences to become a constitutive part of the late Soviet culture. "The symbols of the Imaginary West did not necessarily represent the "real" West and its "bourgeois" values; rather, they introduced into Soviet reality a new imaginary dimension that was neither "Western" nor "Soviet"" (Yurchak 2006: 203). Such aspects allowed this paradoxical system to function for as long as it did, and also contributed to its fast collapse. In line with this, we can consider the "past", as another country, to have been similarly allowed to be part of Soviet society, reinterpreted in the Soviet Estonian context, and put into use in the various situations of and for different groups in the Soviet everyday. As a result, Estonian cultural activities with their reconstructions of the era of lost independence were working towards creating Soviet hegemony in cultural as well as in political and economic life, and at the same time harboured also the nationalist sentiments. We must understand the practice of blanket-funding in this context, with its apparent ignorance of the elements of nationalism in such activities.

In sum, despite its regulative and financing role, the formal structure was only partly successful in establishing a Soviet hegemony in the Baltic states. The informal structures parasitised on the system, taking on various unintended functions, keeping alive the nationalist counter-hegemony of independence. In practice, cultural groups were offered blanket-funding by the Soviet structures, enabling the organisation, supervision, and participation in the greater scheme of cultural activities. The result of such organisation was surprising: rather than providing the grounds for the ruling power to promote their ideology through the financed cultural activities, the real workings of such activities created a substantial mass of active people and the space for venting their discontentment outside the private realm, but not publicly, and for sustaining the idealised memories of the pre-occupation times.

<sup>4</sup>This differed from the actions directed at cultural intelligentsia, which was often handled roughly and forced to follow strict state-approved codes of expression (see, for instance, Olesk 2003; Kreegipuu 2005).

## Re-establishing Civil Society?

The vitality and strength of the informal sphere surfaced during the upsurge of resistance in the 1990s and has divided some commentators of those years. Although the term “civil society” was applied to the Soviet dissent already in 1979, as Gawin (Gawin 2003: 32) points out, the possibility of a “true” civil society in the “gaps” of the formally controlled structures of an oppressive state” (Pachenkov 2005) has been dismissed by many politicians and a fair number of social scientists (e.g., Gellner 1996; Hall 1995). Janine Wedel (Wedel 1994: 323) notes that

Under communism, the nations of Eastern Europe never had a “civil society”. A “civil society” exists when individuals and groups are free to form organizations that function independently of the state and that can mediate between citizens and the state. Because the lack of civil society was part of the very essence of the all-pervasive communist state, creating such a society and supporting organizations independent of the state – or NGOs – have been seen as the connective tissue of democratic political culture.

Such considerations were behind the Western approach to the states emerging from the Soviet era; at the same time they demonstrate how profound a challenge to the Western model of civil society the late Soviet rule provided.

Although different from the Western ideal in its position vis-a-vis the state, the previous section demonstrated that civil activity – oppositional and collaborative – had existed within cultural organisations during the Soviet time. Throughout the Soviet rule, civil activity existed, of course, in different degrees at different moments. According to Starr (Starr 1988), there were 30.000 *neformally* or informal grass roots voluntary associations in the Soviet Union already in the 1970s. By “the early 1980s the initiative for ideas had shifted from state to society in a process of *de facto* democratization” (Starr 1988). These associations allowed a considerable proportion of the population to participate also in a dissenting “civil society” that became the basis for the revolution of the 1990s. The existence of such institutions had a considerable role to play in bringing about or enabling the Soviet collapse. A type of public spirit (Volkov 2003: 66) or public conscience – the essence of civil society – with its hidden expressions and strength in creating certain unity, created a successful counter-hegemony that activated in the late 1980s.

The state is always present in the civil society, to some degree, in every society, if in no other form than by regulating the groups according to their legality. Civil society is thus a matter of degree rather than a dichotomous all-or-none phenomenon. The Singing Revolution of the late 1980s and early 1990s did not materialise from nothing. It greatly benefited from the survival of the nationalist ideology within the formal Soviet institutions hiding the informal

ideology within it. Even more, the Singing Revolution benefited from the preserved habit and skill to participate in the communal institutionalised life, the Soviet-funded daily (or, rather, weekly, as most rehearsals and gatherings would take place roughly once a week) embodiment of civil activities.

