

## Creating a Seto Epic

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The creation of the Seto epic known as *Peko*, composed by the Seto singer Anne Vabarna in 1927 (Hagu and Suhonen 1995) represented a complicated collaborative interaction between folklorists documenting Seto tradition and a singer/poet constructing personal and communal identities. The resulting text emerged as a negotiation between invented symbolic representation and the establishment of a personal voice through a combination of creativity and traditional repertoire. In this study I explore the collaborative framework in which this text was produced, probing the circumstances and individual relations as well as representational agencies involved. The analysis applies an interdisciplinary anthropological and folkloristic approach, informed by hybridity and the blurring of disciplinary boundaries in historicizing inquiries into cultural documentation and textual practices.

Arguing that the epic under discussion has become an ambivalent symbolic text in cultural representation,<sup>1</sup> my investigation into its historical establishment proceeds from the standpoint that it constitutes an ethnographic representation of Seto culture in traditional poetic form. Anthropological inquiry has recently addressed discursive aspects of cultural representation as textual practice, and by the Foucauldian deconstruction of “regimes of truth” has transformed the tradition-researcher into an object of analysis and evaluation as an author, an institutional being in a concrete historical context, while contesting the authority emergent in textual representation (see, e.g., Clifford and Marcus 1986, Clifford 1988a, Geertz 1988). In comparison to the revisionist historiography of anthropology, folklorists problematize their methodology less frequently, leaving the scholar in the field transparent and essentializing traditional collective heritage, reflected in individual repertoire at the expense of the performing or interacting subjectivities. Oral poetry, however, appears as a social phenomenon in performance or ethno poetic studies and in epic scholarship; especially research concerning the Finnish epic *Kalevala* has included

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<sup>1</sup> For a brief outline of the key elements of the discourses and practices of modern representation see Rabinow 1986.

explorations of ambivalent textual practices (e.g., DuBois 1995, 2000). The social role of epics finds marked investigation in identity discourse, as is illustrated in several contributions to *Oral Tradition*, particularly those by Lauri Harvilahti (1996) and Lauri Honko (1996). In his latest research into the creation and performance of oral epics, Lauri Honko (1998) united folkloristic, textual and anthropological studies, but in his focus on the “textualization” process the social framework and intercommunication between the singer and the ethnographer remained largely disregarded.

The current study aims at historicizing inquiries into cultural documentation and textual practices. My analysis is dynamically informed by Stephen Greenblatt’s sensitivity to the “poetics of culture” (1995), observable in written documents (including poetic compositions) of the period and ascertainable in research aimed at cultural reconstruction, and by James Clifford’s approach to “ethnographic authority” (1988b), which draws attention to the disempowering effect of anthropological representation. I thus propose a rereading of texts and documents to study cultural and social, aesthetic and political contingencies and constraints in the production of a cultural text, and its emergence as a representation. My perspective explores the emergent interaction of the documenting scribe or scholar, the narrator and the narrative presented in the text, and the text’s larger social context. In studying textual representation, the departure point for analysis recognizes the issues of authenticity, traditionalization of personal repertoire, the orality/literacy interface in traditional cultural expression, and the transition of an oral repertoire into a text designed as a cultural representation. Particular discursive background in this context is provided by a historiography of folklore studies by Regina Bendix (1997), in which she argues for a reflexive study of the role and subjectivity of cultural scholars. The contested transparency of signs and interpretive procedures extends to antithetical agendas and subjectivities of folklorists and performers as they emerge in the practices of gender construction that are conceptualized from conflicting perspectives (cf. Kodish 1987, Mills 1993).

The current research explores the creation of *Peko*, first by observing the individuals instrumental in the emergence of the epic project, focusing on two outside folklorists, Armas Otto Väisänen of Finland and Paulopriit Voolaine of Estonia, and their interaction with the Seto folk singer and poet Anne Vabarna. The scholarly and cultural agendas negotiated and the enacted personal relations investigated concurrently reflect the context and practices of folklore studies of the time. The inquiry into the institutionalization of representative tradition-experts is expanded by an analysis of the epic poem Anne Vabarna composed, the way her singer’s subjectivity emerged in it, and how she expressed her personal as well as communal experience in her repertoire. The textual elements of this oral-derived epic are observed for their emblematic qualities in reflecting the

creative process of oral tradition. Vabarna's poetic composition presents an epic unity previously unknown in Seto culture, and yet the singer—as a competent tradition-expert—performed the commissioned poem as a traditionalized narrative drawing on her repertoire. In Estonian folklore scholarship, *Peko* and Anne Vabarna in Seto tradition have been discussed by Paul Hagu (see 1995, 1999a, 1999c). I suggest a different reading of the creative framework and the product by exploring the process behind the creation of an intended Seto representative text, while examining the contingent interactions in their sociocultural contexts to dispute the marginality accorded to the collaborative effort and the hybrid text it produced. My analysis reveals the existence of a multifaceted ethnographic “voice” that broadened a personal repertoire to encompass an entire people, a process that entailed an intended ethnographic representation and expression of identity.

The Seto are a tiny ethnic group of Finno-Ugric origin in the border zone between Estonia and Russia, inhabiting the present-day southeastern corner of Estonia and the northwestern Pskov region in Russia.<sup>2</sup> Their cultural expression is defined by a complex interplay of continuous social and political marginalization on the one hand, and an active idealization of Seto cultural heritage on the other. They maintain distinct features of local vernacular deviating considerably from standard Estonian, adhere to distinct traditional customs, invest the local community with substantial authority, and follow the Russian Orthodox faith (in contrast to the predominant Protestant Lutheranism among neighboring Estonians). Historically the Seto have preserved their identity between two contrasting worlds: retaining linguistic affinities (and shared folkloric features) with the Estonians to the west, who rejected them based on their religion and cultural difference, while harboring religious affinities with the Russians to the east, who in turn denounced the Seto as “half-believers” based on their language and idiosyncrasies in their religious practices.

However, by the end of the nineteenth century Estonian nationalist intellectuals in search of pristine cultural treasures had discovered the Seto region, a folklore reservoir of presumably ancient Finno-Ugric lore, and saw in it an Estonian ancestral heritage that was declared lost in the rest of Estonian culture due to economic transformations, modernization, and urbanization. The Seto lived as an agrarian community with relatively conservative economic practices, where habitual and ritual singing, especially by women, accompanied daily chores and defined customary rites in patriarchal farming households. In the same period, Estonians were

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<sup>2</sup> I adhere to terms “Seto” and “Setomaa,” corresponding to the vernacular reference and preferred in native writing today, in contrast to Estonianized “Setu” and “Setumaa” that remain unchanged in quotations. Aspects of Seto history are discussed in Raun 1991, Hagu 1999b, and Richter 1979.

undergoing an emancipating national “awakening” process, opposed to the Baltic German intellectual and czarist Russian administrative predominance. The conscious constitution of Estonian national culture entailed the establishment of extensive folklore collections and active folklore collecting activities, which emerged through the inspiration and example of similar efforts in neighboring Finland.

In Finland, social trends in the late nineteenth century rekindled interest in myth and Finno-Ugric affinities with an agenda of reclaiming cultural affiliations, preferably in opposition to dominant hegemonies. This renewed interest in cultural heritage led to a further quest for genuine folk poetry, particularly poems of narrative nature, that inspired the Estonian folklorist Jakob Hurt to compile an anthology of lyrical narrative songs of the Seto.<sup>3</sup> Hurt made several trips to Setomaa (the Seto region), and edited a monumental three-volume collection of traditional poetry, *Setukeste laulud* (*Songs of the Seto*), published in Helsinki in 1904-07. From Helsinki came also the first researcher to do systematic fieldwork in Setomaa, the Finnish folklorist and ethnomusicologist Armas Otto Väisänen, who during his trips in 1912-23 wrote down verbal folklore as well as acoustically recorded Seto music on phonograph.<sup>4</sup> Eventually, as a result of his dedicated interest in preserving Seto folklore, communicative skills in the field, and use of advanced recording equipment, Väisänen played a pivotal role in the process of institutionalizing Seto cultural heritage.

### **The Contested Identification of Tradition-experts**

Taking his lead from Hurt’s collection and following the folkloristic idealization of folk poetry, Väisänen entered the field and defined his search via established preconceptions about the nature of competent singers (preferably elderly women) and a measure of exemplary songs (preferably of extensive length). In his fieldnotes, Väisänen defined the Seto region as rich but relatively unified in its poetic expression, concluding that he need not visit every village and should focus his search on the *lauluimä* (“mother of song”), a concept outlined by Hurt (Väisänen 1992:10). Such star performers would represent repositories of a past glory, an ancient tradition in rapid decay, which a collector had to salvage for posterity before it vanished. In his article describing the area and its tradition, A. O. Väisänen suggested an imminent demise when he described “vielä elossaolewien

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<sup>3</sup> Pastor Hurt arranged the most extensive folklore collection campaigns in Estonia starting from the 1880s (cf. Hurt 1903, Mirov 1989).

<sup>4</sup> On Väisänen see Leisiö 1992, Väisänen 1970.

laluemojen kymmenlukuisesta joukosta” (“ten last mothers of song still alive”; 1992:154). In so doing, he defined a recording practice that would exclude men (who attracted his attention only as instrumental musicians) and categorized women as the primary performers. Through the choices he made he assisted in establishing star-performer reputations for particular singers, a mode of individual recognition unprecedented in the immediate Seto community. His activities promoting Seto tradition consequently created renowned singers of local, national, and international celebrity.

Singing was an overall cultural expression for Seto women of the time: it was an integral part of ritual ceremony (e.g., weddings and burials), a daily accompaniment of work (e.g., work songs for churning, milling, and reaping), and a source of entertainment at seasonal festivities or in communal recreation (e.g., swinging songs or party songs). A woman with a noticeable gift for wording poetry for singing was called *sõnoline*<sup>5</sup> (cf. Leisiö 1992:21). Naturally, not everyone was equally talented poetically or musically, but every young girl was expected to acquire some mastery of singing and poetic creation. Singing was valued relatively highly by the community: mothers aspired to teach their daughters to sing in order to enhance their chances of making a better match in marriage. Since singing was a relatively common practice, though greatly valued by the community, and because it was so widespread, it could not render a person unique or exceptional in the Seto community. Such an appraisal emerged through the process of folklore collecting.

A focused and determined folklore preservation campaign started in Setomaa particularly after the region became part of the new Republic of Estonia in 1918. With the rise of a new style of organizational activity, concentrated sociopolitical undertakings aimed at edifying and “civilizing” the largely illiterate, socially and economically backward Seto people. These efforts served the ambivalent purpose of claiming the territory of Setomaa for Estonia by officially Estonianizing its public sphere, while at the same time the cultural activists idealized Seto cultural expression for its singular, pristine qualities. The latter development shifted Seto singing practices from their traditional contexts into focused performances for folklore recordings and performances on public, national, and international stages in an alien representational context unfamiliar to the community. One event transported from Estonian national culture was the song festival, which celebrated and displayed Seto singing traditions for public enjoyment and enlightenment.<sup>6</sup> This process involved selection of lead-singers by some

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<sup>5</sup> A person who has lot of *sõna*, literally “word.” However, in the Seto tradition a verse line perceived as one poetic unit was also referred to by singers as *sõna*. Therefore it carries the meaning of having, that is to say knowing or creating, a lot of verse lines.

