

The folk and others: constructing social reality in Estonian legends

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Abstract. The chapter discusses oral storytelling in Estonia during the period of the national movement and the spread of education in the second half of the 19th century. The dominant beliefs in the supernatural are discussed in connection with social changes and power relations in rural communities. Focus is on legend as a genre about encounters with the supernatural, which have usually been studied through diachronic perspective as survivals of declining folk belief. The chapter argues that in order to understand traditional Estonian legends these legends should not be detached from the social world of the rural communities who tell them. Legends are not only forms of symbolic expressions of social conflicts and tensions, they also participate in reinforcing, directing or restraining social processes. Thus, social reality is not outside folklore but actively constructed through its dominant genres.

Legends are a folklore genre that expresses, validates and questions belief. They also extend belief as ideas, mental images and attitudes that are shaped into narratives, the plots of which are attached to the physical and social environments that the storytellers inhabit. However, legends are not confined to the discussion of religious matters and supernatural belief. As a genre with an orientation towards daily life, legends also express mundane opinions and shape worldly attitudes. The chapter that follows argues that in order to be fully understood, legends should not be detached from the social world of the village community that tells them. Social reality does not exist outside legends but is actively constructed through the medium of language and daily communication in its public and private forms, and oral, written and printed genres.

The national movement and the Estonianisation of folklore

At the beginning of nineteenth century, the Estonian language was mainly spoken by the rural people. The landlords, who formed the noble elite of the society and represented high culture, spoke Baltic German. The population was thus divided by a clear social and ethnic borderline, which was almost impossible to cross from either side. The nobility and the Estonian folk were nonetheless not completely isolated from each other. They belonged to the same Lutheran church and had daily contact in the manors. The first peasant schools had been founded in the late seventeenth century, and by the early nineteenth century literacy was widespread.

In political and administrative terms, Estonia was a province of the Russian Empire, but the domination of the German language tied it culturally and mentally with Western Europe. These ties were strengthened in 1802, when the University of Dorpat (Tartu) was re-established, something that opened the country to more intellectual influences from the West, such as the ideologies of the Enlightenment and Romanticism. These new movements started reaching Estonia via the intellectual circles of the Baltic Germans, who were joined by several ethnic Estonians in the first decades of the nineteenth century. People of peasant origin gained better access to university education when serfdom was abolished in 1816 in the province of Estland in the north and in 1819 in the province of Liefland in the south. It was around this time that the Enlightenment thinker, Garlieb Merkel (1769–1850) introduced into his writings the principle that all nations have the right to live and should be seen as equal, something which paved the way for the birth of Estonian literature (Annist 2005, 394). Early writers such as Friedrich Robert Faehlmann (1798–1850) nonetheless composed their works in German in order to prove the artistic quality of the folklore of the suppressed Estonian folk. Faehlmann's mythical narratives (*Estnische Sagen*) about the doings of pre-Christian deities and harmonic life in ancient Estonia closely followed the literary models of the Ancient Greek, Roman and Germanic myths which had appeared in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century writings. Following on from this, in 1857–1861, Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald (1803–1882) published the Estonian epic *Kalevipoeg* (The Son of [the mythical hero] Kalev), a work that became the cornerstone of Estonian professional literature and national culture. Although academic circles expected a scholarly work that would represent authentic Estonian folklore, Kreutzwald approached his material as a creative writer, composing a mythical biography of the ancient king Kalevipoeg from the fabric of folklore and his own poetry. Nonetheless, the national mythology composed by Faehlmann, Kreutzwald and a few other writers provided the Estonian people with a precious heritage which linked the emerging national

aspirations with the imagined golden age of ancient independence that existed before the German conquest of the thirteenth century. The last lines of Kreutzwald's epic predict the return of the mythical hero Kalevipoeg who will create a new life in the future Estonia.

