

SA SETO INSTITUUT

SETOMAA
◦
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AND GENUINE

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WHO ARE THE SETOS, AND WHERE IS SETOMAA?

The Setos are a small Finno-Ugric nation close to the border between Estonia and Russia, in the most southeasterly part of Estonia, an area called Setomaa. Several features distinguish Setos from Estonians. Firstly, in contrast to primarily Lutheran or atheist Estonians, Setos are traditionally Orthodox. Secondly, the language they speak differs from the Estonian written language in a way that makes it difficult for Estonians to understand, and almost impossible for them to learn to speak. Russian has had a major impact on the Seto language, as well as their clothing, cooking, architecture and music. Historically, Setomaa was Russian territory, thus the Russian influence. However, Setos have remained a separate nation to this day, and have not been subsumed by Russia.

However, their location on the boundary between East and West has greatly affected the being and essence of Setos. Setomaa has always been on the periphery, a borderland. Being peripheral and being separated from others is the reason why ancient cus-

toms are still alive. Paradoxically, the economic backwardness and unwritten culture – written culture was a recent development in Setomaa – have helped to maintain those traditions.

Setomaa, with its special and ancient cultural features, has interested researchers since the end of the 19th century. A three-volume collection of Seto songs was published at the beginning of the 20th century. The unique and ancient Seto singing tradition is called *leelo*. In the autumn of 2009, *leelo* was officially recognised and added to the list of UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage. Seeing Seto women singing and wearing distinctive and eye-catching silver jewellery is a sight to remember – a visiting card for Setomaa.

Several collections, research papers and pieces of work have appeared during the last decade documenting Seto culture. They are mostly in Estonian, with some in Seto as well. Some of them do include references and captions in English, but unfortunately there is no comprehensive English overview of Setomaa – nothing that Setos could take with them when going abroad to introduce themselves or to give to foreign visitors.

The present book aims to do just that. The book was put together in the framework of the Estonian-

→ Despite of difficult history, the Seto people know how to party.
The eye-catching national national dress adds festivity.
Photo: Andres Ots





Latvian international cooperational project “Seto-Suiti Renaissance”. The Suiti cultural environment in Courland (Kuramaa) belongs to the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage list, like the Seto *leelo*, and both these fascinating areas deserve to be introduced to the English reader as well.

The book gives a general yet detailed overview of Setomaa and its diverse history, surprisingly unique nature and the rich cultural repository of the Setos: their language, religion, traditional folk celebrations, *leelo* singing practices, national dress, traditional food and architecture. All of these aspects are closely linked together and have developed under the specific circumstances which Setos have lived under since the earliest days. We hope that this guide will help friends of Setomaa to better know and understand this small but unique place. More importantly, however, seeing is believing! Come and visit us!

← Härmä village with typical log buildings with no outer wainscoting. Photo: Ahto Raudoja

← The main colors of Seto national dress are white, red and black, and the noteworthy silver brooch of women can be called a trademark of Setos.. Photo: Ülle Pärnoja

SETOMAA IN FACTS

TERRITORY

Divided between two countries: Estonia and Russia

Historically, the territory of Setos (Pechory County) has covered about 1700 km²

Nowadays, about 2/3 of the historical range belongs to Russian Federation, and about 1/3 to Estonian Republic.

In Estonia, the territory of Setomaa is divided into 3 rural municipalities (Meremäe, Mikitamäe, Värska), and a small patch lies in Misso municipality.

POPULATION

As of 2011 Estonian census, there are about 12 800 people able to understand the Seto language in Estonia. About 4000 of them live in Setomaa (Estonia), about 8500 elsewhere in Estonia and in the world, and about 300 in Russia.

The historical capital of Setomaa has been Pechory (Petseri), which now belongs to Russia.

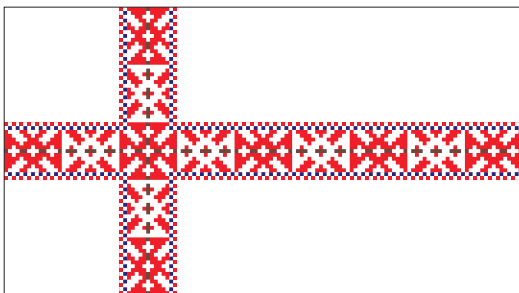
The most important settlements in today's Setomaa in Estonia are Värska, Obinitša, Meremäe, Mikitamäe, Luhamaa and Saatse.

SPECIAL FEATURES

- *Leelo* (special singing) – on the list of UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage since 2009
- Silver jewellery, especially the huge silver brooch
- Seto Kingdom Days held in August
- Orthodox religion and church feast days followed by village parties

The most important church feasts are:

- St. George's Day (6 May) at Väraska
- St. John's Day (7 June) at Miikse
- *Päätnits*/St. Paraskeva Day (last Friday of July) at Saatse
- Transfiguration Day (19 August) at Obinitsa
- Assumption of Mary (Great St. Mary's Day, 28 August) at Pechory



The flag of Setomaa, adopted in 2003



Location of Setomaa. A detailed map of Setomaa is attached on the back cover

Tourist information: www.visitsetomaa.ee

HISTORY OF SETOMAA

EARLIEST HISTORY

The history of settlement in Setomaa is a long one, dating back at least 8,000 to 9,000 years. The first humans here chose to settle near bodies of water, like Väraska Bay, Optjok River and Lake Izborsk. In the hillier western part of Setomaa, people have also lived farther away from large bodies of water, as is evidenced by the stone tools found around Mere-mäe. Not much changed over millennia: the settlements of ancient people remained in the same regions throughout the Stone Age, the Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age. As yet, we do not know a lot about the burial grounds of those times – only a few Early Iron Age stone graves have been examined.

There is considerably more information about burial grounds from the Middle Iron Age. From the 6th to the 10th century, people used to build round or elongated mounds of sand, in which they buried the bone fragments of the deceased burnt on a pyre. Sometimes, bones have been buried in such mounds in a burial urn, and jewellery or other smaller items have been added. There are numerous mounds, for

instance, in the pine forests around Laossina, Suurõ-Rõsna and Obinitša. While in the Soviet times it was thought that the burial mounds mainly belonged to Slavic tribes, in recent decades researchers have generally been of the opinion that these were the burial places of a local Baltic-Finnic nation. Burial mounds have been common also elsewhere in south-eastern Estonia and the Pskov region.

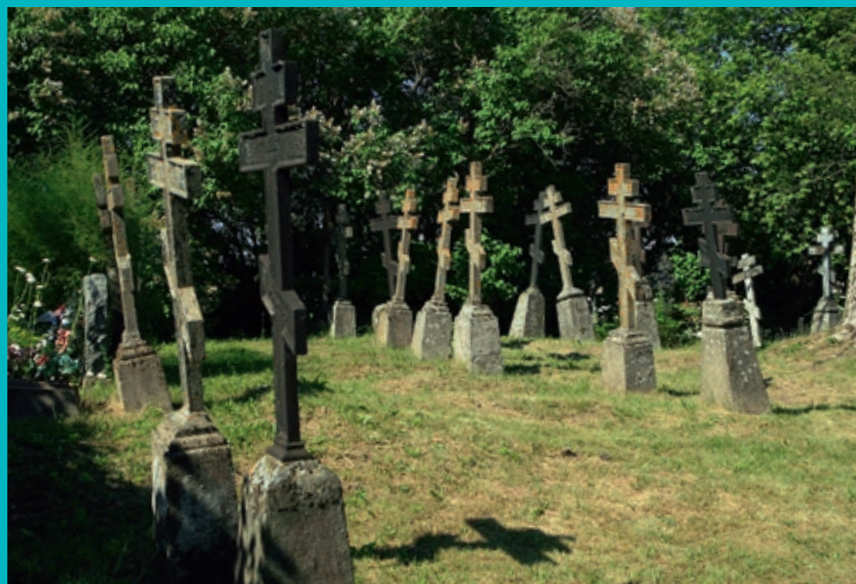
BEGINNING OF THE RUSSIAN STATE

Setomaa was first engaged in big politics during the time of the Vikings (9th to 11th century). According to legend, in 862 three Varangian brothers were called from overseas to rule the Russian State: Rjurik, Sineus and Truvor. It is said that Rjurik settled in Novgorod, Sineus at Beloozero, and Truvor at Izborsk. The old town hill in Izborsk is therefore also known as Truvor's Castle.

Some historians think that the original text might have said that Rjurik came "*sine hus, thru varing*" or "with his tribe, a faithful force" and a scrivener, not knowing Proto-Norse, later thought that those words stood for names – Sineus and Truvor. It has also been thought that instead of Izborsk, as mentioned in the legend,

- The first humans settled near water bodies, such as the Värskä Bay. Today, there is a well-known curative centre and recreation area. Photo: Toomas Tuul
- In the first centuries of the second millennium, the Izborsk Castle became a major fortified center of the area settled by the ancestors of Setos. Photo: Natalia Baranova





Rurik actually settled in Pskov, as the location of Pskov on Velikaya River is much more advantageous than that of Izborsk in terms of access to main waterways.

Be that as it may, over the last centuries of the Antiquity, Izborsk Castle together with the adjacent settlement grew into an important centre in the context of both Setomaa and the entire developing Old Russian State. It is probable that besides the ancestors of Setos, people of other nationalities lived there, including Slavs. In addition to Izborsk, there were castles also at Sahnova, Metkovitsa, Korodissa, Lisja and elsewhere.

At the beginning of the 13th century, German and Danish crusaders occupied the territory of Estonia and the catholic Diocese of Dorpat (Tartu) was established to the west of Setomaa. The Estonian country folk were christened as Catholics, while the ancestors of Setos were left in the Orthodox sphere of influence. However, the christening process here was slow, taking several centuries. Setomaa remained linked to the Russian State also politically, becoming a border area that repeatedly suffered in wars between various parties over the subsequent centuries.

In order to fortify the border areas of Old Livonia and the Pskov Principality, Vastseliina Castle was

← Burial mounds from the second half of the first millennium are still visible in the landscape. Photo: Ahto Raudoja

← The cemetery of Beresje, the northernmost village of Setomaa on the coastline of Lake Pskov, inhabited by Old Believers. Photo: Ahto Raudoja

erected on the lands of the Diocese of Dorpat, and Marienburg or Alüksne Castle on the lands of the Livonian Order in 1342. At Izborsk, the former castle was abandoned and in 1350 a stronger and more contemporary stone castle was completed a few hundred metres away. The old castle was replaced by the small Nikolsky monastery. Pskov's control over Izborsk was strengthened.

FROM THE MIDDLE AGES TO MODERN TIMES

In the Middle Ages, Setomaa was administratively divided between two counties. Among other areas, Izborsk County included the south-eastern and southern part of Setomaa – Izborsk, Senno, Pankjavitsa and Sõmeritsa regions (*gubaa*), at the centres (*pogosti*) of which churches were located. The Pskov region beyond Velikaya River covered the northern and western part of Setomaa: Kulkna, Kuulja, Petska and Taelova regions.

At the end of the 15th century, two important monasteries were established, which have played an important role in the spread of Christianity among the eastern Setos: Mõla (Maly) monastery in the valley of Lake Mõla (Maly), and Pechory monastery at Pechory (*Petseri* in Estonian). During the 16th century,

→ The large stone cross at the Truvor's town hill, also known as Truvor's Castle, marks the grave of the legendary Truvor, the founder of Izborsk. Photo: Toomas Tuul





the small hermitage at Pechory evolved into an influential religious centre and a small town grew around it – the predecessor of today’s Pechory. Perhaps that was when numerous Russian villages also evolved to the south of Pechory. During the Livonian War (1558–1583), the monastery was on Abbot Cornelius’ orders surrounded by a strong protecting wall and towers. In 1581, Polish troops unsuccessfully besieged the monastery of Pechory.

The times were troubled also in the first half of the 17th century. In addition to the confusion and power struggles around the seat of the Russian Tsar, wars with Sweden and Poland put a strain on the region. The subsequent period, which was somewhat more peaceful, allowed the war-battered villages to recover and the small town of Pechory to grow. Over time, Pechory surpassed the former centre of the region, Izborsk.