Literature teems with examples of everyday routine, repetitive procedures and corporeal practices that link us as the subjects of hegemonic rule to the state (e.g., Scott 1985; Connerton 1989; Stoller 1995; Linke 1999), but counter-hegemony becomes a reality in a very similar manner. Being active, involved and engaged with the country as a whole through the system of local groups, mid-level events, such as periodical cultural gatherings, and nation-wide events – most prominently the Singing Festival every four years – where the masses singing the same songs or dancing the same dances were brought together, built a strong civil society within the Soviet hegemony, a society which had a widespread coverage and a strong core<sup>5</sup>. Financing the cultural activities in the Soviet *sovhoosid* and *kolhoosid* inadvertently became one of the important sources of this capacity.

### The New Institutional Setting

During the Soviet time the local cultural activities led their separate, informal and partly disloyal lives, at the same time reproducing the Soviet order and undermining it – typical to the Soviet socialism full of paradoxes (Yurchak 2006). In post-socialism, the space for such activities changed dramatically.

On the one hand, the variety of activities and their links to other spheres of life increased. With the coming of the Western version of civil society, the voluntary associations were to be freed from any state control, in order to start representing and facilitating the bottom-up, grass-roots democratic processes. On the other hand, as Sampson (Sampson 2003) suggests, what the West was exporting to Eastern Europe under the name of democracy was forms of activity typical to “project society”, highly dependent on funding and funders’ interests. He also suggests that “[d]emocracy’ was understood quantitatively. Few NGOs meant less democracy, more NGOs meant more democracy” (Sampson 1996: 128). Estonia turned out to be a willing participant in establishing this kind of civil society, and has done well in comparison with the rest of the post-socialist countries, ranking the highest in USAID NGO Sustainability Index (USAID 2007), demonstrating the strength and viability of the NGO

<sup>5</sup> Putnam (Putnam 2000) has pointed out that it is precisely such civic involvement of the grass roots that builds up organisations on the local, regional and national level that has been disappearing in the United States since around 1960s, undermining the social capital of this society.

sector. Yet, Howard (Howard 2002) demonstrates that overall, organisational membership in Estonia in the late 1990s was low in comparison to many other post-socialist societies.

The new situation had meant that the funding of cultural activities in the countryside stopped in a rather abrupt manner. The structures that had provided finances and facilities for the cultural groups in the countryside, mostly *kolhoosid* and *sovhoosid*, disappeared, as did the cultural departments of executive committees of the rayons, by nature ideological institutions. Funding in the rural areas was taken over by the local municipalities and the new state which was highly neoliberal in its approach to the state involvement in any realms of life. The minimal budgets of the municipalities left them to provide at best the space – rooms and keys – for the societies to reorganise themselves; the culture houses were closed down. Instead of building onto the Soviet or pre-Soviet versions of civil activity, activism rapidly disintegrated over the 1990s.

Only in the late 1990s, attempts were made to restart funding such activities, primarily by hiring organising or coordinating staff, and in some cases founding new cultural societies. Funding cultural activities was extremely scanty:

We were railed from the top and bottom; and there was never any money. You have to constantly beg for it and neither those in the bottom nor those at the top never understood why we could not do this or that – but there was no money anymore, culture and education were the last to be given anything because they did not bring money back... (Female, 55, former head of the culture house).

By the early 21st century, the staff involved with “cultural life” in rural municipalities was primarily acquiring funding by “writing projects” to various sources for which they often acquired special training during various training days. Applying for funding has become an enormously important factor in the life of cultural groups. It has become a central activity that regularly diverts the activists from their particular interests and everyday practices to the application procedures.

My fieldwork in South Eastern Estonian villages revealed, among the active villagers, the commonness of the experience of almost physical torment of writing and presenting projects. The routine, somatic practices of today include, at least for some of the most active, being seated at the table to apply for funding, to produce carefully worded explanations of the goals of their organisations, to link these with the manifest aims of the funding bodies, to agonise over the pending decisions or failed applications and to painstakingly report on the way the funds were spent. The other members of the NGOs they were applying funding for expected them to perform well in project applications. The period of applications diverted attention from paid work, resulted in a certain united

misery of the writers and bitterness towards those not taking such tasks, and triggered vows to never undertake this painful labour again.