Alongside these developments in literature, new agrarian laws passed in the middle of the nineteenth century prepared for changes to take place in rural communities. Rent in the form of money started to replace labour carried out for the manor, and the number of peasants who had become owners through buying land grew rapidly (Raun 1991, 49–50). This reinforced the levels of stratification in Estonian villages, as farmers, tenants, farm-hands and other landless workers started to become part of distinctive social groups. The Baltic German landlords nonetheless remained the political rulers of the country. They also remained ethnic and social 'others' in contrast to the independent Estonian farmers, those Estonians who had a university education and those other ethnic Estonians who had started the national movement.

Meanwhile, the ideas of being Estonian, of speaking the vernacular language with pride, and of celebrating Estonianness as a special quality were spreading rapidly through society by means of the printed and spoken word, and in both the private and the public spheres. Nation building was also supported by various societies, schools, and even the church, where some pastors came to be leaders of this movement. Newspapers, works of fiction, schoolbooks and the whole Estonian print-language played a central role in changing the ethnic consciousness of the people. For example, it was due to the distribution of newspapers that Jakob Hurt's (1839–1907) public appeal of 1888 for the recording of old songs, tales and other forms of *vanavara* (ancient treasures) reached those people who were later to become his most devoted helpers in accumulating folklore collections. Popular books of folklore with the word *Eesti* (Estonian) or *rahvas* (people, folk) in their title started appearing, following on from the epic *Kalevipoeg*, which was referred to as *Üks ennemuistne Eesti jutt* (An Ancient Estonian Tale), and Kreutzwald's collection of fairy tales, which were described as *Eesti rahva ennemuistsed jutud* (1866) (Ancient Tales of the Estonian Folk). Such publications gave Estonian readers the feeling that they could identify themselves as owners of this new 'national' heritage. Estonia is an example of countries where "language became an important medium for national cohesion and belonging [...]" and "the nationalization of culture was very much linked to the creation of a *public sphere* by the rising bourgeoisie, who created new arenas and media of debate and information" (Löfgren 1989, 16).

Writers went on to compose historical narratives about the romantic and heroic adventures of ancient Estonians who had fought for the freedom of their

country, such as *Tasuja* (The Avenger, 1878) and *Villu võitlused* (Villu's Battles, 1890) by Eduard Bornhöhe (1862–1923); and *Vambola* (1889), *Aita* (1891) and *Leili* (1892–1893) by Andres Saal (1861–1931), the titles of the latter trilogy referring to central characters who lived during the Ancient Fight for Freedom in the thirteenth century. Others, such as Eduard Vilde (1865–1933), published realistic and critical works of fiction discussing social problems in contemporary Estonia, as in Vilde's novel *Külmale maale* (To the Cold Land, 1896). The last two writers played a central role in establishing the novel as a genre in Estonian literature during the last decades of the nineteenth century.

Benedict Anderson has noted the parallel spread of newspapers and novels in many societies and the role that both play in constructing nations as imagined communities. While superficially different, both share a similar format, if not a similar train of thought. As Anderson notes: "Reading a newspaper is like reading a novel whose author has abandoned any thought of a coherent plot" (Anderson 1991, 33). Both newspapers and novels nonetheless manifest social orientation, permit the expression of different, even opposing points of view within the pages of the same publication, and also take part in ideological discussion.

Within the same context, Mikhail Bakhtin studied the historical emergence of literary genres in Europe, and the movement from monologic, myth-making epics to novels that manifest the new qualities of "pluralism of independent and unblended voices and consciousnesses" and pervasive dialogism that encompasses all elements of the work (Bakhtin 2002, 10, 51). The author's dialogic position with regard to the literary characters means that they are independent of the author, who regards them as subjects (op cit, 74). The appearance of novelistic qualities, or novelisation, is a historical process that bears on many genres. Bakhtin notes that novelised genres:

become more free, flexible, their language renews itself by incorporating extraliterary heteroglossia and "novelistic" layers of literary language, they become dialogized, permeated with laughter, irony, humor, elements of self-parody and finally – this is the most important thing – the novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openedness, a living contact with unfinished, still evolving contemporary reality (the opened present) (Bakhtin 1981, 7).