In the 1660s, church reforms were introduced in Russia and changes to liturgy and some other practices were made. The reform caused a schism, as a result of which those against the reforms – the so-called Old Believers – settled in various periphery areas of Russia (including the western shore of Lake Peipsi) in order to escape the persecution imposed by the state and the church. In Setomaa, the Old Believers settled in the village of Beresje (Peresi) by Lake Lämmijärv.

← Setos used to have large families with all generations living under one roof. A picture of the Kaupmees family in Obinitsa in 1922. Photo: Armas Otto Väisänen. ERM Fk 350:212

The Great Northern War between Russia and Sweden (1700–1721) only brushed Setomaa with a small battle near Võmmorski village in 1703. The Swedes managed to temporarily occupy the small town of Pechory, but not the monastery. As a result of the war, Russia occupied the Baltic Provinces – the current territory of Estonia and a large part of Latvia – and Setomaa ceased to be a border area for the subsequent 200 years.

However, the differences between Setos and the South-Estonians of the Livonian Province remained. Thus, many peasants of the Livonian Province fled the high-handed rule of their squires and moved to the lands of Pechory monastery in Setomaa, where taxes were lower and where refugees were not extradited. Probably thanks to the large number of immigrants, the Seto folklore includes self-identification as a Swedish nation and recollections from the Swedish times, although Setomaa itself has never belonged under the Swedes for any long periods.

Catherine the Great nationalised the lands of churches and monasteries and, among others, closed the monasteries at Izborsk and Mõla (Maly) in 1764. The monastery of Pechory, however, continued its activities and still managed a large part of farmlands

→ The monastery of Pechory, the center of the religious life of Setos, was founded in the end of the 15th century. It has never stopped functioning since its establishment.

Photo: Ahto Raudoja





in Setomaa. In 1782, Pechory was granted the official status of a town. The 1860s were of revolutionary importance – peasants were released from serfdom in internal Russian provinces, including Setomaa, which belonged to the Pskov Province.

Towards the end of the 19th century, other small towns began to grow near Pechory and Izborsk: New Izborsk (Novyj Izborsk) by the Valga-Pskov railroad, Laura on the road from Pechory to Alüksne, and Võõpsu on the northern border of Setomaa.

Despite the tightening links with the rest of the world, the Seto people for a long time still maintained their traditional lifestyle. School education was provided in Russian and therefore a large part of the Seto people was still illiterate at the beginning of the 20th century.

Due to the archaic lifestyle, Setomaa and its people have been in the sphere of interest of intellectuals and researchers already since the 19th century. Researchers have been captivated by Seto folk songs and other folklore, national costumes, beliefs and customs. Jakob Hurt, one of the most renowned researchers of the Seto people, recorded a lot of valuable information about the Seto villages and the number of Setos. According to his data, there were 16,500 Setos at the turn of the 19th and 20th century. Villages were crowded and land deficiency was therefore high. Since then the number of Setos has decreased.

20th CENTURY

Big changes took place at the beginning of the 20th century. After World War I, Estonia fought for and won its independence and on 2 February 1920 concluded a peace treaty with the Soviet Russia. According to the treaty, the area around Pechory was given to Estonia. The area became Petseri County (*Petserimaa*), which was divided into 11 rural municipalities – partly along the existing ethnic boundaries, but mostly along administratively decided lines, as the Seto villages and the Russian villages were interspersed.

The Estonian State placed great emphasis on bringing Setos educationally and culturally closer to the rest of Estonians, opening schools and encouraging social activities. In 1921, the residents of Petseri County were given surnames, which before that only a few of them had. The signs of modern times slowly started to make their way into the everyday life of Setos – pleasure gardens were created at homesteads, younger people started preferring clothes made of cloth purchased from shops and people started giving Estonian first names to their children.

During World War II, the Soviet Union occupied Estonia and united about three fourths of Petseri

- A Sunday school at Palandõ village in early 1920s. Before joining the Estonian Republic, most Setos, especially women, were illiterate. Photo: Kristjan Lausing. ERM k 486:25
- The small borough of Väraska in 1930ies. Today, Väraska is the largest settlement of Estonian Setomaa. Photo: Ahto Raudoja's collection





County with Pskov Oblast in 1944, even before the war ended. Together with Russian villages many Seto villages and Pechory, the centre of Setomaa, were included in the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic. After several administrative changes, the areas that were then left to the Estonian SSR today belong to Põlva and Võru counties.

The Soviet authorities carried out a forced collectivization in rural areas – homesteads were eliminated and country folk were instead made to work on Soviet farms (*sovhoz*) and collective farms (*kolhoz*). Life on such farms was at first very difficult and many people left for towns in search of an easier life. Smaller collective farms were gradually merged into bigger ones, until they reached a more or less stable size by 1970s.

In the Russian-side Setomaa, Estonian language based country schools were closed one after another, which is why younger people mostly moved to Estonia and the Seto villages in Russia faded away. High-quality education in Estonian was throughout the Soviet era provided at the Pechory II Secondary School.

← Setos at a fair in Pechory – the religious, administrative and economic center of Setomaa for many centuries.
Photo: Joh. Triefeldt, Ahto Raudoja's collection

REAWAKENING PERIOD TO PRESENT DAY

AWAKENING PERIOD

At the end of the 1980s, a 'reawakening period' of Setos began with a rise in their self-awareness. The first Seto organisation to be officially registered was the Seto Society founded at Pechory (Petseri) in October 1987. The Society included the representatives of the Setos living all the Setomaa regions as well as in Tallinn, Tartu and Võru. In 1991, the Association of Pechory was founded, with the main aim to restore the border established in the Tartu Peace Treaty and to represent the interests of the people of the Pechory region.

The Seto Society and the Association of Pechory discontinued their activities in the first half of 1990s. By that time, a number of new Seto organisations had grown out of those two societies, including the Seto Congress and the Union of Rural Municipalities of Setomaa.

→ Seto men are proudly carrying the flag of Setomaa at a Seto Kingdom day held annually on the first Saturday of August.
Photo: Toomas Tuul





SETO CONGRESS AND COUNCIL OF ELDERS OF SETO CONGRESS

In 1991, an idea evolved to again hold the elections of the representative body of Setos – the Seto Congress. The first Seto Congress was held in 1921, and the second in 1930. During 1993, the procedure for the election of the Seto Congress and the statutes of the Seto Congress were developed and draft acts for the Congress were prepared.

The Third Seto Congress was held on 9 October 1993 in Värskä. The total of 105 delegates had been elected to the Congress from all over Setomaa and from outside its historical boundaries. The Third Seto Congress formulated the main problems of Setomaa, like the division of historical Setomaa, the complicated economic situation, the risk of discontinuity in passing on the folk culture, and proposed solutions for the revival of Setomaa.

According to the statutes, the Seto Congress is the representative body of Setomaa and the Seto people. The Seto Congress discusses problems and passes decisions which concern the cultural, economic and political development of Setomaa. For the periods between the Congress sessions, the Seto Congress elects a 13-member Council of Elders. The elections

← Seto Kingdom days bring together Seto people from all over the world and unite them for a day. It is a day full of singing, dancing and partying. Photo: Toomas Tuul

← A showpiece of the Seto Kingdom days is always the parade of the Seto army. Photo: Tõnu Noorits

and regular sessions of the Seto Congress take place every three years, usually on 9 October in Värskä, with 70 to 110 delegates attending.

The most important decisions of the Seto Congress have included selecting the Seto flag and declaring the Setos a nation.

UNION OF RURAL MUNICIPALITIES OF SETOMAA

In 1992, local government reform was carried out, creating a new type of local government – rural municipalities. In 1993, rural municipality councils were elected, and the councils in turn elected rural municipality mayors. In the rural municipalities of Setomaa, the leaders of the Seto movement became mayors. Immediately after that, in 1994, a joint organisation of four rural municipalities of Setomaa was established: the Union of Rural Municipalities of Setomaa (*Setomaa Valdade Liit* – SVL). The aim of the Union is to agree upon the joint activities of the rural municipalities of Setomaa and to strive to solve various problems in cooperation with the Council of Elders of the Seto Congress, the Setomaa support group in the *Riigikogu* (Estonian Parliament), the Government of the Republic of Estonia, and various other organisations.

- Leelo days help to maintain the traditional singing tradition of Setos. Photo: Ahto Raudoja
- Seto Congress is the informal representative body of Setomaa citizens. Photo: Igor Taro



Администрация Псковской области

SETOMAA. PERRIDÕ KOKKOTULÕK

Международный



Seto CETO

The main areas of activity of the Union is to preserve, promote and introduce the ethnic Seto culture, to support the social and economic development of Setomaa, to improve social welfare, to develop studying and entrepreneurship possibilities, to represent and protect the common interests of the Seto people in all areas of life and to develop cooperation in that area. The valuation of Setomaa as a living environment is also of great importance.

The highest body of the Union of Rural Municipalities of Setomaa is the General Meeting made up of council members appointed for four years by rural government councils. The governing body is the Union Council. The Council is chaired by rural government mayors on the basis of rotation.

The executive body of the Union is a three-member Management Board.

RURAL MUNICIPALITIES OF SETOMAA

Mikitamäe rural municipality (104 km²) is located in the area between Lake Pskov, Võhandu River and Mäda jõe River. The population of the municipality is 1,015¹, the largest villages are Mikitamäe (290 people) and Võõpsu. On the shore of Lake Peipsi in

1 Here and elsewhere, data of the Ministry of the Interior as of January 1, 2014.

← Since 2008 there is an annual gathering Setos at Radaja (Russia). The festival gives Setos an opportunity to visit their former homes and graves of their ancestors. Photo: Priit Palomets

Mikitamäe rural municipality, there are two villages with a rather different culture: the Old Believers' village Beresje and the Russian fishermen's village Lüüb-nitsa. The most widely known events in the municipality are the Lüüb-nitsa Fish and Onion Fair, the Setomaa Education Conference and the Seto Fairytale Day.

Värška rural municipality (188 km²) is located on the shore of Värška Bay and Lake Pskov, with Piusa River running through the municipality. The population is 1,420, incl. 530 in Värška. Värška is home to the Seto Farm Museum, the Church of St. George and a spa and water park, and in every three years hosts the Seto Leelo Day and Seto Folk.

Meremäe rural municipality (132 km²) is located on the Vaaksaarõ Uplands in the area between Piusa River and Pelska Stream. The population is 1,120, the largest villages are Obinitsa (170 people) and Meremäe (160 people), with the municipality government located at the latter. Obinitsa is home to the Church of the Transfiguration and Miikse is home to the Church of John the Baptist.

Misso rural municipality (190 km²) is located on the Pskov-Riga highway. The population of the municipality is 690, the largest villages are the municipality centre Misso (250 people), Missokülä and Määsi. Luhamaa, the eastern part of the Misso rural

→ The procession around the church at Mõla (Maly) on the church feast day in July. Photo: Ahto Raudoja

→ A house in nowadays Pechory suburb. Photo: Ahto Raudoja





municipality, is the historical Setomaa, while the western part is Old Võromaa. Luhamaa is home to the Church of the Holy Spirit.

SETO KINGDOM

The idea to establish the Seto Kingdom Day evolved at the beginning of the 1990s, following the example of the Republic of Forest Finns organised in Norway. The main motifs of the Seto Kingdom Day are based partly on the Seto epic “Peko”, and partly on discussions held in 1993. The first Seto Kingdom Day was held on 20 August 1994 at Obinitsa.

On the Seto Kingdom Day, Setos demonstrate their skills in the improvisation of the Seto song *leelo*, in instrument-playing and dance, the best handicraft, cottage cheese (*sõir*), bread, pie, beer, moonshine (*handsa*) and wine makers are selected and the Seto strongman is determined.

The highlight of the Kingdom Day is the election of a new *ülemsootska* (Chief Herald). *Ülemsootska* is the most important and highly respected person in Setomaa: his or her task is to represent the entire Seto people and his or her powers are valid until the next Seto Kingdom Day. According to legend, *ülemsootska* is the messenger and substitute of Peko, the King of

← A view of Izborsk in 2013, with streets and houses newly renovated to celebrate the 1150th birthday of the settlement.

Photo: Ahto Raudoja

← A helicopter of Estonian Police and Border Guard Board.

Photo: USACE by Carol E. Davis/Wikimedia Commons

Setos on Earth. Peko himself sleeps an eternal sleep in a cave of the Pechory monastery and can therefore not rule the people. Legend says that Peko appears to the Chief Heald in a dream and gives the *him/her* instructions to be passed on to the people.

