

SACRED GROVES AND TREES OF NATIVE ESTONIANS: TRADITIONAL BEHAVIOURAL NORMATIVES

Auli Kütt

English Summary

This paper is telling about the sacred trees and groves of the Native Estonians, attempting to give an overview of the concepts of the *sacred* and also a developed typology of the places. My main purpose is to discuss the behaviour connected to the places.

I use the concept of Native Estonians to refer to the former name of the Estonian nation, *maarahvas* (literally 'People of the Land'). It must be pointed out that the concept *maarahvas* is an ethnonym. In general, when I speak about Native Estonians, I mean the people who call themselves Estonians nowadays. I use the older term just to emphasize the older type of culture.

My paper is based on folkloric material, basically the folkloric texts written down mainly in 1870-1970. There are also a few texts from the period after. I presuppose that if a place is considered sacred, it refers to certain type(s) of behaviour. But it could be understood also the other way round — knowing what kind of behaviour can be considered as *sacred behaviour*, we can also assume that a place is sacred if there is known some data about that certain type of (sacred) behaviour.

Considering the term *sacred*, Veikko Anttonen, a Finnish folklorist has said: "As an adjective, *sacred* has been used as an appellative designation for a place, for a specific topos, or for a specific period in reckoning time in order to mark a categorical boundary." (Anttonen 2000) Marcel Danesi and Paul Perron speak about *sacred* as a spatial code regulating behaviour in a social context. (Danesi, Perron 1999) According to them, every place has a denotation and a connotation. The denotation of a sacred place would be the place itself — as a place or landscape that is called *sacred*. But the connotation of sacred would be a certain type of behaviour, set of customs, practices and taboos that are activated while the border of *sacred* is crossed.

On a closer view, the typology of the sacred places of Estonia appears to be very rich. As Émile Durkheim states it, all kinds of things and phenomena can be sacred (Durkheim 1968: 37), and this statement is true about the Native Estonian culture. There are hillocks, forests, groves, trees, springs, lakes, rivers, creeks, stones, etc. There are also sacrificial gardens and boxes. All those form a geographic or a toponymic aspect of the typology. There is also a semiotic aspect that consists of common names and proper names, specific to the sacred places. Such names immanently

refer to a place as a sacred (special) one, therefore the names affect the human behaviour even if there is yet no other information known about the place. Some examples of such name types are: *pyha* 'sacred', *hiis* 'sacred grove', *ohvri-*, *ahi-*, *uri-* 'sacrificial', *ravi-* 'healing', *Uku-*, *Tõnni-*, *jumala-*, *Pelli-* (names of the spirits). The places can also be categorized according to how many people visited or used the place.

Traditionally the sacred places have had as less influence by the humans as possible. Many kinds of affecting activities are totally forbidden: cutting down a tree, breaking off of a twig; in some places it is forbidden to clean up fallen twigs; also ploughing, digging is not allowed. Domestic animals were not allowed to enter a sacred grove, therefore the groves were often surrounded by a fence. People used to go and gather in the places; they made offerings, such as food, coins, jewellery, pieces of cloth, silver etc.; prayed for their success and happiness. Those who happened to defile such places, suffered from disasters and accidents, such as blindness, diseases, injuries, death; or there might have something happened to their cattle (death, disease) or house. Sometimes even the culprits' children and grandchildren suffered from the supernatural punishments.

Mainly because of the punishments the lore has protected the places. Now the lore is being forgotten and the places need governmental protection. Though, nature and heritage protection is not enough. Sacred groves are valuable culturally and historically as *sacred* places, but often neither of the protecting institutions is interested in the groves. Therefore there is a need of special legislation that should be based on the traditional activities, customs, rules and normatives specific to the places.

This paper has been written also due to the need of protection legislation. Its purpose is to give a basic overview of the forbidden types of behaviour and to state that a Native Estonian sacred groves are not simply forests (or parks) but rather like nature reservations that are similar to virgin forests, especially if it is forbidden to clean up trees that have fallen down.