

CULTURAL MAPPING VERSUS THICK DESCRIPTION: RECENT FOLKLORISTIC PRACTICES IN ESTONIA THROUGH THE EYES OF AN ANTHROPOLOGIST

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ABSTRACT

During my anthropological fieldwork in Estonia in 1996-97 I approached various folkloristic traditions and practices at several occasions. My meeting with folklorists and their practices can be described as a 'clash' between academic disciplines. As an anthropology student I obviously reacted to how folklorists related to their research material. It is probably often so when people from different disciplines meet, that disagreements will arise about how research is done and fieldwork material is interpreted. Somehow we have to accept these differences, but sometimes it is also inspiring to get to know what people from other disciplines think about your own discipline. I want to give an account of folkloristic practices as seen through the eyes of an anthropologist. And it is related to a particular time and place: Estonia in the 1990ties at the time of my fieldwork. I guess, and I know, that changes have occurred since then, but I still hope that these reflections can be of interest.

KEY WORDS: socio-cultural anthropology, cultural mapping, Finno-Ugric, ancient traditions, ethnographic fieldworks, definition of region, anthropological interest in kinship, definition of kinship.

ANOTACIJA

Antropologinės ekspedicijos Estijoje 1996–1997 m. metu autoriui teko susipažinti su įvairiomis folklorinių tyrimų tradicijomis ir jų praktika. Straipsnyje jis apžvelgia savo įspūdžius iš šių folklorinių ekspedicijų praktikos ir lygina ją su socialinės antropologijos praktika. Formuluojama problema: kokie kultūrinės ir socialinės tikrovės aspektai ignoruojami, fiksuojant finougrų senąsias tradicijas vien kultūrinio žemėlapiu aspektu? Išskirtinis dėmesys vien šioms temoms lemia tyrimo vienpusiškumą. Dėmesio sutelkimas vien kultūriniais žemėlapiams sudaryti gali reikšti socialinio aspekto, o kartu ir kultūros reiškinių tyrimo analitinio gilumo, praradimą. Socialinio aspekto ignoravimas kultūros reiškinių tyrimuose lemia aprašų paviršutiniškumą. Įvesdami į kultūros reiškinių tyrimą socialinę dimensiją, išvėlgsime tiriamojo reiškinių sudėtinius kultūrinius, arba socialinius-kultūrinius sluoksnius, kurie galiausiai padėtų parengti išsamesnį aprašą.

PAGRINDINIAI ŽODŽIAI: sociokultūrinė antropologija, kultūrinis žemėlapis, finougrai, senovinės tradicijos folklorinė ekspedicija, antropologinė ekspedicija, kultūriniai sluoksniai.

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During my anthropological fieldwork in Estonia in 1996-97 I approached various folkloristic traditions and practices at several occasions. Viljandi College of Culture, which was my base during fieldwork, was definitely influenced by folklorists, and several times I joined students and teachers on 'expeditions' to rural Estonian places like Setumaa and Kihnu (Bach 2002:84-88). The theme of my post-graduate thesis was the relation between folk music, folklore and national reconstruction. Folklorists had a significant role in the first national awakening in the 19th century (Laur, Pajur & Tanneberg 1995, Bach 2002:60-63), and because of this it suited well that the people who carried on these traditions in this way became 'my natives'. In this article I want to shed light on what I experienced as characterizing these folkloristic practices, and how these practices differ from social anthropological practices. Hence it will be just as much a discussion of my own reaction to these practices as a description from "the natives' point of view".

My meeting with folklorists and their practices can be described as a ‘clash’ between academic disciplines. As an anthropology student I obviously reacted to how folklorists related to their research material. It is probably often so when people from different disciplines meet, that disagreements will arise about how research is done and fieldwork material is interpreted. Somehow we have to accept these differences, but sometimes it is also inspiring – I hope – to get to know what people from other disciplines think about your own discipline.

Anyway, I want to stress that it is not my intention by what follows to criticize folklorists. The kinds of research folklorists pursue have my full respect. Rather I want to give an account of folkloristic practices as seen through the eyes of an anthropologist. And it is related to a particular time and place: Estonia in the 1990ties at the time of my fieldwork. I guess, and I know, that changes have occurred since then, but I still hope that these reflections can be of interest.

