This paper will discuss storytelling and riddlemaking associated with liminal periods in the folk calendar on the basis of examples from Estonian and Udmurt traditions. It will introduce a broader cultural context in order to shed light on the background of this aspect of tradition. Nearly fifty years ago, the Estonian folklorist Richard Viidalepp already pointed out similarities between ritual storytelling and riddlemaking traditions of the Estonians and those of several other peoples (including Udmurts) in his doctoral dissertation (defended in 1965, published in 2004). Unfortunately, Viidalepp had limited comparative material for making broad generalisations. In the dissertation chapter which treats the function of folktales, he offers several examples of storytelling on hunting and fishing trips, but these are limited to indicating a magical productive function of storytelling (see Viidalepp 2004: 64–82). This paper will attempt to take Viidalepp’s observations a step further to uncover what type of beliefs have generated Estonian expressions such as ämärigun ärja suure, videvigun villa pika ['the great oxen of twilight, the long wool of dusk’] (AES, MT 130, 29 < Kambja) and äbendame ämärät, pühitseme pimeet, siss kasusse hää ärjä’ ja suure’ sarve’ ['let’s honour the twilight, celebrate the dark time, thus good oxen and big horns will grow’] (ERA II 284, 625 (599) < Sangaste).

Liminal periods of the folk calendar

Concerning liminal times in the folk calendar, it is possible to speak of two models which are relevant to both day/night alternations and the annual cycle. The first model situates liminal periods between two qualitatively different sides of the cycle (day and night, summer and winter). The second model marks the points of climax on either side and emphasises the significance of the time surrounding (or marked by) these (midnight and midday, winter and summer solstices). In the Estonian folk calendar, the first model is at the foundation of “twilight” and liminal periods called jaguaeg and the “time of souls”; midnight, midpoints of summer and winter derive from the second. Our longest clearly marked liminal period is the time of souls, connected with the transition from summer to winter. Twilight has the same position and function in the daily cycle. In the Udmurt folk calendar, twilight (referred to by the loanword akšan) is also very important. For example, more than a century ago the Udmurt clergyman and ethnographer Grigoriy Vereščagin wrote: “Akšan is the deity of
twilight. He does not tolerate working, noise making, eating, etc., during the period of twilight, but demands that people must lie down at this time.” (Vereščagin 1995: 46.) In addition to twilight, midday and midnight also play an important role. The Besermyans, an ethnic group in the Northern Udmurtia, call the liminal period following midnight nevrama (possibly from Russian не время ['not time for/to'] or не вовремя ['not timely']). It lasts about one hour. It is not permitted to enter a house during this period: “You can’t enter a house at midnight because šaitan [the devil] will enter with you.” (Popova 2004: 35.) After sunset, one is not allowed to clean rooms, and children’s clothing is not left outside because the devil or spirits of diseases can inhabit them (ibid.). At midday, it is prohibited to swim, to go into the field or the forest, or to start a long journey. During this period, the forest spirit čaškuz’o / ludkuz’o or the field spirit mežakuz’o inspect their territories and the probability of meeting them is extremely high. (Popova 2004: 37.) Morning twilight (žyt akšan) and evening twilight (čuk akšan) have different semantic values. Evening twilight has a rather negative significance. It was prohibited to start a work or begin supper at that time. When entering the house one has to touch the oven in order to get rid of diseases which may have been carried inside. Morning twilight has a positive character. Water brought from the spring during this time has healing properties. (Popova 2004: 38.) Similar beliefs were also found among the Udmurts. In addition, midday was the main period when the water spirit was active, and which in some places was also connected with the deity called aktaš: “Among the evil spirits oktaš, the midday god, who demands that this particular time of day will not be dedicated to work, has an important place, and punishes sternly disturbers of his peace.” (Bogaevskij 1888: 17.)

Both models of liminality were also used regarding the week. For the Besermyans and Udmurts, Wednesday is the critical day of the week (arn’a šor ['midweek’] or Besermyan viro / vironunal, Udmurt virnunal ['day of blood']). This day also has the same significance and/or name among the Bashkir, Chuvash people, Tatars, Mokša-Mordvins and Maris. Some connect the day with blood sacrifices, but this does not offer an adequate explanation for the case of present day Udmurtia, where Wednesday is considered a bad and hard day. The last Wednesday of the month is considered especially hard: “s ’öd kuaka n’ör no ug vaivy karaz so nunale” ['even the rook will not carry a single twig to its nest on that day’]. (Minnijaxmetova 2000: 92.)

