Developing sustainable heritage-based livelihoods: an initial study of artisans and their crafts in Viljandi County, Estonia

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This paper examines the role of traditional woodworking and building crafts as a local resource in a country in transition from socialism to a market-based economy. The authors use an applied anthropological approach to integrate the preservation of intangible heritage (in the form of traditional crafts) and sustainable heritage-based livelihoods into a contemporary institutional framework. The paper starts with a theoretical discussion of skills as a form of tacit knowledge, a mode of knowing that does not easily submit to verbal explanation and transfer. The authors then discuss the methodology, purposes, procedures and precedents of collecting information about artisans and their skills. Relying on fieldwork data collected in Viljandi County, Estonia in the summer of 2008, the authors sketch an overview of relations between artisans and the communities they live in. The paper also examines several related phenomena such as economic sustainability of the crafts, intergenerational transmission of skills, changes in the relationship between the artisan and the customer, and relevant implications for craft-related institutions and policies.

Keywords: sustainable heritage-based livelihoods; crafts; tacit knowing; intangible heritage; craft-related institutions and policies

Introduction: theoretical background and context

In a number of academic communities, the popularity of crafts as a subject of research has increased markedly in recent years (Anttila 1993; Adamson 2007; Risatti 2007). Yet, on the whole, much still remains to be done to raise our awareness of crafts studies as an independent academic discipline and of crafts as a viable livelihood (Äyväri 2006). In part, this may be due to significant difficulties encountered in defining the field – it is becoming increasingly hard to distinguish between (fine) arts and crafts, between recreational and professional involvement (Rattus and Jääts 2004) – let alone to provide a sufficiently clear definition of crafts as such. The relatively high number of practitioners, the number of crafts partnerships and societies,¹ and a strong interest shown for continuing education in the crafts suggest

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that the social importance of crafts and their share in the livelihood of regional communities is significant (Korhonen and Alitalo 2006; Vanamölder 2009).

Focusing on traditional woodworking and building crafts, this paper examines the question of how to produce the knowledge required to sustain and invigorate heritage-based livelihoods. It also considers the challenges that the production of such knowledge entails for the relevant institutions and for government policy as regards intergenerational transmission of crafts-related skills and practices.

This, of course, begs the questions ‘what is a craft?’ and ‘what theoretical approaches should we adopt in the study of skills?’ One of the first modern thinkers to deal with the subject in a systematic fashion was the philosopher Michael Polanyi (1891–1976), who advanced the concept of ‘tacit knowing’. He argued that, in addition to facts, human knowledge also relates to the performance of various acts that require skilful or tacit knowing. Tacit knowing manifests itself in skill and connoisseurship. It cannot be acquired by reading a manual or following a recipe. This limits the spread of skills to their possessor’s circle of personal contacts (Polanyi 2002, pp. 49–63).

In the anthropological literature we often encounter the concept of ‘indigenous knowledge’, which generally covers traditional knowledge and skills of indigenous peoples, thus overlapping with the terms ‘local knowledge’, ‘folk knowledge’ and ‘traditional knowledge’. Although particular authors writing within a specific academic discipline or cultural context may sometimes attribute slightly different meanings to them, the terms still represent a closely related set of concepts. Norsk Handverksutvikling (Norwegian Crafts Development, NHU), a Norwegian government agency founded to preserve, pass on and develop crafts as a form of knowledge, as a means of expression and as livelihoods, takes a similar view. In Nordic countries, the discussion of crafts frequently revolves around the concept of handlingboren kunnskap, knowledge acquired by practice, which the NHU has defined as ‘the sum of experience and skill inherited from the previous generation in the form of day-to-day activities, activity patterns and practical insights attained through joint work’ (Martinussen s.a.). The gist of the concept of inherited crafts is captured quite well in the NHU’s definition. In addition, certain terms in the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) also appear relevant to defining our area of study. Thus, intangible cultural heritage includes ‘social practices’, ‘knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe’, and ‘traditional craftsmanship’ [sic] (ICH 2003, p. 2).

It is interesting to note that the idea of tacit or practical knowing is gaining popularity, and not only in academic debates (Moss 1995; Frykman and Gilje 2003). Authors writing about knowledge management and innovation management suggest that human societies have entered the ‘knowledge era’, in which a society is defined by the methods its members use to acquire, process and propagate knowledge (Quinn 1992; Drucker 1993). The advent of this new era means that, in order to survive, organisations must ever be on their toes, constantly learning and renewing themselves. Similarly, individuals are required to possess outstanding social and information management skills and an excellent learning ability, since the useful lifespan of their formal education has become very short (Davenport and Prusak 1998).