Bakhtin's theory of genres was open, encompassing literature, folklore, oral and written forms of expression. His concept of novelisation was also broad and can be applied to society as a whole and all public uses of the word in its oral, written and printed forms.

In nineteenth-century Estonia, one can note several traits of novelisation, including the appearance of new literary genres and the development of a system of generic classification in the emerging discipline of folkloristics. We can also note the parallel, dialogic functioning of several discourses as “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault 2001, 49), such as pietistic, enlightening, scientific, agricultural, capitalistic and national discourse – all based on certain public institutions and all aiming at making changes in social life and in people’s mentality. Folklore cannot be called “discourse” in the Foucauldian sense, because it lacks systematic coherence and the purposeful dissemination of a certain worldview and the support of official institutions. However, the emerging discipline of folkloristics can be viewed as a discursive practice, generated by the national project, but over the course of time acquiring autonomy from the original national pursuits.

The conceptualising of folklore as ancestral heritage spread widely as it was popularised by Estonian newspapers. One can note parallel developments in the mass media and the public awareness of Estonian folklore as a national resource. Both folklore and the mass media share common traits, such as the blending of several genres, the construction of social reality as a verbal practice, the shaping of social attitudes, and the enabling of different points of view and dialogue. Romantic poetry, the epic, choral singing, patriotic speech, Lutheran hymns and sermons all manifest monologic voicing. According to Bakhtin, monologism is characterised by the author’s omniscient position, which opens up the world from a truthful, correct perspective that excludes other points of view as erroneous, deceitful visions (Bakhtin 2002, 90–93). In contrast to these monologic artistic forms, several genres of journalism and folklore manifest novelistic qualities, such as internal dialogism. Bakhtin also writes about the novelistic prevalence of the “double-voiced word” (*dvugolosoye slovo*) that mediates the utterances of others (op cit, 207). The “double-voiced word” refers to reported speech – something that has already been said or heard by others, but when reverbalised acquires a new colouring and tone. As examples of the double-voiced word, Bakhtin mentions stylisation, parody, dialogue and colloquial narration in everyday life (*skaz*) (op cit, 207).

The concept of the double-voiced word linked to tradition and intertextuality helps us to deepen our understanding of folklore and explain how it was transformed into national heritage, that is, Estonianised. Valuable folklore manuscripts were born out of a dialogue between collectors and informants whose words were not only recorded, but also modified and co-produced by the collectors, something that made these texts truly double-voiced. As the verbatim recording of narratives was near impossible, archival manuscripts were usually based on the

collector's memory, in which several performances merged (Hiimäe 1999, 3–4). In addition to the voices of the collector and the informant, we can often 'hear' the echo of former performances in folklore. This polyphony of voices that are involved in narrating the same story was conceptualised by Walter Anderson as the "self-correction" of tradition; it directs each new performance, both in oral and written form. Many storytellers and folklore collectors made use of different sources, simultaneously following earlier models and trying to imitate the ideal 'folk style' formulated by the chapbooks that were so widely spread in late-nineteenth-century Estonia. Although many folk tales and legends are seemingly coarse or even primitive, their textual tissue is thicker than that in most works of fiction written by individual authors. The collectors combined oral and literary traditions and interpreted their work as a national project, something that is evident from the titles they added to their recordings. Titles such as *Eesti Rahvalaul* (Estonian Folk Jokes), *Vana Eesti nalju* (Jokes of Old Estonia), *Eesti rahva vana usu kombed ja nõiduse vigurid* (Ancient Customs, Belief, and Witchcraft Tricks of the Estonian Folk), *Eesti ennemustetse jut* (Ancient Estonian Tales), *Eesti rahva vana-vara* (The Ancient Heritage of the Estonian People) are typical in the manuscript folklore collection of Jakob Hurt from the late nineteenth century (Peebo & Peegel 1989, 22, 94, 138, 206, 224). Jakob Hurt himself valued folklore collecting highly as a form of mental labour, calling it "proof of a lively and healthy patriotic spirit in people's hearts, and burning love for one's homeland and nation" (Hurt 1989, 81). The collection of folklore and the publication of manuscripts for a wide Estonian readership can be understood as the utilisation of folklore as part of the Estonianisation and nationalisation of culture and society (see Bauman 1999): a project with an orientation towards the future but a firm foundation in history.