<sup>6</sup> Described in Seto 1922:139–57; Kodotulõ’ 1924:209–21.

outside official; dignified “star performers” were greatly honored and rewarded, leaving a mark on the Seto singing community.

On the other hand, these developments triggered a growing interest in Estonian academic and cultural circles, most notably among folklorists and linguists. Within the framework of culturally edifying aspirations, such projects provided the Seto with written language and publications in their vernacular, wherein the preservation of indigenous cultural expression combined with conceiving of an epic to be “discovered” among the people of Seto.

### **The Idea of an Epic Envisioned**

In the historical context of constructing Estonian national culture, the discourse on national epic and its aesthetic as well as cultural-political significance had been paramount and instrumental in cultural developments for nearly one hundred years. The idea of an epic had enjoyed a persistent presence among the Estonian cultural elite since the 1800s. The Estonian epic *Kalevipoeg* had been compiled and edited by Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald and was first published in 1857–61 as a serial in six volumes (see Kreutzwald 1961 and 1963). Soon after its appearance, and departing from the immediate and unavoidable comparison with the Finnish epic *Kalevala*, Estonian folklorists started finding fault with Kreutzwald’s work, regardless of its popular success and acceptance by the general public.<sup>7</sup> Based particularly on the late-nineteenth century folklore research carried out in Finland as well as in Estonia, *Kalevipoeg* was found inadequate and unrepresentative in comparison with “real” folklore. Its style and themes lacked the ingenuity of a true folklore creation, while Kreutzwald’s role as author was pronounced too significant, especially in comparison with the established ideal represented by Lönnrot’s *Kalevala*. Heated debates in scholarly publications, accompanied by the ongoing collection of folklore, inspired some folklorists and literary scholars (with poetic aspirations) to attempt to “create” a folklore epic themselves, one which—informed by the abundant collections of folk poetry in the archives—would better lend itself to national use. However, the topic and main themes of a “respectable” epic proved to be a problem in the case of Estonian folk poetry. The vast majority of songs had been recorded from women, and their repertoire was considered more lyrical, and therefore inadequate for presenting the heroic or mythic deeds (as in the *Kalevala*’s case) of folk heroes of yore. This

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<sup>7</sup> For the discourse on Estonian and Finnish epics, see, e.g., Laugaste 1990; Mirov 1996; Anttonen and Kuusi 1999. The contested narrators and bards in these epics are compared in DuBois 2000.

“desire for an epic” (*eepose-igatsus*), so dubbed by Estonian folklorist Ruth Mirov (1996a), gave inspiration to several folklorists and creative authors for imagining an epic to be found among archived folk poetry, and led to concrete attempts to create one. By the early twentieth century, the extensive collections of traditional poetry and burgeoning professional folkloristics, supplemented by national creative writing of the day, contributed to the persistent obsession with epic narrative poetry, including the emerging project of composing a Seto epic.

The National Romanticist ideological context of the inspirational contingencies of an epic eventually motivated an enthusiastic young folklorist, Paulopriit Voolaine, to envision the promotional role of an epic composition in the cultural advancement of the Seto, drawing an inspirational parallel from the historical developments of Estonian (and Finnish) culture-building efforts. The imagined epic among the Seto had, however, already entered the discourse with the endeavors of A. O. Väisänen. In his descriptive analysis of Seto culture, published in 1921,<sup>8</sup> Väisänen applied epic as a yardstick with which to measure the true merit of folklore in a culture, relying on the established epic canon and the preconceived singer of epic poetry (Väisänen 1992:152):

*Aineksia on kokonaiselle hääepokselle [...]. Eikä ainoastaan hääepokselle, vaan elämäneepokselle. Mitään Kalewalaan werrattawaa ei setukaisrunoudesta Lönnrotin työllä tosin saa. Tästä runoudesta näet puuttuivat partasuut urohot sywine syntyineen, puuttuivat ainekset Sammon nouantaan werrattawalle keskeiselle ja eeposta koossapitäwälle mainetyölle. Se on ennen kaikkea tunteen runoutta, jossa puhuu naisen mielikuwitus.*

We have material for a whole wedding epic [...]. There is material not only for a wedding epic, but also for a whole life epic. However, the Seto poetry would not form through the application of Lönnrot’s method into anything comparable to *Kalevala*. In this poetry the ancient bearded, old male sages are absent, nor is there any material concerning a great feat that could form the core and cement of an epic, like the retrieval of the Sampo. There is instead primarily emotional lyrical poetry, which reflects a female imagination.

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<sup>8</sup> Article “*Setunmaa*” on Seto culture, traditions, lifestyle, and expressive heritage in ten installments in the periodical *Helsingin Sanomat*. See Väisänen 1992.

### Seto Legends in Voolaine's Editorial Activities and Creative Writing

Paulopriit Voolaine (1899–1985)<sup>9</sup> hailed from Rāpina parish in the Lutheran Estonian region adjacent to Setomaa. He studied folklore and dialects of Estonian and Balto-Finnic languages at the University of Tartu without, however, finishing his degree. Voolaine became an active member of various academic and social organizations and combined his fieldwork and folklore-collecting activities with sociopolitical agendas of cultural edification, the enhancement of temperance, and the promotion of Finno-Ugric affinities. He made an early mark in the academic world of the twenties by becoming an editor of (and the major contributor to) two Seto language readers, but eventually published popularizing articles to promote the folklore collected, without providing substantial studies of that material. He deposited in the Eesti Rahvaluule Arhiiv [Estonian Folklore Archives] more than 5,000 pages of recorded folklore; to the Emakeele Selts [Mother Tongue Society] he donated 400 pages of text in dialect together with thousands of notations of dialect words; to the Estonian National Museum he handed over hundreds of photos and artifacts and fifteen hundred pages of ethnographic descriptions of material culture (Hagu 1995:16). Voolaine also attempted creative writing, which met with little public success, and despite his energetic cultural activities he remained relatively marginal on the academic scene, being mainly appreciated and recognized for his collecting work in the southeastern corner of Estonia.

Voolaine noted in his memoirs that he got “ensnared in the magic of Seto folklore” in early childhood, meeting itinerant farmhands and pottery peddlers of Seto origin (Pino 1987:192–93). He documented his first Seto songs during the 1922 song festival, and his publication *Seto lugõmik. I osa* [Seto reader, volume 1] came into print in April/May 1923,<sup>10</sup> with Voolaine as its acting editor, main translator, and frequent contributor. The second volume, entitled *Kodotulõ'. Seto lugõmiku II osa* [Lights from home. Seto reader, volume 2] appeared in April of 1925 (see Seto 1922; Kodotulõ' 1924). The contents of the first reader fell into the sections *Leelo* (“Songs”), *Muistitsõ' jutu'* (“Ancient tales”), *Vägimeehe'* (“Giants”), *Jutustusõ'* (“Stories”), and *Mitmõsugust* (“Miscellaneous”). In the *Vägimeehe'* section several folk heroes are introduced: a narrative on the giant of Petseri,<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Personal information on Voolaine is based on Pino 1986 and 1987.

<sup>10</sup> In both readers, the title page shows the previous year, respectively 1922 and 1924.

<sup>11</sup> Petseri (in Russian Pechory; in German Pleskau) was an administrative, economic, and spiritual center of the Seto region. The reader included a description of Petseri Monastery, an important site in the Seto epic project.



“*Petseri vägiméés*” by the folklorist J. V. Eisen; “*Kalõvipoig ja tä lóó kirjäpandja*” about the giant Kalevipoeg and how Kreutzwald compiled the Estonian national epic; a longer account of the contents of *Kalevipoeg*; and an introduction of Suur Tõll, the folk giant from the Island of Saaremaa on the west coast of Estonia. Among various short story translations from Estonian literary classics is included a story titled “*Saladuslik nõvvpidämine Peko üle*” (“A Secret Meeting about Peko”), where the folk deity/icon of fertility is introduced as the god Peko. Evident in these readers is a general agenda to provide the Seto with either a tangible or mythological history.

Voolaine was an ardent romantic, an idealistic activist, and a champion of conscious cultural identity, mostly inspired by the ideals of the Finno-Ugric movement.<sup>12</sup> His cultural and political agendas found expression in creative poems in the Seto language: *Seto laul* (“Seto song”; Seto 1922:9), and a four-page composition, *Rahva vabadusõ éést* (“For the freedom of the nation”; 175), recounting the course of the recent War of Independence in Estonia, composed in a style reminiscent of folk poetry. In addition, he translated into Seto the Estonian national anthem, with a few other patriotic poems (179). Into the second reader, Voolaine included the section *Luulõ* (“Poetry”), and an anthology of poetry and prose pieces from Estonian literary classics, translated into Seto mainly by the editor, with surveys of seminal poets in Estonian history and leading contemporaries in Estonian cultural life (Kodotulõ’ 1924:47–70). Inspired by traditional Seto poetic compositions, he also penned a lengthy poem titled “*Palakõsõ’ jutlast ‘Kuningas Seto’: Rahvajutta alosõl leelotanu’ Voolaise Paulopriit*” (“Pieces from the Tale ‘King Seto’: Based on Folktales, Sung by Voolaine’s Paulopriit”; 101–22). The main hero, the King of the Seto, had similar features to folk legends (cf. a concurrent feature in the compilation technique of *Kalevipoeg*), and reflected themes from the first reader.

In conclusion, Voolaine’s editorial activities and creative writing circled around the combined role of poetry and tradition in the establishment of national and cultural identity. His aspirations were strong enough to publish his epic poem about King Seto under the section *Ancient Tales*, thus considering that composition more important as a narrative. On the other hand, he sought legitimization for his effort with an introductory remark that his creation was based on folk tales. Yet in poetic form his composition does not correspond fully to the poetic structure of the Seto *leelo* (“poem”),

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<sup>12</sup> Among the Seto, his promotional activities included visiting households and organizing public meetings to give talks about the importance of education, Estonian literature, Finno-Ugric peoples, and the devastating effect of alcohol consumption. In 1928–29 he was officially hired by the Society of Border Regions as an instructor in Seto Sunday-schools (Pino 1987:194).

while his lexicon, grammar, and formulae deviate from the standard of the tradition and lack coherent rhythm. However, by envisioning the idea of a Seto epic, and making creative efforts in compiling the imagined cultural landmark, Paulopriit Voolaine appeared as a folklore enthusiast whose ideas combined well-meaning aspirations to preserve cultural tradition with an acceptance of the creative role of an individual in such a pursuit.

### **In Search of a Singer for a Seto Epic**

The interaction among the individuals involved that eventually led to the creation of the Seto epic *Peko* was recorded in travelogues, journal articles, and poetry or memoirs that reflect complex communication and intricate collaboration between the tradition-researcher and the tradition-bearer, with varying objectives and contested agendas. Although the prime focus for folklorists in the field was to seek out informants as passive reservoirs of tradition, the collaboration that resulted reveals both parties as subjective with particular intents, disputed marginalities, and conflicting representational concepts.