Riddlemaking and liminal periods
The two special liminal times of the Udmurt folk calendar are the period of midsummer, called invožo dyr, and the period of midwinter, called vožodyr. The latter was often associated with sessions of evening storytelling and especially riddlemaking, which were believed to determine the herding luck of the following breeding cycle. The terms for these periods derive from the root vež- marking liminality or borderline nature. The root vež- is considered to be from Finno-Ugric *vaješ, cf. Finnish vaihe, Estonian vahe. The Estonian folk calendar includes the period known as jagu- or jäguaeg, which has roughly the same linguistic meaning as the Udmurt vožo, and it is correspondingly associated with riddlemaking to ensure herding luck. Jaguaeg, however, is known only among the North-Estonian coastal population. The same period was more generally known in Finland, where it was called jakoaika. According to Richard Viidalepp (2004: 50), “In Finland, jakoaika marked the period which joined the end of one year with the beginning of the next; very likely, this has also been the case in Estonia.” Some scholars have seen the period as the one necessary for uniting solar and lunar calendar (Vilkuna 1950: 288). The tradition of celebrating the twilight links jaguaeg to the all-souls’ period, which was known all over Estonia; however, twilight was often celebrated even later in the annual cycle, sometimes up to yuletide or the calving and lambing time. In the Udmurt language, vožokyl [‘vožo-language] or vožomad’ [‘vožo-tale’ or ‘vožo-speech’] was the term for ‘riddle’. (In Udmurt mythology, vožos are supernatural water-related creatures, which will be returned to below.)

In the Udmurt tradition, riddlemaking was connected with a specific period lasting from pukro nunal (the Assumption) to vyl’ ar (New Year) or jö vyle sulton (the Epiphany) (Perevozchikova 1982: 5) and riddlemaking was forbidden after the start of the calving and lambing: jö vyle sulton bere madis’kyny ug jara: pudo vera kare [‘after the Baptism of Jesus one should not tell riddles: animals will produce milk’] (Vladykina 1998: 73). A comparative example from the Setu region in Southeast Estonia is as follows:

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| At yuletide, when there were no young cattle yet, people told riddles and stories. After the fast, [when] the young cattle were already in the sheds, riddles were no longer made nor stories told. I’m not quite sure why, but when we, the children, started telling stories after yuletide, our grandmother used to say, ‘There will be no storytelling anymore. Young cattle are already in the shed!’ |

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It must be added that the taboo on riddlemaking after calving or lambing has been more popularly known in Belarusian, Ukrainian and Russian traditions.

**Supernatural visitors of the Udmurt liminal period**

Now it is necessary to account for the mythological background of the Udmurt vožo period. In some (especially northern) Udmurt regions, vožos were supernatural guests of the winter liminal period. For example, the Udmurts of the Glazovskij District believed that water spirits came into the villages and inhabited the saunas before Christmas. They could be encountered on the street at twilight. According to N. Pervuxin (1888: 75):

It sleeps during the summer vožo dyr, but during the winter solstice (before Christmas) it leaves the water and spends most of its time in saunas, though it can be met on the street. This is why no Votyak [Udmurt] dares to walk alone on the streets without a burnt chip during Christmas.

The water spirits of the Christmas period were most often called vožos. Pervuxin continues (1888: 99-100):

From December 25th to January 6th, small (no more than a couple archines1 tall), colourful, though relatively similar-looking devils (with tails and horns) walk on the streets of villages, settlements, and even the town of Glazov. The Russians call them kuliš, the Votyaks [Udmurts] vožos. Like water spirits, the vožos fear even the smallest piece of burnt chip. [...] Those, who walk around without a chip, will be tripped up by vožos. [...] to that purpose they will turn into a post or the corner of a house [...] They may take a man to his neighbour’s house instead of his own, and may make a woman drive other people’s cattle into her own yard [...] For the Udmurts, vožodyr is the period for mumming. The most common name for mumming is põrtmas’kon (cf. põrtmany [‘to change, transform; to slander’]). Other words for mumming are pendzas’kon (cf. pen [‘soot, ashes’], pendzyny [‘to incinerate, burn to ashes’]), referring to the most common way of masking by smearing the face with soot or ashes, vožoias’kon ~ vožoas’kon [‘vožoing’] (in several regions the mummers called themselves the vožos) and čokmorskon. The latter derives from the word čokmor – wooden club (cf. Russian чекмарь [‘wooden club, beater’] < чека [‘wedge, pole’]) and refers to banging on house corners and

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1 An archine is an old Russian unit of measure equivalent to about 71 centimeters or 28 inches. – Editors’ note.
floors with sticks and clubs, a characteristic activity of the mummers, which helped to repel evil spirits and diseases from the house and the village (Vladykin 1994: 227). The Udmurt Christmas mummers almost seem like they have split personalities: they wore clothes inside out, had faces smeared with soot, men wore women’s clothes and women wore men’s clothing, all indications that they were visitors from the otherworld where, according to a widely spread belief, things are reverse to this world (for peoples living in Siberia and Altai look Lintrop 1995: 76 – 78). The fact that the mummers were believed to bring luck in herding relates them to the souls of ancestors, who were considered the primary bringers of herding luck in many cultures. And, last but not least, the mummers were addressed as vozos, which were undoubtedly related to the dead ancestors.