These changes have also influenced the buzzwords employed in relation to rural communities. In 1990, for example, the EU redefined its priorities in the area of rural development. Nature conservation, tourism, landscape management and the
strengthening of local communities were added to production-intensive agriculture, which was no longer top of the agenda. In connection with these trends, a number of authors have started to use references such as ‘post-productivist transition’ and ‘post-productivist countryside’, both of which describe a reality where agricultural production in many rural areas has been reduced to a marginal source of income and employment (see, for instance, Evans et al. 2002; Phillips 2005). Instead of agriculture, people in those areas engage in the commodification of landscapes, local knowledge, skills and various community actions and events related to rural life and cultural heritage (see, for example, Cohen 1993; Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 1995, Graham et al. 2000, pp. 143–144, Parts 2004a, 2004b).

Collecting information about individuals possessing an inherited craft in Viljandi County: methods, aims and procedures

In 2008, the authors collected information about individuals possessing an inherited skill in Viljandi County in South Estonia as part of a larger community development project aimed at developing and instituting study programmes in traditional crafts at vocational schools. The project was motivated by trends in Viljandi County, at one time Estonia’s granary, in which agriculture and forestry are rapidly being marginalised as providers of employment (Viljandimaa maakonnaplaneering 2005–2010). Such a situation creates a natural niche for small rural businesses — especially ones that are capable of adding value to wood and timber in diverse ways (ibid). This study also develops out of the concept of ‘sustainable livelihood’ advocated by Chambers and Conway (1991, p. 6), in which a livelihood is defined as sustainable if it can provide a living, cope with stress, maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets, and provide sustainable livelihood opportunities for the next generation.

The principles of collecting information about individuals possessing an inherited skill bear direct relevance to the educational priorities of the University of Tartu Viljandi Culture Academy and the two vocational schools participating in the project. The project focused on traditional building and woodworking skills, since these are less readily recognised as crafts in Estonian society and are rarely represented in its educational institutions. At the same time, we tried to shape our information collection methods such that the field of their potential application would not be limited by the gender of the artisan, the principal materials used by them or the place where they work.

Upon commencing this project, we soon realised that notions such as ‘traditional craftsmanship’ and ‘intangible heritage’, which are employed in international policy instruments, require considerable adaptation at the local level (cf. Siivonen 2002; Rattus and Jääts 2004, pp. 127–128). For this reason, we decided to adopt a more relaxed approach. In addition to crafts that have been inherited in the strict sense of the word (according to the UNESCO definition, intangible cultural heritage has ‘to be transmitted from generation to generation’ (ICH 2003, p. 2)), the study also included certain more recent skills, as well as certain skills and competencies that are not necessarily perceived as a ‘craft’ (for example, the use of power tools in craftwork, certain agricultural and forestry know-how, etc.), but are often intrinsically related to one.

Applying the notion of ‘individuals possessing inherited skills’ in the field proved to be another complicating issue. On the one hand, we wished to respect the
community’s own crafts-related beliefs and values. On the other hand, if we were to get any information at all on the type of artisan we were interested in, we needed to explain the concept somehow to our informants at the outset of the project. Thus, in the preparatory stage of the project, we decided to draw up a list of crafts or products that we were interested in, in order to clarify the aims of our research (see Table 1; for further details, see Parts et al. 2009). In the course of the preparatory stage, we collected tips about 128 artisans and seven small crafts companies (see Rennu 2008), all of whom turned out to be, or employ, male artisans. In view of the fact that Estonian traditions regarding the division of labour between the sexes are still influenced by the country’s agrarian past (see, for example, Viires 1960; Vunder 2008)5 this was not surprising.

In selecting the craftspeople to be interviewed during the main part of the fieldwork, we observed the following criteria: the craft concerned must be of local origin; it must be (at least to a certain extent) acquired by way of a master–apprentice

