

**Part II**

# **Lived Orthodoxy**



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## 6 How to ask embarrassing questions about women's religion

### Menstruating Mother of God, ritual impurity, and fieldwork among Seto women in Estonia and Russia\*

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While Orthodox theology regards both women and men as equally perfect outcomes of God's creation, in practice women are subject to various restrictions that are not imposed on men. Teachings concerning women's ritual impurity and uncleanness impact on Orthodox women in their everyday lives. According to the canons, women are inherently no more sinful than men. Nevertheless, they are expected to abstain from Holy Communion and participation in any other Sacrament, as well as from reading the sacred Scriptures, venerating icons, lighting candles or lanterns, baking the bread of offering, and kissing the hand of a priest during menstruation and the period following childbirth. The canonized teachings of St. Dionysus of Alexandria, for example, state that a menstruating woman is not allowed to enter the church, take communion, or touch sacred objects; communion is also denied from a woman who has given birth because she is unclean in both spirit and body (see Polidoulis Kapsalis 1998; Schulz 2003).<sup>1</sup>

Interpretations of canonized texts related to women's impurity vary across Orthodox cultures, countries, and congregations. Once, as I was browsing the Estonian Folklore Archives for texts collected in the 1930s, I came upon interviews in which Seto women explained the origin of Orthodox menstrual taboos. I was surprised to realize that the texts associated both menstruation and Orthodox teachings concerning impurity with the Mother of God. Driven by my interest in Marian beliefs in Seto folklore, I decided to interview churchgoing Seto women to find out how the folklore related to the Mother of God and the female body has changed. During my many field expeditions to Seto settlements, I strove to learn

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how contemporary Seto women interpret the Orthodox canons concerning woman's ritual uncleanness (Kalkun 2007).<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter, I provide an overview of Seto women's traditions and notions based on material stored in the Estonian Folklore Archives and accounts that I have collected in the past decade. I take special interest in the Mariology of Seto women, exploring the relation between the Mother of God and women's intimate physical experiences related to menstruation and childbirth. When asking questions about such taboo topics as menstruation and postpartum behavior, I have found myself time and again revising my position as folklorist, reflecting on the topic of fieldwork ethics, and analyzing what exactly happens in interactions between a researcher and his or her interlocutors. How should one combine research and close interpersonal communication? How can one maintain intimacy and trust when discussing embarrassing subjects? In the following, I also tackle these questions on the basis of my fieldwork experiences.

### **The religion of Seto women, the Mother of God, menstrual taboos, and childbirth**

The present-day Seto settlement area on the border of the Republic of Estonia and the Russian Federation is also situated on the border of Eastern and Western Christianity (see Engelhardt 2015; Kalkun 2015a; Kalkun and Vuola 2017). Like Estonians, Setos speak a Finno-Ugric language.<sup>3</sup> They were Christianized as the result of an early Orthodox mission and remained in the sphere of influence of Russian culture until 1918, when Seto areas were incorporated into the Republic of Estonia.<sup>4</sup> In this border area, the small Seto people did not assimilate either with Lutheran Estonians, their linguistic relatives, or Orthodox Russians. Marriages between Setos and Estonians were constrained by religious differences, while the language barrier hindered marriages between Setos and Russians. Even though Setos and Russians frequented the same churches for centuries, Russians referred to Setos as "half-believers," since they felt that the faith of the Setos was not similar to theirs. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Estonian scholars described Setos as kinsfolk who were centuries behind the Estonians in their development. One reason for Setos' backwardness was believed to be their "Russian-style" faith, which deprived them of the level of education and literacy common to Estonians (see Kalkun 2015b).<sup>5</sup>

Setos are known for their rich and unique Orthodox tradition, characterized by many divergent practices and unusual interpretations of Orthodox theology. Literacy spread among the Setos as late as in the 1920s. For a long time, their religious beliefs and practices were thus transmitted in oral form. The Soviet period, during which religious education was prohibited, prolonged this situation. My informants were often not very familiar with the official views of the Orthodox Church nor had they read religious literature. Many were aware of their different faith and lack of official

knowledge and suggested that I turn to a priest or the Scripture for the “right” answers.