Jakob Hurt saw oral tradition as a resource of historical memory, a chronicle of the Estonian people, a great narrative about the lives of the ancestors and events in the old days. In Hurt's time, it was an innovative, recently discovered truth that folklore had the quality of being able to preserve ancient ideas and knowledge. As Estonians were a people who lacked ancient manuscripts and historical writings in their native language, the folklore recordings seemed a suitable substitute. The association of folklore with ancient times before the German conquest of the country was, of course, a value attribution. In nineteenth-century Estonia, the epithet *vana* (old) was used to define most genres and conceptual fields of folklore: old songs, old stories, old proverbs, old beliefs and so on were all worth recording for future generations. They were valued differently to new songs and new stories.

On the teleology of Estonian legends

The oral and printed legends of nineteenth-century Estonia should not be isolated from the public discourse encountered in newspapers and other publications. The legend is a genre of everyday communication that frequently discusses social matters, such as relationships between neighbours, or conflicts and tensions in the village. In his monograph on the Danish legends of the late nineteenth century, Timothy Tangherlini has noted that:

social, economic, geographic, political and psychological forces at work in a given society are important influencing features which should be included in any consideration of tradition (Tangherlini 1994, 31).

As a belief-related genre, the legend shapes collective mental attitudes and supports the local identities of village communities. Legends express the points of view of those who could be called the rural 'folk': the Estonian peasants who were involved in daily communication in face-to-face situations, constantly negotiating relationships between themselves and with others in rural communities where social stratification grew rapidly.

The Estonian legends recorded in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries belong to a lively oral tradition. The dominant topics in the legends of this time were the devil, the restless dead, witchcraft, and demons (*kratt, puuk*) who fetch property for their masters by stealing it from local neighbours. Forest and water spirits, 'underground' folk, angels and other supernatural creatures also appear in many legends, but these still seem to be more in the background, compared with the above-noted sets of beliefs.

The drawing of social borders within the Estonian countryside, and the separation of village communities from the supernatural others are processes that are strongly related. Although, as noted above, serfdom had been abolished and the number of independent Estonian farmers was growing, the Baltic German landlords maintained their powerful position in society. They were the most prominent ethnic 'others' in Estonian folklore, and were surrounded by an aura of suspicion, mistrust, fear, hatred and envy. The Germanisation of the Devil in Estonian folklore probably started in the Middle Ages but was still very evident as late as the end of the nineteenth century. It is also noteworthy that one of the favourite guises of the Devil in Estonian legends is that of a landlord, a gentleman or a German nobleman, as can be seen in the following example:



Figure 1. Landlords drinking coffee. Luist manor, Kullamaa parish, western Estonia. This image and that which follows give some idea of the elite lifestyle of Estonian landlords during the time discussed in this chapter.

Once the threshers of the estate were talking about hanging. One of them said it was like this, another like that until they decided to try it to see what it's really like. Then, for a joke, they tied a rope to a beam and decided to try hanging, one in turn. One of them had just got the rope around his neck and hung there when the landlord himself appeared in the barn and shouted at them: "What! You're idling here! Get back to work at once!" No one had time to take down the man who was hanging on the rope – everyone tried to escape. The Old Bad Boy (*vanapagan*) changed himself into the landlord, and got one more soul for himself that way (H II 37, 303 [3] < Jõhvi – N. Otto [1892] in Valk 2001, 75).

In this international migratory legend (TMI 456, Hanging Oneself in Jest; MI N334.2), the Devil usually appears as a hare (in Finnish, German, English and Hungarian folklore: see Valk 2001, 124) and the boys rush to catch him, forgetting about their friend who unintentionally dies by hanging. The replacement of a hare with the landlord in the Estonian example above does not seem unusual

if we consider other Estonian legends, where, as noted above, the German appearance of the Devil is common.

