

## Strengthening transmission within Võro-Seto heritage communities

I represent a community in the South-Eastern part of Estonia, called **Võro-Seto community**. These are in fact two different ethnic groups, who have the same language (or dialect) but quite important cultural differences.

The **Võro culture** is closer to the mainstream Estonian culture, and historically influenced by the Protestant Lutheran church. Võro singing, dancing, music-making, and many life-style traditions are different from the Seto. The link that the Seto share with the Võro community, is the **language** (belonging to the Finno-Ugric family, together with standard Estonian).

Some statistics: The population of Estonia today is 1.3 million. There are about 70,000 people who master actively or passively the Võro language. There are 10,000-13,000 Seto, of whom 3,000-4,000 live in the territory of the Seto area. Today many Seto have moved also to urban areas and their inhabitation is divided by different administrative regions also in Estonia. Since the second half of the twentieth century, the Võro and Seto communities have lived in a much closer contact and mixed with each other than ever before.

The **Seto culture** developed between Russia in the east and Estonia in the west. The Seto area (Setomaa) has been part of Estonia only since the beginning of the 20th century. In 1945 Setomaa was cut into two, one part remained under the direct Russian administration. The Seto still preserve their own language, their traditions, local cooking and handicraft skills.

The Seto have traditionally been Russian Orthodox Christians, this defines their special calendar holidays where the old beliefs and customs are mixed with church traditions. The Seto venerate their ancestors. For example, after the service at church holidays, followed by a procession around the church, people go to family graves to feast with food and drink and commemorate the dead.

The Seto have maintained ancient singing practices of their unique *leelo*, mostly practiced by women today. This is a communal tradition where one singer composes and performs leading lines that the choir repeats in many parts. The best singers may perform songs of thousands of lines and earn the title of Seto Mother of Songs.

The communal singing is still very much alive in family parties and village festivities where different generations sing together. I myself sing in a Seto choir called *Helmekaala* (Those Wearing Jewelry) that gathers in my hometown Võru, and there I have learned many songs from our talented leader Anne Linnupuu. She has also encouraged me to compose my own songs. In this way the singing tradition is passed on in the Seto choirs, from the older singers to the young ones. Every year is held a Seto song festival where all the choirs of local and diaspora Setos meet to sing and celebrate. These events draw also musicians playing traditional instruments, and likewise traditional dancing has an important role. Recently, the younger

generation has grown more interested in Seto culture particularly because of these ancient elements of cultural heritage that provide roots and difference in the Estonian mainstream. In this environment the young communicate and get inspiration from their peers, which simultaneously raises the prestige of Seto culture.

### **New channels**

It seems to me that traditional culture cannot really be taught formally at school: It is something inner, lived and valued within the community. Here family connections and life style play an important role. At the same time the current social changes have a strong influence in small communities, and therefore the attention and support from the government is necessary. There are national programs that have supported the projects in the Seto area and in Southern Estonia in recent years.

In cultural transmission, it is important to create a general positive cultural background for the children and youth and make old traditions to fit into the modern world. The young generation should feel the meaning of their roots and intangible heritage. The best results can be achieved through activities that conjoin different generations but without ignoring the age differences. One should observe older practitioners, but at the same time draw on the educational potential and positive example of the younger people. Here are some examples:

Different **workshops and trainings** to learn handicraft skills that are applied in modern settings: the original Seto lace, traditional knitting patterns, traditional methods of making rugs (blankets/carpets), bands or belts. There are workshops for making traditional Seto pottery; young Seto activists have also revitalised its traditional trading practices. A selected group of **Seto Handicraft Masters** financed by European program INTERREG IIIA teaches the weaving of Seto textiles, wooden handicraft and jewelry making.

**The Seto Kingdom Days**, an innovative event based on village feast traditions and initiated a decade ago, combine ancient legends that boost local identity and gather Setos from all over Estonia. This festival plays a significant part in transmission of traditions, as the Seto compete in their traditional skills, music-making and sports. The first day of the program is especially dedicated to children.

Other new **projects** have been started to promote cultural heritage. One of the more successful has been the **musical drama Taarka** about the Seto Mother of Song Hilana Taarka's life. In the summers of 2005 and 2006 a lot of local people, among them children and youth, performed in this project together with professional actors. It drew big audiences from all over Estonia, and got praising reviews, which positively reinforced the Seto identity. This project has now initiated a local youth theatre group.

For more information on Seto culture see <http://www.setomaa.ee/>

**The Võro Institute**, a scholarly institution founded in 1995 under the Estonian Ministry of Culture, **plays an important role particularly in the preservation of local languages** (<http://www.wi.ee/>) They coordinate the teaching of the Võro language and culture in the Võro District schools, but also the teaching of the Seto language in the Seto area. There are about 400 children officially learning the Võro-Seto languages and culture, taught by 33 teachers. The Institute provides **additional trainings for teachers, study trips and teaching materials**. Other events organised to support Võro-Seto culture: **poetry contest, book of children's narratives, quizzes and camps of traditional culture, a Võro culture week, children's folklore days**.

Since 2000 a **newspaper** is published twice a month **in the Võro language**, financed by the Ministry of Culture. Since 1995 the Seto community publishes their periodical *Setomaa* <http://www.estpak.ee/~setomaa/>

In early 2006, the Võro Institute cooperated in the project of a **children's website**, and now children watch each Wednesday a new Võro-language episode of the animated cartoon *Jänku-Juss* (Johnny-the-Bunny) on the children's web portal [www.lastekas.ee](http://www.lastekas.ee).

The first Võro-language version of the popular Estonian **children's magazine** *Täheke* (Little Star, targeted for children of age 5 to 10 and widely read in kindergartens) was published in February 2005, with another edition coming out this month.

In the Võro District and Seto area are also different **hobby schools and clubs** that play an important role in supporting heritage culture. 17 folk dance groups, 5 traditional instrumental groups and 3 choirs work at regular schools. Traditional music is taught besides classical curricula in the **Võro Music School** and the **Võro School of Arts**.

In the Võro club of playing and singing, children from age 3 to 10 are provided with the environment where the local dialect is spoken, in order to sing, play, and tell stories together. The smaller ones come with their parents; toddlers learn old traditional songs and rhymes, and also old dances. Both Seto and Võro children play together; they like especially singing and dancing activities, and the Seto folktales. Children and parents participated together in the Võro Folklore Festival, where groups from many different cultures perform <http://www.werro.ee/folkloor/>

We are now preparing for a big local singing festival in 2008 where old songs together with the modern ones will be performed in the local languages.