One of the features of the Setos’ Marian tradition is bringing the Mother of God closer in time and space. Seto legends state that the Mother of God was active mainly in the Seto region, as she used to hold services in the caves of the Pskovo-Pechersky Monastery and visit local villages. Because of her physical presence there, the Mother of God also assumed guardianship over the Seto region, the area surrounding the Pechersky Monastery. Setos call their settlement area the Land of St. Mary (*Pühä-Maarja maa* in Seto). According to old origin tales, the Mother of God had even created the earth:

In the old days only water covered the earth. There were stones in the water and soil under the stones. St. Mary stepped on a stone, took three times soil from under the stone, threw it across the water, and the water receded and turned into ground. There was three parts of water and the fourth part was soil, and this is why they call it the Land of St. Mary, because St. Mary created it.

(Estonian Folklore Archives; S 5274013 Aleksei Pöhi (1933))

In Seto legends, the Mother of God wears the clothes of Seto women and speaks the Seto language, which further emphasizes the bond between her and the Seto people. For my contemporary informants, the Mother of God was simultaneously a sacred and very close and friendly figure. This intimacy was reflected in her appearance and speech. One of my interlocutors, for example, described how her mother used to have recurring dreams about the Mother of God, clad in traditional Seto clothes and speaking “in a high voice” in the Seto language. When her mother had once forgotten a Marian feast day and slept in, in her sleep she heard a woman asking in a very casual manner: “Aren’t you coming to see me today?” At once, she realized that the voice belonged to the Mother of God, upon which she got up, tended the animals, and rushed to church. The interlocutor in question ended her narrative by noting that the Mother of God is kind, she is always there, waiting for even those who are late:

You can be late for church. It is good to get there while they read the Gospel. St. Mary says that you may even come at the final hour, I am still waiting for you. When the bell is rung, St. Mary invites everyone to the church.

(N 1932, Saptja village (2013))<sup>6</sup>

In the dreams of Seto women, the Mother of God possesses other, very mundane physical qualities. She may have dirty clothes—because those who clean their floors on the Virgin Mary’s feast day taint her clothes with the washing water. She may also feel cold. A bedridden informant from

Väraska village explained how she had been thinking about taking some icon scarves she had woven to church, but had not got around to doing it. When the Mother of God appeared to her in a dream and told her that she was cold, she had understood it as a sign that she must quickly fulfill her promise.

Most collectors of Seto folklore have avoided issues related to sexuality and the female body as inappropriate and marginal topics (see also Keinänen 1999, 184). Regardless, the oral tradition collected in the Seto region in the early twentieth century contains accounts concerning Orthodox women's proper conduct during menstruation and the postpartum period (see, e.g., Väisänen 1924). These typical texts about restrictions related to menstruation are dated to the 1930s.

When one is menstruating, she is not allowed to make deep bows to God, she is not allowed to go to church or commemorate the ancestors' spirits; this is a grave sin, the woman is not pure.

(Estonian Folklore Archives; S 107614/5 (3) Anna Oinas-Tammerorg—Ode Hunt (1935))

This is the thing with a woman that you are not allowed to go [to church] when you are unclean. In the olden days they wouldn't even go to sauna, because the sauna is the same as the church, the sauna is for purifying our body, the church is for purifying our soul (...) They were not allowed to touch icons either, when it was the time. And she would ask someone else to place the candle, gave money for that.

(Estonian Folklore Archives; ERA II 286, 95 (77) Ello Kirss—Nati Morel (1935))

The few folklore accounts about the causes of menstruation collected from Setos explain it as a punishment for violating an archaic taboo. These texts suggest that the Setos believed the Mother of God to have been the first woman to have a menstrual period. In one such account, for instance, nosy women secretly watch the Virgin Mary bleeding in the sauna:

St. Mary was the first to have a period, even when no other woman had had it. St. Mary went to the sauna and told women not to watch her. But the women could not resist and watched her. Then St. Mary said: "It doesn't matter, let you have it too then!"

(Estonian Folklore Archives; ERA II 194, 64475 (20) Ello Kirss—Odo Ilusaar, b. 1849 (1938))

Another version of the same legend describes how the Virgin Mary, the first woman to have a period, went to bathe in the sauna with ordinary women and would not let the women look at her long undershirt. The women still

look and see blood on the shirt. As a punishment, they have to experience the same sufferings as St. Mary: menstruation, labor pains, and a painful death (Väisänen 1924, 200).<sup>7</sup> This latter version reflects the Seto notion that objects smeared with menstrual blood carried special power that could have a positive or negative influence on both the people who saw them and their owners (Väisänen 1924, 203). The lower part of the long undershirt (hidden under the bodice skirt, *sukman* or *kitasnik*) worn during the first menstruation was kept for special occasions. Washing, soaking, and drying the shirt carried ritual meaning and was associated with various magical practices (Väisänen 1924).

