

## **A perception of Votians from an Estonian perspective**

**Madis Arukask (University of Tartu)**

There are two sides in studying and representing smaller kindred peoples. Often a cultural conceptualisation or artistic representation of a given group speaks more about the (national) cultural aspirations or 'needs' of its author, no difference whether s/he is a researcher or an artist. Examples of this kind of use of the culture of the kindred peoples to construct national identity can be found both in Estonia and Finland. On the other hand, any study and/or artistic depiction has also been of great importance to the peoples themselves - external interest can raise their self-esteem and self-awareness. The search for identity of Russia's minority peoples today has consisted in a constant positioning of themselves between East and West. At the same time the line between East and West often does not coincide in cultural-linguistic vs. political-ideological terms, which does not make the situation easier.

In this paper, I will take a closer look at the attention dedicated to Votians in Estonia. I will focus on the person of Paul Ariste as a researcher and populariser, as well as a promoter of Votian identity in the second half of the 20th century. As a researcher, Ariste was selective in his choice of informants in the field. Understandably focusing on older people (born at the end of the 19th century) with good language skills, he created his own image of the 'ideal' Votianess, which he presented both rhetorically and analytically in his diaries. Above all, it was a counterpoint to the cultural situation, secularisation and language loss of the Soviet era. But it can also be taken as a veiled warning message about the cultural and linguistic situation in the Soviet Estonia at the time.

Ariste's work and collections have been an important and fundamental source of the cultural revitalisation in some Votian villages of the Leningrad Oblast that began in the very end of the 20th century. Of course, the Russian-speaking revivalists do not use Ariste's rhetoric presented from an Estonian perspective. Today's Votian 'own' is based on people's place identity and kinship relations, on material ethnography and historical knowledge, as well as on environmental activism in the struggle against the constant expansion of the Ust-Luga port in the region. Linguistic identity and language learning, as well as Western cultural influences, have been brought to the region until recently by Estonian researchers, first of all by Heinike Heinsoo. The knowledge that the Votians (as well as other Finno-Ugric peoples in Russia) continue to exist is needed by both the Votians themselves (or their descendants with

a Russian identity) and the enthusiasts in Estonia and Finland. It is very likely that the radically changed political situation will widen the gap in perceptions on both sides.

Arukask, M. (2009). The narratives of Oskar Loorits and Paul Ariste and their problematic dialogue with the 'Popular'. *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore*, 43, 123–142.

Västriik, E.-H.; Võsu, E. (2010). Performing Votianness. Heritage Production, the Votian Museum and Village Feasts. *Ethnologia Europaea*, 40 (2), 60–76.