Anne Vabarna (1877–1964)<sup>13</sup> was born and raised in the village of Võporsova in the northern part of the Seto region, then Pskov province. In accordance with customary practice in the Seto peasant community of the time, her father married off Anne (Anna)<sup>14</sup> at the age of nineteen to a farmer in the neighboring village of Ton'a, where Anne bore nine children and lived until her death at age eighty-six. By that time, Anne Vabarna, an illiterate peasant woman but an intelligent and competent expert in Seto tradition and traditional expressive poetry, renowned as a singer: she had toured widely in Estonia, performing in major music halls in Tartu and Tallinn as well as in Helsinki, Finland. In later years, she also made a concert tour to Moscow, the capital of the Soviet Union. Anne earned the honorary title of *lauluimä* (“mother of song”). In the course of forty years, six thousand pages of manuscript folklore material—the majority of which is poetry—were recorded from her and deposited in the Estonian Folklore Archives (Pino 1997a:5). Recently, folklorists have estimated that her creation approximates 100,000 verse lines. Other folklore items documented from Anne included information about beliefs and rituals, folkprayers, proverbs, sayings, riddles, and about a hundred folktales. Poems recorded from Anne

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<sup>13</sup> This account of Vabarna’s life story is mainly based on Pino 1997 and Hagu 1995.

<sup>14</sup> The Seto baptized in the Russian Orthodox church were given Russian names, which they substituted in daily communication with Seto versions. Here the former are added in brackets.

include wedding songs, bridal laments, burial laments, lyrical songs, game songs, children's songs, and longer narrative poems about legendary figures. A vast portion of Anne's poetry embodies compositions of epic nature and praise songs for specific occasions.

Seto folklorist Veera Pino has listed Anne's longer compositions as songs on mythological figures (Peko); on the natural environment with each about a thousand lines: trees (*Kõivolaul* [Birch tree song], *Tammõlaul* [Oak tree song], *Pedäjälaul* [Pine tree song], *Kuusõlaul* [Spruce song], *Kadajalaul* [Juniper song], *Mõisa uibo ja talu uibo* [Manor apple and Farm apple song]); bodies of water (*Viilaul* [Water song]); celestial bodies; wind (*Tuulõlaul* [Wind song]); fire (*Tulõlaul* [Fire song]); change of seasons (*Keväjälaul* [Spring song]); and poems about people: the historical character Ivan the Terrible, *Ivvan Hirmus*, praise songs for presidents, government ministers, generals, university professors, directors of institutions, doctors who cared for her at hospitals, folklore collectors, and so forth, with a total of 20,000 verse lines (see Pino 1997b:5 and Hagu 2000a:371). Her lengthiest recorded poetic work contains a Seto wedding epic *Suurõ' saja'* ("The Great Wedding") of 5,595 verse lines, with an attachment of *Koolulaul* ("Death Song/Suitors from the Netherworld") of 1,662 lines; a novel in verse *Ale* of 11,000 lines; the second part of *Pekolaul* ("Song on Peko") of 4,318 lines; and finally, the 7,929-line epic *Peko*, performed by Anne Vabarna in 1927 but published only seventy years later (see Hagu and Suhonen 1995).

Anne matured as a singer in the traditional expressive environment of the Seto village community. Regarding her lineage, especially the female family members who were considered the major voice in poetic tradition in Estonia, Anne recalled her mother, who died when Anne was only ten, as a good singer (cf. Pino 1997a:5). Other influential family members were her father's talented sister and also his second wife, who, though thirty years her husband's junior, took good care of the large family and reportedly had talent in poetic expression. Thus singing was a common daily practice, a communicational means that combined poetry and music into ritual and entertaining expression, which Anne heard and employed in her communal surroundings.

The community of folklorists "discovered" her as a talented and highly skilled tradition expert in the summer of 1923, when A. O. Väisänen visited Anne to record local knowledge on birthing traditions from an expert midwife (Hagu 1999a:14). Vabarna, however, took the initiative to establish herself as a singer, and she asked the folklorist to take down her poetry instead. She demonstrated her excellent mastery of Seto poetic form in rendering traditional themes as well as immediate personal experiences through shorter lyric poems and extended epic compositions on wedding traditions, describing the proposal ritual and the four-day wedding ceremony

at both the bride's and the groom's household (titled *Suurõ' saja'* ["The Great Wedding"]), with more than five thousand verse lines. Anne explained her mettle in poetic form by recollecting how she had performed in a group for Väisänen a decade earlier,<sup>15</sup> but felt hurt for not being recognized as a "star-performer" at the Seto Song Festival the previous year. Väisänen's visible activities as a collector of folklore had defined also the lead-singer performers chosen by the organizers for that event. Consequently, the outsider activities and the contingent rewarding of recognition inspired the talented and confident singer to embark on creating her "singer subjectivity" as an identity marker.<sup>16</sup> Anne was successful in convincing Väisänen, who in turn exposed his "discovery" to the reading audience in both Estonia and Finland.

On the other hand, Väisänen was also the first to talk about an epic in the Seto tradition, and to associate the epic discourse with the singer Anne Vabarna. After recording her performance of a lengthy Seto wedding cycle as a contingent narrative, he introduced it in an article in *Päevaleht*, an Estonian daily paper, in 1923 as "Uus Eesti eepos Setomaalt" ("New Estonian Epic from Setomaa"; Hagu 2000b:186–89).

Paulopriit Voolaine met Anne Vabarna at the Seto Song Festival in the summer of 1924, where she participated as an established "mother of song," and launched a constructive relationship with Vabarna providing a narrative poem in traditional form recounting the festival, which Voolaine published as an appendix to his article about that event in his Seto reader *Kodotulõ'* (Voolaine 1924b:209–12; Pino 1997b:5). The same volume contained substantial articles on the Seto singers and their repertoire, music, and musicians (including Anne Vabarna) in the Seto language by A. O. Väisänen (1924).

### **The Performer of Tradition as a Creative Poet**

Anne Vabarna was a talented creator of traditional verse who was likewise conscious of the role of an audience and cared about the dissemination of her poems. However, she did not consider her immediate Seto community her only audience, but included folklorists as an important means for reaching the wider world. Her creative subjectivity sought

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<sup>15</sup> The folklorists' concept of expert singers had neglected Anne among the generation of women around 30 to 50, who were usually married and, due to social restrictions prevailing in cross-gender communication, reluctant to communicate with Väisänen.

<sup>16</sup> For discussion on gender relations of folklorists in the field and the interaction in the construction of singer subjectivities, see Babcock 1987, and espec. Kodish 1987.

exposure through folklore collecting practices. Besides those who visited her in person, the illiterate singer ingeniously communicated her creative talent with the help of her children, who had enough schooling to write down her songs.<sup>17</sup> Notebooks filled with Anne's compositions were sent to major collectors. Collecting folklore through correspondence was already a regular practice in many parts of nineteenth-century Europe: the aim of this practice was to preserve it from impending demise due to modernization. The major objective was fulfilled by accumulating extensive amounts of material and, given the scarcity of expert scholars, the work was organized with the assistance of activists and correspondents. For example, from 1923 through 1936, Anne Vabarna sent to one collector sixteen thick notebooks containing her songs, tales, religious poems, ritual descriptions, proverbs, and riddles—all-in-all 3,000 pages, written down by her sons Ivo (Ivan), Timmo, Mihkel (Mihal), or her youngest daughter Manni. Such an arrangement of recording presentations of traditional poetry evolved through the collaborative effort between the singer and folklore collector. When Paulopriit Voolaine took interest in Anne Vabarna as an informant of the Seto tradition, Anne was quite "skilled" in communicating with outsiders as well as relatively accustomed to working with collectors and presenting her heritage through creative performance.

Anne Vabarna had defined herself as a singer with a rich repertoire, conscious of her role and able to perform the "established tradition" as well as her own compositions, inspired by the occasion or her creative impulse. In her performance practice, she also evaluated the expectations of the outsider—the collector—who determined the fate of her creation. Vabarna recognized the validating effect that print offered: a much wider audience and appreciation could be attained if her poems were disseminated through modern print media. Singing also entailed a prospective financial income, which for her emerged as a preferred precondition, since the gentlemen from the cities appeared to be willing to pay money for something that came so naturally to her and which contrasted starkly to the hard daily farm labor.

When Paulopriit Voolaine embarked on fieldwork to collect Seto lore in late 1926 and early 1927, he was to a certain extent on the lookout for a singer for his epic project. Among other Seto singers, he visited Anne Vabarna and recorded her and her whole family, including her youngest children (Pino 1997b:5). His work there indicates a positive communicative atmosphere in the negotiated interaction between the visitor and the household. Exposure to Vabarna's creative talent strongly impressed Voolaine, who likewise harbored poetic aspirations: he had published by that time a number of poems, both in standard Estonian and in Seto. Sensitive to poetic talent, he treated Vabarna as a fellow artist and a creative poet, in

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<sup>17</sup> Only her eldest daughters never attended school and remained illiterate.

contrast to the common expectations that folklore informants merely recalled the past or recollected words heard in distant youth. Such an unusual approach could be explained by Voolaine's own relative marginality. His indoctrination into academic folklore remained ambivalent—until the end of his life, he was valued as a productive, indefatigable collector of folklore material, but not entirely accepted as a scholar. He was considered too eccentric, not focused enough on facts but prone to follow his own imagination; for him fantasy and invention proved as valid as tradition, while in his ideal the two had to mingle. Apparently Vabarna attracted him as a poet, and she in turn was evidently responsive to such interest. Voolaine and Vabarna's collaborative aspirations coincided when they discussed Anne's creative style, her repertoire, her preferences, and also her plans for the future (see Pino 1997b:5). Among these exchanges, Voolaine suggested that Anne should compose an epic poem in which she could sing about the legendary god/King of the Seto, Peko. This idea was inspired by Anne Vabarna's impressive poetic talent and competence in the Seto tradition, as well as by the romanticized ideal of an epic as cultural symbol.

### **Anne Vabarna Becomes an Epic Singer**

Before Voolaine's inspirational commission, Anne had composed and recorded several epic poems of impressive length. In addition to the wedding epic and her initial documented poetic narrative on the suitors from the Netherworld as recited to Väisänen, she sent a poem of more than two thousand lines<sup>18</sup> to the collector Samuel Sommer in 1925, telling about a young Seto man who was a successful farmer, built a church, buried his parents, and married an orphan girl. Eventually all these themes found their way into the epic Voolaine commissioned her to sing.