In Seto oral tradition, labor pains are also associated with the Mother of God. The Virgin Mary was believed to have experienced a very painful labor. Suffering pain during childbirth was therefore considered a blessing:

Giving birth is more difficult to some women than it is to others. There are three types of women: those like St. Mary have the most difficult childbirth, those like a horse have an easier one. Women who are like bitches have the easiest childbirth.

(Estonian Folklore Archives; ERA II 194, 444 (18)  
Ello Kirss—Oga Ambo, b. 1869 (1938))

Linking St. Mary to some of women's most intimate physical experiences is very common in popular representations in both Eastern and Western Christianity. These representations often differ from the interpretations of the church (see, e.g., Timonen 1994; Vuola 2002).<sup>8</sup> In Orthodox theology, for example, the Mother of God is considered to have given birth painlessly.

Seto women have passed on the tradition that anything alluding to sexuality is considered inappropriate in church. Even today, one should not attend church wearing the large silver brooch that is a part of Seto women's traditional clothes, because this brooch indicates fertile age and has been associated with woman's sexuality in the Seto culture. Thus, when going to church, any adornments were either left at home or hidden under overgarments.

Traces of these older beliefs concerning the Virgin Mary survived in the narratives of contemporary religious women. My informants thought that the Mother of God helps women specifically with their "ladies' problems." They often had a very special relationship with the Virgin Mary due to some prayer or wish that she had granted or some very personal issue that she had helped them solve. Furthermore, my interlocutors were also aware of the traditions, according to which during her period a woman is not allowed to participate in sacred rituals, commemorate the dead, kiss icons, light candles in front of them, or in more extreme cases, even go to church. In the following, I turn to their accounts of these issues—and the practical and ethical challenges involved in eliciting them.

## Talking about purity regulations with contemporary Seto women

Folklorists, ethnographers, and anthropologists who study religion or religious people have usually not considered it important to discuss their own religious background. The scholar's personal religiosity has been considered so intimate and even inappropriate a topic that existing literature gives it scant attention. Yet, the religious views of many researchers have certainly had an impact on their work (see Larsen 2016). For example, when Jakob Hurt (1904) studied the religious life of Setos, he was clearly influenced by his role as a Lutheran pastor. He argued that Seto Orthodoxy is of an "external nature," a set of ceremonies and rituals the meaning of which is not questioned. Overall, scholars studying Russian peasant culture have noticed that researchers of non-Orthodox and especially Protestant backgrounds have far too casually viewed popular Orthodox practices as a token gesture. From a Protestant perspective, Russian peasants' illiterate and vernacular piety is easily interpreted as indifference to religion or as half-belief, a mix of paganism and Christianity (see Lewin 1990, 166ff).

Jakob Hurt was not the only scholar influenced by his religious background when studying Setos. As an Orthodox believer and member of the Seto community myself (although not Seto-born), I have often had to consider my positionality. I have referred to my position using the term of "halfie" by anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod (1991). It stands for a scholar who is partly inside and partly outside the studied community. Due to his or her multiple identity, the halfie is in a difficult position. On the one hand, similar experiences and background may prove useful in a field situation, and on the other, lack of distance may also become a problem.

My fieldwork has involved studying women with whom I have sung together in church, elbowed my way forward at cross-processions, and waited in line to receive communion or kiss the cross. They have offered me candy to commemorate their deceased relatives and praised my singing voice. Nevertheless, when I have casually asked the very same women, while sitting at their kitchen table or living room sofa, "is there a time when a woman is not allowed to enter a church" (*Kas om määnegi aig, ku naane tohi-i kerikoh minnä?*), I have clearly assumed the position of a researcher who is playing a closed hand (see Kalkun 2007). I know the texts describing restrictions imposed on women in the Orthodox Church and I have asked dozens of women the same questions. However, I have found it better to pretend ignorance to determine how a specific informant talks about menstruation taboos.

Theologian Elina Vuola has noted how talking with Catholic women about the Virgin Mary is often like opening Pandora's box: it enables discussions about the female body, sexuality, and motherhood, but can also evoke criticism of the Catholic Church, official theology, and Mariology in particular (see, e.g., Vuola 2011; Kalkun and Vuola 2017). In a similar



manner, some seemingly innocent or even ridiculous questions that I have asked have prompted my informants to discuss intimate topics that may be potentially uncomfortable or unpleasant for them. The questions are like bait, traps, or wormholes, which may lead to subjects that are difficult to approach directly.