The similarity between the Udmurt vozos and Russian mythological creatures of the winter liminal period kulìš ~ kul’áš (кулиш ~ куляш) or šulikun (шулукун) was introduced in the article about the Udmurt water spirit (see Lintrop 2004: 23). It is interesting that the Russian terms are loans from Finno-Ugric (Mansi kul’ ['devil'], kul’ oter ['Master of the Underworld'], Komi kul’ ['water spirit, devil’]; cf. Estonian koll ['evil spirit']) or Turkic languages (cf. Yakut süllükün, possibly from Old Turkish suvlug, connected with water) (Lintrop 2003: 126, 131, Lintrop 2004: 23). In addition, I have proposed that all of these supernatural guests emerging from the water at critical period are based on a conception of the Land of the Dead situated somewhere downstream and/or behind a body of water (Lintrop 2003: 131, Lintrop 2004: 23). It is possible to see a clear connection between the dead and the supernatural visitors of liminal periods in the Beserman folk calendar, where the time for performing a ritual called ‘the sending off of, or departure of vozos’ is dependent on the location of the village:

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It is necessary to mention that the different times for performing the ritual in different villages are connected to the idea that vozos will leave downriver and return at the summer solstice and the blossoming time of rye. At first they started to send off vozos in villages situated near the river’s upper course, after that in the middle part, and in villages along the lower course of the river on the last day. Nowadays, this custom is preserved in the villages along the Lekma and Lema Rivers. (Popova 2004: 165-166).

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Elena Popova presents excellent contemporary fieldwork material on the subject of relations between the vozos and the dead: “They are dead, drowned people, the sides of their coats are wet.” It is this peculiarity that makes it possible to distinguish real vozos from the mummers
of one’s own village.” (Popova 2004: 166.) The following example is particularly relevant to the present paper:

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It’s forbidden to speak ill words about *vožos*. They look like people. They have both young and old among them. *Vožos* are dead people. Besermyans are dressed in Besermyan clothes, Udmurts in Udmurt clothes. They wear boots and bast shoes. They are the dearest guests, the golden ones. They can hear everything. (Popova 2004: 167.)
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If supernatural visitors of liminal time are considered the dearest guests, one must greet and entertain them properly.

The Estonian time of souls and it’s visitors

I have pondered on the question of why most early reports situate the time of souls between Michaelmas and Martinmas, for example: “Siis võtame engi vastu, pääle mihkle päeva üts nädal’ võtame vastu, enne mardipäeva üts nädal’ saadame minema” ['Thus we welcome souls, a week after Michaelmas we welcome them, a week before Martinmas we’ll send them away'] (EKA < Paistu). Conversely, according to more recent interpretations, the time of souls begins on All Souls’ Day. Compare, for example, an extract from the commenation to the new wooden calendars: “Kooljakuu (november) 2. Hingepäev. Kadunukesed tulevad kodu kaema, neile jäetakse söök ööseks lauale. Algab videviku pidamine.” ['November 2, All Souls’ Day. The dead are returning home; food is left on the table for them. The celebration of the twilight commences’.] (Kama 1988: 53.) Had there been no earlier references to the pre-Christian time of souls, this shift might be explained by the transition to the new calendar. In this case, the association of the time of souls with a specific period of the season would be so fixed that it would counterbalance its dependence on specific feast days. However, if this were the case, why would November be referred to as ‘the month of souls’ in some places (e.g. Finnish *marraskuu*), while in the old calendar the time of souls fell in October? According to Estonian folklorist Mall Hiinemäe (1991: 233):

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Tuleb arvata, et enne kirikukalendri kanoniseeritud tähtpäevade meie maale jõudmist ning siin kinnistumist on hingedeajaks olnud aastalõpu aeg, mille määrasid looduse sõigisene hiääumine koos taimeveretatsiooni lõppemisega, üksiti kõige pimedama aja saabumine, põlluharijatel ja karjakasvatajatel lõiðusaja lõpp.

It must be concluded that before the canonical church calendar holidays were introduced and became fixed in our country, the end of the year was considered the time of souls,
conditioned by the autumnal withering of nature, the ending of plant vegetation, and the onset of the darkest time of the year, the end of harvest for farmers and herders.