As funding is primarily sourced from philanthropists, the state, local governments or businesses, those applying for funds have to adjust their aims to the different funders promoting specific kinds of activities. Within this setting of funding that depends on application procedures, control over the particular activities of the cultural groups is subtle. Through this procedural control, a new technology of power is created that is remarkably potent in guiding the local activities.

Fisher (Fisher 1983), studying philanthropic foundations in the early 20th century, suggests that the funding bodies are the key institutions in both the reproduction and production of cultural hegemony, that is, in the domination of certain groups in the society. National and regional cultural politics are easy to establish if the ruling version of civil society expects the voluntary associations involved in various cultural activities to be theoretically independent, while in practice they depend on funding from a variety of institutions set up outside the region or the nation. The presumed independence of the NGOs invalidates their right for stable funding as that would link them to a particular funder on a long term basis. Instead, their existence is at the mercy of unsystematic donor funding.

Rather than a default part of the existence of cultural groups as was the case during the Soviet era, many, if not most, cultural groups have to regularly justify their existence to acquire funds. At the same time, entering capitalist economy has increased the monetary needs of such cultural groups. Events are not organised simply with the help of the local volunteers who, during the Soviet time, often contributed their working time and various resources, for instance, *sovhoos* transport. Instead, the new expectations contain organised and paid transport, expensive costumes, meals and accommodation, etc. Being no longer offered blanket-funding, nor considering it normal to get by with no money or pay for their own enjoyment and activities, organisations function from one project to another. The successful project writers facilitate the daily participation in the cultural scene, but they do it at a considerable personal cost that increases the turnout of cultural leaders. This context, the expectations and the formal setting of NGOisation of activities turns these organisations into vehicles of donor interests.

### **Celebrated Locality of the Seto Country**

Seto country (Setomaa) in the South Eastern corner of Estonia offers an interesting example of how this new situation affects local activities, enforces cultural politics and hegemony of an active and well placed minority and serves

the national interest of rural diversification while channelling local diversity in the national interest.

The Seto region was separated from the rest of the country since around the 10th century until 1918, during which the people there shared their historic experiences with the citizens of Russia. This period of separation is considered to be the source of uniqueness of the Seto culture and identity. A version of Russian orthodoxy, a dialect (or a language) different from Estonian, several peculiar customs and remarkable traditions developed and were retained even under various forms of pressure to “civilise”, “Estonianise” or “Sovietise” Setos.

During the First Republic of Estonia, from 1918 to 1940, the whole of Seto Country was part of Estonia. During the Soviet era, Seto culture was reduced to very private traditions and customs, existing publicly almost exclusively in the form of *leelo*-choir performances. Singing and music, in general, could be considered the pillar of Seto identity. In fact, one could even claim that it is the Seto singing that preserved the Seto culture, although, or perhaps, because, it has changed and “folklorised” (Sarv 1995). The Finno-Ugric and folk movement gained popularity in the freer years under Khrushchev in the 1960s, leading to the formation of the small “community-like” groups where folk singing, folk music and dance were practised with the aim of returning to their “ethnographic roots”, rather than following the “national in form, socialist in content” pattern characteristic to Soviet cultural reproductions (Kuutma 2008: 591). As a direct outgrowth of this movement, the tradition of *leelo*-days where local female polyphonic singing (*leelo*) was performed by seto choirs, was (re)established in Seto country in the late 1970s. The organisers Tiiu Kunst and Laine Lõvi recall these days with certain nostalgia, pointing out that they had no financial worries in relation to organising the events. It was enough to discuss the plans and scribble the rough estimation of expenses onto a piece of paper. There was no need for further reports. “The *sovhoos* financed the whole event so that all we had to do was to deal with the content” (Taro 2007).

However, as there were pejorative views amongst the majority population about Setos as a backward and somewhat Russified group, and regulations, such as attempts to ban using Seto language at school, that further diminished the public presence of Seto features, their popularity and numbers were in decline.

In 1991, Seto Country was divided unequally between Russia and Estonia. The border dispute is still one of the ongoing sources of conflict between the two countries. More importantly, this dispute has become the site of ethnopolitical struggles of Setos, on the one hand creating alliances and juxtapositions with Estonian state politics and popular positions, on the other hand, dividing the

Setos themselves to those who dismiss the problem and those who consider it central to Seto existence.