During fieldwork, I have usually asked questions about purity regulations only when the conversation is in full swing, often as a logical transition from baptism, to ensure that the shift in the topic is not perceived as too sudden or dramatic. Since menstrual taboos and postpartum behavior are not often discussed aloud, at least in the presence of men, some informants found my questions concerning the times “when a woman was not allowed to go to church” confusing. Of course, my attempts to use as neutral and general phrasings as possible—for example, to initially leave out any mention of menstruation—may have contributed to the confusion. Nevertheless, most Seto women with whom I have talked about these issues confirmed that it was not appropriate to go to church during menstruation (cf. Väisänen 1924, 193–194). Furthermore, when it was deemed necessary to be present at church for a service or a ritual, a menstruating woman was not supposed to make the sign of the cross, kiss the icons or the cross, kneel, or take communion; in other words, it was forbidden to take active part in the service or sacrament. As the following excerpt demonstrates, the restrictions could lead to complicated situations. It is a custom in the Seto region that, in the funeral procession from church to graveyard, the cross is carried by the godchild of the deceased. But what if the godchild was having her monthly period at the time and, according to another strict tradition, was not permitted to touch the cross?

[AK:] But how was it in the old days, when was a woman allowed to go to church?

[INFORMANT:] Well, yes, a woman was not allowed to go to church when she was having her period.

[AK:] Okay, but if she really needed to?

[I:] Well, you can go but you have to be modest about it.

[AK:] But were you allowed to light a candle?

[I:] It was not advisable. I had a situation that my godmother had died and in the morning the priest came and asked me whether I will be carrying the cross. Well, I was her godchild. Mom then explained him the nature of the situation. But the priest told her that do as you like. Told her that he wouldn't prohibit me, but that he wouldn't tell me to do that either. But I wouldn't do it, I wouldn't carry the cross. And, yes, you shouldn't light a candle during that time either. And, well, you shouldn't go near the icons. You can enter the church, but you have to be like, modest about it. Keep to the sides... Haven't you heard enough of this? [Laughing]

(N 1928, Tiirhanna village, 2005)

Even though most of the informants were relatively tight-lipped about menstruation and religion, some of them were more outspoken. Sometimes, the topic could also inspire a rather naturalist discussion about the past and hygiene. However, it was common for the informants to burst into laughter afterwards—as if to avoid humiliation or ease the tension caused by an unconventional and delicate topic. In the above quotation, for example, the informant’s jokingly asked question seemed to signal her wish to end the conversation.

While the menstrual taboos customarily observed in the Seto region may be perceived as demeaning or discriminating toward women, my informants seemed to accept them simply as traditional rules or “laws of God” that is was advisable to observe. Some women questioned the origin of the restrictions, however, wondering whether they had emerged as a misunderstanding caused by their great-grandmothers’ lack of education.

- [AK:] But how is it, is a woman allowed to go to church at any time?  
 [INFORMANT:] No, she isn’t.  
 [AK:] She can’t when she has her period?  
 [I:] Yes, when she has menses, then she is not allowed, a woman can’t go to church then.  
 [AK:] But what if you sing in the choir or you just have to go?  
 [I:] We don’t go then! You can’t go and you won’t.  
 [AK:] But who taught you that?  
 [I:] My mother, of course, this is how it was in the old days, so mother taught me.  
 [AK:] But why is it like that?  
 [I:] Well, I don’t know why. Perhaps old people imposed the rule and we never asked the priest and the priest never told us about that. Maybe it isn’t even a sin against God if you choose to go to church like that. But the old people simply didn’t realize it. They just believed that you can’t go. My mother taught me that and all the parents did. So it wasn’t just me, or some other people, but everybody knew about it! Girls and women never went to church during this time of the month.  
 (N 1931, Saabolda village, 2014)

Since Setos usually do not speak to strangers about menstrual taboos, it is entirely possible that, as the informant suggests, they did not discuss the topic with priests either. Thus, new priests who came to the region may not have known about many beliefs and customs in their congregations.

Furthermore, instead of accepting church traditions without question, some Seto women actively proposed alternative explanations for them. One informant speculated that menstrual restrictions could be because the communion wine transforms into the blood of Christ: it would be inappropriate if women’s menstrual blood was present together with the blood of Christ in the church.

During my fieldwork, I also sought information about contemporary Seto women's knowledge regarding the traditional purification ceremony of churching a woman after she has given birth. In Seto tradition, a woman had to be confined to her home after giving birth. She was also prohibited from undertaking certain duties, going near the well, and having sexual intercourse. Forty days after giving birth she underwent a special ritual to rejoin the church and society. In earlier times, children were usually baptized no later than a couple of weeks after birth, which meant that Seto mothers could not attend their own children's baptisms. Nowadays, however, children are baptized later.