It logically follows that the time of souls was connected with agricultural activities at the end of October and the beginning of November, and as the significance of this identification of the end of the year diminished, the time of souls was transferred to December in some areas and the so-called official end of the year was adopted.

Be that as it may, the liminal period entailed preconceptions about the opening of passageways between this world and the otherworld. The spirits of dead ancestors visited homes, while the same passageways also remained open to other spirit creatures. It appears that the visiting souls were mostly familiar and expected. In some parts of Estonia (the area surrounding Viljandi), their visits was celebrated with “masking and mumming”, but this was markedly different from the “mumming” tradition at Martinmas. This period demanded obeying several rules. Compare, for example, the following text from Vigala:

Sügisel, kui ööd kõige pikemad on, peetakse “hingede püha”, sel ajal laotakse öled tuppa maha, et käimisest ega millegi asja maha kukkumisest kolinad ei oleks, et ‘hinged’, kes sel ajal haudadest koju tulevad, selle üle nurisema ei hakkaks. Ka ei raiuta ega pesta sel ajal. (H III 23, 780 < Vigala.)

In autumn, when the nights are longest, people celebrate ‘the day of the souls’; at this time straw is spread on the floor so that no noise will be made by walking or things falling over, and the ‘souls’ which are visiting the home from their graves will not complain. It is also forbidden to cut wood or do the laundry at that time.

The taboo against making noise, doing laundry and fetching water from a river, lake or sea with dirty vessels was also observed by Udmurts during critical periods. The time of souls was a good time for celebrating the twilight. The liminal period on the cusp of the darkest part of year was filled with riddlemaking and storytelling in the transition between day and night. According to beliefs found across Estonia and Finland, the tradition of riddlemaking ensured the birth of piebald calves or lambs; in Latvia it predicted the good growth of pigs (Viidalepp 2004: 71–73).

In the narrative repertoire of liminal periods, it is possible to find intriguing reports about the popularity of telling memorates at that time – and more specifically memorates which
describe encounters with supernatural creatures. Such tales are known in Estonian as well as Udmurt cultural traditions:

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Vanasti räägititi videvikul igasugu juttusi tontidest ja kodukäijatest, untidest ja igasugu ennemuiste-juttusi” (ERA II 298, 155 (4) < Järva-Jaani).

In the old days, at twilight people told all kinds of stories about ghosts and revenants, werewolves and all kinds of ancient stories.

Õdagu ole talutoan just kui vabrik. Kui oll mõni jutumiis, sis tuu selet, mis ta mõistõ. Väega pallo seletati tondijutte tuul aal” (ERA II 160, 10/11 >Kanepi)

In evenings, the room became like a factory. When someone was a fine storyteller, he told what he knew. Telling ghost stories was very popular at that time.

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Concerning the Besermyns, Elena Popova states:

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In the first half of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, the evening sessions of adults and the aged were extremely popular. People came together to tell folktales and all kinds of stories, especially memorates about vožos. During the period of [midwinter called] vožodyr, people used to tell folktales and make riddles not only at these evening sessions but also within the close family circle (Popova 2004: 175).

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A yuletide custom of the Mari people called šorykiol, or ‘sheep-leg’, entailed an evening gathering at a house and playing games, telling folktales, and making riddles (Kalinina 2003: 177–178). Other data suggests that storytelling and riddlemaking primarily took place in the period preceding Christmas (Kalinina 2003: 230).

In Estonia, the time of souls preceded Martinmas and ended on All Souls’ Day, when the welcomed dead eventually departed. When homes were visited by Martinmas “maskers and mummers” a week later, these were no longer representatives of the dearly departed but simply visitors from the otherworld. The turn of St Catherine’s Day’s “mummers” followed after that. Visitors, clad in costumes, went from house to house in the manner of a reminder: *Watch out people – the door between the worlds is open!*

Udmurts did not have the time of souls as it was known in Estonia. Dead relatives were left food and they were asked to return before or during several important calendar holidays. However, there was one ritual that was performed only in the winter part of the year, mostly before yuletide. This was called *iyryed s’oton* ['giving the head and legs'] or *viro s’oton*
[‘giving blood’], and it was a singular event during which children brought their departed parents the last major offering. This ritual was called “a reverse wedding”; its objective was to finally unite the deceased father or mother with the dead ancestors. The Udmurt yuletide “mummers”, like their Estonian Martinmas equivalents, were the visitors of a liminal period. They came from the otherworld, but they were not exactly “familiar souls”. Nevertheless, they represented benevolent forces, reflected in their behaviour and noisemaking to repel evil spirits.