Currently, the population of the Estonian part of Setomaa is less than 5000 inhabitants<sup>6</sup>, divided between four rural municipalities. Of them, about 1500 consider themselves to be Seto (Setomaa Valdade Liit 2006). Striking folk costumes and jewellery and exotic traditions of partying, singing and music have turned Setos into an important destination of cultural tourism in Estonia; they are also frequently used to promote international tourism to Estonian countryside. They are the visible symbols of something exotic and authentic, something to trigger interest and to intrigue, and something that in an era of agricultural diversification is the source of intense tourist interest. They are seen to embody and live an ancient culture which the rest of Estonia has failed to preserve (Piho 2003: 121), and, as such, Seto culture is seen to be worth preserving, presenting and paying for.

Olsen (Olsen 2003) has pointed out that exhibiting a culture in a touristic way reinforces ethnic boundaries. Indeed, Setos have become the emblematic other, something to compare and contrast with the rest of the Estonian life. This is what they themselves do on a daily basis, and what Estonians, when prompted, do to point out the value and speciality of Setos or to emphasise their difference.

The national interest in Setos as a significantly and flamboyantly different cultural group matches a local, or rather, regional interest expressed by a relatively small group of Setos and Seto enthusiasts some of whom have become "*nouveau* Setos". By this I mean a handful of people who did not originally have any roots (genetic, historic, property-related, etc.) in the Seto region but who have, via their friends, or their interest in folk culture or music, or for a variety of other reasons, come to make their lives in the area. Having acquired property and work there, they have often become visible and outspoken representatives of the Seto culture with all its bodily expressions, subjecting themselves to wearing folk costumes, albeit primarily during the multitude of parties and festivals; of the consumption of particular food, enjoyments (such as singing, dancing and playing instruments associated with Seto culture) and tasks (handicrafts, log house building etc.).

By the early 1990s, Seto culture had entered a period of rapid and substantial upsurge that overflowed from the cultural sphere to the political and, in some form, the economic spheres. The foundation of Setomaa Municipalities' Union,

<sup>6</sup> As the original territory of Seto country is not congruent with the official borders used in censuses, these numbers are only approximates.

the Setomaa Development Centre, Petserimaa Parliamentary support group, and Seto Congresses represented the emphasis on the official organisation recognised to be necessary for success in alleviating the disadvantages of the peripheral position of Setomaa, and in standing for their particular interests as a cultural minority.

Since 1997, the region has been supported by the state via a special funding programme – Setomaa Riiklik Kultuuriprogramm (SRK, State Funded Cultural Programme of the Seto country). In 2003 this was separated from the rest of the regional programmes and concentrated specifically on cultural aspects of the region. The aim of this programme is to support and maintain the endangered traditional identity and culture, and, with its yearly budget of around 3 million Estonian *kroon* (180.000GBP), it is a considerable source of influence in the region where a typical municipal budget earmarked for cultural events is about 100.000 (6.000GBP) (Annist 2006).

Funds are offered only to registered NGOs, rather than any local voluntary associations. But even more importantly, funds are offered not to just any interesting local initiative, but specifically to Seto activities, with the aim of “helping the preservation of Seto intangible and material cultural heritage, restoration and development in the most authentic form possible, and expanding the participants in Seto culture, especially tying young people to the language and cultural heritage of the ancestors” (*Seletuskiri...* 2009). The examples of funding include producing CDs with *leelo*-singing, acquiring folk costumes to the choirs and dancing groups, cleaning and restoring old Seto jewellery, and the activities of Seto museums.

The programme has created relative stability for the Seto cultural groups by providing “sustainable funds” over several years for allowing them to practice their specific Seto skills. The programme has created considerable response among the potential applicants and has had a remarkable effect on the local scene. Seto cultural vivacity is obvious at every local event.

