

# Can Collected Lore Be Returned to the Community?

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## Introduction

In the 1980s, particularly during the *perestroika* initiated by the Soviet Union's last head of state Mikhail Gorbachev (in office 1985-1991) the pressure of the Soviet ideology began to retreat, while at the same time the national consciousness of minorities living in Russia increased. In the summer of 1991, the independence of the Republic of Estonia was restored. In the wake of the major changes taking place in both countries, people began to take more interest in their roots and the heritage of their forefathers, both on an individual as well as a societal level. In many of Estonia's rural municipalities the idea to gather preservable community heritage held in Estonian memory institutions to the home municipality was put forward. The Estonian Folklore Archives also received requests from representatives of municipalities, asking for copies of folklore materials which had been stored in the Estonian Folklore Archives for more than a hundred years. Most of the time, it didn't occur to them beforehand that the copying of materials is both time-consuming and costly and that requests for this material sometimes are few and far between.

As a member of the Estonian Folklore Archives' field research team I have been collecting oral lore and to an extent the biographies and village histories of Estonians living in the rural areas of Russia (mainly Siberia) since 1991. Each year we focused on the Estonian communities of a specific area; we later returned to villages especially rich in preserved lore after another year (see Korb 2005: 18–23, 153–154). Today I have visited almost all of the Estonian communities in Russia that are still in existence today. Russia was not an attractive research area in the 1990s and the formerly Estonian villages saw few Estonian researchers. In almost all of the villages where we collected lore, people were curious and asked about what we were planning to do with the collected material and where it would be accessible in the future.

During my expedition to the largest Seto settlement in Siberia's Krasnoyarsk Krai, Haida village (Russian: Haidak) and the smaller nearby village of Bulatnovka in the summer of 2007 (see Korb 2007: 363–370), the problems surrounding the usage of collected materials surfaced

yet again. The more active members of the villages helping me and my fellow expeditioners Andreas Kalkun and Marge Laasti were efficient in aiding us and repeatedly stated that they wished to have all of the collected materials returned to the village. The urgent request of the inhabitants of that Siberian village forced me to yet again more thoroughly contemplate what and how the collector-researcher can give back to the interviewees. As the initiator of the research project on Russia's Estonians I accepted responsibility for the fate of the materials collected and the information shared. Naturally, problems surrounding collected materials reaching the archives and subsequently the general public raise issues of broader interest as well.

### **Archives *versus* domestic collections**

It is characteristic of the Estonian communities in Russia that only a relatively small amount of people have written down their village or family history, not to mention collected oral traditions (such as songs, stories, customs, etc.). Here, our hopes must mainly be put in collectors and researchers from outside of the communities. Among the materials collected from Estonian communities in Russia by myself and my fellow expeditioners are photographs, video materials, sound recordings, handwritten accounts and fieldwork diaries.

Having worked at the Estonian Folklore Archives for a long time, I don't have any hesitations regarding the handing over of collected materials to archival institutions. Conditions in these archives usually preserve materials better than those in normal homes, and in most of them, materials are accessible to researchers. The handing over of an collection of lore does not lessen the researcher's possibility to continue to work with those materials – on the contrary, materials supplied with archival references rather give more weight to the research.

Unfortunately, I have often come across collectors who cannot seem to be separated from their collected materials in any way. Others might see the importance of archives, but are unable to organise the handing over of their collected materials to an archival institution due to their many other duties, so the collected materials remain in a cupboard or end up lying about unused on a shelf somewhere. The situation is even worse when the collector has promised to give the collected material over to an archive, but hasn't had the ability or will to do so. The interviewees then believe that the materials collected from them are held in proper storage, but when records about the native village are searched for it becomes clear that they never reached the archives.

Unfortunately, the risk of lore materials and archives in private possession being destroyed is quite high.

Personal information in the records handed over to the archive must of course be connected to conditions of use. The decision as to which parts of the collections are out of bounds for general researchers is usually made by those who documented and collected the materials, or archive workers – there simply are no hard and fast general rules regarding lore materials. The prime reason behind the collecting of different materials is not that they will end up in the storage of a particular archive – that is but the first step, as one must prevent the material from disappearing. It is only after this that one can look at what to research, introduce to the public, put into print or make video and audio recordings from, etc.

### **The publication and exhibition of collected material**

I support the position that the collector of lore or other materials cannot act only as a recipient, but must also offer something in return. During my field work in the Estonian communities in Russia I came to understand that there is very little knowledge in Estonia about past and present fellow countrymen in Russia, and I have been trying to change this situation little by little. During the course of the last fifteen years I have published scientific articles as well as popular scientific articles, compiled a series of books based on lore materials from Siberian Estonians, *“Eesti asundused”* (Estonian Settlements, 1995-1999), a CD anthology, *“Siberi eestlaste laulud”* (Songs of Siberian Estonians, 2005), two monographs (2005 and 2007), partaken in the creation of the website *Estonka* ([www.folklore.ee/estonka](http://www.folklore.ee/estonka), compiler Astrid Tuisk), and in cooperation with Kadri Viires compiled the exhibition *“Siberi eestlased”* (Siberian Estonians, 2008).