The Chief Herald is elected by the people attending the Seto Kingdom Day. A candidate should be of Seto origin and proficient in the Seto language and at least 10 people should support his or her letter of application, in which the candidate states his or her promises. At least one *leelo* choir must support and praise the candidate. To be elected, all the suitable candidates stand on a high stump to be visible to people. The candidate with the largest number of people standing in front of his or her stump is elected as the *ülemsootska* of Setomaa.

The election of the Chief Herld is followed by a parade of the Seto army – the most spectacular part of the Kingdom Day. Anyone from babies to the elderly may take part in the parade, and the weaponry often includes pitchforks and spades. The parade includes many groups in costumes, and antique vehicles such as old cars and motorcycles.

The First and the Second Seto Kingdom Days were held at Obinitsa. Since 1997, the Seto Kingdom Day rotates around Setomaa, always taking place on the Saturday of the first week of August.

→ In wintertime the Pechory monastery enjoys peace and quiet.

Photo: Wikingenge/Wikimedia Commons





LEELO DAYS

The Leelo Days connect Setos in the same way that the Seto Congress and the Seto Kingdom do. The Leelo Day is the longest-standing among these traditions, having taken place every three years already since 1977 when the I Seto Leelo Day was held in Värskä. It was dedicated to the 100th anniversary of the famous *lauluema* ("Song Mother") Anne Vabarna, and due to the inevitable circumstances, to the 60th anniversary of the Great Socialist October Revolution. The Leelo Day became the first consistent cultural event that unites all the regions of Setomaa, including the Setos living in the Pechory region and other Estonian towns. The Leelo Day is held in Värskä; only in 1986 the event took place at Obinitsa in order to celebrate the 150th anniversary of *lauluema* ("Song Mother") Hilana Taarka. Every Leelo Day has its own theme.

LIFE ON TWO SIDES OF THE BORDER

In 1995, the administrative border bisecting Setomaa was renamed as a border line that is subject to state border regime. That caused fundamental changes in everyday life: the radial road network based in Pechory could not longer be used as such, and many people were no longer able to attend their home church. Visiting the next-of-kin and honouring the deceased has always been very important in the Seto culture. The border

← The new railway station of Koidula at the border of Estonia has been a major investment for Estonia. Photo: Toomas Tuul

has particularly caused problems for the Saatserinna church on the Estonian side and the Taeluva, Pechory Varvara, Saalessa, Pankjavitsa and Mõla congregations on the Russian side. At first, the Pechory II Estonian Secondary School continued operating, but the number of students started to decrease rapidly. Setos in the Pechory region founded their own Seto organisation: the Seto Ethnic Culture Society.

In cooperation between the Council of Elders of the Seto Congress, the Union of Rural Municipalities of Setomaa, the Pechory support group in the *Riigikogu* (the Parliament), the Estonian and Russian foreign ministries and the Estonian Police and Border Guard Board it was agreed that about 8,000 persons can cross the border during church feast days visa-free on the basis of a list. Since 2000, annual visas for the Russian Federation are issued free of charge to 2,000 persons who live in Võru and Põlva counties and who have a justified reason to visit the Pechory region – be it cultural exchange, visiting the graves of next-of-kin, or visiting relatives living in the Pechory region. The consulate of the Republic of Estonia in Pskov issues long-term visas of up to four years on the same grounds and to as many people.

Since 2008, the Seto branch of Izborsk Museum

- Värskä is well-known for many sights, the Seto farm museum and the adjacent Tsäitarõ (Tea House) among them. Photo: Toomas Tuul
- Obinitša is the center of today's western Setomaa and also has a place offering traditional food and cultural activities right in the center of the village. Photo: Ahto Raudoja





organises an ethno-cultural festival in Radaja village on August 28, called the “Setomaa perride kokkotulõk” (Reunion of the Setomaa Families). The festival always attracts a great crowd, nearly all the Seto *leelo* choirs attend and a lot of visitors whose roots are in the Seto area currently under the administration of the Russian Federation.

The main church feast days also attract a lot of people, with Setos from both the Pechory region and Estonia attending: St. Nicholas’ Day on May 22 and December 19 at Taeluva, the Mõla Church Day on the Sunday following the Feast of St. Peter and St. Paul on July 12 at Mõla (Maly), and the feast day of the Assumption of Mary on August 28 in Pechory.

In the 1990s and the 2000s, many people left the Pechory region in Russia for the Republic of Estonia under the resettlement programme of the Setomaa measure of the Estonian State. During the 2010 census in the Russian Federation, 123 persons in the Pechory region identified themselves as Setos. Pechory region has one youth *leelo* choir and one women’s *leelo* choir. Old Seto homesteads have mostly been sold to summerhouse owners from Pskov, St. Petersburg and Moscow. Descendants of Setos can also be found in Krasnojarski krai in Siberia, to where Setos emigrated at the turn of the 19th and the 20th century when their land was overcrowded.

← The Mikitamäe rural municipality is famous for its annual Fish and Onion Fair. Photo: Ahto Raudoja

SETO LANGUAGE

ANCIENT FEATURES

Simply put, the Seto language is the most south-easternmost dialect of the historical South-Estonian language that has survived until the present day. Estonian dialect researchers consider the Seto language as a vernacular group of the South-Estonian Võru dialect.

Various features of the old South-Estonian language, e.g. many phonetic and grammatical peculiarities, have been preserved particularly well in the Seto language. The Seto vocabulary contains several words that in the Baltic-Finnic language region are only found in the Seto language, but are common in eastern Finno-Ugric languages. Peculiar old Baltic and Slavic loans are also characteristic of the Seto language.

The Seto song tradition has played and still plays a very big role in preserving the Seto language.

INTERNAL DIFFERENCES IN DIALECT

Although the settlement region of Setos is relatively small, there are local variations in the language spoken here. Due to such differences between all the

→ The Setos have their own newspaper "Setomaa", which publishes articles in the Seto language. Photo: Ahto Raudoja



HÖRNA AARE:

aga ma ei ole enam
üksik, ma olen ka
-10.9



MAHUTUS
KÄRVÄRA
KÄRVÄRA

MAHUTUS
KÄRVÄRA
KÄRVÄRA

Setomaa

Kärvära projekt läte suurebaste ku plaanir



Evangeelium

vai

Hüä sõnnom maailma Lunastajast
Jeesusõst Kristusõst,
Pühä Matteusõ kirofõt.

1. Päätükk.

Jeesusõ suguvõsa, nimi ja sündimine.

(S. 1—17. Luuk. 3, 25—38.)

Jeesusõ Kristusõ sündimise raamat, kiä om Abrahami puja Taavedi poig.

2. Abraham sünnüt lisaki, ja lisak sünnüt Jaakobi, ja Jaakob sünnüt Juuda ja tää vele'.
1 Moos. 21, 5, 12; 25, 26; 29, 35; 49, 10.

3. Ja Juudas sünnüt Peeretsi ja Saara Taamariگا', ja Peerets sünnüt Esromi, ja Esrom sünnüt Aarami. 1 Moos. 38, 29, 30.
1 Aja r. 2, 5, 9. Rut. 4, 18—22.

4. Ja Aaram sünnüt Aminaadabi, ja Aminaadab sünnüt Naassoni, ja Naasson sünnüt Salmoni. 1 Aja r. 2, 10, 11.

5. Ja Salmon sünnüt Poasõ Rahabiga', ja Poas sünnüt Oobedi Rutiga', ja Oobed sünnüt lisai.

6. Ja lisai sünnüt kuningas Taavedi, ja kuningas Taavet sünnüt Saalomoni Uuria naasega'.
1 Aja r. 2, 15.

7. Ja Saalomon sünnüt Roboami, ja Roboam sünnüt Aabia, ja Aabia sünnüt Aasa.
1 Kun. 11, 45. 1 Aja r. 5, 10—16.

8. Ja Aasa sünnüt Joosavati, ja Joosavat sünnüt Joorami, ja Jooram sünnüt Uusia.
1 Kun. 15, 24; 22, 51. 1 Aja r. 3, 11, 12.

9. Ja Uusia sünnüt Jootami, ja Jootam sünnüt Ahasõ, ja Ahas sünnüt Hiskia. 2 Kun. 15, 7; 16, 1, 20.

10. Ja Hiskia sünnüt Manassõ, ja Manassõ sünnüt Aamoni, ja Aamon sünnüt Joosia.
2 Kun. 20, 21; 21, 18, 24.

11. Ja Joosia sünnüt Jekonja ja tää vele' Paabelihe vangiviimise aol.
1 Aja r. 3, 15.

12 historical village groups (*nulk*), the language of every such subregion could be considered as a Seto vernacular.

The differences are, however, more clearly manifested between larger Seto settlement areas which have historically had separate centres. Distinction is usually made between the North-Seto dialect spoken in the Lake Pskov area with Värskä as its centre, the South-Seto dialect in the area with formerly Pechory, but now Obinitša as its centre, and the East-Seto dialect spoken in the area around Izborsk. Unfortunately, the latter dialect has been fading the fastest and very few samples of it have remained, mainly in the form of folk songs and audio recordings of texts. A variation of the East-Seto dialect has also been spoken in the Kraasna enclave in the southern Pskov region.

NEW WRITTEN LANGUAGE

For centuries, the Seto language was only a spoken language. The first attempts to write it down were made at the beginning of the 20th century, when folklore was collected and the first Seto books were published, including the Seto epic “Peko”.

The need for the written Seto language arose in the 1990s, during the Seto ‘awakening period’, when Setos wanted to start publishing literature in

← The first Gospel in Seto language was published in 1922.

their own language. The written Seto language is still in a stage of development, as no definitive agreement has been reached in regards to orthography. The reason for this lies in the aforementioned dialect variations: every author writes slightly differently than others, following the specific features of the language spoken in his or her region of origin. Differences also arise from the approach – whether the written language would be based on the grammar and phonetics of the Estonian language or the written Võro language or another such source. However, it can be said that the majority of the newer Seto literature published since 1990s is based on the South-Seto language practices.

THE PRESENT DAY

In the middle of the 20th century, during the Soviet occupation, students were forbidden to speak in Seto at school. Thus, parents started to teach their children the standard written Estonian language, although at home people had still been speaking Seto. As a result, the continuity of language was lost and by now mostly only older people speak the Seto language; the vocabulary and skills of younger people are very limited. Strong influences of the Estonian and Võro language

→ Quite a number of books have been published in the Seto language over the past 10–20 years. The series called *Seto Kirävara* include books from the Gospel to collections of poetry and *leelo*. Photo: Agnes Ratas



SETO- JA VÖRO-
KEELINE LAULIK



SETO- JA VÖRO-
KEELINE LAULIK



VABARNA ANNE
PEKO SUURILÕ JA
VÄIKSILE LUKO'



VABARNA ANNE
PEKO SUURILÕ JA
VÄIKSILE LUKO'



HERMANN JULIUS
SCHMALZI JUTTÕ



HERMANN JULIUS
SCHMALZI JUTTÕ



Merca
PÜHÄ PÄIV



Merca
PÜHÄ PÄIV



M' ISSÄNDÄ
JEESUSÕ KRISTUSÕ
PÜHÄ EVANGEELIUM



M' ISSÄNDÄ
JEESUSÕ KRISTUSÕ
PÜHÄ EVANGEELIUM



RAASAKÕISI SETOMAALT
Setomaa Jakob Hurda silmi
läbi aastagil 1886 ja 1903



RAASAKÕISI SETOMAALT
Setomaa Jakob Hurda silmi
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Setomaa Jakob Hurda silmi
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Setomaa Jakob Hurda silmi
läbi aastagil 1886 ja 1903



and, in eastern areas, the Russian language can be discerned.

The exact number of the users of the Seto language is not known. During the 2011 census, approximately 12,500 people identified themselves as speakers of the Seto dialect. This number most probably includes many people who understand the language, but do not speak it.

Setos themselves have definitely not given up on their language and over the past 20 years the status of the Seto language has improved: there is active Seto media, books are being published and even films are being made. With the state's support, some schools teach the Seto language as an additional subject.

← In 2008, a first full movie in the Seto language was screened. The film called "Taarka" is a drama of a famous *laluema* ("song mother") Hilana Taarka, and is partly based on a true story. Photo: Marika Ahven

LEELO – THE SETO SINGING TRADITION

In 2009 UNESCO added the Seto multi-tone singing tradition to the list of Intangible Cultural Heritage, thus recognising this unique and ancient singing culture and also acknowledging its need for protection.