Entertaining supernatural creatures

But why are riddlemaking and storytelling so important particularly during critical periods? Certainly, riddlemaking and storytelling at liminal times do not constitute a phenomenon which is otherwise unique to Estonian, Udmurt and Besermyan traditions. Two aspects of these traditions which place the issue in a broader perspective have been introduced above: first, the belief in blurring of the boundary between our world and the otherworld; second, herding luck (and often good harvest), has been principally associated with dead ancestors among many peoples (including Udmurts and Estonians). There is however a third important nuance to consider: throughout the ages, people have told stories and sung to supernatural creatures for one reason or another, and riddlemaking is often associated with these creatures as well. In his monograph, Richard Viidalepp (2004) provides several examples of how hunters tried to ensure hunting luck by telling stories. Relying on the works of Andrej Maskaev, Viidalepp (2004: 64) claims:

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Even in 1940, a tale was recorded in Mordovia about the old lady of the forest, who is described as greatly interested in storytelling: she may even fall asleep from listening to the hunters’ tales and, if this happens, the hunters’ catch is even greater.
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In 1929, Dmitrij Zelenin (1929: 66) wrote:

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Observations carried out among the Turks of Altay by N(adežda) Dyrienkova and L(eonid) Portapov, the young ethnographers of our museum, resulted in the discovery of a specific method used to please the master of the taiga [...]. The artel of hunters used to take a specialist storyteller to the woods with them. The Altay Turks believe that the master of the taiga likes to listen to folktales, especially when the teller is accompanied on a kobyz, the musical instrument, and thus he comes close to the hunters’ cabin to listen to these tales. As a reward for this entertainment, the master of the taiga will give the hunters hunting luck.
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While resting in the evening, Buryat hunters “usually tell folktales, sing, play the *balalaika* and the hand-made violin”, “all these forms of entertainment are deemed necessary so that *khangai* (the master of the forest) will give more squirrels and sables” (Zelenin 1929: 67). The Soyots of Buryatia believe that the guardian spirit of an area always listens to people telling folktales, and does not like bad storytelling (Zelenin 1934: 223).

**Spirits of stories**

Evidently, tales have been told and riddles made in order to please supernatural creatures in many parts of the world. However, there is another, more interesting aspect to this phenomenon: the nature of characters “cut from navel” in tales – characters who were conjured up in the course of storytelling are similar to supernatural beings, and thus they require special treatment, not to mention the deities and fairies in tales who are full and equal representatives of the otherworld *per se* and *par excellence*.

For example, *khaijees*, singers of *khais*, Khakass epic songs, believed that their special talent came from specific spirits called *khai eezi*. They were convinced that after the spirit had entered them and the spirits of the tale’s characters had been conjured up, the storytelling performance could not be interrupted; the tale’s heroes had to be given rest by narrating the tale to the end. If a break was needed during a long performance, the storyteller had to search for the moment when the characters were having a party. However, if the story was left unfinished so that the characters had not conquered the evil spirits of the tale, the latter started harming people. The tale characters that were not dealt with could even exact revenge by killing the singer or storyteller. The Khakass *khaijees* were (and still are) shaman-like people who undergo an initiation, in the course of which they establish contact with the spirits of epic songs with the help of mountain spirits called *tag eezi*. They described the performance of the songs as follows, “I close my eyes and see scenes unrolling, which I then describe” (Van Deusen 2004: 78).

**Stories and riddles as a means of traditionary control**

In addition to this approach, however, an alternative explanation can be considered – namely, that storytelling and riddlemaking are necessary for convincing spirits and gods that people know how the world is organised, and know their responsibilities, rights, etc., in that world.
Put in words befitting the scientific paradigm – stories, songs and riddles were used as means of traditionary control for maintaining a community’s worldview and traditions.

I suspect that traditional knowledge, which is particularly crucial for a given community, was (and is) transmitted in a pre-literate society in at least two modes, one of which is significantly more rule-oriented than the others. The information must be restated in different ways and it can even be translated into a different mode. As an example of this, we can take the holy songs of the Khanty and Mansi which women and children were not allowed to hear. The women and children nonetheless knew the contents of these songs, although they were forced to transmit them in another form. Thus, already from early childhood, a potential singer carried the contents of the songs with him in a reworked form. This may have been useful for him to develop a better understanding the songs later, and also for keeping “tighter rein” on them, inhibiting the poetic-expressive aspects of singing from taking over unduly. It is evident that such mythological songs were primary oriented toward the transmission of traditional knowledge for the Khanty and Mansi from the fact that the hero of these stories was usually identified by means of stock phrases which were intertwined into legends (see Lintrop 1997: 34–35, 200).