Landlords still had a central role in nineteenth-century Estonian society, and their image in the folklore of the time is complex and many-sided. Some songs and recordings of oral history actually praise benevolent landlords who treated their peasants with justice and kindness, for example, by arranging Christmas celebrations for the village folk and providing gifts for them. There are also legends about eccentric or mad landlords who gained attention because of their unusual behaviour and bizarre habits. However, the stereotype of evil landlords noted above was dominant in folklore. Indeed, several manors were reported to have special cellars with instruments of torture that were used to punish disobedient village folk. Descriptions of the sadistic beating of the peasants and sexual violence towards women were also common (Rommel 2004, 28). In the following legend, the landlord is described as being involved in superstitious practices designed to give him magical control over his workers:

In the old days when folk slaved for the manor, the landlord believed that if a new serf came to the manor, the overseer had to cut his fingernails in secret at night. It had to happen during the first week: at least the nails of the first two fingers. These fingernails were put into a crack in the wall of the granary. Then the new serf would do an excellent job and would be loyal to the landlord. If the overseer failed to cut the fingernails during the first week, the serf did not become a good worker and left soon. The serfs did not want the overseer to cut their fingernails, and tried to hide their hands while sleeping, so that they would wake up if the overseer tried to cut the fingernails (ERA II 57, 713/4 [10] < Märjamaa < Rapla – E. Poom [1932] in Loorits 1990, 12).

Evil landlords often went on to become members of the restless dead in Estonian folklore, and their graves and burial chambers were feared. These places were admittedly sometimes plundered by people in the hope of finding gold and other valuables, something that contributed further towards the demonisation of the landlords whose anger seemed more menacing when it emanated from the other world. Landlords were also often depicted as suffering in hell, a common motif in Estonian folklore showing how the Devil comes to claim the soul of an evil landlord on his deathbed.

It is said that if evil people die, there are frightening great storms at night which destroy houses. When the landlord of Loopre manor died, there was a storm like this. People say this landlord was very cruel to the working people,



Figure 2. Baron Johann Karl Girard de Soucanton with his wife. Kunda manor, Viru-Nigula parish, northern Estonia.

and used to beat them with a stick. When he felt that death was near, he asked others to bring a black rooster and a dog with four eyes. But when he was dying, there was a great noise next to his deathbed three times as if firewood was being thrown on floor. Then the old man shivered and died. Many people say that a coach was sent from Hell to take him away (H II 74, 359 < Pilistvere, Kõo v. – J. Keller [1905]).

A black rooster and a dog with four eyes (that is, with dark patches above the eyes) were supposedly able to detect the Devil and keep him away, according to folk belief. The attribution of such beliefs to the landlord, such as the alleged magic concerning the use of fingernails in the previous example, shows that the stereotype of the landlord had been integrated into the popular belief systems of Estonian folklore. Such belief attribution served as a means of underlining the social borders that existed between the village folk and the nobility. This ethnic borderline between the Estonian peasants and the Baltic German landlords came



Figure 3. A peasant woman from Saaremaa with a cow wagon.

to be essential for the self-determination of the new nation. In the middle of the nineteenth century, Germanisation actually seemed a positive future scenario for those Estonians who strove for a better position in society. The mastery of the German language was an inseparable part of the quest for proper education, worthy jobs and participation in high society. Even Kreutzwald had predicted such a future for Estonians when he composed the epic *Kalevipoeg* as a monument to their disappearing ethnic culture. However, in spite of such predictions, the Estonians maintained their language and managed to construct an ethnic identity that was different from that of the Baltic Germans. The demonisation of the landlords and the Germanisation of the Devil thus supported the formation of the Estonian nation. Indeed, the borderlines between Estonians and Germans were so strongly underlined in the legendary tradition that crossing them *en masse* became near impossible.