The Seto multi-tone singing tradition, known as *leelo*, arose in certain historic and social circumstances. Based on text and verse signature, it is a distinguished local variation of the older Baltic-Finnic runic song. This special singing tradition of the Baltic-Finnic cultures is believed to be more than 1,000 years old. The poetics, motifs and verses of the Seto songs is connected to the old singing styles well known in Finland, Karelia and Estonia, but many of the motifs and song types in Setomaa have received a local shape and a specific and unique musical touch.

In general, the Seto songs are multi-toned, and only lullabies, pastorals, elegies, chants, and some children's songs are sung by one singer only. Seto choir songs are distinguished by the call-and-response alternation between the lead singer and the choir: usually the lead singer sings a verse, and the choir

→ A today's women choir singing on a Seto Kingdom Day.

Photo: Reigo Teervalt





joins in during the final syllables of the line, repeating the verse as well. Excellent lead singers in the Seto culture are those who are able to improvise: to create traditional poetics or new songs by using metrics and formulaic sentences or to add an individual approach to old songs.

One of the most valued features of the Seto song is its topicality and the fact that text is born at the exact moment of singing. The tradition of singing competitions at weddings is fading away, but new traditions are constantly being born: during the Seto Kingdom Day, lead singer competitions have taken place, where the improviser who can best spontaneously sing and follow the traditional verse signature and poetics is picked.

SETO CHOIRS

Nowadays, *leelo* choirs are important carriers of the Seto identity in Setomaa, in other Estonian towns, and in the diaspora. People with similar backgrounds or people interested in Seto culture meet in these choirs, which are often the only places in urban areas where people can speak the Seto language and sing traditional songs. Children's and youth choirs act as institutions where language, customs and traditional music are being taught.

Choir members are also regarded as experts on Seto traditions, and as "real" Setos in the Seto com-

munity. The prestige of the Seto *leelo* experts is shown by the fact that next to the villages and organisations of Setomaa, the Seto choirs are also allowed to send their own delegation to the Seto Congress, the representative body for Setos. Seto choir members are connected through the Assembly of Seto *Leelo* Experts, whose primary aim is to ensure the continuity of Seto singing traditions and to coordinate choir activity. There are about 10 active Seto choirs in historic Setomaa, and another 10 choirs in Estonian towns.

Until the 1960s, a choir in Setomaa generally comprised just the members of one village or the women or men of one family who were used to singing together at work, festivities or weddings. Anyone who could sing, and wanted to sing, could join the company. At the same time, social relationships as well as the background and the position of its members could clearly emerge in the choir.

In accordance with the changes in the village communities and performances outside Setomaa, choirs have been gradually institutionalised. This new kind of choir was usually connected to some sort of societal institution (culture centres, libraries, schools) and had a manager or a director that might have been one of the members or someone from outside. The membership of the choirs became steadier and more hierarchic. The proportion of intimate or spon-

→ Hilana Taarka was one of the most famous, but also most contradictory *laluema* ("Song Mother") of Setomaa. ERM Fk 718:14





taneous singing situations decreased and singing was turned more outwards.

SETO *LAULUEMA*

Today the most skilled performers of the art of Seto singing are called *lauluemas* ("Song Mothers"). Although many of the illiterate Seto song masters from past centuries have faded away without ever leaving a record behind, the intensive preservation of Seto folk songs at the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century has rescued the texts of some artful singers. The fame of some of the singers went beyond their home villages, and at the end of the 1920s, the government of Estonia provided scholarships for well-known song mothers, who owed their fame to folklorists.

Some of the pre-eminent song masters from the beginning of the 20th century are Miku Ode (Jevdokia Kanniste, 1864–1924), Martina Iro (Irina Luik, 1866–1947), Hilana Taarka (Darja Pisumaa, 1856–1933) and Anne Vabarna (1877–1964). More than 150,000 verses created by Anne Vabarna have been documented and catalogued. Anne Vabarna also verbalised several epic texts, such as "Peko," which has since become the national Seto epic.

← Anne Vabarna can perhaps be named the most "productive" Seto *lauluema*, as more than 150,000 verses of her creation have been recorded. Photo: Gustav Ränk, 1929. ERM Fk 479:21

SETO UNIQUE MUSIC

Seto songs are unique for being multi-toned and for having a rare musical mode. Multi-tonality is based on the clashing of two parts. The main melody is known as *torrõ* (enjoyable, nice) and the higher solo voice as *killõ* (high-pitched, sharp). The voice of the *killõ* singer must be intensive and sharp, so that it would clearly contrast the voices of the *torrõ* singers. Sometimes there is also a singer for a so-called lower *torrõ*. Tensioned and faceted sound of the main melody due to singers' spontaneous variations is highly appreciated.

The most mysterious and endangered part of the Seto songs are the old sound modes, which are hard for people used to more European music to understand or grasp. Even the European tablature is unsuitable for musical notation of Seto songs. Most of the older Seto women's songs are in such modes, although this occurs less frequently due to the influence of the European music.

THE GENRES AND FUNCTION OF THE SONGS

Seto songs have traditionally been related to religious and family ceremonies and works, meaning that singing was usually part of a ritual or an activity and

- In the beginning of the 20th century, the Seto leelo became of interest to Estonian and Finnish folklorists. Treiali Ode, a *lauluema*, is explaining something to a recording folklorist. Photo: Armas Otto Väisänen, 1922. ERM Fk 350:209
- A woman lamenting at a grave in 1922. Photo: Armas Otto Väisänen. ERM Fk 350:215





was not solely for entertainment or leisure. Songs for calendar feast days were related to Orthodox holidays (songs for Lent, Easter swing songs, St John's and St Peter's bonfire songs etc.) and often several play songs and song plays (Christmas, Palm Sunday swinging) were also related to holidays. In addition, the rituals structuring people's lives (birth, weddings, funeral) were bound up with singing.

Singing was connected to the church calendar. The cycle of fasting and holidays, as well as seasonal farm work, divided the year into periods of more or less singing. The tradition of singing at certain times and in certain places has dropped off during the 20th century due to the rise of professional singing.

Setos classify their songs by text (old, long, dirty songs), melody (wedding, swinging melodies), function (travelling, harvesting, feasting) and performer (men songs, women songs, children songs). It has not been important for Setos to have a unified classification.

They did however divide their songs into three categories according to Jakob Hurt, the author of the first collection of Seto songs: old songs, occasional songs and improvisations. Old songs stood for lyric-epic songs, occasional songs meant lyrical songs

← Seto women singing at a wedding in 2010. However, in most parts today's leelo is presented at concerts and stages.

Photo: Andres Ots

← A wedding lament is a traditional cry to express the bride's feelings on her wedding day. Photo: Jüri Külvik

related to a certain time or place, and the third classification comprised both improvisations as well as songs with an obscene message.

Jakob Hurt has divided the songs into ancient religious, Christian, fairy tale, or fictional, based on their lyric-epic message. Later researchers classified the Seto lyric-epics as mythic songs, family ballads, songs of love, courtship, and marriage, songs for everyday life, and fairy tales. Lyrical songs are in turn classified by function – work songs, ceremonial lyricism (wedding songs, calendar feast songs) and non-ceremonial lyricism (general feast songs, improvisations).

THE SETO FEMALE SINGING CULTURE

According to the verse signature and texts, the Seto songs are divided into laments, pre-runic songs, runic songs and newer songs. The Seto culture is also called a lament culture, because the lament is of great importance at funerals and weddings. Drafted man laments and household laments have also been noted.

A singer can express things in songs and laments that could not be expressed otherwise. Lamentation at funeral and weddings was a traditional ritual cry with a certain function. A lamentation at a grave represented communication with the beyond, the bridal

- The leelo tradition of Setos has never been interrupted and is still passed down to younger generations. Photo: Reigo Teervalt
- Even though seto leelo is mostly sung mostly by women, Seto men have also sung, and new powerful groups have emerged in past years. Photo: Reigo Teervalt

SETO LEEDPÄEV





lamentation again gave the young woman a chance to be critical and openly express her despair, since usually girls were wed against their own will. Only women lamented.

The performance of the Seto songs depended on the context. Outside and in a bigger crowd, the songs sounded differently than at home. Certain songs were meant to be far-reaching (i.e. swinging songs, mountain songs) and they were sung more intensely and loudly. An intensive tone, sonority and loudness were also considered important in men's songs. The content of the songs also depended on the performance: i.e. the songs sung by women differed from those sung by mixed choirs.

Today the women's singing traditions have been better preserved. Women kept their traditional outfits, beliefs and singing traditions better and longer, probably because the Seto village community was patriarchal. Women stayed at home and were kept from education, modernisation and secularisation, which forced them to retain traditional skills and heritage.

Despite the great changes in Seto culture, and the slight changes in the singing traditions, Setos still sing their songs and make much of their traditions. Their choral culture is viable and new choirs have been established both in and outside of Setomaa.

← The statue of Seto *lauluema* (Song Mother) erected at Obinita is dedicated to all artful seto singers and was opened in 1986 during the Leelo Day. Photo: Rein Järvelill/Wikimedia Commons

RELIGION OF SETOS

Historically, Setomaa and Setos have belonged to the Orthodox culture. Grand Duke Vladimir of Russia officially embraced Byzantine Christianity in 988, and the conversion of Setos most probably started in the 10th or 11th century. Ancient beliefs persisted alongside Christianity among local people for centuries. Due to their position between Orthodox and Western Catholicism, and later also on the borderland of Lutheranism, the Seto religion has some features derived from Catholicism as well.

The first definite evidence of Orthodox churches in Setomaa, around Izborsk (Irboska), date back to the 14th century. One of the oldest remaining sanctuaries in Setomaa is the St. Nicholas church, built inside the Izborsk fortress and dating back to the 1340s.

PECHORY MONASTERY

The most important centre of Orthodoxy during the 15th century was Pechory monastery. Thanks to the fact that between 1920 and 1930 the monastery was under Estonian rule, which rescued it from the Stalinist terror and liquidation, it is one of

→ The first parts of the of the St. Nicholas church at Izborsk date back to 1340s, making it the oldest Orthodox sanctuary of Setomaa. Photo: Toomas Tuul





the few monasteries in Russia that has worked continuously until today. The monastery's name is derived from natural sandstone caves (*Пещеры* – caves) on which it was built. The founder of the monastery is believed to be priest Johann (Joann, Joonat), who fled to the caves from Tartu, Livonia, due to religious persecution. Long before the monastery was established in the 14th century, a hermit monk Markus had already lived in these caves.

According to the lore of the monastery and the Setos, Christianity found its way to the Setos through the Pechory monastery. Cornelius, the abbot of the monastery from 1529 to 1570, played a central role in the history of the monastery, and under his rule the Pechory monastery strengthened considerably. Many of the church buildings that have survived until today were built during this time: in 1540, the Church of the Annunciation of St Mary, in 1541, the Blagoveshchensky Church, and in 1565 the St Nicholas church over the Holy Gate was renewed.

In 1558–1565 a strong stone wall was built around the monastery. It is still standing tall today. This also turned the monastery into a strong border fortress. According to legend, the Russian tsar Ivan

← The church of Mõla (Maly) was preceded by the Mõla (Maly) monastery built in the 15th century. The monastery is now in ruins and a church belfry is built on the former ruins.
Photo: Toomas Tuul

← In the middle of the 16th century, the Pechory monastery was enclosed by a strong stone wall. Photo: Ahto Raudoja

the Terrible flew into a rage when he realised the size of the construction project, and killed Cornelius in 1570. The tsar then began to regret his deed, and carried the dead body in his arms down to the Uspenski church. The road that once witnessed the tsar carrying the decapitated abbot is now called Road of Blood. Every year, on August 28th, during the feast day of Assumption of Mary, the road is carpeted in flowers. Abbot Cornelius has also left a strong mark on the traditions of Setos. He is remembered as the builder of the monastery, and as a hero.

Other monasteries situated close to the Pechory monastery, such as those in Izborsk and Mõla (Maly), have also played an important role in the Christianisation of the area. Today, the monastery of Pechory and the other aforementioned former monasteries are under the rule of the Russian Federation.