Cultural mapping, the Finno-Ugric and ancient traditions

First I want briefly to describe what I experienced as characterizing folklorist practices in Estonia in the 1990ties. Here I will mention three key concepts: *Cultural mapping*, *the Finno-Ugric*, and *ancient traditions*. The first, *cultural mapping*, comprises what I experienced was the kind of cultural artefacts or expressions folklorists usually looked for. This could typically be songs, dances, costumes, food, weddings, beliefs or fairytales (Bach 2002:63, Korb, Oras & Tedre 1995). In short it is these kind of cultural expressions and artefacts that are normally associated with folklore. Folklorists showed interest in mapping out these different classes of cultural expressions, making links from one place to another, and from one time to another, to say that this song comes from this place, and this food-tradition originates from that place. Their professional interest seemed to be mainly into these cultural artefacts, and not so much in the people who were making the culture. This was something that conflicted to the anthropological research methods I had been trained in. A social anthropologist would have had to spend much more time on mapping out the social relations of the people in question, how they relate to each other, and how they relate to other groups of people.

The second concept, *Finno-Ugric*, displayed itself in the way that folkloric research was mainly done in areas where people spoke, or had previously spoken, a Finno-Ugric language. This was based on the theory which says that Finno-Ugric languages are somehow related, and that they have some common origin in the far past. As Estonian is a Finno-Ugric language, they had as a consequence given priority to do research on what they recognized as their cultural relatives. This was perhaps also fostered by a hope to find more traces of cultural relationships that could indicate closer connections in the past (Bach 2002:62). We can see the link between the ‘Finno-Ugric’ concept and ‘cultural mapping’ in the way that they wanted to map the Finno-Ugric cultural area. The priority given to the Finno-Ugric also displayed itself in an extensive Finno-Ugric network, and in various events like the Finno-Ugric Festival.

The third concept, *ancient traditions*, points to the kind of cultural artefacts that – to my experience – had the highest status among the folklorists.¹ This became apparent by where the folklorists went to collect folklore, and by what kind of folklore was documented. Fieldwork-expeditions often went to places and people that had been more or less isolated from contact with modern ‘mainstream’ culture.

¹ *Ancient traditions* here are in the meaning *traditions believed to be ancient*.

The kind of folklore that was documented could for instance be religious ceremonies, songs, or traditions connected to subsistence agriculture. This preference given to isolated and exotic cultural expressions was not new to me, as it has been a trend within anthropology as well. The main idea behind this kind of research, which is sometimes called *salvage anthropology*, is to document cultural and social forms before they disappear. Another motive for folklorists may be the belief that cultural artefacts in isolated areas are older and more authentic than others, and therefore more valuable in the ‘cultural mapping’ – project.

As a general statement, I do not think it is wrong to be interested in cultural mapping, the Finno-Ugric and ancient traditions. On the contrary these topics are important, especially it is crucial to study people living more or less isolated from the space we call ‘modern culture’. A question that should be discussed is however what parts of the cultural and social reality are ignored when choosing to do research on these themes? The danger is that by concentrating only on these subjects the research could end up being one-sided or even biased.

I also think the choices done when such projects are started - as always - should be well founded. For example: If you are a musician or musicologist who is only interested in different kinds of musical expressions, it may be justified to only record the music and leave the rest untouched. But, if you are interested in the role of music in that society, this of course is not sufficient.

Thick description

The other side of being very focused on cultural mapping can be the loss of the social dimension and then analytical depth of the cultural phenomena studied. From an anthropological point of view the social is what makes the culture important. Behind this statement lies the assumption that people are essentially social, they like to communicate with each other, and they use culture to communicate. Cultural artefacts and expressions are by this not only practical, but perhaps even more communicative.² People are singing and dancing not for practical reasons but for social reasons, because singing and dancing is an excellent way of communication. Even buying a tractor can be a communicative act within an agricultural social setting.

In general I will assert that the loss of the social dimension when studying cultural phenomena will lead to what can be called a thin description (Geertz 1993a:7). You can say the result will be only a slice of culture, or the topping of the cultural cake. By adding the social dimension to cultural phenomena we can find that there are multiple cultural, or socio-cultural levels in the case observed, something that in the end can make up a thicker description. Folklorists also make deep analyses, but they seem often to go in other directions, without paying very much attention of the social relations at work.

