JANIKA ORAS
(ESTONIA)

SETO MULTIPART SINGING AND OTHER MUSIC. CHANGING MEANINGS AND FUNCTIONS OF MULTIPART TRADITION OVER TIME THROUGH THE EYES OF ELDERLY SINGERS

In my presentation, I try to shed light on the historical changes in the Seto multipart oral singing tradition in the 20th–21st century through the musical biographies of active female singers in the community.

The Seto are a small ethnos (about 12, 000 people) closely related to Estonians and belonging to Baltic-Finnic, and more generally to Finno-Ugric people. Nowadays the historical Seto area (Setomaa – 'Seto land') is divided into two parts by the Estonian-Russian border. Due to decades of migration, most of the Seto now live in several places in Estonia (about 2500 of them in the Setomaa municipality), with just over 200 people living on the Russian side.

Seto multipart singing tradition (Seto *leelo*) represents a unique sub-tradition of the Finnic runosong (known also as Kalevala-metric song, runic song, *regilaul*) estimated to have emerged approximately two millennia ago (Rüütel 1997; Frog 2019). *Leelo* tradition has been transmitted largely orally up to recent times and was inscribed into the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2009. During the 20th and 21st centuries, the tradition underwent profound changes: from a communal practice, *leelo* singing has become a tradition practiced and passed on mainly in institutions – groups of singers called *leelo* choirs. In addition to orally inherited and self-composed songs, the repertoire is complemented by published and archival material. Even though the *leelo* plays a very important role in the self-presentation of the Seto people, it is practiced systematically by a small part of the community – about 250 singers participate in *leelo* choirs. It should be added, however, that after Estonia regained its independence in 1991 and the Seto community became politically and culturally quite active, various events have been re-established or invented, where it is possible to spontaneously sing *leelo* together and learn to sing (UNESCO Seto; Oras, Powell 2022).

The 20th and 21st centuries are characterized by the active practice of several other musical styles in the Seto community alongside Seto singing: end-rhymed more modern song tradition; Orthodox song, classical music (a cappella choral song); concertina and Russian karmoshka music, popular music of the 20th century. According to the Setomaa municipality website, besides 10 Seto *leelo* choirs there are 3 classical choirs and 11 popular music groups in the municipality (https://setomaa.kovtp.ee/kultuuriseltsid-ja-kollektiivid).

Statistics and official documentation only partially describe the musical behavior of the community. In order to understand what the continuity of the *leelo* tradition means and what has enabled its sustainability so far, it is also necessary to examine those practices that fall outside formal institutions, as well as the individual experiences in all their heterogeneity and complexity (Bangstad 2016). For this purpose, I made qualitative in-depth semi-structured interviews with 11 women, born between 1933 and 1962. All of them actively make or have made music in Setomaa or a Seto *leelo* choir outside of geographical Setomaa. In the following, I will speak conditionally about the older and younger generations, which include women born in the 1930s and 1940s and women

born in the 1950s and 1960s respectively. Of course, no broad generalizations can be made based on 11 interviews. This paper can be seen as a pilot study or a midterm review, which highlights the common features of my interviewees' musical experiences, but also unique individual memories.

Ethnicity and Geography of Residence

The ethnicity of the interviewees and the geography of their residence were quite diverse, reflecting the global processes of urbanization, and peripheralization in the second half of the 20th century, as well as the economic deprivation of rural Estonia after the forced collectivization of 1949. Young people left Setomaa to continue their studies and work. No woman in my sample had not studied or worked outside Setomaa. Relatives kept them in touch with their homeplace and one of the reasons for returning to Setomaa was the need to support elderly parents. But among the younger generation, there was also, for example, an ethnic Seto born in Tallinn, who settled in Setomaa as an adult and later also took in her mother, who had left Setomaa for the capital when she was young.

There were four ethnically non-Seto women in my sample. In terms of percentage, this is roughly the same as in the Setomaa population, where the proportion of non-Seto people is estimated to be nearly 1/3. Three non-Seto women had married a Seto man, one Seto woman an Estonian man; two non-Seto women had come to Setomaa for work, and two had come for marriage.