Table 1. Indicative list of woodworking and building skills of interest to the research team from the Viljandi Culture Academy during fieldwork in Viljandi County (2008).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Woodworking skills (making of wooden products or artwork)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Wooden utensils – various spoons, bowls and barrels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Wooden gardening tools: brooms, rakes, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Wooden boats – clinker-planked sailboats and dugout canoes (e.g. kale and haabjas) but also newer wooden boat types</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Wickerwork and basketry – baskets, furniture, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Horse harnesses and other gear – sledges, carts, thills, horse bows, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) Beekeeping gear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(7) Woodcarving, decorative wood burning, intarsia, objects made of birch bark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(8) Other traditional woodworking crafts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Building crafts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Log building – the creation of new buildings, renovation of old log buildings, as well as their dismantling and re-assembly at another location</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Traditional timber framing. Construction of mills and other big or complex timber-framed structures, preferably using round timbers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Clay masonry – new buildings, renovation of old buildings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Stone masonry – construction of buildings, foundations and other structures of cobblestones and boulders, also cobblestone and boulder splitting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Wooden or reed thatch roofing, including the manufacture of the corresponding roofing materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) Insulation of buildings with traditional materials, e.g. reed mats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(7) Windows and doors and everything related thereto – joinery, replication and renovation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(8) Stove building – tile stoves, masonry and metal stoves, cooking stoves, fireplaces, sauna stoves and also chimneys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(9) Building of traditional hand-dug wells</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(10) Tinsmithing – standing seam metal roofs, rain gutters, stove shells, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(11) Blacksmithed hardware: hinges, locks, woodworking and building tools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(12) Small structures made of wood, stone or metal – fences, gates, swings, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(13) Other materials used in traditional construction, and the small businesses producing such materials – tar and lime, lumber mills that sell materials outside of the regular product range</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(14) Other crafts related to construction work; also smaller decorative components and design</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
relationship; the craftsperson’s skills must meet a certain standard of quality; and the practice of the craft should be environmentally sound. In addition, we decided to look for the presence of a certain personal charisma, which is a factor likely to contribute to the economic and social sustainability of the artisan’s livelihood. We considered that, if a person is not enjoying what they do, and performs a ‘faceless’ service, their work is unlikely to prove sustainable in the long term.

We also decided to attribute significant weight to recognition of the community. The artisan must be sufficiently well known in the local community and their skills should be attested by references. Previous work done by the artisan should be available for inspection. This criterion chiefly served the aim of visual documentation, yet was also likely to reveal something about the artisan’s individual touch. Last, but not least, it permitted the fieldworker to verify that the artisan in question actually possessed the skills attributed to them by the informants.

Our previous experience in communicating with artisans, as well as the theoretical considerations set out in the previous section, suggested that it was unlikely that we would be able to make significant progress in understanding and describing the skills of our artisans during the relatively short period of the project. Consequently, we decided not to focus in detail on the technical aspects of our craftspeople skills (leaving these for future research projects) and restricted ourselves to compiling an inventory of those who could potentially become teachers of their craft, and of their skills. To gain a better overall picture regarding the viability and sustainability of the crafts we focused on, we also decided to note the conditions required to ensure the sustainability of a craft. At the same time, we tried to organise our research such that it would facilitate the emergence and growth of informal communication networks. For example, the researchers were assisted in collecting the information by students pursuing the programme of studies of Estonian native construction from the Viljandi Culture Academy—a fact which on the one hand may have complicated the research process, but on the other hand also contributed to the development of direct professional cooperation between students and practising artisans.

The principal part of the fieldwork consisted of in-depth interviews conducted with 39 craftsmen. In our search, we did not find artisans representing every craft and skill in our preliminary list; however, we did discover a few individuals possessing knowledge of rather unexpected crafts. Some craftsmen engaged in several crafts at the same time and sometimes their principal area of competence was difficult to pinpoint, as they might have ceased to actively engage in some areas. If an individual skill/craft was difficult to define or was pursued predominantly as a hobby, we classified it as ‘other’ (Table 2). The information collected as a result of the fieldwork conducted in 2008 is stored in a web-based database (Database of Viljandi County Artisans Possessing Inherited Skills—hereinafter DAPIS).8

Examples of heritage-based livelihoods in Viljandi County

Priit Retsep (born 1977) is a maker of wicker baskets (Figures 1 and 2–4), whose reputation extends well beyond Viljandi County. His trade is rooted in family traditions and an intimate knowledge of local natural environment. Although traditional Estonian wickerwork makers mostly use one or more of the willow (genus Salix; Viires 2000) species as their raw material, Retsep’s preference is bird-cherry (Padus avium) because of its wide availability and the ease with which it lends itself to wickerwork:
Table 2. Information collected with respect to individuals possessing inherited skills in 2008 (DAPIS 2008).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of activity or knowledge</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Interest in publicity regarding the trade</th>
<th>Number of practitioners found</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stove building</td>
<td>Various traditional heating systems</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building and renovation of log homes and cabins</td>
<td>Mainly independent craftsmen who work alone; services include dismantling and re-assembly of log cabins, traditional timber-framing</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing and installation of wooden roofing</td>
<td>Roofing boards, planed and sawn shingles</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tinsmithing</td>
<td>Traditional rolled metal roofing and sheet metal elements</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional cabinetmaking and joinery</td>
<td>Doors, windows, furniture, staircases, etc.; manufacture, renovation, replication of furniture</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural stone splitting and masonry</td>
<td>Cobblestone and boulder splitting; rubble and limestone masonry</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watermills</td>
<td>Restoration of watermills, small-scale hydro generation</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blacksmithing</td>
<td>Blacksmithed decorative elements and construction hardware</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wickerwork and basketry</td>
<td>Various baskets</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (various crafts pursued as a hobby or a secondary source of income)</td>
<td>Clay masonry, saddlery and furriery, various wooden handicraft items (spoons, bowls, sledges, etc.)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interviewer: So where do you get your supply of twigs?