CHURCHES AND *TSÄSSONS*

The first evidence of churches in Kolpino (Kulkna) and Senno date back to the 15th or 16th century. According to legend, the Taeluva stone church, built in around 1697, was erected by a Seto farmer or merchant from Võmmorski village. Churches on present-day Estonian territory date back to the 16th or

→ The Obinitsa church was built by the local people in early 1950s, during Stalin's reigning era. Photo: Rein Järvelill/
Wikimedia commons





17th centuries. The oldest surviving church building today is in Saatse. It was built in 1801.

The churches of Miikse and Obinitisa were built in 20th century and these are the only orthodox churches that were built in Estonia after World War II, during the Stalinist regime. During a period when many churches in Estonia and all over the Soviet Union were being used as warehouses or were torn down, Setos somehow managed to build several new ones. The churches of Miikse as well as Obinitisa were both built by the local people themselves. The church buildings were ready by 1952 and, after some difficulties, they managed to receive permission from the authorities to use them. There had been a church in Obinitisa since 1904, but it shared its premises with a local school in a unique building still standing today. This was not acceptable for the Soviet authorities.

In addition to churches, many of the villages in Setomaa also have village chapels, locally known as *tsässon*. Many of them are still standing. Some of the oldest ones were built at the end of the 17th and beginning of the 18th centuries, and are therefore the oldest wooden sanctuaries on the Estonian mainland.

← Village chapels (*tsässons*) are dedicated to certain church holiday or saint's day. Pelsi chapel near Meremäe is dedicated to St. Anne. Photo: Ahto Raudoja

← A procession at Pechory on Assumption of Mary, the special feast day of the Pechory monastery on 28 August. Photo: Ahto Raudoja

Orthodox chapels stood at the religious centre of the local village community. Each chapel was dedicated to a certain church holiday or saint's day, which is when the local village feast took place. Chapels were also visited by cloisters. During the Soviet era, church services in the village chapels were forbidden. Some chapels were even torn down. After Estonia's re-independence, local people began to rebuild some of the decayed buildings and to build new ones. Devotions are once again being held in these village chapels.

Orthodox traditions are cherished even today among Setos. The most important church feast is the nominal feast day of Pechory monastery, the Feast Day of Assumption of Mary, on August 28th. People still fast, and there are still icon shrines in many Seto homes.

OLD TRACES IN A NEW RELIGION

The Orthodox Church was somewhat lenient on natural holy places as well, and did not prevent people from believing in holy springs, stones and trees. Some of the most famous oblation stones include Miiakse *Jaanikivi* (John's stone), Pelsi *Annekivi* (Anne's stone) and the Kito stone near Pechory. Offerings were brought to them, where believers prayed for good health.

→ A domestic icon corner of a Seto household. The icon shelf is covered with a special hand-made icon doily.

Photo: Ahto Raudoja





It is still customary, even today, to visit the Miikse *Jaunikivi* on old Midsummer Day, July 7th. According to folklore, St. John, also known as John the Baptist, once rested on this stone, leaving marks behind. An estate owner in Vastseliina (or in Miikse, according to some) refused to believe that the stone was sacred, had it broken apart, and used parts of it to build a new barn. The animals in the new barn came down with illnesses, and did not recover until the pieces of the stone were taken back to where they belonged.

A creek called *Silmaallikas* (Spring of the Eye) runs past the stone. People used to bathe in the creek or wash their faces with water from the creek if their eyes were hurting. Butter, cottage cheese and wool were usually offered on the stone. The priest took some of it and the rest of it was laid on the stone, where beggars took it. People still believe in the healing powers of the stone.

Another similar (funeral) custom, probably dating back to the pre-Christian era, is to honour the sacred trees (*lautsipuud*) that usually are situated on the border of the village.

The survival of old customs and traditions was helped by the fact that until the first decades of the 20th century, Setos were mainly illiterate. Knowledge was passed on through unwritten traditions and

← Inside view of the Obinitsa church. Some icons are decorated with crafted icon doilies, just like at homes. Photo: Toomas Tuul

thus the shared memory extended back over hundreds of years. The rooting of Christian customs was also hampered by the lack of Russian-speaking Setos – since the services were in Slavic, Setos didn't always understand the priest and the deeper meaning of the rituals was not understood to a large extent.

PEKO – GOD OF CROPS

Non-Christian gods have been honoured by Setos for a long time. The best-known is Peko, god of crops. Peko was not known in all of Setomaa, but rather primarily in Mokornulk, a group of villages in today's Meremäe county. Peko was represented by a human figure made of wood or wax, which circled annually between different families.

The figure was kept in the grain storage of Peko's host, who was chosen each year. The election took place on the autumn feast, which only men could take part in. The feast was held at the end of harvesting and the selection was done through the drawing of blood. According to tradition, men gathered together before midnight at the farm of Peko's host. The windows of the room were closed and the host, together with two assistants, brought in Peko's figure. Then the men ate, took each other by the hand and asked for protection for the next year's crop and cattle, while

→ The Miiakse spring and *Jaanikivi* (St. John's stone) are considered holy sacrificial sites, and people still believe in the healing powers of both. Photo: Ahto Raudoja





circling around Peko. They then ran out and started to jump over the fence, at the same time grabbing and scratching each other. The first one to bleed became the new host for Peko. The new host took Peko to his home and stored him in his grain storage.

Peko was given a new life by song mother Anne Vabarna, who verbalised the Seto national epic “Peko” as an order from folklorist Paulopriit Voolaine in 1927. Peko, the main character of the epic, is a hero crowned as king in return for winning in battle. At the end of his life, Peko goes to a cave and falls asleep for eternity. Pechory monastery is built on top of the cave.

According to legend, Peko is the king of Setos, asleep in his cave under the monastery. His representative on Earth is the *ülemsootska* (Chief Herald), elected each year on the Seto Kingdom.

← Härmä chapel is standing next to an old pine tree, which is known as sacrificial tree. Photo: Rein Järvelill/Wikimedia Commons

← A newly made statue of Peko at the Samarina village near Saatse is a piece of art, not a traditional statue. Photo: Ahto Raudoja

FOLK CALENDAR HOLIDAYS AND CHURCH FEASTS

Setos belong to the Greek Catholic (Russian Orthodox Christian denomination, and as in the Russian Orthodox Church, holidays are observed according to the old Julian calendar, which is 13 days behind the new Gregorian calendar. The dates listed below all use the Gregorian calendar as a reference, with corresponding old calendar dates given in brackets.

Although the folk calendar system used by the Setos relies heavily on the Orthodox tradition, some Seto holidays have been borrowed from Estonians and their folk traditions, and thus coincide with the Catholic and – more recently – with the Lutheran church calendar. This is quite natural, considering that the Setos live “on the edge of the world”, the situation also described by their anthem. At least by name, the Setos are known to have knowledge of 65 holidays. The following list introduces the most important of these, with references both to the church calendar as well as the Seto folk calendar.

→ Egg-rolling competition takes place at a specially built sand construction on Easter Sunday. Photo: Ahto Raudoja





Candlemas (Groundhog Day, *kündlepäiv*) – 15.02 (2.02)

Church calendar: the date marks the presentation of Jesus Christ in the temple 40 days after his birth, during which the candles lit themselves.

Folk calendar: this date also marks the turning point of winter, and is mostly known as a women's holiday. On this day, the Setos traditionally went to church and lit candles both at church and in their homes.

Maslenitsa (comparable to Shrove Tuesday) – a moveable feast celebrated during the last week before Lent.

Folk calendar: growing linen has given rise to several magic rites such as sledding down the hill (the longer the slide, the longer the stem of flax) and horse sleigh riding. During Maslenitsa week, dishes with meat were no longer permitted, but dairy could still be consumed. As singing and other forms of entertainment were forbidden during Lent, this was the last chance for people to sing and enjoy life to the fullest.

The origin of *ulasöpäiv* (St. Blasius Day), which is celebrated on Thursday during the *Maslenitsa* week, goes back to pre-Christian traditions. This is a celebration for married women. The participants traditionally brought some food and drinks, performed a variety of fertility rituals (which had to be kept secret), with the bride who had arrived in the village during the past year serving as hostess to other female

← At important feast days, food is brought to the church for blessing. Eggs coloured red mark Easter. Photo: Ahto Raudoja

guests. No men, children or unmarried women were allowed to participate.

The Day of the Annunciation (*paastumaarjapäiv*) – 7.04 (25.03)

Church calendar: the day when the birth of Jesus was told to Virgin Mary.

Folk calendar: women's holiday, during which several forms of handicraft were forbidden. Magic rituals were carried out to promote cabbage growth. Rituals included drinking red-coloured beverages (mostly juice, wine or liquor), which were believed to bring good health and produce red cheeks for the entire summer.

Palm Sunday – week before Easter.

Folk calendar: traditions include the blessing of willow twigs at church; the twigs were then brought home and placed in front of the icons. They were also used to decorate other buildings, placed into the growing rye and used on the day the cattle were let out into the open as well as on the first ploughing day to perform related rituals. While the tradition of waking up sleeping family members (especially children and young girls) by a stroke of a willow twig and saying a special formula is common to both Setos and Estonians, another tradition – children swinging on

→ Transfiguration Day commemoration feast at the Obinitša cemetery. Some food is always left for the deceased family members. Photo: Ahto Raudoja





a makeshift seesaw (a plank from a fence or any other piece of wood was often used for this purpose) while singing a song with a specific melody – is unique to the Seto people. During Lent, singing was considered taboo, and exceptions were made only for children.

Easter (*ülestõusmispüha*, *paasapüha*) – a moveable feast lasting three days.

Folk calendar: during the first day of the feast, each village set up a swing, and people began swinging. In old times, it was the only week when swinging was practiced. Ritual foods included boiled eggs, which were sometimes coloured. Although different colours could be used, red eggs were considered mandatory. People also prepared a patch of ground for an egg-rolling competition right next to the swing. The competition was especially popular among young men, and in some Seto villages, competitions are held to this day and attract a considerable number of tourists. In addition to young men, other adults and children may also take part in the competition.

The village chapel or *tsässon* in Tobrova village is dedicated to Easter holidays: in the past, a special village party called *kirmask* (*kirmas*) was held there on Easter Sunday.

← Assumption of Mary at the Pechory monastery. A central element of the feast day is a flower-carpeted road called the Road of Blood. Photo: Ahto Raudoja

← People looking at the procession of Assumption Day of Mary at Pechory. Photo: Ahto Raudoja

St. George's Day (*jüripäiv*) – 6.05 (23.04)

Church calendar: the date marks the death of the Great Martyr St. George. St. George is known as the protector of animals, especially horses. Icons often depict him mounted upon a white horse slaying a dragon. He is the patron saint of Värška church.

Folk calendar: St. George's Day is a day dedicated to horses. On this day nobody worked the fields. Instead, horses were taken to the church to be whisked with holy water. In Värška, the village feast known as *kirmas* is still celebrated on St. George's Day: the day starts with a church service and is followed by eating at the graves at around lunch time; the celebrations last until late in the evening.

Ascension Day (*suur ristipäiv*) – a moveable feast celebrated 40 days after Easter.

Church calendar: the date marks the day when Jesus ascended to heaven.

Folk calendar: working the fields was forbidden; it was also believed that if a branch of a tree was broken or a twig is torn, the tree would bleed, rather than letting sap run.

Pentecost (*suvistöpühi, nelipühi*) – a moveable feast celebrated 50 days after Easter, lasts for three days.

Church calendar: a feast commemorating the

→ St. George's Day church service is followed by a merry village feast (*kirmas*) at Värška. Photo: Ahto Raudoja





descent of the Holy Spirit.

Folk calendar: birch trees are brought into homes. Ritual foods include a homemade cheese called *sõir* and eggs dyed yellow. During this holiday, ancestors are also commemorated.

St. Nicholas Day (*migulapäiv*) – 22.05 (9.05)

Church calendar: the day marks the reburial of St. Nicholas (*Migul* in Seto language), an archbishop and miracle worker. St. Nicholas is a patron saint of fields, cattle and common people.

Folk calendar: on this day, working in fields was not strictly forbidden. Taeluva church is dedicated to Migul.

Hail Day – 25.05 (12.05)

Folk calendar: working in fields was forbidden so as to keep hail from destroying the grain crop.