### **Establishing Seto Hegemony through the Institutionalisation of Funding**

Although with a strong backing among the Seto regional community, the SRK establishes definitions of worthiness of activities that are not necessarily local but respond to national or even international expectations. As in most institutions oriented to heritage protection, heritage is defined and identified by experts who often also act as “guardians of authenticity” (such as folklorists, musicologists, representatives of various Seto organisations, etc.) (Annist 2004). They advise the state donors on the worthiness of local events based

on their vision of local heritage and its present and future potential. The voice of these guardians becomes particularly strong and impersonal when it echoes in relation to their institutional or academic affiliations and when it shapes or guides decisions and is siphoned to the public arena through the programme.

Just as any “locality building” has colonising effects (Appadurai 2008: 183), the SRK also successfully establishes the cultural hegemony of Setoness in the region. Its effect is all the more remarkable in the light of the fact that the population who actively identify themselves as Setos and/or who are involved in these displays and activities of Setoness is small. Their ability to gain access to exclusive funds, however, has a remarkable influence on the local scene – something that is, in fact, the prime aim of the Seto activists, the funders, but is also in the interest of the rest of Estonia, shaping Setos to become the “emblematic signs” (Olsen 2003) necessary for tourist allure. The emblematic Setoness is, first of all, recognised in the perceived authenticity of certain features, ranging from minute details of their costumes to particular ways of making music. Then, mismatching features are exposed and rejected, including through the process of rejecting applications that display such features.

For instance, the SRK is taking a strong stand on funding only specific kinds of Seto jewellery – the cleaning and restoring of the magnificent *tsäposka'*, weighing up to 6kg, consisting of lines of silver coins from the Czarist era, some of which are proudly presented to be even from the late 18th century. Traditionally worn by Seto women as a display of family wealth, this attire has, in the later years, taken various new forms, including making the *tsäposka'* with Soviet and Estonian coins, which are not made of silver, a metal seen in historic Seto beliefs to protect women. The head of the SRK has declared that the programme will not support making new jewellery out of current Russian roubles: “We cannot forbid it but we can express our stance. And we do not support making such jewellery” (Taro 2009). Similarly, the programme has gone through stages of refusing to fund certain new interpretations of Seto music.

Through such decisions, a certain version of “proper”, “pure” emblematic Setoness, roughly deriving from the early 20th century visual and recorded representations of Seto costumes and music, is encouraged and established. The strong emphasis on a particular interpretation of authentic Setoness, supported by SRK and the “guardians”, has slowly strengthened its specific features and has created expectations that are familiar from re-enactment scenes. These expectations are especially enacted during larger festivals. Over time, the clothing worn at such events has become more traditional, from very meagre

beginnings – for instance, one Seto choir was wearing striped skirts associated with Estonian folk costumes only in 1997 – to increasing numbers of old and new, but traditionally made, folk costumes worn by all age groups coming to the Seto public arena. Today, it would be completely unthinkable for any Seto group to go out wearing Estonian folk costumes.

Increasingly vocal “guardians of authenticity” who are frequently also the experts that the funders turn to, reprimand the “farbs”<sup>7</sup> who fail to follow the “authentic” features. In addition, the support of the SRK to making and buying traditional costumes has added new layers of traditional clothes on its wearers which by now exceed a certain threshold making “inauthenticity” stand out. This is further reinforced by the chronicles of the Seto scene who concentrate heavily on the “authentic” looks.

Interestingly, in many cases, the heart and soul of the “authentic” Setoness, as well as the successful recipients of funds from the SRK are the above-mentioned *nouveau* Setos. Not so long ago, they were the non-local admirers of the Seto heritage who have been converted to a version of Seto culture and lifestyle by their peers or teachers. They seem to display no interest in tracking their “one drop of native blood”, yet are fully involved in Seto cultural activities.

One non-Seto couple in their 30s offers a good example of such “bloodlessness” of today’s Seto identity. Both grew up in the countryside, but not in or even near the Seto region. A graduate student in agricultural subjects, Madis, and his partner Liina, equally highly educated, bought a summer house in Setomaa. Madis’ best friend was a Seto, also a university graduate, with whom they had been involved in a folk dancing group at the university, provided the grounds from which their impulse to committing to Seto life has derived. Over the years of renovating their newly bought traditional Seto house Madis and Liina became more and more involved with the activities in the region and eventually moved to Setomaa, leaving their apartment in the city for just occasional visits. Today, their children go to the schools and kindergartens in the Seto region; their house and themselves have become represented by local and international media as emblems of Setoness. The whole family has become committed *nouveau* Setos. As they have developed their skills in relation to their adopted homeland, both have become excellent restorers, conservationists and innovators of Seto style, Madis in woodwork and music and Liina in a variety of female handicrafts. As a result, they have both become successful recipients of funds from the programme.