Priit Retsep: From the forest. From the land here in the neighbourhood. For example, there’s an abandoned narrow-gauge railway embankment that you probably crossed on your way here. It’s full and here the forest is [full] of bird-cherry and beyond there’s another forest, which is full of bird-cherry saplings. ... [The forest growers] are glad that somebody’s clearing up that thicket.

... The willow, it requires a lot of soaking and boiling in salt water. With bird-cherry, you don’t have to go to all that trouble. You can cut it any time of the year. ... [To strip the bark] you either dip it into boiling water or just leave it to dry for a couple of weeks. ...

Interviewer: But what’s the trick with spruce roots?

Priit Retsep: The same thing.

Interviewer: You should also boil them in salt water?

Priit Retsep: If the spruce grows in a high, sandy spot, it will be nicely tall and slender. But no, you can’t just go digging up spruce roots these days; you might get shot at for that.
Maple saplings are also good. They should grow in a tall forest, though; the ones in open spots are too slack.

Interviewer: How exactly do you harvest the roots?

Priit Retsep: I dig them out. Pines sink their central roots deep, but the rest of it is close to the surface. Big trees don’t really mind if you take a few roots – I don’t see it doing any serious damage. . . . In the old days, there were taller willows here everywhere that provided nice rods that you didn’t need to split, but now there’s so many roe deer and elk, they bite off the tops of young trees and then these are no use anymore. (Translated from interview with Priit Retsep, DAPIS 2008)

Priit Retsep’s business is adversely affected by the limitations of his workshop – he lives in and works out of a two-room apartment that he shares with his mother and that also has to serve as his warehouse. However, Priit Retsep remains optimistic about the prospects for his craft, both generally and in terms of his personal livelihood:
Interviewer: I’d like to ask if you have encountered any difficulties in your work?

Priit Retsep: Lack of space. However, I don’t have to worry about cutting my fingernails, they wear down nicely themselves. [laughs]

Interviewer: Which wickerwork products do you think sell the best at the moment?

Priit Retsep: Well, as far as I’m concerned, it’s baskets. But it seems indeed that handcrafted items are making a comeback. The time of plastic and metal buckets is soon up. If we could only get rid of those staple-gunned Chinese wares.... Even their wickerwork is stapled together. (Translated from interview with Priit Retsep, DAPIS 2008)

Priit Retsep dreams of taking out a loan and buying a small home in the countryside, in which he could fit out a workshop, and organise wickerwork courses and camping in summertime (Sakala 2008). He is already involved in many social and tourism-related events and projects, thus making a contribution to the promotion of business and community development in an outlying municipality. Teaching at workshops and fairs has become a natural part of Retsep’s work and lifestyle. His openness, sense of humour and ease in expressing himself make him a good teacher of his craft:
Prit Retsep: This cross [see Figure 5] is done like this: you put the twig in place and make a circle, then repeat the same thing and you bring it up like that. It’s like laying roof tiles; there has to be a slight overlap. And the end is simply wrapped around here [around one of the basket’s main structural twigs or ‘ribs’] and is then sometimes threaded through here.

... For that size we have three ribs here. Three for one; three for the other. These go sort of down across here. Then we do a spot of plaitwork to hold the rest of the ribs in place. And by the way, when it’s dry, that’s how it will stay. This wire is here because it keeps [the ribs] more or less at the same distance and it also exerts a slight strain on the splits. Without it, the basket would become warped. (Translated from interview with Prit Retsep, DAPIS 2008)
The livelihood of Priit Retsep is based on a natural resource that is abundantly and easily available and whose exploitation requires little, if any, initial investment. To make a basket, all you need is ‘a sharp knife, six nails and a strip of wire to hold the frame in place’ (Retsep, DAPIS 2008). Since the raw material weighs relatively little, it can be transported on a bicycle (a 3-metre stick with a diameter of 3 cm provides enough splits for several average-sized baskets; Figure 6). To market his products, all that Priit Retsep needs is a bus ticket and a tent. On average, Priit Retsep makes one basket every day. As a result of the low price of the material required and the widely affordable selling price of the product (€6–23 for a basket, according to a follow-up interview in 2010), he has a stable year-round income, although still below the Estonian average.10