An excellent example of this kind of thick description is found in Clifford Geertz’ article ‘Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cock Fight’ (Geertz 1993b). Geertz gives an account of not only what happens during a cockfight, but also the relation between the cock and the owner, the relation between the owner of the cocks that are fighting, the relation between the owners in the centre of the match and the more distanced crowd following the cockfight, the relation between the cockfight institution and the local government, and finally the relation between Geertz himself and the locals. This together makes up the thick description of the cultural institution that the cockfight represents.

² See for instance Leach (1977) and Bourdieu (1995).

The Women's day in Setumaa

An event I took part in during fieldwork may serve to illustrate this difference between thin and thick description. The 6th of March 1997 I joined a folkloric expedition to the celebration of Women's Day in Obinitisa in Setumaa in southeast Estonia (Bach 2002:84-88). This was a traditional celebration and had nothing to do with the 8th of March international Women's Day. What happened was that a class from Viljandi College of Culture was going to Setumaa on this day in order to learn to do folkloric research. Important to note is that, except from the teacher, these students were not trained folklorists, but were getting a short introduction in folkloric methods.

Before attending to the celebration of Women's Day the students had been given instructions of what their tasks were during the event. When the celebration started, some students took care of the camcorder, some the tape-recorder, while others took notes of song texts, music, dancing style, what kind of clothes they were wearing, what was drunk and eaten and so on. The local women welcomed us with an improvised song in the characteristic setu regi song-style, where one singer leads, and four or five singers repeat the stanza. At the same time they were dancing and twisting. After this welcome there was more singing and dancing, we were served drinks and food, and some of us joined in dancing, playing accordion or singing. After a couple of hours the seance was over, and our teacher from the college sang a regi-song by way of thanks for the hospitality and the things we had been served.

When it was over the students put away the notebooks, camcorder and tape recorder, and one of the ladies who apparently was a leading figure among the women invited us to the local museum. In the museum we could see the local setu culture displayed, there were traditional handicraft, furniture, old tools, and all these things that usually are displayed in a local country museum like this. Among some books lying there I recognized that the Setu have their own epos (epic), and that they also have their own annual kingdom day. The lady brought us to a room where she started to inform us about the museum and Setumaa in general. On a rack behind her there was a map of Setumaa with a thick red line dividing it in two halves. It was the Estonian-Russian border, and she explained that this border caused a lot of trouble for them, because it separated them from relatives, friends and family-graves on the other side.

For me as an anthropologist this was essential information, as it gave the wider context for the celebration of the Women's Day. I knew that the cultivating of local traditions could be a powerful tool in mobilizing people for a common cause. In this case the cause was the reunification of Setumaa, and the glue that kept people together and gave them power to struggle for this cause, was the local cultural traditions. If I would have went on to study the Setus and their let us say musical traditions (something I didn't), I would have had to find out more about the relationship between the singers and their songs, the singers' place in the local community, the relationships of this group of people to the local and the national governments on both Russian and Estonian side. I would have had to ask questions like: Do they get support from, or are they opposed by, the national government in cultivating their local traditions? And why were we, especially me who was a man, welcome to take part of the women's day celebration, when this by tradition was not allowed?

The investigation of these questions might have led to a thick description of the Women's Day celebration. You can say the biggest difference between the folklore students and me was that their interest laid mainly in **what** happened, what kind of song, what kind of dance, what kind of clothes they wear, while I was mainly interested in **why** this was happening. And a good advice to make a

thick description in this way may be to ask why, and ask it enough times, also to yourself and your own activity.

Jewels with stories

The broader international context in Setumaa was in many ways obvious, and maybe this was the reason why it was not paid so much attention among the students. Often it is these things that seem to be obvious which are the easiest to overlook. But for an anthropologist, who is trained in the typical holistic anthropological ideal, this broader context always becomes essential. We should perhaps also remember that after ten or twenty years time, or for people living in other parts of the world, things we today see as obvious are not that obvious.

In general it is my impression that folklorists are very accurate in writing their field-notes, and they are also trained in taking notes of the context, not only the main cultural artefacts they focus on (Hiimäe 1996). Seen from a social anthropological point of view it would be desirable to make a better integration of this contextual information, as well as a deeper investigation of the social relations at work, and more discussions about the role of the researcher.