Seto *Leelo* Experiences from Childhood and Youth

Of my interviewees, all ethnic Seto had heard Seto *leelo* in traditional situations and settings. In the younger generation, women born in the 1950s–1960s, childhood memories of spontaneous singing of Seto *leelo* were associated more with grandmothers and grandfathers, while mothers were not involved in singing:

"It was always the older women who were singing in the group. Mothers had 1960s curled headdresses and sang songs from Horoscope [a popular TV singing show]".

The older generation, women born in the 1930s–1940s, had richer experiences. They told stories of their mothers and villagers singing together – at village feasts, weddings, traditional visiting acquaintances, at the ritual finishing of fieldwork. A recurring motif was the great singing passion of the mother and her generation mates, the search for singing opportunities, and the initiation of singing together:

"I remember one Christmas when we were visiting relatives in Ton´a – I must have been little then, they didn't take grown-ups anymore. And then my mother was the song leader all the time: 'Women, let's sing, let's sing!' And then I remember the next day when my mother said: Oh, we sang! Oh, how we sang yesterday!"

The mother of an interviewee, who was born in 1914, needed singing even when there were few opportunities for spontaneous singing together:

"It was like this with my mother ... She was getting weaker by then. She's coming: "I'm going to Tepo's [son's] wife's mother". I said, "What are you going there for?" – "Daughter, I'm really hungry for singing". So she went to sing with her. Together they sang at Tepo's house, and at my brother's place. In the 70's, singing generally stopped, I don't know when it disappeared. Mum was younger [than the other singers in her village], the others had already disappeared".

All my interview partners had heard other music from their parents, and most of them had sung it with them: more modern folk songs, Orthodox songs, classical and popular compositions taught in Estonian schools, and popular Estonian pre-WWII hits.

Experiences of Singing Seto *Leelo* Before Joining a *Leelo* Choir

None of the interviewees had sung the *leelo* consistently since they were young. The non-Seto and Seto of the younger generation had started singing in a *leelo* choir. Women of the older generation had acquired passive skills by listening to the *leelo* in their youth, but their own singing practices were very sporadic. Their consistent practice of *leelo* singing also began in (mature) adulthood in a *leelo* choir and was preceded by the experience of practicing several other styles of music, both in institutions (school singing class, classical music choir, church choir, popular music ensemble) and in spontaneous singing situations.

None of the women of the older generation, who had closer contact with singing in the village community, recalled having been involved in adult singing or having been taught singing when they were children or young. On the one hand, this was the traditional behaviour – singing skills were acquired by listening to adults, in some cases singing along, and imitating adults in the company of their peers. However, maidens were obviously supervised when they had important self-presentations ahead of them – village feasts and being bridesmaids at weddings. On the other hand, both young people at the time and their elders were influenced by the attitude of modern society, including Soviet cultural policy, that traditional culture implied a lack of civilization and economic backwardness and belonged to the past. Women of the older generation had personally experienced demeaning attitudes towards the Seto people and had hidden their ethnic origin when they went to study or work outside Setomaa.

These attitudes, together with the lifestyle changes, are the main reason why the *leelo* practices of the older generation remained casual before they joined a *leelo* choir, as the following recollections suggest.

A woman born in 1947 recalled how, when she was 11 or 12 years old, she had tried to sneak into the car in which her mother and the other singers were going to sing at a wedding – because she really wanted to hear women singing – and how her mother had pushed her out of the trunk of the car: "You're not going anywhere!" [It wasn't customary to take older children with you when you went further to the party, their role was to keep house with the elderly.] The courageous girl had then gone and made a wedding gate – a traditional barrier to the wedding procession – with her friend and tried to sing a wedding song with her.

A woman born in 1949 told how in the pasture, where the village children were together, one girl sang Seto leelo *and made the other children sing the chorus part – but no one sang in a higher solo voice. The woman, born in 1941, told how there were no other children in the pasture who could sing Seto* leelo*, but instead, they sang together popular songs they had learnt from the village youths' repertoire.*

At weddings, the role of the maidens was to sing the bridal laments together. None of the older generations of women had sung the laments, although at their weddings when they took place in Setomaa, the older women had sung other traditional wedding songs.

A woman born in 1941 recalled that she had wanted to sing laments at her wedding, but her future husband decided he didn't want this old money-making custom at his wedding. The woman thought that perhaps if she had had to sing laments, her mother would have taught her.

