

Estonian perspectives on Finno-Ugric spirituality

Piret Koosa, Estonian National Museum

From the 1960s to the 1990s, the Estonian National Museum organized numerous field expeditions to other Finno-Ugric peoples within the Soviet Union. The primary aim of these trips was to collect objects of material heritage. During the expeditions, photos, drawings, and occasionally video recordings were made, alongside writing ethnographic descriptions and field diaries. This material provides us valuable insights into the lives of Finno-Ugric peoples during these decades. It also enables us to better understand Estonian ethnographers' perspectives regarding their smaller kindred peoples – exploring their motives for collecting, as well as the commonalities and differences they perceived with the locals, etc. One interesting topic that ethnographers occasionally address concerns local spiritual and religious practices and beliefs. Most of the peoples the ethnographers visited had religious backgrounds – either Russian Orthodox or traditional animist – that were different from those of most Estonians. Another layer was added by the officially atheist Soviet framework. In my talk, I intend to examine the fragmentary material on religion found in the ethnographers' accounts, focusing on the contexts these comments occurred and on how the researchers' positionality is reflected in their observations.