St. John's Day (*jaanipäiv*) – 7.07 (24.06)

Church calendar: a holiday marking the birth of St. John the Baptist.

Folk calendar: popular activities on this day include setting up bonfires (on St. John's Eve, the evening before the feast day), performing health magic and predicting the future. Twigs of birch trees were brought to homes, as during Pentecost. Although the fast was not over, people

used to bring dairy products both to the church and to special sacred places to ensure a high milk yield. The best-known sacred place in Setomaa is the sacrificial Stone of St. John (*Jaanikivi*) in Miikse. This is where dairy products, wool and coins were offered; the same goods were sometimes also given to beggars. Sacrifices were also made for the benefit of one's health: for instance, it was a common practice to swim in the Miikse stream just by the sacrificial stone and place the infected or aching body part next to the stone for it to heal. The stone is frequented to this day.

Miikse church is dedicated to St. John. On St. John's Eve (6.06) feasts are held in Miikse and Treski villages.

St. Peter's Day (*piitrepäiv*) – 12.07 (29.06)

Church calendar: the commemoration day for the Apostles Peter and Paul.

Folk calendar: the most important food on this day is a local homemade cottage cheese known as *sõir*, which marks the end of St. Peter's fast. Sometimes bonfires are lit.

The village *kirmas* feast is held in Uusvada village.

Päätnits (St. Paraskeva Day) – last Friday before the commemoration of the Prophet Elijah, usually celebrated on the last Friday of July.

→ St. Paraskeva Day (*päätnitsapäiv*) service in the Saatse church.
Photo: Ülle Pärnoja





Church calendar: the memorial day of the Great Martyr St. Paraskeva.

Folk calendar: St. Paraskeva (nicknamed “Pyatnitsa” or Friday in Slavic tradition, hence the name *Päätnits*) is the patron saint of Saatse church, *päätnitsapäiv* being one of the biggest holidays celebrated in Saatse region. A procession is conducted around the church, with participants carrying the icon of St. Paraskeva and a miraculous stone cross. Participation in this procession is thought to be beneficial to one’s health. It is also said that people used to bring so many dairy products to the church to improve their milk yield that Saatse church earned the nickname of the “curd cheese church”.

Commemoration of the Prophet Elijah (in Setomaa known as *jakapäiv* or *iljapäiv*) – 2.08 (20.07)

Church calendar: the commemoration day of Prophet Elijah.

Folk calendar: as Prophet Elijah is known to be the patron of lightning and thunder, people were not allowed to work in fields or perform any other noisy activities on this day, to prevent lightning from causing harm.

St. Anne’s Day – 7.08 (25.07)

Church calendar: the date commemorating the death of St. Anne, the mother of the Virgin Mary.

Folk calendar: the Setos consider St. Anne to

be the patron saint of sheep. There is a sacrificial stone dedicated to St. Anne in Pelsi village, known as *Annekivi*, where people once sacrificed wool, sheep heads and dairy products.

Transfiguration Day (known as *paasapäiv*) – 19.08 (6.08)

Church calendar: the day commemorating the Transfiguration of Jesus.

Folk calendar: in the past, people used to bring vegetables and honey to the church for blessing. Only after the blessing could the food be eaten. Transfiguration Day is especially important for people in Meremäe County, as it is the church and cemetery feast day of Obinitsa church. On this day, the village *kirmas* feast is held in Obinitsa and on the following day (20.08) in Lepä village.

Assumption of Mary (Great St. Mary's Day, known as *maarjapäiv*) – 28.08 (15.08)

Church calendar: the date marks the day of the death of Virgin Mary; it is a special feast day for Pechory monastery.

Folk calendar: on this day, Setos try to go to Pechory to participate in the mass and procession around

→ The procession of St. Paraskeva Day (*päätnitsapäiv*) around the Saatse church. Photo: Ülle Pärnoja

→ The church feast day of the Miiakse church is St. John's Day held on 7 July. On the previous evening, St. John's Eve festivities take place at Miiakse and Treski villages.

Photo: Rein Järvelill/Wikimedia commons





the monastery there. In the past, the village *kirmas* feast was held in Kassioru near Pechory. Nowadays, *kirmas* is held in Radaja (Russian Sigovo) village.

Nativity of the Virgin Mary (väiko maarjapäiv) – 21.09 (8.09)

Church calendar: the day celebrating the birth of Virgin Mary.

The folk tradition focused on visiting the church. On this day, the village *kirmas* feast is held in Laosina village.

Michaelmas Day (mihklipäiv) – 14.10 (1.10)

Church calendar: the day of the Protection of Our Most Holy Lady Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary, known in Church Slavonic as Pokrov.

Folk calendar: Setos start with Michaelmas Day celebrations two days before i.e. on 29 September (12.10). This period of the year marked the end of fieldwork and cattle herding. Russian *Pokrov* was known as the Russian Michaelmas Day. This also marked the beginning of preparations for winter.

Great Martyr Anastasia's Day (nahtsipäiv) – 11.11 (29.10)

Church calendar: the day commemorating the Great Martyr St. Anastasia.

Folk calendar: the Setos considered Anastasia

← *Annekivi*, St. Anne's stone, is a sacrificial stone at Pelsi.

Photo: Toomas Tuul

(locally known as Nahtsi) to be the patron of livestock, especially sheep. The day was celebrated in many villages of Meremäe County: the relatives came together and the feast or *praasnik* (from the Russian word *prazdnik*, meaning “party, feast”) lasted for several days.

St. Martin's Day 10.11 and St. Catherine's Day 25.11
(no old calendar tradition)

Church calendar: not celebrated in the Orthodox Church.

Folk calendar: on this day, Seto children dress up and go trick and treating, though it now takes place according to the new calendar like in the rest of Estonia. In the past, dressing up on St. Catherine's day (usually girls wearing white) used to be more popular than doing the same on St. Martin's Day (when people dressed up as boys, wearing black). The goods obtained through trick and treating were originally not divided between participants but instead were used to organise a party, known as St. Martin's and St. Catherine's Day nuptials.

Orthodox Christmas (Winter holidays; *talsipühi*) – 7.01 (25.12) lasts three days.

Folk calendar: important activities included fortune telling, which was often performed on New

→ Inauguration of the newly built Pentecost chapel (*tsässon*)
at Kuigõ. Photo: Toomas Tuul





Year's Eve, and going to church on Christmas Eve. A tradition completely forgotten during the Soviet era, but gaining popularity again, is *kristoslaavitamine* – the singing of Christmas carols while walking around the village. Children, especially young boys, go from house to house, carrying self-made round shades that hold a burning candle, singing songs to praise the birth of Jesus Christ.

Epiphany (*kolmekuningapäiv*) – 19.01 (6.01)

Church calendar: on this day, the Orthodox Church celebrates the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River.

Folk calendar: baptism with water marks the end of the two-week winter holiday. Although the Setos did not swim in the ice hole like their Russian neighbours, they used to bring consecrated water from the church to cure illnesses both in humans and in animals. As a local peculiarity, people used tar or chalk to draw crosses on the doors or windows; the makeshift wooden crosses were also placed in wells and in buildings.

- ← The view of the Obinitisa chapel from the inside. The church feast day of Obinitisa is Transfiguration Day. Photo: Toomas Tuul
- ← Orthodox Christmas holidays (*talsipühi*) at the courtyard of the Pechory monastery. Photo: Ahto Raudoja

TRADITIONAL FOOD

Seto cuisine is part of their national cultural heritage. Traditionally, the food eaten by the Setomaa peasantry was simple and natural, straight from the field, garden, forest or river. Depending on the season, there was milk, grain and meat, fish, mushrooms, fruits or vegetables on the table. During holidays, the menu was more varied and more time was spent on cooking and baking. Following Orthodox custom, fasting played an important role. Thus fasting food had a special place in the Seto kitchen. There are not many unique features to the Seto culinary culture, rather being influenced by Russian and Estonian cuisine.

Today, traditional Seto food is associated with items such as *sõir* (heated and pressed cottage cheese), pies, and *handsa* (moonshine). Sharing a meal with ancestors at the cemetery is also a well-known part of Seto culinary culture. Traditional meals and cooking methods have become more popular recently, and Seto national dishes and drinks are on offer at several cafes and restaurants in Setomaa.

→ Large Russian ovens enabled to cook different foods, such as stews and porridges in cast iron or clay pots.

Photo: Priit Palomets





In the old days, dishes were cooked in the oven. Bread and other dishes were baked in cast iron or clay pots. Later, boiling became more widespread, and Setos began cooking on the stove as well. Porridges and soups played an important role in the day-to-day diet. In spring, soups were made of sourdock and nettle.

The staples of the diet depended on the season: in winter and in spring, bread, meat, salted fish or salty cottage cheese were on the table. During summer, meat was replaced with milk, and autumn added more vegetables to the menu. Berries and fruit were eaten fresh or dried for the winter. Mushrooms were used a lot as well. They were dried or boiled and kept in a barrel with a little bit of salt. Mushrooms were also pickled.

Fish was bought or exchanged for grain with Russians in nearby lakeside villages. Fish and meat was salted and then doused for cooking. In spring, the leftovers of the salted meat were smoked in the sauna. Since usually only one pig was butchered a year, meat was not an everyday dish for the Setos. Thus grease was used to give the food a bit more „power“. They preserved it in the shed as raw fat shaped as a ball or as liquid fat in clay containers. Fish was usually dried through hanging under the eaves for several weeks.

Milk played an important role in Seto cuisine.

← Eating at cemeteries on church feast days is an important part of Seto culture. Photo: Axel Olai Heikel, ERM Fk 91:3

← Every cook's *sõir*, a home-made cheese, tastes a little different. Photo: Vladimir Pomortzeff

Fresh milk was used for everyday dishes, and sour milk was used to make cottage cheese. Sour milk was heated in the oven and was then salted and kept in a barrel over winter. Salty cottage cheese was mixed with water and eaten together with boiled potatoes or with other dishes. Thus salty cottage cheese was a preserved milk for winter, until the cows could be milked. Fresh milk was then available again. Colostrum, also known as beestings or first milk, was especially valued and was cooked in the oven. Sour cream was used instead of butter, and was eaten together with blini (Russian pancakes) or oil. Oil was a valued side dish during fasting.

According to the Orthodox church calendar, several fasts had to be undertaken. The Easter fast was the longest and strictest, as regards to food, and lasted 6 to 7 weeks. Believers could not eat meat, milk, butter, cream or eggs during that time, and in more severe cases, fish was also banned. Small herring, pickles, boiled potatoes, onions, viper's grass, peas, beans and grain food were eaten during the fast. *Kama* (a mixture of various roasted and ground grains) mixed with oat, wheat and pea flour and oil was used as side dish to potatoes. Linseed oil pressed from self-grown linseed was also widely used. A unique

→ *Handsa*, the distilled moonshine, is a natural part of Seto culture. Photo: Andres Ots

→ The forests of Setomaa brim over with mushrooms such as chanterelles and boletus species. Mushrooms are dried, but also salted in a barrel or pickled. Photo: Tanel Alumäe





root beer soup was widespread as well – sauerkraut together with boiled and chopped turnip or beetroot was added to root beer. All children, except the very smallest ones, were also expected to fast.

Holiday was the time for feasts: at Christmas (*tal-sipühad*), blood sausages and blood-mixed dumplings were made, as well as oven-cooked meat and jellied meat, pie covered with wild pear jam and beet syrup-flavoured greaves biscuits. On Shrove Tuesday, Russian-type pancakes were eaten, eggs were coloured and *sõir* (homemade pressed cheese) was made on Easter and Whitsuntide. At Michaelmas, soup and pies were the traditional meal. *Sõir* was a ceremonial dish that was brought along to family graves on church feasts.

For family occasions – including weddings, baptisms, baby showers and funerals – special dishes were made. At the centre of weddings were meat dishes, such as jellied meat, pies and egg dishes. A round wedding bread made of wheat and oat flour was baked for the couple. Barley scones were offered to the wedding guests. Each guest had to bring food as a present.

Eggs or scrambled eggs were brought to baptisms, and a round white wheat flatbread was traditionally eaten at funerals. Another traditional funeral dish was flummery, made from oat flour, and then boiled and fer-

← Setos bake their pancakes in the oven and use yeast as the leavening agent. Photo: Priit Palomets

← Home-made beer is a common drink at present-day Setomaa and is successfully sold at fairs. Photo: Ülle Pärnoja

mented, as well as peas sweetened in sugar water and honey. Flummery was eaten together with sugar water or milk and a candle was lit in the flummery dish.