However, the 'folk' of the Estonian legends were naturally much more complex than any homogeneous class of peasants, unanimous in their hostility towards the upper class. While some legends reinforce social borders, others blur them. As noted at the start, the second half of the nineteenth century was a time of growing social stratification within the Estonian village. The buying of

farmhouses and land had now become possible, as had social mobility both upwards and down. For some people, the new conditions meant economic success. For others, increasing poverty seemed more miserable when viewed in the context of the increasing wealth of neighbours. At the same time, we see an explosion in the spread of those Estonian legends concerning demonic assistant spirits or familiars (*kratt*, *puuk*) who steal money, grain and milk products and bring it back to their owners. In order to have a demonic assistant of this kind, you had to undertake a blood contract with the Devil, or buy a *kratt* from the market. The price for such crooked and criminal enrichment entailed the offering of one's soul to the Devil.¹

The aforementioned legends seem to have a direct connection to the increasing social stratification in the Estonian village. As frequently repeated stories, they conveyed important messages (cf Tangherlini 1994, 41). Explaining somebody's economic success in terms of their having made a contract with the Devil and owning a *kratt* probably represents the point of view of those who were less successful, that is landless labourers, farmhands, maids and others who had failed to become independent farmers. The legends, of course, also reflect other tensions within the village, such as conflicts between neighbours competing with each other for rapid enrichment and the gaining of a higher position within the village community. Similar ideas probably lie behind the following legend:

There were two farmers in the next village. They had fields of equal size and were both competent, but one of the farmers was rich and the other was poor. The poor farmer pondered on the reason why his neighbour was rich and he was poor. He worked equally hard. Finally he came to the conclusion that the other farmer might have a *puuk* who stole grain from his house. He went to the forest, picked spruce needles and dried them and added them to his grain, which was drying in his barn. When the grain was dry, he threshed it and started to winnow it. Suddenly a powerful whirlwind appeared in the yard, entered the barn and flew over the heap of grain. The man thought that this was a *puuk* and went to the neighbouring farmer to check what kind of grain he had in his drying barn. He went there and saw that the other farmer was winnowing too, but curiously enough, he also had spruce needles in his grain. Now he realised that the other farmer indeed had a *puuk* who had carried away his grain. He told the other farmer: "If you don't stop these tricks, I will ask some wizard to bewitch you." From that time onwards, the *puuk* did not come to him again, and he became as rich as the other farmer (H II 27, 933/4 [2] < Kodavere – V. Kirik [1889] in Peebo & Peegel 1989, 175).

The most common motifs in Estonian legends concerning the *puuk* or *kratt* are the following: the earlier-noted blood contract with the Devil, which is necessary in order to gain such a demonic assistant; the idea of somebody's *kratt* being seen flying at night as a stream of fire; the idea that a *kratt* is working restlessly for his owner as a faithful slave; the legends concerning an impossible task which is given to the *kratt* as the only way to get rid of it and save one's soul; and finally the accounts of an angry *kratt* burning down the house of its master. According to many legends, this assistant demon is an artificial figure made from different components, which is revived with the help of the Devil, who is summoned on a Thursday night at a crossroads. In other legends, we find the motif of somebody's spirit leaving their body in order to steal or do harm to their fellow men. Many legends about the *kratt* tell the story from the point of view of a poor farmhand, who is opposed to the rich but cruel master:

There was a farmer who got very rich. Nobody knew whence his property came. He never went to the town to buy herring or shoes but there was always fresh herring on the table and his whole family had new footwear.

One Thursday evening the child was asked to bring herring from the store house. The child came back with a plate full of herring and shouted: "Mother, mother, there was a black one in the store house who vomited herring."

Mother scolded: "Don't babble, the black cat ate fish."

"No, no, the black cat vomited herring," the child disagreed.

Then the maids and farmhands realised who was this cat and refused to eat herring. One evening a farmhand heard that the master said to the mistress: "Never ask the child to go to the storehouse on Thursday evenings. The stupid child cannot keep quiet about what he sees."