Another example of a talented artisan employing inherited skills is Valeri Velbaum (born 1957), whose family farm engages in the manufacture and installation of several
types of traditional roofing shingle. He has also found a market niche in supplying sawn and dressed timber of non-standard dimensions (for example, extremely wide (up to 270 mm) boards, replacement weatherboards for vintage buildings, etc.), in very small quantities if necessary. Compared to Priit Retsep’s trade, his business requires significantly more inputs and investment and is more complex. Valeri Velbaum sometimes hires temporary workers and he also runs a website to advertise his business. Woodworking, however, is not the farm’s only line of business – it is skilfully integrated with Velbaum’s farming operations – for example, wood waste is used for burning ditch banks, the manufacture of beehives supports beekeeping, and so forth.

Valeri Velbaum also proved to be a very valuable discovery from the perspective of cultural heritage conservation – one of the services that he offers is the production of roofing straw. Roofs made of rye (*Secale cereale*) straw used to be the most widely used type of roofing in Estonia until the introduction of the threshing machine around a century ago. As mechanised processing makes the straw unsuitable for roofing use, this tradition has declined ever since. Although thatch roofs of straw are very durable (some are known to have lasted 100 years), the extreme scarcity of suitable straw has sometimes forced even open-air museums in Estonia to

Figure 6. Up to ten of Priit Retsep’s baskets can be placed inside one another. This saves storage space and allows him to transport a large number of baskets on a bicycle or in the luggage hold of a bus. At fairs, it also means that he can use a small sales space to offer a wide selection of products. Photograph by Madis Rennu (2010).
use substitute materials such as the common reed (*Phragmites australis*) in the roofs of historical buildings originally known to have been made of rye straw. It is fortunate that Valeri Velbaum owns an antique combine harvester (Figure 7), which can harvest a crop without damaging the stalks and bind it into bundles that are suitable for thatching (DAPIS 2008). It takes Valeri Velbaum approximately a year to fill an order for thatching straw, the price of which will be of the same order as that of wood shingles (around €13 per square metre, including installation) (Figure 8). This allows him to compete with industrially produced roofing materials and can thus be regarded as a very reasonable price. Although Valeri Velbaum does not actively market this product, its historical authenticity lends it considerable development potential, not to mention the value that such use adds to a conventional farming by-product.

Figure 7. The farmer Valeri Velbaum and his antique harvester combine which produces straw bundles suitable for thatching. Photograph taken by Madis Rennu (2010) at Karu farm in Mäeküla village in the municipality of Suure-Jaani.
Among the most important and defining insights gained in the course of our fieldwork is the realisation that none of the craftsmen we interviewed expressed a pessimistic view regarding the viability of their craft in the future. Even those who had ceased to be actively involved in the trade for reasons of age or health said that demand for ‘old school’ building and woodworking know-how was on the rise. This optimistic attitude is also evident in the fact that, except for one, all craftsmen who agreed to participate in the survey also expressed a willingness to pass on their craft and knowledge in one form or another.

At the same time, the respondents were satisfied with the level of income they gained from the practice of their crafts – most of the interviews convey the understanding that, if the quality of work is maintained and deadlines are observed, higher than average pay will be the rule rather than an exception. In spite of the delicacy of the matter, while responding to questions about their economic situation, several interviewees did briefly discuss remuneration and the terms and conditions of filling orders. Thus, it appears that older craftsmen who have an established reputation in the community often tend to neglect drawing up a detailed agreement regarding the terms of providing their service, and perform piecework in accordance with what they regard as good professional practice and standard quality. The recommendation of a respected community member is often enough when a potential customer is searching for a master of a particular craft. In addition to piecework,
hourly rates are sometimes used to calculate the fee in the case of extended or more complicated projects. Needless to say, such transactions are seldom declared to the Estonian Tax Board.

Small entrepreneurs who are running an officially established business usually start with a price quotation, then execute a contract and, after that, proceed to perform the work. Many older-generation craftsmen who are used to oral forms of business culture and lack the necessary accounting and contract skills find it difficult to compete with entrepreneurs of the aforementioned type. Market economy, however, is rapidly transforming the business culture of traditional artisans: the formalisation of transactions, the creation of ‘product stories’ for marketing purposes and other similar sales techniques are becoming part and parcel of the basic professional skills of many active craftsmen.