<sup>7</sup> A derogatory term used in re-enactment, referring to those participants indifferent to the “historical authenticity” of their gear.

Setomaa is by now dotted with the homesteads of similar couples and many of them have found a living in the Seto “comeback”. This provides an interesting platform for comparing “heritage-based” Seto culture with the examples found in the literature studying past or present ethnic groups with a following or fandom (e.g., Green 1988; Peers 2007), and re-enactment groups. These people are not simply engaged in “serious leisure” (Stebbins 2006), that is, systematically pursuing an amateur, hobbyist or volunteer core activity, or “project-based leisure” (Stebbins 2005) – “a short-term, moderately complicated, one-shot or occasional though infrequent, creative undertaking carried out in free time”. The *nouveau* Setos are not “living history” or involved in other types of practices similar to hobby and re-enactment groups. They are not just converts or spending their leisure time by carefully attempting to simulate “life in another time” (Anderson 1985). They are the heart and soul, and the visual and corporeal representation of lived Seto culture.

Instead of “playing themselves” – as representatives of ancestral history (Peers 2007) – these non-Seto people live daily as “Seto” a life as one could imagine. Their youthful fervour and unfailing presence at Seto events has increasingly lent Seto events their remarkable appearance of a lively and sustainable endeavour. Their passion has in many ways truly revived Seto culture and turned many more into national or even international admirers. Often highly educated and well prepared for success in application procedures, they have taken up opportunities offered by the SRK and, in some cases, have turned this into a major source of income. The relative stability that SRK is providing makes them somewhat more privileged in the larger framework of funding for cultural activities.

It is here that the most unusual aspects of hegemony-building that has occurred in the Seto country become visible. While the Seto enthusiasts welcome the formal rules and Seto-oriented definitions of fund-worthy activities, for the rest of Seto inhabitants – many of them Setos by origin, perhaps even engaging in some daily Seto practices, for instance religious traditions – the new setting has restrictive consequences. Since Setoness is defined in the SRK by its heritage as well as active involvement in the Seto scene, and not by blood or long-term residence, many forms in the current variety are defined in practice as non-Seto. Practices that are not seen to be based on Seto heritage are disregarded as insignificant or unimportant local practices or activities that require no support. When attempts are made to acquire funding for such activities, these are directed to other sources of funding. In fact, groups not fulfilling the criteria of Setoness or ancient authentic lifestyle would often not even think of applying for the funds from the SRK. Other sources are, however, often less accessible, having considerably greater levels of competition, and lower levels of stability.

In the circumstances of increasing dependence on money and increasing relative poverty of rural areas, institutional support for cultural activities is unavoidable. As a result of the situation where funding comes to those who can show their activities to contribute to Seto traditional culture, any other cultural/social directions and groups representing the needs and interests of the local population have to look for alternative sources of funds or to readjust to fit the current frames set by the funders. As a consequence of such funding reality, the local cultural life is highly dominated by the Seto activities. A brief summary of the local cultural activities in one of the regions' municipalities (not even the most active in terms of Seto-enthusiasm) serves as an example of the limited availability of cultural events that do not link to the heritage-based Setoness.

*Table 1.* List of events during the fieldwork between April 2003 and January 2004.

Type of activity	Cultural basis of the activity	
	Based on "Seto heritage"	Not based on "Seto heritage"
Discos	0	2
Dance parties	0	3
Choir performances	9	1
Village days	1	0
Children's events	3	2
Easter celebrations	1	0
New Year celebrations	1	1
Christmas celebrations	1	1
Outings to parties outside the village (non-paid)	6	0
Total	22	9

The vast majority of choir performances (which often include a party), as well as events where locals travel to other villages or municipalities for parties, are directly linked to Seto heritage. The "Seto" events occur more than twice more frequently, giving an impression of fully active and lively cultural scene at the village. The most obvious loss is experienced by those inhabitants who would rather steer clear of "Seto" events. In many cases, the disappointment about such reality is expressed in the villages where the active minority has successfully established the Seto hegemony. However, the dissatisfied voices come from individuals rather than groups, perhaps demonstrating the diffi-

culties or even impossibility of group-formation without identity creation. As a result, inhabitants in the Seto municipalities are divided into the hegemony-creators who can pursue their aims with the support of the SRK, and the rest who are often left without opportunities for alternative expressions and are seen to be passive whiners and no-goods in the eyes of the active people, mostly pursuing Seto heritage related interests. At least partly, a certain loss is reflected in the continuous outflow of inhabitants from the Seto region, while occasional newcomers are particularly well received if they also position themselves as *nouveau* Setos.