In the course of time, the tradition-expert established herself through her relations with the tradition-researcher as a folksinger of substantial expertise in traditional poetic expression and as an impressive creative talent. Anne Vabarna had gradually gained confidence and a certain perspective on how to promote herself as a singer and a performer. When these objectives met with Voolaine's desire for an epic, their mutual collaboration received serious impetus, and soon after Voolaine returned from his trip to Tartu, he sent Anne a letter in which he proposed a topic for an epic (see Pino 1997b:5). There is no information available as to what extent Voolaine had already discussed the proposed topic with Anne Vabarna during his visit, but there must have been reciprocal agreement on what Anne would enjoy singing about. On the other hand, Voolaine was

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<sup>18</sup> I owe this reference to Andreas Kalkun.

seeking a composition with epic characteristics, that is with certain compositional and thematic constraints. But taking into account that no compositions documented from Seto singers earlier had met the perceived criteria, he proposed to provide Anne help in developing thematic guidelines. Unfortunately, the letter Voolaine wrote has not survived, but he later commented that he had proposed a content for the poem in brief (1928: 7). It seems likely that his Seto readers provided inspiration and had a certain impact on Vabarna's and Voolaine's future collaboration. Disseminating these publications was complicated because they aimed at a printed reader for a people whose adult generation was largely illiterate or had no capacity to read their vernacular, since the czarist period schooling took place exclusively in Russian. Thus Voolaine could have carried his readers with him and left a copy with Anne Vabarna's family, perhaps reading passages to her, or letting Anne's children read. The poetic works (including Voolaine's poem *Kuningas Seto*) may have worked for Anne the same way as did songs that she heard performed by other singers: the Seto tradition required careful attention be paid to the words sung, with an expectation to respond to what had been uttered. A singer judged the artistic talent of her "rival" in a dialogic response, perhaps in this case, just by being dissatisfied with Voolaine's poetic qualities in rendering a story. A good singer was entitled to perform her own version of the story, especially if it was claimed to be traditional, telling about the history of the Seto.<sup>19</sup>

The composition of the epic proceeded relatively quickly after Vabarna received the letter with topic suggestions or plot guidelines in February, so that by May the written manuscript of *Pekolanõ* was sent to the Academic Mother Tongue Society where it was passed on to Voolaine (Hagu 1995:36). Vabarna dictated or recited the epic to her 19-year-old son Ivo (Ivan), who wrote it down in a notebook of 388 pages (preserved in the Manuscript Deposit at the Estonian Folklore Archives).<sup>20</sup> Anne Vabarna apparently used the native compositional methods of an illiterate singer rooted in her tradition, but having the task of covering a longer plot may also account for the time it took to be created. On the other hand, due to the lack of documentary information on the actual process, it is impossible to

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<sup>19</sup> For a study on an interplay of printed text and oral performance in connection with the *Kalevala*, for example, see DuBois 1996.

<sup>20</sup> However, it is not certain whether this is the original transcript. Vabarna's composition may have first been taken down as notes, probably on loose sheets of paper or in another notebook, from where her children (there seem to be several handwriting styles in the notebook) clean-copied it into the notebook. That scenario would also explain the lines being filled exactly from cover to cover.

distinguish the composition process from that of transcribing.<sup>21</sup> Voolaine has provided a brief reference to the compositional process by merely remarking that there were several obstacles before the poem could be finished (1928:7).

Their collaboration seemed to work well, and in that same year Voolaine gave Vabarna another topic to sing about, addressing issues important to him and carrying significance for the singer. Inspired by the temperance movement, the next epic-length poem Anne composed was called *Ale*, a story about the disastrous deeds of *viinakurat* (“the vodka devil”). After Vabarna had completed composing *Peko* and the narrative poem *Ale*, Voolaine suggested she resume singing about Peko. He proposed that the singer could continue telling about the giant Peko’s deeds as the leader of his people (Voolaine 1930:378):

[K]uidas vägimees Peko valitseb rahvast, mõistab kohut ja võtab üldse osa rahva elust-olust, kusjuures lauluema põimigu oma lugulaulusse Seto muinasjutte ja mitmesuguseid rahvalaule (näit. “Ilo laul”, “Ilmatütar” j.t.). Sedakorda sündmustiku kava talle ei antud.

How Peko rules over his people, gives them judgment and takes part in the life of the people in general, whereas the mother of song should intertwine her narrative poem with Seto folktales and different folksongs (e.g. “*Ilo laul*,” “*Ilmatütar*,” and so on). This time no plot guidelines were offered to her.

On the other hand, this suggestion shows which themes and issues Voolaine regarded as important, but were apparently found lacking in the epic *Peko*. It is not clear, though, whether these were his own ideas or based on comments and criticism by other folklorists after he had published an introductory article about Vabarna’s composition in the journal *Eesti Kirjandus (Estonian Literature)*, where he also recounted the epic (Voolaine 1928). It does, however, simultaneously testify to the first *Peko* being nevertheless Vabarna’s composition, reflecting *her* agendas and *her* artistic and traditional judgment. The second part of Anne’s *Peko laul* (“Song of Peko”) reached Voolaine in written form by Christmas, 1929.

In 1927, as the combined effect of Vabarna’s 50th birthday being marked in periodicals, of articles written by Armas Otto Väisänen, and of a general interest in the Seto *lauluimä* both among academics and laymen, and also thanks to Voolaine’s introductory article about *Peko*, Vabarna’s name

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<sup>21</sup> I rely here on presentations by Veera Pino, a native folklorist and family member who interviewed Vabarna, and on personal communications with Õie Sarv, the singer’s great-granddaughter and granddaughter of Mat’o (Matrjona) Suuvere, Vabarna’s favorite singing companion throughout her life.



became known to the wider Estonian reading public. On the other hand, her fame also drew the attention of cultural performance organizers, whose interest in “authentic” performers had gradually grown. In 1928, Vabarna gave her first public performance outside the Seto region, and in 1931 she was invited to Helsinki to perform at the Congress of Finno-Ugric Cultures, launching her on a career that won her recognition and respect by the outsider Estonian and international community. Anne Vabarna had established herself as *the* major Seto *lauluimä*; henceforth for years to come she would be the one sought out by musicologists, folklorists, and cultural workers to represent the Seto tradition. Today the published *Peko*, both as Anne’s composition and an expressive marker of cultural identity, functions as a powerful symbolic representation of Seto culture.<sup>22</sup>

### The Epic Composed by Anne Vabarna

Having previously discussed the individuals involved in establishing Anne Vabarna as a singer and in envisioning an epic of the Seto, we now turn to the epic that she composed. Our aim is to present the agendas the singer expressed in her poetry and negotiated in the framework of Voolaine’s proposed guidelines, and to analyze the emergent reflection of the singer’s subjectivity through the expressed personal and communal sociocultural experience. In her creative poetry she constructs her image of Seto community through family and gender relations, religious experience, and reflections on historical experience.

Considering the lack of information on the prescribed plot of the prospective epic on the one hand, and the singer’s tendency for “poetic license” on the other, it nevertheless remains a fact that her composition attends to an assignment and bears marks of outside influence. But that description could arguably apply to any documentation of folklore, especially if one is discussing such an extended narrative as an epic. A folklore performance does not arise in a vacuum, and outside influence is particularly apparent in the context of documentation.<sup>23</sup> The current premise in observing Vabarna’s composition of *Peko* assumes that she performed her narrative as a singer who habitually drew from and was inspired by performances she had heard before. Moreover, hers was an epic composition performed outside of any ritual context (which would require adherence to repeated tradition), and therefore its main objective was to

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<sup>22</sup> See Kuutma 2002 for further discussion on *Peko*’s reception.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. discussion on the situatedness of narratives and their documentation in Mills 1991.

render a cohesive narrative, reaffirming a common experience and reenacting a common history in order to provide and confirm a communal identity. Thus, the narrative poem *Peko* is discussed here as a composition initiated and inspired by previous renditions, including lengthy narrative songs by peer singers and also poems and narratives presented by Voolaine. On that ground, it may be argued that even though her composition was intentionally unique, in Anne's perception it fell into the context of her heritage repertoire and was linked to a contingent narrative.

Vabarna was aware of her identity as a singer and her empowering goal involved in putting forward a history of the Seto people, both for them and about them, when she rendered the first few lines introducing her task: "Anne Vabarna nakab innemustist kõwwa seto pekolaist laulma" ("Anne Vabarna begins to sing [about] the ancient mighty [man of] the Peko-clan of the Seto").<sup>24</sup> Her notification that she would be telling an ancient story linked her endeavor to the projects carried out by folklorists in Setomaa who customarily emphasized the role of "antiquity": the songs preferred for recording had to be "of old," whereas the folklorists frequently presented questions and requests for topics or songs to be performed, following particular agendas set by earlier collecting ventures. Vabarna's creative talent welcomed an outside impetus, and the outside world provided for her a meaningful audience. This audience appeared interested in her songs, they could make her known as a singer in the outside world, and they might also provide compensation. Additionally, they would be the audience whose expectations Anne learned to take into account and address in her poems. Thus, she frames her narrative goals in the initial passage of her epic (Hagu and Suhonen 1995:93):<sup>25</sup>

*No heidä ma ette Essu risti, otsa pääle uma risti:  
kagoh minno jummal jõvvutõllõ', armas Essu avitõllõ',  
sedä kirja kirotõlla', sedä laulu laaditõlla'. 5*

*No naka ma koolnut kul'atamma, lesätäjät leelotamma,  
kiä om jo ammu ar koolnu, ommõ mustõ mulda lännü.  
Eesti taha riiki ilotõlla', taha laulo laaditõlla'.  
Peko- olli õks tuu -lanõ pikk miis, väega kõva vägimiis,  
olli tä mi usulinõ, olli selge setokõnõ, 15  
selle taha timmä ilotõlla', taha naane nal'atõlla'.*

<sup>24</sup> These lines occur in the manuscript deposited at the Estonian Folklore Archives (ARS 1.1./384), but have been omitted by the editors of the recent publication (Hagu and Suhonen 1995).

<sup>25</sup> Numbers in the right margin indicate verse lines from Hagu and Suhonen 1995, where a printed line usually includes two verse lines (thus the length of the epic would be about sixteen thousand single lines).

I'll first make a sign of cross for Jesus, our sign upon my forehead:  
 may God grant me power, may Jesus give me strength  
 to write this book, to compose this song. 5  
 I start to tell about the deceased, sing about the departed  
 who died a long time ago, who went beneath the black soil.  
 I want to praise the state of Estonia, wish to compose a song.  
 Peko was a man of height, a giant of great strength,  
 he believed in the same God, he was certainly a Seto, 15  
 that's why I want to praise him, this woman wants to rejoice.<sup>26</sup>

Hence Vabarna was ready to tell stories she knew and was familiar with in the context of her traditional heritage, because events, experience, and relationships reflecting her traditional surroundings recurred from poem to poem. But she nevertheless wanted to render them in her “own words,” while simultaneously taking into her creative work certain inspirations offered by outsiders. The singer intentionally situates her narrative in the framework of communal and personal experience (cf. example passages given below).<sup>27</sup> As a result, her epic narrative is disruptively unique and traditional at the same time: it is a story that has never been told before in that same format, and still its overall imagery and aesthetic and thematic structure derive organically from the Seto poetic tradition and rely on traditional referentiality.<sup>28</sup> Her poem emerges firmly rooted in the common song lore and the recognized tradition.