Desserts are a recent feature in Seto cuisine. Setos lacked enough money to buy the sugar necessary for making jams. Berries were usually preserved as water conserves, or were dried. Sugar was substituted by honey or brown sugar made from sugar beet. In summer, fresh berries could be found in the forests. During spring, the children's favourite sweets were found under the bark of pine or aspen trees.

One of the most common Seto drinks is root beer (*taar*), made from bread and flavoured with juniper berries, as well as fermented birch sap, which was sometimes supplemented with water from melted wax. The main drink was lots of tea (*tsäi*). Every Seto family had a samovar on the table. Home-made beer from malt bread was made for feasts, and later moonshine (*handsa*) was also distilled, this being similar to vodka, but a lot stronger yet.

It was common for Setos to eat out of one big bowl in the centre of the table with a spoon, with solid foods being carved up in advance. This was done even in wealthier households and farms. Food was eaten out of one bowl with a spoon up until the beginning of the 20th century. It was normal to have no more than a couple of knives and forks in the house.

→ Fish was dried for the winter, then cooked in milk and eaten with potatoes. Photo: Toomas Tuul





NATIONAL DRESS AND JEWELLERY

History and their geographic isolation have made Setos quite conservative. Everything new – in architecture, business and fashion – took more time to settle in here than in other, more open areas.

The tradition of wearing national dress on a daily basis was popular among Seto women until World War II. This means that there are still a lot of people who remember their mothers or grandmothers wearing Seto national dress. It can be said that bond between Setomaa and the people wearing their national dress on a daily basis has never been broken. Today, wearing national costumes has again become common, not only at festivals, but also at simpler village and family celebrations.

Seto men were good merchants and went on long journeys for trade. They travelled through rural areas, but also to larger towns, such as Pskov, Riga, and Tartu. What they saw there, they brought to Setomaa as well, including a more urban way of dressing. They also brought along modern fabrics from stores,

← Woman's headwear includes a long head doily, embellished with embroidery and a colourful crochet lace in its very end.
Photo: Toomas Tuul

including yarn, textiles, threads, beads, and lace.

The first decade of the 20th century is regarded as an important time of transition for the Seto men and the development of their outfits, when a more urban dress style dominated their national costumes.

SETO WOMEN'S OUTFITS

The national dresses of Seto women can be divided into two separate styles, being referred to as “earlier” or “white” and “later” outfits among people. The earlier outfit marks a set of clothes worn around the last quarter of the 19th century, the later marks the clothes that came afterwards, until urban outfits took over.

The earlier outfits of Seto women were mostly white. The shirt was made from bleached linen. The narrow sleeves were surprisingly long, about 130 cm, leaving thick folds of fabric on the arm. Today the length of the sleeves is hard to explain. It might have just been fashionable back then. The long sleeves of the shirts are also called false sleeves, since they were usually tied together on the back. A special slit is left in the seams of the sleeve for the arm to emerge. The sleeves are embellished with red stripes, bobbin lace and a strip of embroidery.

A white woollen long dress is worn on top of the

- A white woollen coat decorated with folds and ribbon braids is a traditional overdress of Seto women. Photo: Ahto Raudoja
- Young boys also wear a white linen shirt tied with a string-like belt. Photo: Jüri Külvik





shirt, with false sleeves as well. Unlike shirtsleeves, these are too narrow for the arm to come out. The sleeves of the dress are simply left hanging on the back, attached to a waistband. A waistband is tied around the waist, with its ends hanging in the front. A hip apron is attached to the waistband, embellished with beautiful embroidery. Women wore white wooden tights and laced shoes or leather half boots with laces. Russian-type felt boots were used during the winter.

The headwear of Seto women is special as well. The way you dress your head was, and still is important, and it is followed carefully when wearing the traditional clothes. Married Seto women never showed their hair. Instead, they braided it in two, just above the temple. The braids were then wrapped around the head, to shape it accordingly. If one's own hair is not long enough, false braids are added, made of linen tow cloths, but which were thought to be shameful in the early days. The head doily is tied up with a headband, which for festivities is complemented with a golden cloth. Girls wear a garland or a headscarf.

The later outfits of Seto women have gone through some significant changes as compared to the earlier ones. The sleeves of the shirts are shorter and the elbows of the shirts are decorated with red patterns. The white dress was replaced with a black sleeveless one, with no false sleeves. The dresses were made of black woollen

← The earlier outfit of Seto women is almost all white, with a lovely hip apron and long false sleeves. Photo: Andres Ots

cloth, linen or cotton. Hip aprons were replaced with colourful aprons decorated with embroidery and lace. To this was added a long white woollen coat, with folds and red-green ribbon braids on the back, being either half-woollen or woollen, depending on the season.

JEWELLERY

The traditional Seto woman's outfit has always included a striking set of silver jewellery. Jewellery was given to teenage girls, and was also inherited from grandmothers. The quantity of jewellery was an indicator of the wealth of the family. At the centre of a married woman's jewellery set was a large brooch, which is traditionally worn until about the age of 45 or 50, the end of the fertile period. Then it is passed on to a girl about to marry.

In addition to the brooch, different kinds of silver necklaces were worn: mint necklaces, pocket watch chains, twirl chains. Old-fashioned necklaces include hollow silver beads. Besides breastpins, Seto women also wore rings and different types of bracelets, as well as earrings, though not as often.

SETO MEN'S OUTFITS

The national dress of Seto men includes a linen shirt, embellished with red patterns on the cuffs of the sleeves and the collar. It is believed to magically

→ A Seto woman with the traditional high silver brooch and lots of necklaces. Photo: Ülle Pärnoja





protect the wearer from evil.

The trousers are made from white or striped linen fabric. The stripes can be white and blue, black and white, or red, blue and white. Seto men wear their shirts on top of their trousers, tied with a narrow belt. Married men are clearly distinguished from the unmarried ones by the way they tie their belts – married men tie their belts on their right hip, single men on their left hip.

Long woollen stockings, into which Seto men tuck their trousers, are proudly embellished. What makes them special is the fact that they have no heels. Researchers have tried to find various explanations to this. One explanation says that without heels the size of the stockings was not important and could be made to fit anyone. That way, too, both sides of the stockings could be worn out: if a hole appeared under one heel, the wearer could switch sides and wear out the other one. Since wool is elastic, the heel was known to find its own way. Laced shoes or gallant leather combat boots were worn.

The men's long white woollen coat is known as a woollen shirt. The long winter coat is longer than the woollen shirt and from a thicker fabric.

Men wore a felt hat or a tweed hat – a distinct influence from urban fashion.

← Traditionally, a married woman was never to show her hair and the headwear was paid a close attention. Photo: Ahto Raudoja

← Nowadays most Seto women wear a later outfit with a black sleeveless dress. Photo: Jüri Külvik

TRADITIONAL ARCHITECTURE

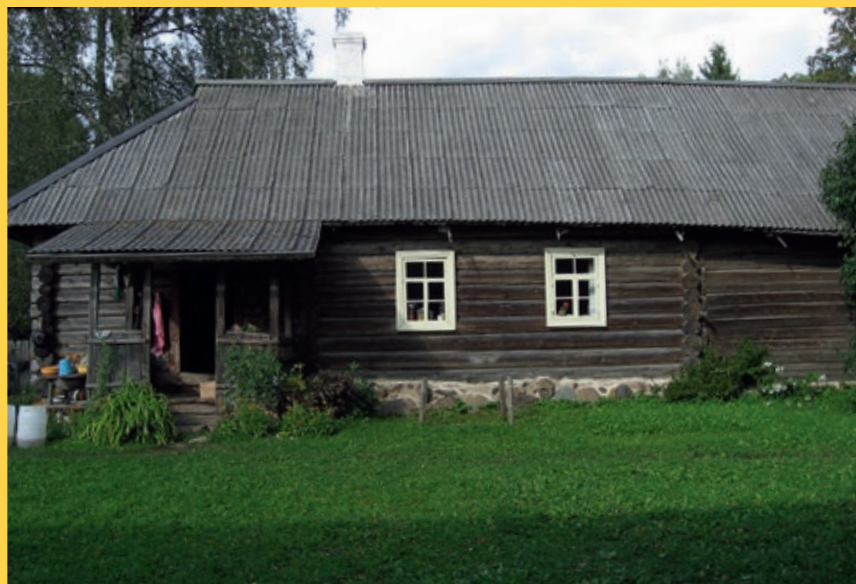
Besides the Seto *leelo*, the eye-catching folk dress and the still important Orthodox customs, the traditional Seto homestead with its Russian-style enclosed courtyard and big gate has a symbolic meaning in the Seto culture.

Although compared to other Estonian regions the share of traditional log buildings in Setomaa is quite large, the political and economic processes of the 20th century have left their mark on the Seto village landscape. In the area of Setomaa currently included in Estonia, only relatively few homesteads still bear the traditional look.

The biggest change for the Seto village came when Setomaa was joined with the Republic of Estonia in the 1920s – homesteads were divided into plots of land, which meant that homesteads that had previously been placed close together were relocated to plots

→ View of the Obinitisa village with several homesteads close together. Photo: Ahto Raudoja

→ A Seto dwelling house was mostly built in several phases. This dwelling house has a main room in the middle, a later addition – the hallway (*seenis*) – on the left and a cold living room on the right. Traditionally, no buildings were painted. Photo: Helen Külvik





of land outside villages. That also made the previously very cramped farmyards significantly more spacious.

SETO HOMESTEAD

A traditional Seto homestead had two or one courtyards surrounded by a row of closely placed buildings and fences and gates. Due to its tightly enclosed appearance it has been called a 'fortress courtyard'. According to one interpretation, the troubled history of Setomaa has played a significant role in the development of that type of homesteads. Such an enclosed courtyard offered better protection against hostile forces at least for a short while. More inflammable buildings like threshing barns and saunas were located separately from other buildings on the homestead.

A traditional Seto dwelling consisted of one or two living rooms and a front hallway (*seenis*). This layout can still be found in Setomaa quite often either in authentic or reconstructed form. Another mandatory element of a traditional Seto homestead dwelling is a big Russian oven with a wide horizontal flue that constituted a warm seat (*Ieso*), usually in the hallway-side corner of the room. An icon corner with an icon cupboard was usually located across from the heater. Upon entering the room, it was customary to first bow towards the icon(s). Underneath the floor of the room,

← On a typical Seto farmstead, several outbuildings form a single row, acting like a courtyard wall. Photo: Mart Külvik

← A two-storey storehouse at Melso. Photo: Ahto Raudoja

a cellar-style storage room was sometimes located.

In connection with the disappearance of small-scale animal-farming in the 1990s, byres, hay sheds and barn buildings have lost their function and can now be seen on fewer and fewer homesteads. The big gates and log fences that give the homesteads the appearance of a fortress have been practically destroyed by today, although people have again started building them after Estonia regained its independence.

Sauna can be considered as the outbuilding that has best preserved its role. While before World War II, the majority of the Seto saunas were still smoke saunas, today most of them have a chimney, although there are still quite a few traditional smoke saunas. Storehouses have also been preserved quite well and the two-storey Seto storehouses – exceptional in the Estonian context – can still be found, primarily in the Meremäe municipality.

In southern Setomaa, mainly in the territory of Russia, farm buildings and particularly dwellings, storehouses and gates have been decorated with wooden lace and artfully designed and cut boards. Besides wood, clay and natural stone have been used as building materials in Setomaa. Numerous limestone buildings can still be found, particularly in the areas currently included in Russia. Roofs have been traditionally built of straw and, in coastal areas, reed.

→ A Russian oven in a homestead at Olohkova.

Photo: Ahto Raudoja





In the 20th century, people started using chips and shingles instead.

TSÄSSONS

Village chapels (*tsässon*) can be considered as the oldest monuments of the Seto architecture, with quite a few of them built already 300 years ago. The materials and techniques used in building the chapels are the same as the ones used for farm buildings: the walls are made of horizontally stacked logs, with corners spliced. The roofs of the chapels were probably also covered with straw. That way the little wooden *tsässons* blended in naturally among other village buildings.