Thus, although the active Seto minority has successfully exploited the concept of Seto culture and directed it at the successful hegemony creation, Seto culture itself is not only benefiting. In addition to the disparities in cultural activities for the “authentic” Setos and the rest of the local population, it is far from obvious whether the enthusiasts are pursuing their very own interests and aims. As one Seto activist explained:

If we come together for our own pleasure, then we do not need to explain what we are doing. But if we ask for money, then this is not our [money] and we have to show that we are doing what we have been paid to do (Female, 50, Seto activist and entrepreneur).

The funded activities are talked about as if they were a kind of outsourcing of cultural work, thus under the control of the “contractor”. In some ways this is indeed the case, when we consider the role that Setos have taken in Estonian heritage/cultural tourism: the bodily experiences of Seto inhabitants as Setos, no matter whether *ancien* or *nouveau*, have been cleansed for the purpose of cultural clarity and representativeness which functions as a sort of exoticisation, authentication that turns the area and the people, particularly the women with their remarkable costumes – the wearing of which takes more than just a light decision in terms of what to put on in the morning – into symbols that can be sold to the outside world while hybrid forms of local life are rejected.

Within the neoliberal discourse of apparent freedom for defining and pursuing their own destiny, local life is ordered into the strategic fields of “autonomisation and responsabilization” (Rose 1999: 174), requiring and leading individuals – now “clients”, “partners” or “subcontractors” – to a successful form of self-governing, to a version of governmentality (e.g., Foucault 1991; Li 2007) that in practice is more successful than a totalitarian regime in creating controlled cultural hegemony.

## Conclusion

Comparing the institutionalization of “heritage” cultural practices in Estonia during and after the Soviet period, demonstrates how the new forms of governance may be even more efficient in establishing a particular hegemony than the practices in an authoritarian state. The daily corporeal practices of coming together for cultural activities within blanket-funded culture houses created habits, skills and space similar to civil society, and links with the nationalistic past. Within this space people both collaborated and dissented with the Soviet state. This space was efficiently activated during the Singing Revolution and led Estonians to independence.

In postsocialist conditions cultural life in the rural areas has severely diminished. The new cultural politics is neoliberal in its approach, leaving choirs, dancing groups and various clubs and societies to struggle for project-based funding.

Such funding is a potent tool for establishing cultural hegemony and excluding or weakening other versions of local culture. It brings together the interested elites on regional, national and even international levels. Institutionalised civil activities within this setting lead to the success of certain realms, approaches, values and ways of pursuing them and to the continuous failure of others. The successful definitions over what are the worthy realms, approaches and values and ways of pursuing those do not necessarily come from the informal spaces that people themselves are in charge of. The room for maneuvering has diminished in certain novel ways, and with it, also the hybrid, alternative or touristically unappealing activities.

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## Įsigyjant kultūrą: paveldo hegemonijos sukūrimas finansuojant kultūrinį gyvenimą pietryčių Estijoje

*Aet Annist*

### *Santrauka*

Straipsnyje lyginami kultūros srities institucionalizavimo procesai sovietiniu ir posovietiniu laikotarpiu, turint omenyje formalųjį veiklos organizavimą ir jo poveikį kultūrinei hegemonijai. Remiantis ilgalaikiais, daugiau negu šešerius metus trukusiais lauko tyrimais, rašoma, kad Estijoje, kurioje oficialus kultūros srities organizavimas buvo labai aukšto lygio jau XIX a., sovietinė kultūros hegemonija iš tikrųjų niekada nebuvo sukurta. Daug galimybių neformaliai ir disidentiniam laviravimui sudarė viską apimančio finansavimo sistema, kuri sustiprino kasdienės hegemonijai priešingas praktikas ir padėjo gyvuoti nacionalistinio kultūrinio aktyvumo įgūdžiams bei įpročiams.