However, two women of the older generation sang the *leelo* when they met their relatives:

"When I came away to Tartu after school, then, when we got together with relatives at home [in Setomaa], there was always singing. And even when I was married, I was living in Ülenurme at the time, when relatives came to visit us, I always asked my aunts: 'Well, sing!' They said they don't know, well, in the apartment, whether to sing ... I said: 'It's nothing!'"

"Disappearance" of the *Leelo*

The 1970s–80s were characterised by a couple of respondents as a time when the *leelo* was in the shadows or the background – despite the fact that there were *leelo* choirs, from 1977 Seto *Leelo* Day was held every third year with the participation of all choirs, and the folklore movement that started in Estonian cities in the 1970s gave Seto *leelo* a new social meaning. However, in the Seto community as a whole, the *leelo* was probably not as visible as it was earlier as well as in the subsequent period of political and cultural activism in the Seto community in the 1990s and onwards. In the 1970-the 80s the community singing practices had disappeared, the *leelo* choirs were relatively closed institutions, modern popular music, and classical choral singing were actively practiced in the cultural centers ('cultural houses'), and new styles of pop music were added to the world of youth from the 1960s onwards.

The woman, who was born in 1947, recalled how she came home to her mother in the early 1970s to ask for a traditional costume to join a folklore group in the capital. From her mother's point of view, the *leelo* tradition was over:

I came to Meeksi, and said to my mother: 'Where are your clothes – Igor Tõnurist is taking me to Leegajus to sing Seto songs.' She got really angry: 'What are you cheating, you want Seto clothes just like that, a treasure.' For my mother, they were a treasure, because she wore them and was a singer and a dressmaker herself. She wouldn't give: 'You came home to lie to me. Even in Setomaa, they don't even sing Seto songs at weddings anymore and you are lying to me that they sing Seto songs in Tallinn. Don't cheat!' She didn't give them. She was really annoyed. [It was only after watching a TV program and meeting the leader of the folklore group that the mother began to believe her daughter.]

What Motivated Women to Sing Seto *Leelo*?

The older generation of Seto women found it difficult to explain why they had joined the *leelo* choir – they just wanted to sing. Their childhood memories show that women's singing at the time left a deep impression on them, creating an epiphanic experience: for them, the *leelo* is beautiful. *Leelo* is also "one's own", it carries a link with parents and the homeplace – the latter is especially important for those who live outside Setomaa. Since the mothers of many of the women of the older generation were the leaders of singing in the community, it seems that these women have inherited from their parents the "passion for singing", the desire to make all kinds of music. Several women were motivated to join the *leelo* choir at a mature age by the need for social interaction.

Non-Seto and the younger generation gave their views more from a bystander position. A couple of women pointed out the "shortcomings" of the *leelo* from the perspective of Western music: it is musically monotonous, the melody lacks development and culmination, the intonation is not clear, and, in general, the performance is not musically ordered or controlled enough. What drew the non-Seto and the younger generation to the *leelo* was a special, heightened, or ritualistic energy that they had experienced watching the older singers and singing themselves. One of the main values of *leelo* was the possibility to improvise words, to express their thoughts, and to address specific people in a particular situation.

Summing Up

Conversations with 11 musicians opened up for me new meanings for the phrase 'continuous *leelo* tradition' in the 20th and 21st centuries. Continuity includes minor and major discontinuities that can be followed in the individual musical life histories of women born in the 1930s and 1960s: the lack (in the case of incomers) or passivity of the *leelo* experience, the lack or randomness of singing practice in adolescence, together with the dominance of practices of other musical styles in adolescence and adulthood, in some cases also currently. However, in (mature) adulthood, women joined *leelo* choirs, motivated by the vivid experiences of singing situations in childhood and the emotional connection to the singers of those days, as well as to the homeplace; by the experience of special energy of traditional performance and the charming personalities of outstanding singers; by the opportunity to enjoy old poetry and to create words appropriate to the situation; and, to some extent, by a consciousness of *leelo* as cultural heritage (see also Oras 2016). The motivational effect of these factors could certainly be taken into account when considering how to ensure the sustainability of the Seto *leelo* tradition in the future – what attracts and keeps people engaged in the *leelo* singing.

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