You could say that for a social anthropologist or a historian, a golden jewel is nothing worth without the stories connected to it. We have to ask for example where the jewel was bought, to whom it was a gift, what does the gift symbolize, and why did this person get it. The same applies to social and cultural events; they become worthless without knowledge of the social relations that unfold or form the basis of the event.

There are clearly several ways a golden jewel can be valuable, it can be related to pure matter (gold), the technique that has formed it, or the social value invested in it. However, you cannot say that the one way is 'more right' than the other. Folklorists in the way I met them in Estonia in the middle of the nineties clearly saw the field in a different way than me, and we ended up with different, but equally right, results. Despite of this, or perhaps more correctly because of this, it can be useful to gain insight into these other perspectives of the cultural artefacts or events that occupy us. At least this is true for those who consider doing new things, like switching from folklore-studies to social anthropology, or vice versa.

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KULTŪRŲ KARTOGRAFAVIMAS VS. TANKUS APRAŠYMAS: PASTAROJO LAIKOTARPIO FOLKLORINIAI TYRIMAI ESTIJOJE ANTROPOLOGO AKIMIS

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Santrauka

Antropologinės ekspedicijos Estijoje 1996–1997 m. metu teko susipažinti su įvairiomis folklorinių tyrimų tradicijomis ir jų praktika. Ekspedicijos bazė buvo Viljandi kultūros kolegija su aktyviais folkloro specialistais, tad kelis kartus prisijungiau prie Kolegijos studentų bei jų pedagogų ir dalyvavau išvykose į Estijos kaimo vietoves *Setumaa* ir *Kihnu*. Šiame straipsnyje apžvelgiu savo išpūdžius iš tų folklorinių ekspedicijų praktikos ir lyginu ją su socialinės antropologijos praktika. Bandau aptarti tiek savo paties reakciją į stebėtą veiklą, tiek apibūdinti ją „vietiniu požiūriu“.

Pradėsiu nuo savo išpūdžių, gautų stebint folklorininkų darbą Estijoje 1990 metais. Trys pagrindinės sąvokos, reikalingos šios veiklos charakteristikai, yra *kultūrinis žemėlapis (cultural mapping)*, *finougrai* ir *senovinės tradicijos*.

Pirmoji sąvoka – *kultūrinis žemėlapis* – yra susijusi su kultūros artefaktais, kitaip tariant, su kultūros produktais, kurių paprastai ieško folklorininkai. Tai kultūros raiškos formos ar artefaktai, paprastai siejami su folkloru: dainos, šokiai, nacionaliniai kostiumai, prietarai, pasakos ir pan. Folklorininkai bando suklasifikuoti visų šių kultūros raiškos formų įvairovę geografinės padėties ir laiko atžvilgiu: rasdami tų pačių formų apraiškas skirtingose vietovėse ir skirtingais laikotarpiais, jie atseka, kad kokia nors konkreti daina yra kilusi vienoje vietovėje, o kokia nors kita (pvz., maisto tradicija) yra užgimusi kitoje vietovėje ar regione.

Antroji sąvoka – *finougrai* – yra aktuali todėl, kad folkloriniai tyrimai iš esmės vyko teritorijose, kur žmonės kalbėjo ar praeityje buvo kalbėję finougrų kalbomis.

Trečioji sąvoka – *senovinės tradicijos* – įvardija kultūros artefaktus, kurie, kaip rodo mano asmeninė patirtis, folklorininkų yra labiausiai vertinami. Tai įrodė ekspedicijų vietovių parinkimas ir dokumentuojamo folkloro pobūdis. Ekspedicijos dažniausiai vykdavo vietovėse, kur vietiniai žmonės buvo daugiau ar mažiau izoliuoti nuo šiuolaikinės „unifikuotos“ kultūros ir kur buvo galima tikėtis rasti išlikusių senovinių ar egzotiškų tradicijų.

Apskritai nenorėčiau teigti, kad neteisinga domėtis kultūriniais žemėlapiams, finougrais ar senovinėmis tradicijomis. Tačiau problema, kurią norėčiau aptarti, turi būti suformuluota taip: **kokie kultūrinės ir socialinės tikrovės aspektai ignoruojami, vykdant tyrimus vien aukščiau įvardytomis temomis?**

Manyčiau, kad išskirtinis dėmesys **vien šioms temoms** lemia tyrimo vienpusiškumą.