Based on my fieldwork, both older and younger Seto women had some knowledge and experience of the churching ritual. Like the woman in the quotation below, they did not question the ritual. Instead, all who commented on the ban against going to church right after giving birth talked simply about what was "acceptable" and what was not. Some women also used the word "unclean" for a woman who had not been churched. Moreover, talking about the ritual inspired some women to comment on how women are more sinful or indecent than men. The topic could surface in connection with baptism, as in the following excerpt:

[AK:] But when a woman gave birth to child, when was she allowed to go to church after that?

[INFORMANT:] After six weeks passed. When she gave birth, six weeks passed, the child, of course, was baptized by then, they used to baptize very early in the old days. And then the woman took her child and went to the "six-week" [churching] ritual. This is how it was called, but Russians called it "malitvu brat." And then the priest took the child and, if it was a boy, he was taken through the gates that lead to the altar room. But a girl is never taken to the altar room! We are sinful! [Laughing] But until then you have to take twelve bows. Yes, twelve deep bows to God. And then the priest was given kopecks or money for that as well. But when it was a girl, she was not taken to the altar room, they were at the first door, where St. Mary is. The priest recites whatever he does at St. Mary and then he goes to the second door and recites there, at St. Nicholas, but the girl is not taken to the altar room, only baby boys are taken there.

[AK:] But why couldn't a woman go to church before the churching ritual?

[I:] But well, before six weeks, some are like, not quite clean yet. Only have menstruation, when there is some. And so it has been told. I don't know either. After the churching ritual is held, you can do everything, like before. So you see.

(N 1911, Kuuraköstõ village, 2003)

Listening to the recording of the above interview, one can hear the symptomatic laughter of the informant, signaling discomfort over a taboo subject. Yet another tactic of “saving face” was to turn the discussion into a funny anecdote. This was how one of the older informants approached the topic. When discussing the mother’s absence from baptism, she is first reminded of the old tradition of confining mothers of newborn babies, after which she recounts an episode when a priest chased her daughter out of her son’s baptism, describing it in a joking manner:

[AK:] But how was it, was the mother there for the child’s baptism?

[INFORMANT:] No, the mother was not shown the baptism.

[AK:] Why?

[I:] Well, I don’t know what tradition this is. Before the churching ritual, a mother is not decent to go to church. And in the old days, it was even so that a woman was not allowed to leave her bed without a scarf before the child was baptized, she had to wear the scarf and all. And before these rules were strict, but now they are nothing. Because, when my daughter was having her first son baptized, she was also in the church and it was no big deal, because the priest did not know her. But when she had her second child baptized, the priest told her to get out! [Laughing.] She came that time as well.

(N 1928, Tiirhanna village, 2005)

### **Fieldwork, intimate topics, and scholars’ limitations**

Fieldwork is often both mentally and physically demanding. People who were complete strangers just a moment ago spend hours together, conversing, among other things, on highly personal topics. Furthermore, the interviewer and interviewee often communicate in a very intimate space, requiring both parties to make compromises concerning their physical autonomy and welfare. To ensure a successful recording session, folklore collectors try to assimilate into the physical space of their interviewee and adapt to the rules of that house or village (see Kalkun 2019). Nevertheless, the mark that a researcher leaves on a small community may still prove indelible and not necessarily entirely positive.

Over the course of my fieldwork, I have noted that subjects related to taboos seem to be capable of exposing hidden aspects of researcher-informant interaction such as hierarchies, power relations, and prejudices. It is intriguing how the seeming closeness between conversation partners may suddenly be revealed as an illusion the moment they touch upon an intimate or delicate topic, and how differing habitual, educational, or cognitive experiences may drive an insurmountable wedge between the two parties. Instances of laughter, as described above, are such revealing moments, when, regardless of all the empathy and respect between the researcher and informant, either one or both of them do not feel comfortable.

Usually, the scholar initiates conversations on topics that are not easy or ordinary for the informant. But seeing that field research is dialogical by nature, the situation may also be reversed. The scholar may be faced with themes that reveal his or her prejudices, limitations, and restraints arising from cultural taboos. Here, I introduce two such themes: sexuality and intimate medical conditions.