The mythological songs of the Papuans of New Guinea contain only hints and key words which are taught to the chosen individuals during an initiation process which lasts for several years. Everyone was allowed to listen to the songs (as well as the stories told in the men’s hut, since there were not any even remotely sound-proofed walls in Papuan villages). At the same time, however, the myths were kept secret. In this situation, the initiated individual had to consider three distinct texts: the song itself, the concealed myth, and the interpretation of the song by the un-initiated. We can perhaps state without exaggeration that for pre-literate societies, in the transmission of their religious beliefs and world views, each performance is a recreation, and in this process, texts of at least two different modes converge: one mode is, from the point of view of the transmission of the traditional knowledge, the main channel of information, while the others contain interpretation, commentaries, attitudes, evaluations. From the perspective of the present article, stories and riddles may also be considered as two channels of traditional knowledge complementing and confirming the same information. The phenomenon is probably even more widely known. In Cosmic Serpent: DNA and the Origins of Knowledge (1988), Jeremy Narby describes a South-American shaman who claims that “twisted language” enables him to see the essence of things, “Singing, I carefully examine
things – twisted language brings me close but not too close – with normal words I would crash into things – with twisted ones I circle around them – I can see them clearly” (Narby 1998: 98–99).

Connecting back to the discussion of liminal periods, I would like to propose the following scheme, which resembles the bear feast of the Ob-Ugrians: the task of liminal period visitors (including dead ancestors) would be to visit homes and ascertain whether they are still held in esteem, whether the living are knowledgeable about the rules prescribed by the gods, etc. It should be remembered that both Estonian Martinmas and St. Catherine’s Day’s costumed and masked figures as well as Udmurt vožo-period mummers were regarded as personifications of visitors from the otherworld. They had an obligatory repertoire to perform, and more importantly, they demanded a traditional reception. In many Estonian regions (especially Western Estonia and its islands), St. Martin’s Day’s and St. Catherine’s Day’s mummers controlled the progress of work on a farm, the diligence and intelligence of adult family members, children’s ability to read, etc. (Hiiemäe1994: 22–23). Riddles or figurative language as the special language used by the visitors of the liminal period were also a means of such a control. The fixed order of the Khanty and Mansi bear feasts, the performance of a strictly determined number of songs, each containing important parts of the traditional worldview and mythology, obligatory knowledge for every member of the community – all this testifies to the fact that the Ob-Ugrian bear feast is not simply a rite of hunting magic or a kind of primitive theatre. The Ob-Ugrian bear feast is, to a certain extent, similar to a complex shamanic ritual – by the scenario, various supernatural beings hear “about the jolly house of the wide-waisted wild beast of the swamp”, leave their houses, travel to the feasting place, introduce themselves, and offer their protection and custody in vital matters concerning the community’s wellbeing. The whole process of the ceremony must demonstrate that the people are well versed in the world order and the rules ordained by the deities. The bear which returns to its heavenly father must tell in detail how it was treated by the people, and whether they behaved correctly, as in the verses of a Mansi song: “My father said: ‘You descended into the corner of the human house. How did they treat you?’” (Kannisto & Liimola 1958: 383.) The bear is like a high religious authority that inspects his congregation.

**Storytelling and riddlemaking as a means of protection**
These visitors from the otherworld could also prove rather harmful. Zelenin argues that in specific cases, storytelling or riddlemaking protected one from a malevolent supernatural creature. He provided the example of *přezpoldnica*, the midday spirit of the Serbs of Luzhitsy. At midday, *přezpoldnica* walked on the field and killed all the women that it encountered. The only way to escape from it was to tell as many stories as possible – whether about working with flax or other things. She who did not know what to tell, was doomed, she who did, was saved. In the latter case the midday spirit would tell the storyteller, “You have taken my strength.” (Zelenin 1934: 227–228.)

A nice complement to the list of such spirits is the Russian midday spirit *poludnica* (полудница), a female spirit who was clad in white clothes. *Poludnica* forced people to compete in riddle contests and tickled the losers to death. It must be observed that the Slavonic *poludnica, polednice* is very closely related to water spirits. In Polesia, *poludenik*, literally ‘midday spirit’, was an alternative name for a water spirit (Levkievskaja 1995: 339).

In Ukrainian folk songs, the water spirit gives a maiden three riddles to solve: “*jak ugadaiš – do bat’ka pušču; ne ugadaiš – do sebe voz’mu*” ([як угадайеш – до батька пущу; не угадайеш – до себе возьму]) ['If you guess – I’ll let you return to your father; if you don’t guess – I’ll take you for myself'] (Zelenin 1934: 229). The water spirit brings us back to the Udmurt tradition.