Be to, dėmesio sutelkimas vien kultūriniais žemėlapiams sudaryti gali reikšti socialinio aspekto, o kartu ir kultūros reiškinių tyrimo analitinio gilumo praradimą. Antropologijos požiūriu būtent socialinis aspektas sąlygoja kultūrą. Šio teiginio prielaida yra tai, kad žmogus iš esmės yra visuomeninė būtybė, jis mėgsta bendrauti, o bendravimas grindžiamas kultūra. Kultūros artefaktai ir raiškos būdai yra ne tik praktinio naudojimo dalykai, bet ir komunikacijos priemonės.

Apibendrinamas drįsčiau teigti, kad socialinio aspekto ignoravimas kultūros reiškinių tyrimuose lemia aprašų paviršutiniškumą. Galima sakyti, kad toks aprašas apima tik vieną kultūros sluoksnį – tarytum vien daugiasluoksnio kultūros „pyrago“ papuošimą. Įvesdami į kultūros reiškinių ty-

rimą socialinę dimensiją, išvelgsime tiriamojo reiškinių sudėtinius kultūrinius, arba socialinius-kultūrinius sluoksnius, kurie galiausiai padės parengti išsamesnį aprašą.

Norėčiau pailiustruoti skirtumą tarp paviršutiniško ir išsamaus aprašo vienu pavyzdžiu iš ekspedicijos praktikos. 1997 metų kovo 6 dieną dalyvavau folkloro ekspedicijoje, kur buvo fiksuojama Moters dienos šventė Obinitsoje, Setumaa rajone, pietrytinėje Estijos dalyje. Viljandi kultūros kolegijos studentų grupė tą dieną susirengė į Setumaa mokytiis folklorinių tyrimų metodikos.

Prieš vykdami į Moters dienos šventę, studentai gavo užduotis. Prasadėjus iškilmėms, vieni jų darė vaizdo ir garso, kiti tik garso įrašus, dar kiti užrašinėjo dainų tekstus, darė muzikos, šokių, drabužių, maisto ir gėrimų aprašus.

Pasibaigus šventei, studentai sudėjo savo aparatūrą bei užrašus, ir viena iš moterų, matyt, moterų bendruomenės aktyvistė, pakvietė mus į vietinį muziejų. Ji pasakojo apie muziejų ir patį Setumaa rajoną. Muziejuje kabančiame žemėlapyje Setumaa rajoną stora raudona linija dalijo į dvi dalis. Linija žymėjo Rusijos–Estijos sieną, ir mūsų gidė papasakojo, kiek negandų vietiniai gyventojai patiria dėl šios ribos, skiriančios juos nuo giminių, draugų ir šeimų, gyvenančių kitoje pusėje.

Man kaip antropologui tai buvo itin svarbi informacija, nes ji pateikė platesnį Moters dienos šventės kontekstą. Žinojau, kad vietinių tradicijų palaikymas gali tapti galingu įrankiu, sutelkiant žmones siekti bendrų tikslų. Minimū atveju tokiu tikslu galėjo tapti Setumaa suvienijimas, o jungiamoji medžiaga, kuri vienijo žmones ir teikė jėgų kovai už bendrą tikslą, buvo vietinės kultūros tradicijos.

Esminis skirtumas tarp studentų ir manęs buvo toks, kad jie domėjosi tuo, **kas** vyko, kokias dainas žmonės dainavo, kokius šokius šoko, kokiais drabužiais vilkėjo, o mane labiausiai domino, **kodėl** visa tai vyko. Geriausias patarimas bandančiam išsamiai aprašyti reiškinių būtų užduoti klausimą „kodėl?“, ir ne vieną kartą, be to, šį klausimą užduoti ir sau pačiam, ir savo veiklai.

Tie folklorininkai, su kuriais susipažinau Estijoje paskutinio dešimtmečio viduryje, neabejotinai įsivaizdavo šios srities tyrimus kitaip negu aš. Tai jokiū būdu nereiškia, kad vienas supratimas yra „teisingesnis“ negu kitas. Tačiau manyčiau, kad abiem pusėms būtų naudinga pažvelgti į kultūros artefaktus bei reiškinius ir iš platesnės, antropologinės, perspektyvos.

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