The epic narrates the life of Peko, a mighty and gigantic Seto farmer, and the fate of his household: mother and father, wife and sons, with various courting, wedding, and funeral rituals occurring. Lengthy elaborations on the deeds of the family members are enhanced by descriptions of daily peasant life. A magic club with the power to enhance the crop or to kill enemies in battle assists the hero, and Jesus crowns Peko the King of the Field so that the Seto people may prosper. When the giant dies, a monastery is built on top of his secret sand cave, and all his predictions for the future come true. The latter third of the narrative gives accounts of Seto life in legendary times, through the experience of an orphan maiden and also Jesus, who established the regulations and rites that ordain the Seto communal existence; in this way traditional themes and songs on biblical legends are combined. Summing up a moral she detects in these songs, Anne gives her message:

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<sup>26</sup> All translations in this article, the passages from *Peko* included, are mine.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. the discussion of poetic form and personal meaning, as well as the role of reality and “fiction” for the narrator in Hymes 1981.

<sup>28</sup> On the relation of traditional poetics and traditional meaning, see Foley 1991.

*Essut lasku-i minnenä meelest, lasku-i süvveh süüamest  
 s'oo õks et hüü tegemäst, vaesõ meele meelütämäst:  
 üte saimi voori ütsä võrra, mi mitmõ külä võrra.  
 S'oo olli küll armas Essukõnõ, ol' helde Maarja heide.* 7895

Do not forget Jesus, nor let him leave the depth of your heart  
 for he did a deed of charity, made the mind of the poor happy:  
 we got a load of nine times, more than the share of many villages.  
 That was the deed of sweet Jesus, the act of benevolent Mary. 7895

And in her next verse, Anne returns without any transition to Peko:

*S'oo ol' õks taa muistinõ laul, innemuistinõ ilo. 7896  
 Pekat õks ma ammuki laulnu, vägimiist veerätänü,  
 Petseri kui olnu piiri pääl, alõva aia all,  
 elänü kui, kulla, tuuh kolgah, mar'a, mastõra ligi.*

Thus went this old song, a poem from the ancient times. 7896  
 I might have sung of Peko ages ago, told the story of the giant,  
 had I lived close to Petseri's border, by the gate of that township,  
 had I resided in that land, there by the beloved monastery.

The singer notes that she would have sung about Peko a long time ago if she had lived closer to Petseri, to the monastery, where she could have visited the church and Peko's coffin more often. The singer wants to praise Peko while she is alive and able to sing, so that the fine gentlemen may remember her name:

*[K]iäki olõ-i tulnu tuust ilmast, tands'nu maalõ taivast.  
 Sääl lasta-i hingel heļotõlla, vaga vaimul vallatõlla,  
 must lasõ-i muld moodotõlla, verrev liiv leelotõlla.  
 Muld ütles: "Murõh otsah!", turbas ütles: "Tohi-i laulda!" 7975  
 Selle lasi ma leelo liinu pite, hiiiril herrile kaia':  
 mino naakõ' nimme nimitsemmä, Anne nimme arotamma-  
 n'oo' omma õks kõik laulu Ton'ast tuudu', Annel vällä arvadu'!*

[N]o one has come back from that world, danced down on earth from  
 heaven.  
 There the souls cannot sound, the devout spirits make merry,  
 the black soil will not let you move, the red sand not let you sing.  
 The soil says: "Agony is over!", the turf says: "Do not sing!" 7975  
 Therefore I let my song go to town, for the smart masters to see:  
 may you start to call my name, announce the name of Anne-  
 from Ton'a these songs were taken, where Anne pronounced them all!

### Historical and Mythological Background of Peko

In general, the idea of the figure of Peko and his proposed leadership of the Seto people as their king originated with Paulopriit Voolaine, who based his suggestion on folklore legends. For the 1922 *Seto lugõmik* he had translated a description of the Giant of Petseri by folklorist Mathias Johann Eisen, recounting Peko's strength and the fearsome deeds of his sword against enemies who wanted to surrender the Petseri settlement, and the peaceful times under his rule in Setomaa, including also a legend of how the Giant of Petseri lies asleep in his cave until this day (Eisen 1922). Those legends have a historical background in the Petseri Monastery (the Pechory Monastery of the Dormition [*Uspenski*]). The first church of the monastery, built on sand caves where the founding Russian Orthodox monks resided and performed their rites, was consecrated to the Virgin Mary, to the Dormition of the Mother of God, in 1473.<sup>29</sup> The prototype of the giant is considered to be Father Superior Cornelius (Kornily), under whose rule (1529-70) the monastery prospered and became fortified; Kornily was killed during the pogroms against the clergy initiated by Ivan the Terrible under the German offensive against the Russians (cf. Selart 1998, Seto 1922: 121–25). Some folk legends then tell of the giant who built the church, whereas other variants maintain that the remorseful Czar was the one who ordered the church to be built on top of the giant's coffin, while the sand caves are related to the catacombs under the monastery.

The character whom Voolaine composed in his poem telling about “kuulus Petsere kuningas, kangõ Setokaise Seto” (“the famous King of Petseri, the strong Seto of the Seto-clan”) in the second Seto reader *Kodotulõ* (1924a:101) was entirely inspired by the legend accounts of Eisen. In the poem entitled *Kuningas Seto* (“King Seto”), fourteen hundred verse lines in length, the giant was proposed to be the King of the Seto people, one of the Seto tribe; the fragmentary narrative included passages about the king's son who played *kannel*<sup>30</sup> and courted a maiden from the mythical Mororiik (Grassland), about King Seto's sleep in the cave, and about his grandchildren, whose courting and love stories derive from Seto narrative poems that had been published already by Hurt (1904) and

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<sup>29</sup> Hence the name Petseri, which in Russian is Pechory < *peščera*, “caves.” The Petseri (Pechory) Monastery established a northwestern stronghold of Russian Orthodoxy that grew into a significant religious center. The monastery's churches contain characteristic symbols of faith, including icons of the Dormition of the Mother of God, the relics of St. Kornily, and his ancient icon (Russian 1982, Hörn 1995).

<sup>30</sup> A stringed instrument, similar to a zither.

reprinted in the first reader *Seto lugõmik*.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, Voolaine makes an attempt to include in his composition the romantic pseudo-pantheon of gods and mythical beings created by the early Estophile intellectuals at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

In his search for a mythological background to the narrative in making, Voolaine took a step further when he proposed the name and identity of a fertility deity to Anne Vabarna. In the introduction to the published epic *Peko*, Paul Hagu suggests that Voolaine mentioned the name Peko to Vabarna (1995:25). In the Folklore Archives were accounts of fertility rituals connected with grain crops among the Seto referring back to no later than the third quarter of the nineteenth century, but the phenomenon had quickly caught the interest of folklorists, emerging as a particularly engaging topic at the beginning of the twentieth century along with the rising interest in beliefs of pre-Christian origin (cf. Hagu 1987).<sup>32</sup> Even if these archival references focused only on a small group of villages, where the rites were held secretly (denounced by church officials) and the descriptions of the material image of the deity or its character remain vague, discussions about such ancient traits in Seto beliefs and rituals were picked up by periodicals. It is from such sources as these that the didactic story published in the first Seto reader (compiled and edited by Voolaine) may derive. It tells about the people in village Mikitamäe and the closest adjacent villages arranging a prayer ritual to appease “umma põlluviljo jumalat Pekot” (“their field crop god Peko”), in order to alleviate the devastating draught (Raid 1922:115).

It is possible that the name Peko was not familiar to Vabarna, though, since she lived in a different location and such Peko-rituals were not practiced in her neighborhood. Anne incorporated Peko and his fate into her own religious system, that of a devout Orthodox Christian who was simultaneously deeply invested in the Seto traditional practices and worldview. In her narrative, ancient beliefs and customs are interwoven into the fabric of Christian legends. Anne sings about mythological rites and magic when she creates an amalgamating parallel between an apple tree and

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<sup>31</sup> From Hurt's *Setukeste laulud* originated: *Leelo toomine* (“Bringing of Song”); *Ilo laul* (“The Song of Merrymaking”); *Ilmatütar* (“The Daughter of the Air”); *Kalmuneijo* (“Maiden of the Grave”) (Seto 1922:11–20).

<sup>32</sup> At the time there was a movement in Estonia to reinvent an “Estonian” religion in order to provide an alternative to the German-based Lutheran Protestantism within the framework of establishing independent national identity. That agenda was simultaneously combined with the Finno-Ugric movement, where one searched for any traces of archaic background that would create a link with the ancient Balto-Finnic heritage. Likewise, more recent interpretations of the epic tend to overemphasize the “pagan cluster” around Peko (e.g., cf. Hagu 1995), an emphasis that does not seem to concur with Vabarna's perception.

an orphan maiden, or when Peko's wife Nabra invokes rain or forces it to fade by singing:

*Esi tä laul' sääntsit sõnno, vihma sõnno veerätelli:  
 "Veerä' õks no meele, vihmakõnõ, saa' üles, saokõnõ!  
 Naka' õks sa, vihma, sadamahe, mamma, maalõ tulõmahe -  
 tahtva' vihma mi vilä', tahtva' kastõt mi kaara',  
 omma' kuivala kuionu', omma' pääväl pälgähüniü'!* 1315  
*Kui veerät meile, vihmakõnõ, saat üles, saokõnõ,  
 annasi' merele linige, kalarannalõ kapuda'!*

These were the words she sang, used the words of rain spell:  
 "Oh dear rain, roll down to our place, oh dear water, gather up in clouds!  
 Rain, may you begin to fall, sweet drops, come down on the soil—  
 our crop needs rain, our oats wish for water,  
 they all have withered in the drought, bleached in the sun! 1315  
 If you, dear rain, roll to our place, you, dear clouds, gather up,  
 I will give a headcloth as a gift to the sea, a pair of socks to the fishing  
 shore!"

A similar atmosphere is created when Peko's mother makes magic clothes for him to wear in battle, or when she interprets her dreams about her own death and Peko's prospective bride. Likewise, the image of the magic club with mythic power to enhance crop growth or to kill enemies derives from Seto traditions concerning magic and rituals, handed down by the hero's father:

*Kesvä- saava' kui -pää' kehväkese', kaara kõrrõ' kasinakõsõ',  
 sis näüädä' keppi kesvile, kallist nuia kaarolõ,* 1585  
*küll sis kesvä' kergähüse', kaara' nuia kargasõ',  
 kesvä-saava' -pää' kui kinda', kaaraterä' kui kapuda'!  
 Rügä nakas hõste rühk'mähe, tõug hõste tõsõmahe,  
 vilja saasõ kõigilõ viländ, saasõ vatska vaesillõ.  
 [...]  
 Peko, keerä' sõa keskehe, suurõ vainu vaihõllõ,  
 Peko, õks sa hinnäst mõrostõllõ', kulla süänd kohrutõllõ',  
 kiioraga naka' keerätämmä, tammõnuial tapmahe!* 1605  
*Vineläisi õks sis tapat kui vihma, leedulaisi kui liiva,  
 purutat sa maalõ poolakõisi, leotat lätläisi.  
 Sis sa minno meeleh pia', ese hinge ülendelle'!  
 Jummal anna' sul julgut järge joosta', kangut kaala rako'!*

If your barley grows up weak, if the oats look too weary,  
 go show that club to your barley, that good weapon to your oats, 1585  
 then your barley will reach high, your oats will become thick,  
 the heads of barley will be like mittens, the heads of oats like woollen  
 socks!  
 The rye will reach up high, the crop will prosper,

enough of grain will grow for all, enough of bread to feed the poor.