Lyginant „paveldo“ kultūros praktikų institucionalizavimą Estijoje sovietiniu ir posovietiniu laikotarpiais, parodoma, kaip naujos valdymo formos gali būti net veiksmingesnės kuriant atskirą hegemoniją nei autoritarinės valstybės praktikos. Naujai sistemai, pagrįstai projektų finansavimu, reikia savanoriškų asociacijų organizavimo ir jų struktūrinimo, kuris yra veiksmingesnis sukuriant kultūrinę hegemoniją nei sovietinių formaliųjų kultūros grupių atveju. Posocialistinėmis sąlygomis kultūrinis gyvenimas kaimo vietovėse labai susilpnėjo. Nauja kultūros politika šiuo požiūriu yra neoliberali: chorai, šokių grupės, įvairūs klubai ir draugijos priversti patys kovoti dėl konkretaus projekto finansavimo. Šis finansavimas yra veiksminga priemonė kultūrinei hegemonijai sukurti ir pašalinti ar susilpninti kitus vietos kultūros variantus. Jis suburia draugėn suinteresuotus elito atstovus regioniniu, nacionaliniu ir net tarptautiniu lygmeniu. Šios institucionalizuotos pilietinės veiklos rezultatas yra tam tikrų sričių, požiūrių, vertybių sėkmė ir nuolatinės kitų nesėkmės. Pateikiami etnografiniai pavyzdžiai, kaip tai ypač padėjo sukurti embleminę mažos, bet turistiniu požiūriu svarbios setų kultūrinės grupės hegemoniją pietryčių Estijoje.

Šis finansavimas sukūrė aktyvų paveldu besiremiantį kultūrinį elitą, kuris sėkmingai pasinaudojo setų kultūros idėja. Parama, gaunama iš išskirtinės valstybės finansuojamos programos, sudaro galimybę šiai atskirai kultūrinei grupei turėti palyginti stabilų išteklių. O kita veikla šioje vietoje apibrėžiama kaip ne setų ir dėl to nefinansuojama. Nors setų elitas palankiai žiūri į šias praktikas, „autentiškiems“ setams ir kitiems vietos gyventojams būdingi kultūrinės veiklos skirtumai gali paskatinti emigruoti vietinį jaunimą, kuris neištrauktas į

paveldu paremtą setų veiklą. Taip pat nėra akivaizdu, kad finansavimą visiškai kontroliuoja „vietiniai“: jį teikiantys laikomi tam tikrais rangovais, užsakančiais kultūrinę veiklą. Setai atlieka svarbų vaidmenį Estijos paveldo ir kultūros turizme: setų gyventojų, kaip setų, patirtys išgrynintos vardan kultūrinio grynumo ir reprezentatyvumo, veikiančių kaip tam tikras suegzotinis, autentiškumo patvirtinimas. Tai regioną ir žmones, ypač moteris, paverčia simboliais, kurie gali būti parduoti išoriniam pasauliui. Kartu mišrios vietos gyvenimo formos yra atmestos.

Pasak neoliberalaus diskurso, kai esi tariamai laisvas apibrėžti savo likimą ir jį įgyvendinti, vietos gyvenimas yra padalintas į strategines sritis, „įgyvendinančias autonomiją ir atsakomybę“ (Rose 1999: 174). Keliami reikalavimai individams persant jiems – dabar „klientams“, „partneriams“ ar „subrangovams“ – sėkmingą savivaldos formą (pvz., Foucault 1991; Li 2007). Ši savivaldos forma, kurianti kontroliuojamą kultūros hegemoniją, faktiškai yra veiksmingesnė nei totalitarinis režimas. Kokios sritys, požiūriai, vertybės ir būdai juos įgyvendinti ar jų siekti yra verti dėmesio, nebūtinai apibrėžiama neformaliose erdvėse, kurias prižiūri patys žmonės. Kai kuriais naujais atvejais sumažėjo galimybių laviruoti ir kartu susiaurėjo hibridinės, alternatyvios ar turistams nepatrauklios veiklos perspektyvos.

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