The Slavonic water spirit was particularly active around midday and midsummer, and even the forest fairy was in some areas believed to rest or reside underground in winter. Among Permian peoples, however, supernatural creatures associated with water inhabited saunas during the period of the winter solstice in particular. Permyak-Komis called these creatures *kul’pijannez* (*kul’* [‘devil, water spirit’]), while Udmurts called them either *vumurts* [‘water spirits’] or *vožos*. As noted above, both are related to the *kuliš ~ kul’aš* and *šulikun* in the Russian tradition, who were generally harmful towards people but at the same time helped them to predict the future.

**Riddlemaking and shamans**

Riddlemaking goes particularly well with the discussion of the supernatural visitors of the liminal period, because, on the one hand, riddlemaking functions like a secret language for expressing the intrinsic things in the world, and on the other, it is linked to an important
aspect of North-Siberian shamanic rituals – namely guessing. According to autobiographical accounts of Nganasan shamans, it is necessary to acknowledge that the spirit whom a candidate meets for the first time during a dream journey of his initiation period should first be recognized. The recognition, naming or guessing of the identity of a supernatural being is one of the examples of traditionary control. In addition, the devotee has to recognize and name the places he visits and objects of importance that he encounters. Recognition in the vision is equivalent to framing it in a traditional form. The would-be shaman either unriddles the visions of his initiation period and, in that way, gives them a sufficiently traditional form, or he eliminates them. Concerning recognition in visions, it is possible to learn more through the medium of shamans’ autobiographical accounts. Semen Momde, a Nganasan shaman, told:

<INDENT>
We saw a tent all covered with ice. A man and a woman were sitting there; a naked boy was walking around in the tent. The tent covers were made from snow and ice; the fire in the middle of the tent was hardly burning. ‘Who are you, from what places are you coming?’ they asked. I answered: ‘Two are leading me. They told me to go along the ancient path. Probably you are spirits of sicknesses.’ There were all kinds of pots and cauldrons in the tent; all were filled with pus. They told me to guess – the boy asked: ‘Who am I?’ I answered: ‘Probably you are headache.’ Old man and woman asked: ‘Guess: who are we?’ – ‘The old man is the beginning of tuberculosis. The old woman is the beginning of cough.’ They said: ‘You are right. If such a sickness would come to your people, you will call for us and we will help you.’ (Popov 1984: 102.)
</INDENT>

An active traditionary control over shamanic visions continues after the initiation period is over. In the case of an experienced shaman, this is expressed in the form of guessing or the so-called “quest for the right path” which takes place during rituals. With the help of such guessing, untypical or inappropriate elements are eliminated from the shaman’s actions. Advice is sought by shamans in difficult situations from people who have a good knowledge of the tradition is also a part of traditionary control. Often, an experienced shaman has to continue recognizing and naming objects and beings of the supernatural world during the rites. For example, Tubiaku Kosterkin, a Nganasan shaman, had three helping spirits called hošitele. They helped him to recognize several places in the upper and lower worlds as well as objects encountered on his shamanic journeys which “did not appear to him as they actually were”. (Gratčeva 1984: 91.)

Riddlemaking and divination
Like a shaman who finds the right way by riddlemaking or guessing, people organise their world by riddlemaking and assure their supernatural visitors that they are on the right path – for which they are in turn rewarded with herding luck and good harvest. It is no coincidence that the Estonian verb *arvama* (‘to think’, ‘to guess’) derives from the shamanic vocabulary. It is etymologically related to the Old Turkic *arva* ['to cast a spell'] and *arvaš* ['spell']. The eleventh-century Mahmud dictionary from the city of Kashgar includes the phrase *qam arvaš arvady* ['a shaman reads (= casts) a spell'] (Nadeljaev 1969: 58). The Estonian words *arp* and *arbuda* and Finnish *arpa* and *arpoa* are of the same origin. As part of a shamanic ritual, guessing was closely related to predicting or prophesying. In many languages the word for predicting and riddle-solving may be the same: for instance, Russian *zagadat’* stands for both predicting and riddle-solving. Likewise, in Estonian folklore, the verb often used for riddle solving (especially in parallel verses of Kalevala-metric songs) is *arvama* ‘to think’ or ‘to guess’, which has been (and occasionally still is) used to denote divination.

In addition to other characteristics, yuletide was a widely known period for making predictions. Interestingly, according to the Yakut or Sakha beliefs, making prophesies at yuletide was possible only because of the presence of spirits called *süllüküns*, who came from the waters to the earth (Zelenin 1930: 23). A report from a cultural area much closer to Estonians says: “*S Roždestva do Kreščenija po zemle xođili šulikuny [....] Snarjažennyе ili rjažennyе izobražali kak raz êtix šulikunov*” (С Рождества до Крещения по земле ходили шуликуны [....] Снаряженные или ряженые изображали как раз этих шуликунов) [*Šulikuns* wandered on earth from Christmas to Epiphany [....] Maskers and mummers were representatives of these *šulikuns*] (Adon’eva 2001: 198 < report from the Folklore Archives of the St Petersburg State University, archival reference Пинеж).