In the field notes and memoirs of the Finnish folklorist Armas Otto Väisänen, who conducted fieldwork in the Seto region in the early twentieth century, strange misunderstandings and sexually loaded incidents involving women figure prominently. Väisänen recounts, for example, numerous situations in which he, as an unmarried young man, was offered a wife, a fiancée, or simply a girl to spend a night with (see Väisänen 1969). When I first read these texts, his abundant descriptions of courting incidents seemed somewhat unexpected and odd (see Kalkun 2015a). At some point, however, I realized that his experiences were not so different from mine. Indeed, since my very first field expeditions in both the Seto region and Siberia, I have repeatedly been asked whether I have a girlfriend. People have also suggested that the main purpose of my travels is to find a girlfriend, promised to introduce me to a local young woman (usually a close relative of theirs), and recommended locales where young people meet and get to know each other. Some closer acquaintances have even jokingly threatened that I better have a girlfriend with me on my next visit or else “we will find a good wife for you here.”<sup>9</sup>

I have learned to think of these discussions as an unavoidable part of my interactions in the field. Although I would not consider such questions appropriate in my day-to-day life, I have never taken them much to heart. After all, I have often asked questions about delicate topics too, sometimes feeling more and sometimes less uneasy about it. I believe that my interlocutors’ concerns about my relationship status are an indication that they care about me and that our relationship is close. Furthermore, one also has to bear in mind that the worldview of the women among whom I have primarily conducted fieldwork—Seto women who are my mother’s age or older—is influenced by the patriarchal culture of early twentieth-century agrarian communities. In traditional village communities, any interaction between an unmarried man and young woman (either married or unmarried) could be interpreted in sexual terms (see Vakimo 2001; Kuutma 2006). When there was a significant age gap between the parties, however, communication on the topics of sexuality and gender relations often reflected the relationship between an older, wiser person and an “inexperienced” youth.

During my fieldwork, I have interviewed many more women than men.<sup>10</sup> All my “favorite” informants have been women and some of my warmest relationships and longest collaborations in the field have been with elderly women. At the same time, a number of instances have revealed and challenged my assumptions and prejudices concerning topics fit to be discussed with a man or a woman of a certain age.

When conducting fieldwork among descendants of Setos who had migrated to Siberia, I visited one particularly skilled storyteller on several occasions (2007, 2008, and 2012). She listened to my and my colleagues' curious and more commonplace questions with great empathy and happily shared stories that our signal words reminded her of. Over the course of our conversations, I asked her questions about menstrual taboos as well as other intimate topics that women do not usually discuss with men or even women they are not closely acquainted with. On several occasions, she told me the story of how she had been such an ignorant young girl that when she had had her first period she believed that she had hurt herself while weaving on a loom that was too heavy for her. When we met for the last time in 2012, this woman's daughter had brought her to live with her in the city of Krasnoyarsk. The storyteller was happy that we had managed to find her. We enjoyed our time together and recorded hours of conversation on a wide range of topics. We talked about her memories of having secretly witnessed her mother giving birth. After discussing predictions concerning the future of newborn children, we came to the topic of her own child-births. I inquired about postpartum behavior and the restraints imposed on a woman in labor.

At this point, something unexpected happened. The informant touched upon a medical condition—that of her grandmother—that I had never heard about or talked about with anyone before. For me, the turn in her story felt so surprising and for some reason totally inappropriate that I was unable to ask any reasonable or specifying further questions or continue on the subject. I was overwhelmed and tried to hide my uneasiness as best I could. After an awkward pause that seemed to go on forever, I changed the topic, asking her decidedly more “neutral” questions about spells used in the sauna and other rituals related to bathing in the sauna.

[AK:] But was there anything that a woman was not allowed to do after giving birth? Could she leave the room?

[INFORMANT:] Well, sure they did, they sure left the room!

[AK:] They wouldn't go out in the village, would they?

[I:] No, they wouldn't go to the village. I don't know how long they had to stay in, that they couldn't leave the yard. That I don't know either. But my grandmother told me, when I was young, that after one has a baby, she shouldn't raise her arms above the head, that grandmother herself, that after she had her baby... Well, in the old days you used to bake your own bread, and the bread trays were huge, and she had lifted the bread tray on top of the oven and strained herself. And then her body [pelvic organ] fell out. And then later she was already old and she always used to ask me to whisk her back [with a branch to cleanse it] in the sauna. And then I whisked her back and washed her where she needed me to. And she always told me: “Be careful not to let water to the pipe!” And then I'm thinking, “what does she mean by pipe?” And well, I'm

not sure how, but I looked down [between her legs] and I saw that grandma had a small ball there. And I'm thinking that "boys have balls, but why would a woman have one?" But this was me, and well, I was such a, how do you call it, nitwit, that I had to touch it, to feel whether it was soft. But her body had prolapsed and dried out like, how do you call it, some dried fruit, a dried pear. And then I told grandma, asked her what it was. "Dear child, this is because after childbirth I lifted the bread tray up on the oven and, then, the uterus came out and it remained like that. And, well, I guess there were no doctors around and it would not heal on its own. And so it remained like that. And, you see, when you get married, make sure you won't lift anything above your head."