Craftsmen’s networks

Amongst other things, the fieldwork part of the project was intended to shed light on craftspeople’s networking practices. We learned that individuals engaged in traditionally male crafts tend to forgo advertising their products or services, often shun public attention and take a cautious attitude to any cooperative projects. For example, advertising is something that self-respecting (especially older-generation) craftsmen do not want to get involved in:

I don’t want no advertisements or nothing. 'Cause, y’know, if you’re the man, they will come to you. . . . He who that starts advertising himself, just isn’t . . . [that’s] just not right, y’know. Like Savisaar [a well-known Estonian politician – transl.] and his ‘Elect me’ campaign. (Translated from interview with Ralf Linnupuu, DAPIS 2008)

What good is that advertising to me anyway? Most of my orders come from people I know, and from people who know those people. Fact is, I don’t even want to take far-away jobs, or jobs with complete strangers. Of course, that could all change in the next couple of years, and then advertisements might come in handy indeed. (Translated from interview with Artur Kasepuu, DAPIS 2008)

Reluctance to embrace advertising and publicity is probably related to several background factors, among which traditional attitudes hold the most prominent place. Craftsmen enjoying an excellent professional reputation in the community can be booked for considerable periods in advance. In the case of highly sought-after stove-setters, for instance, waiting lists several years long have become the rule. On the one hand, these mammoth waiting lists testify to the scarcity of skilled craftsmen. On the other hand, they suggest that the product or service is priced relatively modestly.

In any case, such customer relationship practices represent an interesting phenomenon that deserves closer examination. When, during fieldwork, craftsmen were asked for information about their colleagues, another curious detail emerged – they usually gave information about another craftsman in the area only if that craftsman practised a craft other than their own. Thus, the long waiting periods can be partially explained by the relative monopoly of the craftsmen, which they try to preserve and protect by controlling the spread of information, either knowingly or subconsciously.

The scarcity and relative lack of dynamism of communication networks in traditional woodworking and building trades is in sharp contrast to the burgeoning of
certain crafts that are often pursued as a hobby. In these, cooperation appears to be thriving. For instance, we could cite the example of dugout canoe carving, or refer to the rapid rise in popularity of certain old technologies pursued by living history societies and others\(^\text{13}\) (Figure 9), and certain novel ones – such as clay and straw-bale construction\(^\text{14}\) or the practice of sustainable renovation of vintage buildings.\(^\text{15}\)

Hobby groups are also very keen on making use of the opportunities provided by the Internet and, of course, their ambition extends beyond the borders of any single Estonian county – in fact, even beyond national borders. As in many virtual communities, members do not keep their knowledge to themselves, and share information through craft forums and blogs. The fact that the crafts which are mostly pursued as a hobby do not constitute the main source of income for those involved is most likely conducive to the publicity surrounding such crafts. Because funding for many such projects is provided from the public sector, publicity tends to be perceived as social capital, as opposed to a source of potential competition (cf. Teppor 2008).

As the general economic situation has drastically changed since the completion of our fieldwork, several craftsmen have been compelled to change trade. The number of those who earlier had rejected our offer to include their contacts and general information regarding their trade in the public part of the database, because they

Figure 9. The flaming torch of the 2009 Estonian Song and Dance Festival was brought from Tartu to Tallinn using historical vessels provided by the Estonian Historical Ships Society. In the photograph you can see a fleet of dugouts meeting the Viking ship Turm, whose crew is scheduled to take charge of the torch. The tradition of Baltic song and dance celebrations has been included in UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Photograph by Aivar Ruukel (2009).
considered this to amount to a form of advertising, but who have now changed their minds has also increased. Thus, it has been necessary to recontact the craftsmen to update information. Regular networking is an important factor for the development of crafts – without that, it is difficult to involve artisans in formal training activities. Hopefully, the current economic downturn will also encourage closer cooperation – both with various institutions whose work bears relevance to the practice of crafts and between the artisans themselves. Several collective projects, which were too easily dismissed by many craftsmen a few years ago for the reason that there were numerous other, easier ways of making a living or achieving other professional goals, are now again on the agenda. This signals the start of a most interesting period for continuing our research in the subject.

Discussion

If we were asked about the most unexpected realisation that our fieldwork yielded, we would have to reply: the lack of a reasonably clear concept of the crafts in contemporary Estonia. According to a relatively widespread interpretation, the notion of crafts is identified with women’s handicrafts, which are pursued as a hobby or as an auxiliary source of income. At a very early stage of the fieldwork, we decided that we would deliberately avoid using the Estonian words for ‘crafts/handicrafts’ (käsitöö) and ‘artisan’ (käsitööoline) as much as possible, since even cultural workers and members of crafts societies tended to associate these words with women. This can probably be attributed to the fact that there is a long tradition of institutionalisation (the organisation of various contests, exhibitions, societies, etc.) in the field of what has been traditionally regarded as women’s crafts. Another consideration relates to the ‘post-productivist’ transition experienced by those crafts during the Soviet period: already then, traditional women’s handicraft products (decorative textile elements, souvenirs, national costumes associated with the famous Estonian Song and Dance Festival, etc.) had a predominantly symbolic value.