[...]

Peko, go right to the middle of that battle, stand in the center of the hatred,  
Peko, try and make your spirit strong, raise your golden heart,

go and wave that weapon, go and kill with that club! 1605

You will kill Russians like rain, slay Lithuanians like sand,  
smash Poles to the ground, soak Latvians to their bones.

Then you will remember me, bless the spirit of your father!

God will grant you courage to chase, severity to cut their necks!

On the other hand, Vabarna inserts folk variants of Biblical legends about the persecution and death of Jesus in her narrative traditional poetry:

*Essut nää' piidsaga pessivä', uma roosaga ropsõva',  
kulla veivä' korgõ mäe otsa, kinä suurõ kingo pääle,  
risti säivä' pääle ripakõlla. Sääl nää' huksi' hüä hinge, 5615  
vaga vere vaivssiva', suurõl-panni' -riidel risti pääle.  
Vana- kuts' ar -jummal korgõhõ, puja pand' hinge paradiisi.*

They beat Jesus with a whip, whipped him with their rods,  
took the dear one to a high mountain top, to a splendid open space,  
stuck him on a cross to hang. Thus they put a good soul to death, 5615

spilled the blood of a devout one, nailed to the cross on Good Friday.

Old God called him high above, placed his son's soul in paradise.

Additionally, the images created by the singer in the traditional frame of poetic narrative may find parallels in the Christian tradition. For example, when Peko plants his magic club on top of his cave, it grows into an oak tree, which eventually remains in the yard of the monastery but retains magic power of healing:<sup>33</sup>

*Juurtõ kasus pääle kallis tamm, peris Peko kepikesest. 4875  
Kel nakasõ' hamba' halutamma, varba' valla nägemähe,  
tammõ võtkõ' koobõt tassakõtsi, kuurt külest koobitsõgõ',  
sis naka-i teil hamba' halutamma, varba' valla nägemähe!  
Kuulkõ', mu sõna kullõja', mino takah tagomatsõ:  
mastõr teke' s'oo maa pääle, kulla kooba kottallõ, 4885  
siia teke' kinä' ti kerigo', altre lavva' alostagõ!*

From the roots will rise an oak tree, right from the stick of Peko. 4875

Whoever will suffer from a toothache, and the toes begin to hurt,  
go and scrape the oakbark gently, scratch from the treebark softly,  
then your toothache will fade, your toe-ache will disappear!

Listen to me, listeners of my words, the ones coming after me:

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<sup>33</sup> Peko's oak tree is believed to be an actual tree in Petseri Monastery to which the Seto attribute magic powers.



make a monastery on this land, on the site of my dear cave,                   4885  
 build a nice church here, set up an altar table here!

This tree-imagery can be compared to the Russian Orthodox symbol of the Tree of Life in the form of the cross or the form of the church building (cf. Hubbs 1988:102). Another instance of similar ambiguity can be traced in Vabarna's reference to the significance of the mention of Peko's name by his people, while other names cited are Essu (the Seto version of Jesus), Maarja (the Seto version of Mary), and Anne, the singer of the poem. These references connect to pre-Christian word-magic, but such practices concern simultaneously the Orthodox tradition of mentioning the names of particular saints in the act of blessing (e.g. of water, see Kirkinen 1967:118). In the rendition that communicates Anne's worldview, the characters Peko, Essu, and Maarja appear and function in her narrative while presenting a co-existence in place and time. In Vabarna's composition, folk belief and Christianity are transformed into a synergistic whole, reflecting popular interpretations of official religious concepts.

### **Folk Belief and the Russian Orthodox Church**

The geographical location of the Seto places them between two different worlds. To the west reside Estonians with their cultural differences, albeit presenting a strong language affinity. To the east stretch the Russian domains, with a sharp distinction in language but a strong spiritual bond. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the major cultural distinction between the Estonians and the Seto was determined by historical circumstances: the former adhered to the Lutheran church while the latter followed the Russian Orthodox faith. The Seto recognized their difference by calling themselves *maarahvas* ("country folk")<sup>34</sup> but proudly declaring that they "bow to the Russian god," as documented by Kreutzwald, the first major Estonian folklorist to study Seto folklore (Hörn 1995:184). The Russians, however, expressed their disapproval by calling the Seto *poluvertsy* ("half-believers"). Such marginal positioning between the culturally and spiritually divergent Estonians and Russians was emphasized further by a third aspect: the fusion of popular belief and the official church doctrine in Seto life, a fact noticed by scholars in other religious cultures in which the vernacular of the people and the language of ceremonial worship differ markedly.

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<sup>34</sup> The same vernacular ethnonym was used by Estonians, before the coinage *eestirahvas*>*eestlane* ("Estonian").

In this respect, the spiritual world of the Seto can be paralleled to that of the Orthodox Karelians, another Balto-Finnic ethnic group in the border area of northwestern Russia and eastern Finland whose traditional practices and artistic expressions present significant parallels. In her discussion of the folk interpretation of Orthodox religion in Karelia, Laura Stark has examined the process of syncretism, seen as a fusion of elements that the church defines as “magical” and “religious.” It works in fostering reciprocal and community relations, in promoting community identity (e.g., celebration of village patron saints), in venerating visual representations of sacred agents—who also enjoy intimate and practical relationships of exchange—, in localizing sacred symbols and agents, and finally in maintaining a plurality of religious symbols (Stark 1996). These features find analogy with the Seto, where the interface between Orthodoxy and popular religion can be characterized as showing a noticeable integration within the institutionalized framework.<sup>35</sup> Both among Karelians and Seto, folk religion was “a product of centuries of dialogue with an Orthodox Church that gave local communities the space and freedom to interpret and appropriate Christian teachings” (Stark 2000:57) in concurrence with their daily reality.

Folk religious beliefs in the Orthodox framework are distinguished by the veneration of Christian saints, treated as cohabitants in the human world who form a link with the otherworldly; devotion to the Mother of God as the most caring and powerful protector; and the tangible transformational power of visual images, particularly icons. These aspects are parallel to the institutional Orthodoxy’s teaching of the profound link between the heavenly and earthly church, made through the intercession of the Mother of God and the saints for the living before God, the assertion of the miracle-working power of icons, and the recognition of the Virgin Mary’s icons as a special source of grace. In folk religious discourse, the sacred agents are attributed human-like emotions and morally prescribed activities (cf. Stark 2000). Similarly, in the Seto legend poems, Jesus, Mary, and God appear as analogous characters in the human world. Another aspect parallel to Karelian Orthodox culture is that of sacred centers (holy sites and particularly monasteries) that were powerful places of moral purity and magic symbolism with mythic beginnings related to the presence of Jesus or holy saints. Similar documentations from Setomaa render accounts in different genres of folklore about how God, the Virgin Mary, and the saints walked in the Seto district, leaving behind their traces; in Miikse stands Jaanikivi (John’s rock), on which John the Baptist sat and gave it healing power; in Pelsi the Seto venerate Annekivi (Anne’s rock) for St. Anne, Mother of the Birth-giver; to the icon of Migula (St. Nicholas) at the Petseri

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<sup>35</sup> Similar features have been studied with the focus on Russian folk belief (e.g., Hubbs 1988).

Monastery, the Seto bring bread as a gift and smear the lips of the icon with honey and butter (Hagu 1999b:87). Anchored in an ancient, mythical past, these monastic sites and sacred centers provided in their permanence a focus around which to organize collective memory and identity.

### **From Mythological Past to Historical Present via Personal and Communal Experience**

By proposing to Anne Vabarna that she sing about the ancient leader of the Seto people, who had supposedly determined the fate of the Seto land and defined laws and regulations governing the Seto way of life, Voolaine set her the task of creating a mythological time in order to fashion a historical time for the Seto. For Vabarna to carry out such a project, she had to imagine and define her own perception of that mythic time, which in her mind apparently coincided with the historical one. Creating a narrative about the life and heroic deeds of Peko the giant king apparently was not a monolithic enterprise for her; rather she used the narrative as a framework or meaningful poetic grid onto which she could map a multi-layered representation, her epic description of the Seto experience. Her poem presented a versatile interpretation of that experience as an intricate combination on the communal and the personal levels: first, through the description of her immediate daily farm life, including the emergent ties and gender relations; second, through the reflection of her religious experience; and third, by commenting on the historical experience of her community.

#### *Family Relations and Gender Experience*

Vabarna created a description of a Seto life-cycle, at the same time providing a detailed ethnography of Seto family life, their living surroundings, and their rites and customs. Her narrative concurrently highlights familial relationships between various generations, parents and children, but particularly between mother and son, correlating that tie with the absence of parental care in the character of an orphan maiden, the subsequent daughter-in-law. The singer's narrative begins with an emotional description of a painful delivery and the sacred guardians watching over the mother and the newborn:

*Kõik anni' teno jumalallõ, Marijallõ kitetülle–  
Essu päst' timä pääkese, Maarja hellä hiusõkõsõ:  
kässi võti' nää' pääle kärmähe, peo pääle pehmehe,  
Essu mõsk' livvah lillelitseh, kuldakaasih kullatsõh.  
Essu and' latsõ Maarja kätte, käänd' käeräti pääle,  
Maarja and' pardsi paaba kätte, vaor' vanalõ naaselõ.*

Everyone thanked God, praised good Mary–  
 Jesus let his head appear, Mary guarded his soft hair:  
 they took him quickly in their hands, gently in their palms,  
 Jesus washed him in the bowl of blossoms, in the vessel of gold.  
 Jesus handed the baby to Mary, wrapped him in a towel, 75  
 Mary passed the duck to the old woman, to the care of the midwife.

Vabarna's portrayal is a powerful depiction of a Seto woman's experience, on which is also built the reflection of the general communal experience, particularly that of the recent, memorable past. It was obviously most meaningful for the singer to tell the story of the Seto giant Peko permeated by the life experience of Seto women and men, based on her own observation and practice, and rendered via the traditional means of expression.