[AK:] But you were a child at this time? When did it...

[I:] Of course! Now I'm [telling] all my grandchildren that when you are giving birth, make sure that you won't lift your arms high above your head. Even though these are [the times] when people use washing machines, you still have to hang things up [to dry]. So beware! And always use maternity support, this is a must. Use some belt for support.

[AK:] Oh, you mean, after giving birth?

[I:] Well, yes! And one shouldn't do anything or go anywhere for six weeks. But now nobody believes anything.

(N 1934, Krestyansk village, 2012)

The informant was speaking about her grandmother's vaginal or uterine prolapse, which is a very common condition among older women. She had probably been telling the story as a cautionary tale to her younger female relatives and, since we had been talking about her grandmother, childbirth and postpartum traditions, she considered it appropriate to share with me, thinking that I would find it interesting. It was; however, it also evoked quite an unexpected negative response in me. Evidently the narrative violated some taboo in my world. It crossed the line between interesting topics related to folklore, folk medicine, ethnography, history, and life in general on the one hand, and certain medical conditions and intimate anatomical peculiarities that I felt should remain private on the other. This interview held in an apartment block in Krasnoyarsk revealed taboos that I had not realized existed, taboos reflecting my position as a member of a (supposedly modern and civilized) culture, in which discussing the body of a post-menopausal woman is seen as even more inappropriate than talking about menstruation.

## **Conclusion**

A researcher embarking on a field expedition is equipped with not only background knowledge and communication skills, but also his or her empathy, emotions, and prejudices. Although the scholar's religious background

or relationship status is not often revealed in research reports for the sake of “objectivity,” personal experiences and preferences inevitably accompany him or her in the field. While today it is common to emphasize the dialogical nature of fieldwork, interactions in the field are usually subject to a hidden hierarchy. Encounters are planned and organized so that informants do not necessarily realize why certain topics are discussed during an interview or why they are entering into intimate communication. Scholars rarely emphasize the physical and mental challenges that they endured over the course of fieldwork in their research reports. They are afraid of having overreacted or misinterpreted something, but are also wary of breaches in research ethics, of betraying their informants’ trust.

All in all, a lot more happens during fieldwork than can be later read from publications. Traces of dismay or discomfort, awkward or funny moments, and other disturbances in fluent communication between the researcher and the informant—even subtle and fleeting disruptions that are only just detectable from interview recordings—ruin the illusion of complete understanding and shared language between the parties. However, they may be illuminating (for all concerned), as they reveal prejudices and help identify structures and hierarchies of religion, gender, and sexuality.

When discussing highly intimate or taboo topics, the informant’s willingness to share his or her thoughts with the researcher is always pertinent. The researcher relies on empathy, tactfulness, and his or her relationship with the interviewee. Body and sexuality are much easier to discuss in a same-gender group. In my experience, a significant age gap between the interviewer and the interviewee may reduce the importance of gender. Over the course of my fieldwork, I have learned that a male scholar can discuss intimate topics related to religion, reproduction, and sexuality with women. Even for contemporary Seto women, these themes are intertwined—though menstrual restrictions and other religious purity regulations are usually not spoken of, at least not with strangers.

Both archival sources and my present-day fieldwork suggest that the Mother of God has had a highly influential role in Seto women’s Orthodoxy. Due to their intimate connection, women’s experiences related to menstruation and childbirth have been associated with the Mother of God. According to archival reports, the mothers and grandmothers of my present-day informants were familiar with the folklore that the Mother of God was the first woman to have a period. My interviewees today would not share this specific piece of folklore, but they, too, were familiar with the Orthodox taboos related to ritual purity learned from their mothers and grandmothers, and felt a particular affinity with the Mother of God.