It became clear to the farmhand that it was on Thursday evenings, when stuff was brought to the farmer. The farmhand took a stick from rowan tree, cut three crosses into it and went secretly to the storehouse. After some time a black cat came and vomited grain into the bin. The farmhand beat the cat with his stick. The cat never came back but the farmer soon became poor. Finally he became so poor that he lost his farm (H II 33, 966/7 [32] < Jüri, Rae – J. Pihlakas [1889] in Hiimäe 1988, 34).

While the legends about the Germanised Devil and the demonised landlords underlined existing social borders and separated ethnic groups, the legends about the *kratt* illustrate contemporary social change. As noted above, it was now possible to become a landowner and a farmer in Estonia, and many peasants were reaching for this status. However, explaining somebody's new economic success



Figure 4. Estonian peasant with a barrow with vegetables.

in terms of them having a *kratt* added mystery to upwards social movement and demonised some of those who had been successful. Thus, the apparent owners of *kratt* also became 'others', people who had sold their souls to the Devil and excluded themselves from the community of fellow Christians. Simultaneously, these legends confirmed the possibility of fast enrichment and of ascent through the social hierarchies. Whereas the great careers of the poor heroes of Estonian tales of magic remained fictional, the deeds of the legendary characters were projected into the real world. Shepherds could not become kings but they had fair chances of becoming masters and farm owners in their homeland. We can thus talk of the teleological orientation of legends which reinforce, direct or restrain social processes. Through their construction of social reality, legends also shape the future of those people who share them.

Final remarks

This chapter has focused on two popular groups of legends in nineteenth-century Estonian folklore, one of them supporting the existent social order, while the other illustrates and comments on the changes that were taking place within rural communities, but both affirm “the group identity of the tradition participants” (Tangherlini 2007, 8). There were, of course, also other beliefs that were widely discussed in the nineteenth-century legends of Estonia, such as those concerning revenants who return to their former homes and bother the living. Perhaps these moving restless dead are another symbol of the unstable, restless society of change in which many people felt insecure. The obsession with enrichment in Estonian folklore is thus not a reflection of the remote Middle Ages or of the Early Modern period, but rather a typical feature reflecting the time of rising capitalism in Estonia at the end of the nineteenth century. The legend is a complex genre which is not restricted to supernatural dimensions. It includes material and inspiration drawn from the poetic and the fantastic, the historical and the social space. It is also a genre of symbolic expression, which manifests a specific worldview. As a belief-related genre, the legend can also express the anxieties and insecurities caused by a rapidly changing society, fears of the unknown, aspirations towards economic stability and other important matters of social psychology. As an emotionally charged genre, the legend also draws social borders between in-groups and out-groups. Legends thus not only shaped village communities, which were in face-to-face contact, they also supported the formation of the ‘imagined community’ that was the Estonian nation. The latter function was then reinforced by the numerous popular books of legends that were addressed to Estonian readers. In the nineteenth century, these legends reflecting the forces at work within local communities went on to play a crucial role in the textual production of the Estonian nation. Hence it is completely justified that we call them Estonian legends (in many senses of the word).

Archival sources

ERA = Collection of the Estonian Folklore Archives (Eesti Rahvaluule Arhiiv).

H = Collection of Jakob Hurt, Estonian Folklore Archives.

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Sources of illustrations

Figure 1 – Photographer unknown, around 1900. The photo collection of Estonian National Museum, ERM Fk 887:103.

Figure 2 – Photographer unknown, the beginning of the 20th century. The photo collection of Estonian National Museum, ERM Fk 887:601.

Figure 3 – Photographer: Carl Oswald Bulla, 1909. The photo collection of Estonian National Museum, ERM Fk 90:6.

Figure 4 – Photographer: Bernhard Kangro, 1913. The photo collection of Estonian National Museum, ERM Fk 90:6.

Notes

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¹ Similar legends about witches’ familiars were widespread in the Nordic countries, and also in Ireland. Parallels can also be found in the *nisse/tomte* figures in Nordic legends, which steal hay or corn.