In her epic composition, Vabarna responded in compliance with her traditional expertise to the preceding occasions of poetic presentation, that is the poems and writings by Voolaine and, most importantly, the themes proposed in that notorious letter. Produced in written form, all of it had to be read out loud to the illiterate Anne, an interaction that afforded her the framework to create a dialogue with the prescribed narrative. In the engendered epic, she took *her* turn retelling that story the way *she* envisaged it. The main axis around which Vabarna's narrative revolves consists of birth, courting, wedding, and death. These are the themes forming an intricate part of a traditional Seto singer's repertoire, themes that have been customarily expressed in poetic form and often as part of ritual practice. Thus, in the first third of the poem, the narrative describes in great detail the birth of the giant baby and the name-giving ritual (278 lines), as well as the mother's dream of a daughter-in-law (196), while the longest sections tell about the wedding (486) and the mother's illness and subsequent death (584 lines). The following example is a passage from the mother's speech on her deathbed, indicating the subsequent women's rites:

*Ime lausi meelestäni, kosti sõna kuumal suul:* 2195  
 “No teele ai pikä jutu, kõrra aigo kõnõli,  
 vaim jo ütél:” Olõ’ vaikel!” , hingle ütél:” Teku-i hellü!”  
 Ammugi minno kutsutas korgõhõ, taivahe tahetas.  
 Mullõ toogõ’ tarrõ koolurõiva’ , surmarätt suu mano–  
 kirstu om veereh villarüüd, kadso rõiva’ kaasõ all, 2205  
 kõik omma’ kerrä keridõ’ , omma’ määtä mähidõ’ .  
 Sääl om mul linanõ linik, uhkõ hamõh oplanõ,  
 koolu- om sääl -kiri kirä pääl, liivapuukva’ poolõ pääl!”

Mother uttered thus, spoke a word from her hot mouth: 2195  
 “I have told you now a long story, talked for quite a while,

the spirit is saying: “Be quiet!”, the angel talking: “Make no sound!”  
 They have called for me for long, waited for me in heaven.  
 Bring the death robe inside, put the death cloth near my mouth—  
 woollen coats lie in the chest, linen clothes hide under the lid, 2205  
 all rolled up and bundled up, wrapped into a ball.  
 There you’ll find my linen headcloth, see the fancy flaxen shirt,  
 patterns of death well woven in, letters of sand stitched onto them!”

A description of the father’s death is relatively shorter, comprising only 118 lines. Later on follows a longer account of the wedding of Peko’s son and the maiden Anne, Jesus and Mary’s foster child (510 lines). These events represent the transitional nexus in Seto life, providing a connection to the past and determining the future. The bellicose motifs have not inspired the singer to an equivalent extent: preparations by Peko’s mother and wife to dispatch the giant to war are given in 416 lines,<sup>36</sup> while the actual battle scenes cover only 202 lines. The warfare itself is recounted in a matter-of-fact format, in contrast to the poetic detail of familial and woman’s experience, showing an attempt to include scenes that seem necessary to provide a logical narrative progress, but which do not inspire creative elaboration or abundant detail. Still, those martial segments of Anne’s poem likewise derive the basics of her imagery and core formulae from the traditional song lore, which aptly proposes a female angle on and interpretation of the agonies of battle.

*Peko kiird’ sōa keskehe, läts sisse setokõnõ.*  
*Mõni ol’l jo siseh upikõlla, mõni käve käpikõlla,* 2735  
*pal’l’o nakse’ Pekot pallõmma, kulla setot kumardamma:*  
*“Kagoh sinno ammu siiä oodi, oodi sisse setokõist—*  
*pal’l’o tahtva’ rikko mi riiki, seto poissa purutõlla!”*  
*Peko sis kai, ütél’ kats, seto kuul’d, tek’k kolm.*  
*Peko keerät’ kiiorallõ, taat’ tammõ-tä-nuialõ:* 2745  
*“Olõ’ sa kipõ, tammõkiior, olõ’ nopõ, tammõnui!”*  
*Kiior ütél: “No keerädä’!”, nui ütél: “No nokuda’!”*  
*Peko keerot’ kiioraga, nakas’ nuial nuhklõmma—*  
*kualõ kopsas’, tuu kuuli, sai külge, sattõ maalõ.*  
*Nii pal’l’o tap’p’ tammõnuial, keerät’ maalõ kiioral,* 2755  
*suvõl kui linnas’ librikit, käve tarõh kärpsit.*  
*Lei tä maalõ kui liiva, puut’ maalõ kui putsu.*

Peko hurried into the midst of battle, the Seto entered the war.  
 Some of the fighters were struck down, some roamed on all fours, 2735  
 many started to beg Peko, bow to the dear Seto:  
 “We have waited long for you, waited for the Seto to join in—

<sup>36</sup> Equivalent familial relations inspire the traditional poem *Venna sõjalugu* (“The Brother’s Tale of War”), where the main protagonist is the sister or the bride (cf. Mirov 1996b:839).

hordes want to strike our state, break down Seto lads!”  
 Peko looked and spoke two words, the Seto heard and did three  
 deeds.  
 Peko swirled his weapon, struck with the oak club: 2745  
 “Be painful, oak weapon, be fast, oak club!”  
 The weapon responded: “Let me fly!”, the club said: “Let me fall!”  
 Peko swung the weapon, started to strike with the club—  
 on whom it landed, that one died; whom it struck, that one fell.  
 He killed so many with his oak club, swung to the ground  
 with his weapon 2755  
 as many as moths in summer, flies flying in the house.  
 He struck them to the ground like sand, cut them down like crumbs.

Regardless of the distinct individuality of her poem, it stands firmly embedded in traditional poetic expression. Within its characteristic structure and form, the idiosyncratic storylines are embellished and elaborated with thematic and formulaic features derived from Seto traditional song lore. In her rendition of the course of time, Vabarna depicts the daily work and toil of Seto farm life. The Seto life-cycle is reflected through giving birth, finding a spouse, and then departing from this world; the composed passages use the ritual poetry performed in connection with birthing rites and at various stages of the wedding ritual, as well as elements of death laments. On her deathbed, Peko’s mother passes on traditional instructions to her daughter-in-law that contain elements from poems of lamentation:

*Kuulõ’ , kul’la tütrekene, meelihüä miniakõnõ:  
 sullõ jätä kar’a kasumahe, kirä häste kiirdümähe,  
 Pekolõ jätä tõu tõsõmahe, pujalõ vilä vinnümähe! 1995  
 Õga vii-i liiva viläõnnõ, panõ-i kalmo kar’aõnnõ—  
 ime, panõ õks ma rüppü rüäõnnõ, üskä üsädse õnnõ!  
 Sis mullõ käüge’ kääpälle, mullõ liitkõ’ liivakollõ!  
 Käsi- mullõ hot’ -kivil keerätäge’ , umah kambrõh kallutagõ’ ,  
 siski jätku-i kandjat kaemalda, liiva mano liitmalda— 2005  
 õga olõ-i mul, imel, tütrit, linnul linahiussit,  
 kiä ikk imme ilosahe, risti man ripakilla!*

Listen, dear daughter, my gentle-minded daughter-in-law:  
 I leave the cattle in your care, the piebald flock to prosper,  
 To Peko I give the fields, to my son the crops to grow! 1995  
 I won’t take grain-luck to my grave, carry cattle-luck into the sand—  
 mother will place rye-luck in your hands, child-luck in your lap!  
 Do then come and see my grave, remember me on the sandy barrow!  
 Turn your millstone for me, recall me in your rooms,  
 do come and see the childbearer, call upon the sandy barrow— 2005  
 I am a mother with no daughters, the birdie has no flaxen hair,  
 who could loudly lament their mother, and be bent over the grave  
 cross!

In these descriptions, Anne's communal observation and participation are overshadowed by the powerful combination of her own life-encounters. Her creation derives from her personal experience as a mother, a midwife, a bride, a ritual wedding singer, a grieving daughter, and a bereaved woman. The recurring female figures in her narrative are an orphan girl and a young maiden of marriageable age, or a mother and a middle-aged or elderly woman. Anne's fondness for the theme of the orphan has close links to the tradition (e.g., the depiction of a young maiden living under an apple tree), but may well be based on her own personal experience, which can be likewise said of the elaborate description of the mother's sickness and departure.

### *Religious Experience*

On the other hand, these elements are closely related and intertwined with Anne Vabarna's spiritual perceptions, reflecting her religious experience. In her world, the daily companions of human beings, whose presence is particularly noteworthy and expected at the transitional points of existence, are Jesus (Essu) and Mary (Maarja). Anne perceives them as living companions, whose daily life is comparable to that of ordinary Seto farmers—they have a household to attend to, fields of rye or oats and herds of cattle, so that helping hands are needed in order to carry out the daily chores. But in that respect, her composition is far from exceptional: it is characteristic of Seto tradition to see divine figures and Orthodox saints humanized, as daily partners whose presence is desired and sought after. Her religious characters have powerful ties to the general portrayal of familial relations, particularly so in the parallel images of the mother and Peko, Maarja and Peko, or Maarja and Essu, which all draw upon the mother-and-son relationship entangled in a multiple identification in which the heavenly and the earthly merge.<sup>37</sup>

In her depiction of Jesus and Mary, Vabarna appears to be carefully didactic: her whole narrative of Peko is meant to present an honorable guideline for life. A decent, respectable, and orderly life has to follow the rules and regulations set by Jesus and Mary:

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<sup>37</sup> In Russian Orthodox hymns Mary is called the bride as well as the birth-giver of Christ. The church is understood as analogous with the maternal body; cf. the union of mother and child, male and female (see Hubbs 1988:102–3).

Senni Timonen, in her study of Orthodox Karelian women's epic with Marian themes (1994), has also emphasized the Virgin Mary's appearance in those works of folklore in person, transcending time and space with a special place in the world of women. This presence is rendered in an intimate tone, with a sense of proximity and a viable personal relationship.

*Peko elle üte Essu pääle, luuf' üte Looja pääle, 2285*  
*Essu näid opas' oigõhõ, Maarja kõigildõ kõnõli,*  
*Peko käve Essu käsko piti, juusk' Maarja juhatust piti—*  
*nii käve' vana-täl-vanõba', käve' ese ni ime.*

Peko lived a life in Jesus, trusted the one and only Lord, 2285  
 Jesus gave them proper guidance, Mary rendered words of wisdom,  
 Peko took his orders from Jesus, ran at the request of Mary—  
 so had lived his ancient fathers, done the same both his parents.

Actually, in Anne's perception that depiction has a dual character: she does not make a clear difference between Jesus and Mary, and in her narrative they merge. For her, the gender of such transcendent figures appears to be fluid, and their institutionalized roles alter in the singer's interpretation; they simultaneously represent divinity and human origin. In her world, Essu (Jesus) and Maarja (Mary) may merge into one person:

*Essu jal lausi, esi ütël', kallis Maarja kadsatõlli:*  
*"No saat sa kolga kunigast, perüs riigi peremehest! [...]"*  
 [...] 3585  
*Essu lausi meelestäni, Maarja meele poolõstani:*  
*"No kuulõ', Peko, pikk miis, väega hüü vägimiis! [...]"*

Jesus thus spoke and said again, dear Mary then told:  
 "Well, you are now the king of this land, the true lord of this state! [...]"  
 [...] 3585  
 Jesus uttered thus, Mary spoke her mind:  
 "Now listen, Peko, tall man, great good giant! [...]"

At the same time they may also form a household, living as husband and wife, having daughters and sons or fostering children. In a typical invocation Anne uses throughout her epic, Essu and Maarja appear as the transcendent father and mother figures of all Seto people: "*Essu, mi ese, Pühä Maarja, mi maama*" ("Jesus our father, Holy Mary our mother").