It is interesting to observe that in Karelia, predictions or prophesies were made at a hole in the ice on a lake or river. *Vierissän akka* ['old woman of the Epiphany'] was the mythological being who ruled the period. She was only the size of a hemp seed at the beginning of yuletide and the size of a haystack by the end of it. Karelians believed that she could pull people under ice if they were not protected by a magic circle drawn on the ice with the blade of an axe (Lavonen 1977: 75). Similar reports can be found from Besermyans:

<INDENT>Fortune-telling outside the house or beyond the border of the village was considered the most dangerous. In order to protect oneself from the mythical *vožos*, people used to take a rooster
with them or draw a circle with an iron tool (scythe, sickle). While standing in the circle, people ‘listened’ to the destiny and tried to summon vozós (Gordino village). It was important that the circle was not be opened or destroyed, otherwise the fortune-tellers ‘might die or become seriously ill’ (Popova 2004: 176–177).

They say that vozós come from under the river ice. They told that some villager was pulled under ice at yuletide (Šamardan village) (Popova 2004: 165).

In Karelia the following charm was recited during the ritual of protecting with iron:

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Rakennan rautaisen aijan
teräksistä seipähistä
muasta taivahen suahen,
taivahasta muahan suahen,
čičiliuskoilla sivoin,
kiärmehillä kiännetelehen,
panen hännät háilymään,
piät piällä kehajamaan.

I am building an iron fence
Of steel palings
From the earth to the sky,
From the sky to the earth,
I am confining it with lizards,
Encircling it with snakes,
Making their tails wave,
Heads sway.


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According to the materials presented by Niina Lavonen, storytelling of the time was equated with making a similar magical circle:

There was this rule that people had to tell folktales at yuletide, even three tales during a single night. While the folktales were told, an iron band formed around the house from each tale so that no evil spirit could enter the house (Lavonen 1977: 75 < A. Remšueva, Voknavolok/Vuokkiniemi).

Vilho Jyrinoja from Akonlahti affirmed:

Every evening, three folktales had to be told in every house. From this, it was as though three iron bands formed around the house, but these protected the house from all evil. You can even tell a rather bad tale, it is no sin; God likes humour, doesn’t he? (Lavonen 1977: 76).
Conclusion

After observing the topic from different perspectives it is possible to summarize that Estonian expressions such as ämärigun ärja suure, videvigun villa pika [‘the great oxen of twilight, the long wool of dusk’] (AES, MT 130, 29 < Kambja) have nothing to do with the mythical Great Ox of Finnish and Estonian runo songs, nor are they expressions of fear (as in the Estonian expression “fear has great eyes”). Instead, they are connected to beliefs about critical (liminal) periods and about the supernatural visitors associated with those times. Entertaining spirits with stories and riddles on the one hand and demonstrating one’s knowledge of the world’s order on the other – these are possible grounds for the phenomenon observed. As such, liminal period storytelling and riddlemaking have magical-protection and magical-fertility functions, but they also provide a special means of communicating with the supernatural sphere for a community. Here it must be remembered that ‘riddle’ is vožokyl [‘vožo-language’] or vožomad’ [‘vožo-tale’ or ‘vožo-speech’] in the Udmurt language. The phenomenon can also be considered as means of control over the transmission of oral tradition important to a community group.

The next question would be: of the tales and riddles that had to be told and performed, were there some which were more acceptable than others, and among those others were there some that were left aside as inappropriate? There is no direct information available on this point. The Karelian examples of 20th Century suggest that anything could be told, even if the telling was badly done; the essential thing was that the act of storytelling took place. This is, however, not conclusive when turning to the Siberian parallels. And of course we can’t say much about the ancient times’ storytelling. However, another, more important question, is whether the acts of storytelling and riddlemaking themselves protected people from harm, and whether storytelling and riddlemaking were favoured by the supernatural beings which protected people from evil spirits, leading them to reward tellers with luck in herding and good harvest. On the basis of the material presented in this paper, I am inclined toward the latter explanation.

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1 Vožos are described as little hairy demons with tails and horns, and are mostly active during the liminal winter period.

ii This is how the Khanty refer to mortals as opposed to deities who are “uncut from navel”.

iii Concerning the forest fairy see Kriničnaja 2004: 253.