A popular notion of Estonian men’s crafts links these, for instance, to the making of wooden toys, to basket weaving and partly also to blacksmithing. The work, for instance, of a mason or a roofer is today described in common parlance as simply ‘men’s work’ and not a ‘craft’. Such a notion may partly stem from the fact that many traditionally male crafts are physically too demanding and investment-intensive to be pursued on a non-commercial basis. Although the association of traditional crafts with women’s work is not unique to post-Soviet countries (see, for example, Korhonen and Alitalo 2006), Soviet heritage has definitely played a role in shaping this trend. As it was, up to the end of the Soviet period (1991) and to a lesser extent also later, there was a considerable social and economic demand for the services traditionally provided by male artisans – the rigid planned economy of the Soviet system gave rise to an extensive unofficial market for many services of a practical nature (such as stove-setting, building, etc.), which tended to involve considerable physical labour. It was especially in the area of home construction and renovation that workmen (seldom women) provided their services to private individuals on a moonlighting basis. A person who provided services in this manner in the Soviet Union was referred to as ‘khalturschik’ or ‘shabashnik’ (both are Russian coinages, the former term having mostly pejorative connotations; see, for example, Shlapentokh 1989). Although everybody in the Soviet Union was (at least formally) employed, employers tacitly accepted that after hours or on weekends their employees would unofficially provide various ser-
vices to willing customers, for a market-based, privately-agreed fee. Fees for such unofficially provided services were, as a rule, significantly higher than the official market rate (where one existed), since the ‘illicit’ products or services provided were in short supply (Rennu 2007). It was also common practice to pay in kind for such services (a bottle of vodka, a box of chocolates, a tube of smoked sausage, etc.). A khalturschchik’s service often involved the use of their employer’s tools or machinery (often with the tacit acceptance of the employer, thus amounting to an unofficial benefit), which created added value for the customer (Shlapentokh 1989). Needless to say, any agreements between the providers of an unofficial service and their customers were made orally in the private as well as in the public sector (see, for example, Shlapentokh 1989; Rennu 2007):

In the Soviet time, that was indeed the case – I went to the quarry in Tallinn, gave a bottle of vodka for the men and loaded a ton or a ton and a half of limestone onto my old Yeraz [type of van produced in Yerevan (Armenia) during the Soviet period] and drove home. These trips [were part of my job] – and so I went there at least once or twice a week. (Translated from interview with rubble masonry master Urmas Anton, DAPIS 2008)

The social standing and self-image of traditional craftsmen is to a large extent rooted in the Soviet-time practice of ‘khaltura’ (Russian for ‘moonlighting work’) and in the unofficial employment relations it gave rise to. Needless to say, that part of social reality has changed beyond recognition – in the free market, artisans practising one of the building trades now have to compete with the abundant and often low-priced offerings of international hardware chain stores (such as Bauhaus and K-Rauta in Estonia). Artisans’ survival in this new environment depends on the flexibility and adaptability of their services, on informal customer relations and so forth. In some cases, it may still depend on the opportunity to use the tools and machinery of their principal employer, as was the case previously. In certain cases, artisans may derive a competitive advantage from established custom and their network of relationships in the community: for many middle-aged and senior customers, hiring (possibly on a formal basis) somebody other than the local workman to do the job he has always done without any need for paperwork is almost unthinkable.

However, in many cases traditional crafts are in the process of becoming a conscious (life)style choice of both the customer and the artisan. The rising popularity of everything green, healthy and heritage-related creates a new context for traditional crafts (Rattus and Jääts 2004). As discussed above, many artisans practising traditional crafts are still learning to position themselves in this situation and to market their service by highlighting the symbolic value of their work.

The common perception of many crafts as simply ‘men’s work’ limits the validity of a number of crafts studies since they (often implicitly – for example, Korhonen and Alitalo 2006; Vanamölder 2009) deal with women’s crafts and craftswomen. Our experience of collecting information about individuals possessing inherited skills in Viljandi County hopefully provides a better insight into the world of craftsmen (male artisans), with its peculiar features. As such, it should provide valuable information for involving artisans who practise woodworking and building crafts in the corresponding programmes of educational institutions, and should also have certain implications regarding the integration of craftsmen practising other crafts and of their know-how into various training activities and projects.
In this connection, it should be noted that, since craftsmen’s identity usually includes a strong component of self-image as a skilled workman, they may often dislike being labelled as ‘artisans’. Thus, when involving them in the work of educational institutions, care must be taken to remain sensitive to their self-image and allow them to maintain it; it should not be taken for granted that they will be willing to embrace the professional culture of educational and cultural workers. Second, since many of the crafts mentioned in this paper and the artisans as individuals define themselves to a large extent through their environment (family, home, regular customers, personal tools and local knowledge) — this applies both to male (Parts et al. 2009) and female (see, for example, Reinonen and Komppula 2004; Teppor 2008) artisans — any training events involving artisans as instructors should be held in their own environment or in an environment closely resembling their own.