All in all, Seto women’s Orthodoxy demonstrates a remarkable relation between the Mother of God and church taboos. The Setos’ Mother of God closely resembles an ordinary woman even in her bodily functions: she menstruates and suffers from a painful childbirth and agonizing death. It appears that Seto women have actively interpreted ecclesial restrictions



and associated the causes of the taboos related to women's bodies with the Mother of God. In the Seto tradition, all the Orthodox restrictions imposed on women are associated with the Mother of God as "women's God." Ancient Orthodox traditions have been kept alive in the Seto region on the periphery of the Orthodox world. The ritual taboos of purity, restrictions on menstruating women, and rules of conduct for the postpartum period have been passed on in oral tradition. An old Orthodox custom has been given a local interpretation, in which the Mother of God plays a significant role.

The Orthodox Church rules concerning a woman's body are not publicly discussed in the Orthodox communities of the Seto region. Still, folklore about a people specially chosen by the Mother of God lives on. The practice of blessing a woman after she has given birth is falling into oblivion, since these days children are usually not baptized under the age of six weeks but months or even years later. Even now, the prohibition on going to church or taking part in sacraments during menstruation was a surprisingly relevant aspect of the Orthodox tradition for elderly Seto women. It remains to be seen whether it will be passed on to future generations. My interviews with Seto women revealed that many topics, although not publicly discussed, continue to exist—one must only find a way to discuss these in a friendly and open manner.

## Notes

- 1 The custom of stigmatizing menstruation and the practice of "churching" a woman after she has given birth are based on the Old Testament. Leviticus contains passages on the uncleanliness of menstruation (Lev. 15:19–31) and a prescription to confine women to their homes after giving birth (Lev. 12: 1–5). The Christian rituals for blessing or purifying a woman 40 days after giving birth derive from Jewish tradition and reflect blood-related taboos and purification rituals known in Judaism (Raphael 1996, 135). The retention of Jewish tradition is explained with reference to the New Testament, according to which Mary meticulously observed the Law of Moses after giving birth to Jesus (Lempiäinen 1969, 10; cf. Dresen 2003; Roll 2003). Orthodox theologians began to critically address this topic only in the 1990s (e.g., Polidoulis Kapsalis 1998).
- 2 I have been asking Seto women questions about the Mother of God and menstruation as part of my fieldwork interviews since the summer of 2003. The fieldwork was conducted both in historical Seto territory and in diaspora communities in Krasnoyarsk Krai, where Setos settled in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. All translations from Seto to English are mine.
- 3 In 2002, the Seto Council of Elders declared Setos a separate people. Estonians have considered Seto as a dialect of the Estonian language and have not recognized Setos as an ethnic minority. Russia recognizes Setos as a small ethnic minority.
- 4 Records of the St. Nicholas Church in Izborsk, situated in the Seto settlement area, date back to the eleventh century (see Piho 2011). Later, the religious life of the Setos has mostly been influenced by the Pskovo-Pechersky Monastery, founded in the fifteenth century and situated in the center of the Seto area.
- 5 In the Lutheran areas of Estonia, schools were often linked to church institutions. A network of schools covering the entire country began to develop after

- the Reformation. However, schools linked to the Orthodox Church emerged much later. While there were some Russian language schools in the Seto settlement area, as a rule, Setos did not send their children to these schools (see Schvak and Paert 2014; Kalkun 2015b).
- 6 The reference to the final hour is clearly a paraphrase of the Bible (Matt 20: 1–16), but it is attributed to the Mother of God.
  - 7 The “official” Orthodox theology also emphasizes the human nature of the Mother of God. For example, it is emphasized that the Mother of God died like an ordinary human, but she was assumed into Heaven where she acts as a mediator and protector for the rest of humanity (see Cunningham 2015, 65, 183). However, there is no mention of her experiencing a painful death.
  - 8 Feminist theologians, speaking specifically of Western Christianity, have criticized the asexual image of the Virgin Mary and her virgin birth for serving as poor examples to ordinary women of flesh and blood (see Kalkun and Vuola 2017).
  - 9 For a discussion on intimate and sexual relations between anthropologists and their research subjects, see Kulick and Willson (1995).
  - 10 I have often been asked why I am not studying men’s songs and men’s religion. Why would a man explore themes related to women and, moreover, themes not conventionally disclosed in the Seto culture? In my research, I have focused on the older singing tradition and the religious culture of Setos. Since the number of recorded and written songs performed by Seto women is far greater than that of men, I have chosen to study women’s songs in particular. Another reason is that contemporary Seto women lead a far more active religious life than men. Processes of modernization had begun to affect Seto men long before Seto women, whose bond with the past and with Seto traditions is therefore much stronger and more organic.

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