TRADITIONS LIVE ON

Over the past two decades, appreciation has grown for the Seto culture, including construction culture and many old buildings have been renovated and new ones built following the old examples. A new generation of skilful master builders has also emerged. Traditionally constructed Seto homestead buildings can be seen at the Seto Farm Museum in Väraska and at the Estonian Open Air Museum in Tallinn.

- ← Traditional smoke sauna at Miku village. A smoke sauna has no chimney, and as it is highly flammable, the sauna is always located at a distance from other buildings. Photo: Mart Külvik
- ← A new big Seto gate, constructed in a traditional style.
Photo: Ain Raal

NATURE OF SETOMAA

BORDERLAND

Setomaa is a land located on a boundary line. Primarily in terms of culture, as it is located on the border between east and west, but also in terms of nature. Geographically, Setomaa is squeezed between Lake Pskov and Haanja-Alüksne Uplands. This means that the landscape of the region is very diverse: from sandy and marshy lowlands by Lake Pskov, where the ground is 30 metres above sea level, to the hilly area near the Haanja Uplands, where the highest peaks of the entire historical Setomaa are located around Luhamaa (Maaniidumägi 224.5 m above sea level). In between, sandy pine forests rich in mushrooms and berries stand in the north (called Palumaa), extensive reclaimed plains intersected by primeval valleys lay in the central and western part, and the majestic Izborsk Plateau covers the southern part, to the east and south of Pechory (Petseri).

Climate of Setomaa is clearly continental. This means that summers here are notably warmer and winters colder than, for instance, around Pärnu

→ Winter at Setomaa. Photo: Toomas Tuul





(200 km to the west). Setomaa also has less precipitation than the Estonian average, because the Haanja Uplands function as a sort of a wall which catches the mainly western and south-western rains.

A HAVEN FOR STEPPE PLANTS

The continental climate and the sandy soils have created a favourable growing environment for numerous steppe plants that are unknown or rare in the rest of Estonia. The non-indigenous species of steppe and forest steppe plants grow mostly in treeless heath areas as well as on railway embankments and shore outcrops. These plants also include species familiar to gardening enthusiasts – plants that feel at home in the light-filled pine forests of Setomaa just like on natural rockeries: dwarf everlast (*Helichrysum arenarium*), rolling hen-and-chicks (*Jovibarba globifera*), eastern pasque flower (*Pulsatilla patens*), small pasque flower (*Pulsatilla pratensis*), spiked speedwell (*Veronica spicata*), sand pink (*Dianthus arenarius*) and many others. All these species are under nature protection and people are prohibited from picking them and replanting them in their home garden.

A wooded area to the south of Väraska, called the Mustoja kame field, is a Mecca for such unconven-

← Dwarf everlast is one of the many steppe plant species that grow in the sandy habitats of Setomaa. Photo: HelenaH/ Wikimedia Commons

← The rather continental climate of Setomaa is suitable for growing strawberries. Photo: Toomas Tuul

tional plant life in Setomaa. Kame fields are characterised by a very complex relief, where kames and small bog planes are interceded by depressions, gullies and dunes. The latter, sand dunes and drifting sand areas, are particularly characteristic of the region – unique surface forms that create a homely environment for plant species originating from steppes.

The undulating landscape here has also been influenced by the Pechory shooting field of the Estonian Defence Forces, which was established in the 1920s. During the Soviet times, the area was used as a tank polygon. The military history of the Mustoja kame field is evident from the countless bunkers and trenches that add even more hillocks and holes to the surface here.

Setomaa forests are renowned for being rich in berries and mushrooms. Blueberries and cowberries, chantarelles and boletes thrive in the sparse and light-filled pine forests. The Setos themselves are avid gatherers, and forest fruits, especially mushrooms, have had a place of honour in their cuisine for centuries. Today, summertime gathering provides a significant additional income for many locals.

- On the Izborsk Plateau, limestone has been skilfully used in construction. Photo: Ahto Raudoja
- The coast of Lake Pskov: a view from Podmotsa to Kulje. Photo: Ingvar Pärnamäe / Wikimedia Commons





NATURAL RESOURCES

In addition to the above-ground natural riches, there are also hidden treasures in the Setomaa soil. A large part of the underground treasures in the Estonian territory of Setomaa is related to the Värskä region, with the Värskä mineral water being the most renowned resource. There are actually several different kinds of mineral water – some are smooth, but some so salty as to be unfit for drinking. Salinity or the content of minerals depends on how deep the water is extracted from: the deeper, the more potent. Special-purpose water is primarily extracted from the depth of 450 to 600 meters, and some of it is sold in stores as drinking water, while some is supplied to the nearby spa and water park as therapeutic water. The spa also uses another mineral resource of the Värskä region – the lake mud of Värskä Bay.

Somewhat surprisingly, an important item on the list of the natural resources of Setomaa is limestone, which is only found in very few places near the border in South-Estonia. The majority of the impressive deposits of Devonian limestone or dolomite lie in the current territory of Russia. The most representative layer of limestone on the Estonian side is located at Tiirhanna village. Towards the east, on the Izborsk Plateau, limestone has been skilfully used for construction purposes, mainly for building barns.

← A view from the lookout tower on the Meremäe Hill.

Photo: Toomas Tuul

The famous Piusa sand quarries and caves are also associated with Setomaa. Although the Piusa caves and quarries are actually located to the north of Piusa River, i.e. in Põlva County immediately beyond the north-western boundary of Setomaa, white quartz sand layers also extend to the south of Piusa River, to the territory of Setomaa. The sand deposits here in the Pechory-Võru primeval valley differ from the Devonian reddish iron-rich sandstone primarily due to the absence of iron compounds. At the Piusa quarry, we can imagine ourselves back to a moment in time nearly 385 million years ago, when the white sandy beaches of the Devonian sea and rivers were, indeed, quite similar to what we can now see at both Piusa and other sandstone deposits in the Pechory-Võru primeval valley.

PIUSA RIVER AND LAKE PSKOV

Piusa River has also been called as the Mother River (Emajõgi) of Setomaa. It is a border river: along its middle course from Vana-Vastseliina to Koidula, it separates Setomaa from the rest of Estonia. The lower course of Piusa River starting from Koidula runs inside Setomaa, but according to the current political layout it is an Estonian-Russian border river

- Piusa River is the main river of Setomaa. It is lined with beautiful sandstone outcrops on its middle course.
Photo: Marko.Eesti / Wikimedia Commons
- Piusa River has clear cold waters and a great fall, making it a favourite for water sports. It is also the main border river between Setomaa and the rest of Estonia. Photo: Toomas Tuul





up to Rääptsova village, after which it runs calmly through Setomaa into Lake Pskov.

Piusa River is also known for other characteristic features: it is a river with clear cold waters and a great drop, starting from Lake Külajärv at Plaani on the Haanja Uplands and draining into Lake Pskov. The height difference is 214 metres, and the fall is distributed very unevenly. After reaching Setomaa, Piusa River winds along a deep primeval valley lined with sandstone outcrops, dropping by 70 metres, i.e. 3.3 metres per kilometre.

Along the same section, between Vastseliina and Tamme, the shores of Piusa River are lined with numerous sandstone outcrops. It is often thought that the tallest sandstone outcrop in Estonia is at Taevaskoja, but that is not the case. The tallest sandstone outcrop in Estonia is located by Härmä village in the primeval valley of Piusa and is called the Upper Härmä Wall (Müür in local language) or the Keldre Wall. The height of the sandstone outcrop is 30 metres, while the slopes of the valley are up to 43 metres high. To protect the shore cliffs, alluvial meadows and other values of nature here, the Landscape Protection Area of the Piusa River Primeval Valley has been established.

← The water of Slavic (Slovensky) springs at Izborsk is believed to have a healing effect Photo: Ahto Raudoja

← Famous Piusa caves are manmade caves dug into white sandstone from 1920s until 1960s. The caves offer a favourable hibernating place for several bat species. Photo: Toomas Tuul

Due to its great drop, Piusa River has been home to many watermills: at least 39 on the main river and as many on its tributaries. The largest number of mills was located on the rapids-rich section from Vana-Vastseliina to Tamme, with 14 mills operating on the 21 km section before World War II.

Lake Pskov and the surrounding boggy lowlands have primarily influenced the people living by the lake, and their lifestyle. Fishing has given a significant additional income, but mostly a possibility to survive in the meagre conditions provided by the boggy and sandy lakeside lands. Biologist Nikolai Laanetu has written: "From early childhood, hunger taught you to communicate with nature and to value every life around you. People took the maximum offered by local nature, without taking too much. There simply wasn't too much anyway. In spring, fish gave sustenance, and in summer, people picked mushrooms and berries from forests and bogs. When fish was abundant, people dried it by hanging fish underneath the eaves and stocked it for harder times. Today, such dried fish is more of a delicacy for beer lovers, but back then people's lives depended on it."

Human settlement in this boggy area is concentrated

- Sheep rearing helps to maintain open landscapes and offers some supplementary income for the local people. Photo: Toomas Tuul
- The European roller, once a common inhabitant of open cultural landscapes probably does not live in Setomaa anymore, but it's good to stay open-eyed. Photo: Artur Mikolajewski / Wikimedia Commons





primarily on higher ground suitable for farming. The lake has several islands and islets, including the largest island of Lake Peipsi-Pskov, Kulkna (Kolpino) island.

SURPRISES IN THE ANIMAL KINGDOM

In the southern part of the Lake Pskov Lowlands, along the middle course and tributaries of River Optjok, one can encounter a rather unexpected animal – the European pond turtle (*Emys orbicularis*). These shy warmth-loving little animals have definitely been living in Setomaa already before, but for nearly a century no sightings were recorded. It is possible that the European pond turtle is distributed rather more widely than we think and therefore it is worth keeping one's eyes open when hiking in damp areas.

Another exciting animal species to be looked out for in Setomaa is the smooth snake (*Coronella austriaca*). A few observations, although unverified, indicate that this non-poisonous snake may live in the area of Värska Bay in Setomaa, on the northern boundaries of its distribution range – just like the European pond turtle and the common spadefoot toad (*Pelobates fuscus*) discussed below. The smooth snake is sandy grey, with a dark brown stripe running from

← The common spadefoot toad, a rare amphibian in Europe, can be met in the small farm ponds of Setomaa. Photo: Christian Fischer/Wikimedia Commons

← The great crested newt, a European protected species, also loves the small waterbodies of Setomaa for breeding. Photo: Rainer Theuer/Wikimedia Commons

its nostrils to the neck and little dotted lines covering the sides of the front part of its body.

A few decades ago, one could still meet a jackdaw-sized bird with bright blue plumage in Setomaa and elsewhere in the depths of South-Estonia – the European roller (*Coracias garrulus*). Unfortunately, it can now be said that this beautiful bird no longer lives here and the northern boundary of its distribution range has receded considerably southward. The European roller, also commonly called the German crow, can be easily distinguished and anyone who is fortunate enough to encounter it should inform a local museum of the sighting. Reports of sightings of the European pond turtle and the smooth snake would also be highly appreciated.

The common spadefoot toad, one of the most threatened European amphibians, also feels at home in Setomaa. The soft sandy soils of Setomaa suit the spadefoot well, as it spends a large part of its day burrowed in the ground. It requires small clean puddles and ponds for spawning and therefore it is very important to preserve old cultural heritage elements like flax-retting and sauna ponds.

TREASURES OF IZBORSK

The Izborsk-Mõla (Maly) primeval valley located on the Izborsk Plateau is considered as the most

→ The Izborsk-Maly primeval valley, the most outstanding landscape feature of Setomaa, Strokin.ru/Wikimedia Commons





remarkable landscape form in Setomaa. It is the most high-relief place in Setomaa, offering unforgettable views which are particularly powerful in places where the slopes have not yet overgrown with brush or trees. Views to the serpentine Izborsk and Mõla (Maly) lakes meandering along the bottom of the valley are particularly beautiful. The slopes above the long and narrow Lake Mõla (Maly), which in places are 70 metres high, create an illusion of an inland fjord.

Another sight to see in the Izborsk area in connection with limestone slopes is the Izborsk Springs or the Holy Slavic Springs. Here on the western shore of Izborsk Town Lake abundant veins of water sprout from thin cliff layers. It is believed that the spring water here has a rejuvenating and healing effect and therefore the foot of the cliff by the springs is often crowded with people catching some of the supposedly holy water into canisters to take home.