Since 2003 I arrange the presentation *“Venemaale veerenud”* (Rolled to Russia), where we present the Estonian communities in Russia and the lore materials collected from them in popular form. During these events we also showed the documentary *“Võõral maal, kaugel teel”* (*In a Strange Land, Far Away*, Aado Lintrop 2001) based on recordings made during expeditions undertaken by the Estonian Folklore Archives, *“Võera maade sies”* (In Foreign Lands, Andres Korjus, Exitfilm 2005) and the Estonian Academy of Arts’ documentary *“Jaanipäev”* (Midsummer’s Day, Madis Tuuder, 2008) based on materials collected during an expedition to

Siberia. In the exhibition 'Siberi eestlased' other film clips edited by Madis Tuuder were also shown.

During the course of my collecting and research work I have maintained ties with the interviewees after the expeditions were finished and also sent published materials to the Estonian communities in Russia. In time I have become acquainted with many Estonians who were born in Russia and who have returned to Estonia, and I have developed my network of informants. These people are of help in supplementing and specifying information regarding Estonians in Russia, and it is through them that opinions on my work reach me. The researcher who doesn't communicate with his interviewees after his field work is finished usually doesn't find out about any oversights.

### **Collected data – what and how to return to the community**

Based on the experiences of many other researchers as well as my own, I can claim that people are generally interested in the material collected from them being returned to the community in one way or another. The question of feedback, returning collected data to the lore group or individual in question is not simple, but technically definitely possible given today's recording technology. I would like to direct attention to some of the problems that I have come across during my research and popularising of collected lore material.

When I returned from my field work I sent photographs of my interviewees, their family members and other local people back to the villages – doing so is a researcher's small way of expressing gratitude. Sometimes the informants themselves ask to have their photo taken, or group photos with the collector. Photos are very welcome in the Estonian communities in Russia: a photo is a sign of remembrance and of care. Still, some of the interviewees believe that all village members (for instance those rejected by the community because of a drinking problem or some other reason) don't deserve to have their photo taken – the photographer can be reproached for photographing the drunk casting a shadow over the community.

Photos sent can also be a source of disappointment for the informants: some might think they look bad in the photo (because of a tired face, dirty clothes or messy hair). The way in which people behave in front of a camera is largely based on cultural traditions (for instance, see

Becker 2000: 105). When photographing, one should be aware of what norms are accepted in the community. But norms change over time. We can appreciate old photographs, where people are carefully posed before the photo, but we don't have our photos taken in that manner today. Old family photos which had been enlarged to several times their original size were displayed in the exhibition "*Siberi eestlased*" (Siberian Estonians), and aroused general admiration. Those who had relocated to Estonia were particularly moved, they recognized family members or acquaintances in the photos. The Estonians in Russia today primarily want portrait photos of themselves and their family. I learned of a mistake made by one of my fellow expeditioners a year on, when visiting that same community – the women were barefoot in the photo. A woman who was portrayed in all four photos spoke about this and complained to us that a photo like that wasn't apt. When stepping into the house, the women in the photo had taken their shoes off and left them behind the door as per the custom, not knowing that their bare feet would be visible in the photograph.

More complicated still is the situation when the collector-researcher wishes to have his photos displayed in public (for instance in an exhibition, film or book). I was once asked why it was that I had one person's photo enlarged to cover an entire page, when the others were only half that size. In that particular case, the sizing was the wish of the graphic designer. However, in the eyes of the community in question the enlargement of a particular person's photo meant placing unjustified emphasis on that individual. The members of the community would have decided to place emphasis on a person of prominent position in the village.

The compilers of an exhibition can often have an understanding of the photo or frame exhibited which is altogether different from that of the people connected to the community. For instance, in the exhibition "*Siberi eestlased*" (Siberian Estonians) which opened in late 2008, there was a photo from the village of Ülem-Suetuki, in which free-ranging cattle belonging to the village were looking for shade by the church. The members of the field research team thought this to be a successful shot, a reflection of reality, but the man who had been handling the village's religious matters since 2002 was hurt by it. He had been bothered by the animals roaming about around the church for a long time. This man had applied for financial support to erect a fence around the church but that had not succeeded. With the display of this photo, a sore spot was touched.

There was another photo in the same exhibition, taken on Midsummer's Day in a holiday mood, where a group of people are sitting on a motorcycle. The photo can obviously not be handled as documented proof that the bike was actually ridden at all; the photo doesn't tell! Still, a person familiar with the conditions in the village felt the photo was inappropriate, since the drunken bunch (excessive drinking is a problem in the villages!) weren't deserving of public display.