Such an approach to the theological canon is not unique to Anne or the Seto tradition, but coincides with the general syncretic approach observable in folk belief, quite characteristic in areas of Greek Orthodox denomination, where the official ceremonial language of worship does not concur with the vernacular, allowing the traditional poetry to interpret Christian narratives within their general traditional narrative framework. It is particularly noticeable in the figures of Essu and Maarja, combining the love of son and the love of mother with the concept of care and protection, salvation and mercy, compassion and empathy.

Folk interpretation of theological doctrine also extends to the perception of God the Father and God the Son, who may likewise merge, both taking the name of Jesus (Essu), a practice mentioned already by Jakob



Hurt in his collection of Seto songs (1904) when discussing the narrative legend songs. This practice of merging Mary and Jesus, and the Son and the Father, is observable in Anne's poetic heritage in general (cf. Kalkun 2000). It reflects Anne's cohesive religious worldview, where the pre-Christian and Christian concepts and practices are fused, presenting an imitation of the daily existence of the Seto community. A passage from one of the wedding descriptions of the epic with Jesus as a prominent participant illustrates this point:

*Essu nakas' kui vällä minemähe, tarõst vällä taganõmma,  
oo õks tuud nuurt nuurtpaare, latsõkõisi laulatõttu–  
ilosahe nää' lätsi' Essu mano, madaluistõ Maarja mano, 4155  
kolm kõrda jalga kumardiva', pardsikõsõ' painutiva'.  
Hüä olli Essu meelekene, kerge Maarja keelekene,  
et sai veri verd pite, sai ugla ukla pite.*

*Essu and' käe kärmähe, viis sõrmõ villatsõhõ:  
"Siin naakõ' õnnõh elämähe, naakõ' kar'ah kasumahe, 4165  
õnn naaku teil iih häitsemmä, au takah astumahe!  
Mia õks ma ütle, tuu saa, anna sõna, tuu astus."*

When Jesus was about to leave, to walk out of the house,  
oh that new married couple, these dear wedded children–  
they went kindly to Jesus, meekly went to Mary, 4155  
bowed to the ground three times, the dear ducks bent themselves.  
Jesus was so truly happy, Mary's mind all so light  
because blood was linked to blood, one heart matched with another.  
Jesus gave his hand in haste, handed five fingers swiftly:  
"May you see a life of happiness, may you see your cattle prosper. 4165  
Happiness will blossom there in front of you, honor will there walk  
behind you!  
What I foretell, that will come to pass, I give a word and it will be."

At the same time, Jesus and Mary evince an omnipresence in a Seto household: they rule Seto life, establishing both its daily norms and its various religious fasts and rituals.

Into that pre-existing worldview and poetic tradition, in her epic composition Vabarna introduced the figure of Peko, in whose character she had the task of commingling a progenitor and ancient ruler of the Seto people, as suggested by Paulopriit Voolaine. Evidently, in imagining the ancient king of the Setos, Voolaine had suggested to Vabarna that Peko as the mythical/legendary forefather should provide the rules and regulations for the Seto existence in accord with the notion of the deity providing fecundity. Considering Vabarna's religious worldview, it is not surprising that in the course of her epic composition the regulatory agency of Peko gradually intermingles with the authority of Jesus, so that in the latter part of the epic narrative the focus shifts nearly entirely to recounting the acts of

Jesus. Apparently, for Vabarna the regulatory authority of Jesus eventually had to prevail over that of Peko: Jesus and Mary are present at Peko's birth, take part in the rites of passage of his life, care for, console, and give him advice. Jesus also grants him regal status:

*Essu and' Pekolõ peo, käänd' kõvalõ käe:* 3635

*"No võidõ", keisre, keerätellä, veerüs Peko veerätellä!*

*Sullõ kingi õnnõ, anna avvo,*

*sullõ kingi õnnõ keisrille, kulla õnnõ kunigallõ.*

[...]

*Peko mingu' riik rikkast, kõva kolk korgõst!*

*Rikkusõ jätä sino kätte, kalle õnnõ sino kaala:*

*seto- olõt no -kõnõ sirgõ miis, korgõ seto olt kunigas–* 3655

*no kroonõ setot kunigast, noorõst nurmõjumalast!"*

Jesus gave his hand to Peko, held out his palm to the mighty: 3635

"Now you may go, ruler, take to the road, powerful Peko!

I will grant you happiness, I will give you honor.

I will grant you happiness, ruler, good luck to the king.

[...]

May Peko's state thus prosper, the mighty land become powerful!

I'll leave wealth in your hands, hang happiness about your neck:

you are a strong man, dear Seto, you are the king, great Seto– 3655

I thus crown you king, my Seto, to be the young lord of the fields."

In his capacity as the king of the Seto, crowned by Jesus and acting under his watchful eye, Peko gives directions to the Seto people on how to manage daily life and predicts their future. But eventually it is Jesus who emerges as the chief regulator, ordaining and canonizing the Seto ways and customs.

### *Portrayal of the Community Experience*

From that perspective Anne Vabarna also introduces into her narrative the experience of the Seto community, while combining mythological and historical time. Apparently, in the topics proposed by Voolaine, Vabarna was supposed to create an image of ancient times, and in carrying out that task Anne sings of a Christian ancient time when Jesus was still roaming the earth and mingling with the Seto people, thus depicting him among the Seto as guiding their life, or including traditional motifs from narrative songs on biblical legends:

*[K]ui olli tuu tunnikõnõ, mustinõ moodukõnõ,* 5445

*Essu käve kui inne ilma piti, tandsõ rahva tarri piti,*

*Essu ol' ka helde hingega, piso pehme süämega!*

[...]

*Essu käve kui inne ilma piti, vanast marssõ maad piti,* 7445

*kui käve' kundõh kur'a' mehe', Essul hannah halva' poisi',  
kätte tahtsõ' võtta käokõist, pekko piiripardsikõist,  
Essukõnõ pagõsi pal'lo maad, mõtsa piti mõtõldõh.  
Liit' sis lepä lehe ala, haardõ haava ossa ala.*

[I]n that long-gone hour, in those dear ancient times, 5445  
when Jesus still walked in this world, danced in people's farms,  
then Jesus had a soul so gentle, slightly soft his heart, indeed.

[...]

When Jesus still walked upon the earth, marched the ground  
in olden times, 7445  
when the evil men were on his heels, bad lads stuck to the  
coat-tail of Jesus,  
they wished to catch the dear cuckoo bird, have the darling duck  
in their hands.

Dear Jesus had to flee afar, he flew through the forest thinking.  
Soon he sought rest under alder leaves, to find cover by an  
aspen branch.

Concurrently with mythological themes, she provides a picture of Seto life extending back to ancient times, based on her own perceptions. Through an interpretation of the perceived mythological past, Vabarna actually creates a representation of the historical past of the Seto. In these descriptions, her perception of the past merges with the present: she compares her own past life experience to her current circumstances, and the past in her narrative is colored strongly by the events and observations she experienced in her own lifetime. At the same time, her poetic narrative draws strong inspiration from the traditional lyric and narrative epic poetry. In this context, Vabarna actually enacts the historical experience of her community: she describes the transition from agricultural past to the innovations of the industrial present, which are accompanied by the vivid and intensely painful portrayals of the Seto community's most recent war experience (the First World War, followed by the War of Independence). But even more immediately poignant looms the dramatic experience of the Seto migration to Siberia around 1893 to 1914 (see Piho 1995) that Vabarna herself witnessed:

*Tuu no ol' tuu jutt, arvo peräst tuu asi:  
tiikese' kui vallalõ lasti', armu peräst astmahe, 6245  
kui minti sinnä Siberihe, minti pargõl plaan'kil[.]*

[...]

*Sinnä lätsi' mul risti ristämmä', pääle tähe tädikese'.  
Esi sai näid saatmahe, läbesigi lähätämmä.  
Kõgõ sis üü kõnõlimi, valgõni vallatõlli,  
kõik oll' sääl kuuh kutsutava', aedu' arma' umadsõ'. 6325*

Thus went that story, thus was the state of those things:  
 when the roads were opened up, mercy granted for walking, 6245  
 when people set out to Siberia, headed out on wide horse carts[.]  
 [...]

There went my sweet godmother, together with my star-dear aunt.  
 I myself there saw them off, was there to send them off for good.

We did talk through the whole night, we sang until the dawn,  
 all our own had come together, the loved ones were invited. 6325

Anne describes in drastic and dramatic detail the agony of leaving behind one's home, the long and dangerous journey, and the stalwart effort to build a new farmstead at an alien and distant location, an experience of great importance in Seto historical memory.

Hence, Vabarna appears well equipped and expertly qualified to create a representation of her immediate life experience and that of her community. Voolaine's proposal to sing about the great majestic deeds of Peko as an executive leader of the Seto people, gathering impetus from an imagined mythological or legendary background, could emerge in poetic expression only after being absorbed into Vabarna's worldview and becoming manifest through her traditional prism of knowledge and interpretation. On that ground, the greatest feat for the ruler of the people turns out to be the founding of the monastery, a feat that readily allowed Anne to amalgamate Peko with Essu [Jesus]; on the other hand, the theme of administrative parameters inspired her to draw parallels with the new independent Republic of Estonia and the changing life of the Seto people under new circumstances. In conclusion, Vabarna has adapted the innovative chronicle of Peko's heroic enterprise into her personal narrative framework in order to represent the Seto experience in her poetic epic composition. In her story of Peko, the epic singer enacts the story of the Seto people.

## Conclusion

This article has analyzed the process of creating the Seto epic known as *Peko*. The discussion of the interpersonal relationships between the outsider folklorists and Seto singers helped to draw a portrayal of the project to record Seto heritage and the importance of establishing the institution of *lauluimä*, the mother of song—developments that simultaneously reflect the general agenda of folklorists at the time: to construct cultural symbols and to define a cultural identity through them. On the other hand, the Seto singer Anne Vabarna appeared as an active agent in that process, as one who recognized her poetry as a means of creating personal voice. In her

collaboration with A. O. Väisänen, Vabarna established herself as a prominent singer with creative talent. With the contribution of folklorists celebrating the Seto cultural tradition, she established a public identity as a poet and a performer with excellent traditional expertise. She recognized the important role of folklorists and their effort to collect folk poetry for her agenda. She was not a passive informant of folksongs but a creative performer of a tradition. Vabarna proved her talent in a collaborative project initiated by folklorist Voolaine, who was motivated by an intellectual program of the time for symbolic cultural representation in epic form. Voolaine proposed the theme of Peko, King of the Seto, to the singer, a theme that Vabarna used as creative poetic grid onto which she constructed a multilayered representation of Seto experience. Her epic poem presented a native interpretation on communal and personal levels, providing a description of daily farm life and family and gender relations while reflecting her religious experiences and recounting the historical experience of her Seto community. In her epic composition, Anne Vabarna expressed a strong personal voice through traditional poetic form to represent her personal identity as a Seto woman and the communal identity of the Seto people. Thus the interaction between the tradition-bearer and the tradition-researcher that led to the creation of the Seto epic *Peko* entailed complex communication and tangled collaboration with varying objectives.

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