Andres Korjus' documentary "*Võera maade sies*" (In Foreign Lands) disturbed some of those born in Siberia because of a couple of frames with cluttered views of the village. Someone exclaimed: "We have such a beautiful village, why do they show those ugly places?" The film really did show more of the beautiful nature than it did rubbish piles, but it is the eyesores that draw attention. Estonians born in Russia generally do not want strangers to see – let alone film – the unkempt places in their home village.

A similar problem can appear in the texting of the film; one example is the short film "Krinbergi Miku", based on material collected by Madis Tuuder during his expedition in 2007. "Krinbergi Miku" gives a good insight into the world of Siberian village youth, but in the eyes of many villagers, the sporadic jargon of the youth in question eliminates the film from public viewing.

Sometimes it proves expedient to copy a part of the collected archive material (such as songs or stories) for use on the spot. It is of course easier to make running copies without editing. Material which is unique from the perspective of the lore researcher, where a song or story is jointly recalled and might be started over from the beginning repeatedly, might cause embarrassment to members of the community if copied in that form, because mistakes are perceived as failures.

The texts selected for books, films or exhibitions have proven to create the same problems as those attached to photographs – the same stories and lore information are shared by many, so the selection of texts for a publication or exhibition must be rather strict. Whose text is worthy of display? Those involved might not always think that the researcher has been fair. Members of a lore group naturally want to read and see more about their families or people in their village and their own village in general. They are as a rule not interested in reading about people from other

villages. When a publication, film or exhibition contains material from several villages, people may feel that their village has had an unfairly small amount of exposure.

People are generally interested in historical truth and how the texts used in a book or given to an archive correspond to the truth. When recording oral history, it appears that people remember and interpret the same events in different manners (for instance, see Jaago 2003:191). The published story can be held to be completely untrue by another member of the same community, who might reproach the compiler of the book for not finding out the truth. Some members of the younger generation hold their forefathers' legends, healing words, magical rituals and the like to be nothing but empty chatter not worthy of recording. A few of the young men of rational mind who had left the village were outright angered by such texts.

The collector is often trusted with information strictly belonging to the private sphere—information that cannot be shared even with those nearest, but still needs to be shared – and appears to have a therapeutic effect of sorts. The narrator usually doesn't want to repeat or listen to the narrative again, and it happens that they regret their words afterwards, as their story might hurt a family or individual living in the same or in the neighbouring village. The collector-researcher may not always perceive the very fine line that separates the publishable from the unpublishable. Sometimes the collector comes very close to those he is to study – as shown during the 2009 World Film Festival in Tartu, with the film “Vera and Janis Lācis” by the young researcher of Siberian Latvians, Aigars Lielbārdise. The film showed the village of Timofeyevka, founded by emigrated Latgalians in the Novosibirsk Oblast. It portrayed the everyday life of a family of third-generation Latgalians. The filmmaker, also of Latgalian extraction, had bluntly put gone into the bedroom of his hosts. Such invasion of people's private sphere by means of film equipment is a risky business.

Texts with obscene content can also prove a problem, as they aren't intended for a larger audience. Having said this, it is not always clear-cut as to what texts can be categorized as obscene or private; these perceptions change over time.

The delivery of finished publications and films to the interviewees can also be problematic. Due to expensive postal costs it is usually not possible to send copies to all villagers. On what basis do you choose? It isn't always the case that publications reach all of those who might be

interested: in the villages, information is mainly shared within circles of friends; publications given might not always be shown to others for reading or looking at out of fear of losing them.

Publications and also copies of collected material reaching the village help the community to preserve the local heritage longer. It is of course absolutely necessary to have knowledge about the technical possibilities available beforehand. Listening to sound recordings, looking at video or film and reading texts help the younger generation reinforce that which was previously heard. In this way, the stories, songs, dances, games and customs of the older generation live on even when their carriers have passed on. If needed, the young ones can relearn what they have forgotten. If enough people are interested, the heritage begins to get new life.

### **To summarise**

Although the appeal – the return of collected lore to the community – sounds alluring, it has not been completely possible to comply with it: not due to complacency or lack of will on behalf of collectors-researchers, but because of community members' own stance, the need to protect persons who have shared information, etc.

One must in a responsible manner weigh up which parts of the material recorded can be recycled. The selection is always subjective and it is not necessarily the only right one. The preferences of the compiler of a publication, film or book do not always coincide with those of the community members. People's values, community relations and other factors inevitably affect the evaluation. Negative feedback and exposure of mistakes made by the researcher usually gives the researcher more information than positive feedback. Empathy and active communication with members of the community is always of help in the decision-making. It gives the collector-researcher the opportunity to justify his choices and smooth over any oversights.

### **Literature**

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