Here, again, it appears relevant to refer to the practice of the NHU in the matter. The NHU has been looking for ways to give official recognition to informal crafts training, since it is obvious that many rare trades (such as those of the cooper, the Saamish handicrafts master, the gunsmith – NHU’s examples) can never be taught in class at a vocational education institution — in addition to the need for highly specific factors in the immediate environment, there is also the matter of funding for such classes, which is more than likely to become an obstacle because of the marginal importance of the trades in question. Thus, individuals who wish to learn a rare trade in which no formal courses are offered can acquire the know-how and skills of that trade by working for a master of the trade, or in an enterprise in which the trade is practised, and they will be entitled to take out student loans and use other student benefits on the same basis as regular students. The NHU also administers a scholarship scheme for artisans, which is another way to officially recognise the continuing education of artisans and to ensure them a status equal to that of other professions (from interviews conducted by Parts and Metslang at the headquarters of the NHU in Lillehammer on 24 September 2008; NHU n.d.; Martinussen s.a.).

An aspect of the NHU model that could successfully be implemented in countries not as prosperous as Norway – Estonia among them – is the support scheme for individual training. We could flexibly offer vocational education courses for those who otherwise would experience difficulties in obtaining formal education in a particular rare trade, or in fact any formal education (beyond the compulsory basic one) at all. In Nordic countries, similar principles have been applied in providing vocational education to people living in outlying regions (for example, the Finnish apprenticeship studies framework, Oppisopimuskoulutus17). Although Estonia is a small country, many of the obstacles that make it difficult for people who live in peripheral areas to obtain an education of their choice are mobility-related: the public transport system is poorly developed, it is too costly to commute to the educational institution, conventional forms of study are incompatible with the life situation of the potential student (age, job, household and family members who need to be supported, etc.).

In Estonia, too, it is possible to give formal recognition to forms of training based on an apprenticeship arrangement — these can be registered with a vocational education institution, which will give them a status equal to that of an official programme of studies administered by that institution (see Töökohapõhiõõ õppe rakendamise kord18). However, so far this option has been used very rarely, most probably because of the organisational difficulties it entails19 and the lack of previous experience (Raus 2010).
andi Culture Academy has already experimented with several forms of in situ training within the existing legal framework. For example, in the field of textile crafts, vocational education courses have been developed with a view to meeting the special needs of women belonging to certain social-risk groups (women with small children, women over 40 years of age, etc.). However, the organisational details and methods of apprenticeship training under a master skilled in an inherited craft (both with respect to male and female crafts) have yet to find their way from our department’s strategy documents into practice. It is a matter of considerable importance for the department – we find that various forms of individual training hold great potential for incubating and developing livelihoods that are based on local knowledge.

**Conclusion**

The present paper examined the question of how to produce knowledge that would allow formal institutions, especially educational institutions, to contribute to the sustainability of heritage-based livelihoods and to facilitate intergenerational transmission of craft-related skills and practices. To add a practical aspect to our discussion, we drew on a study organised in Viljandi County (Estonia) to gather information about individuals possessing inherited traditional woodworking or building skills. We relied on the theory formulated by the philosopher Michael Polanyi, who argues that, in addition to various facts that can be represented in an abstract manner, knowledge inheres in the performance of various acts. The type of knowledge that performing those acts requires may be termed tacit, which means that it cannot be transferred or taught by words alone. Instead of formal descriptions, such knowledge can primarily be acquired by practice and personal contact between a master and an apprentice (Polanyi 2002). As part of the project, we developed a methodology for collecting information about individuals possessing an inherited skill. The underlying idea of the methodology was to facilitate the formulation of integrated development agendas that would combine the educational and practical economic needs of communities with the goals of protecting intangible cultural heritage.

Although the immediate goal of the research project was the involvement of artisans in the work of educational institutions, we had designed our research activities in a manner that would in itself be conducive to the emergence of informal networks and would ‘naturally’ give rise to situations in which an artisan’s tacit knowledge can be grasped by and transferred to potential apprentices. In the future, we also intend to conduct participant observations with more specific goals – for example, to have a researcher take on the role of an apprentice and work with the master. In addition, we plan to start involving practising artisans in the formal teaching of their crafts and in designing novel learning/research encounters to be offered by educational institutions, as well as to request artisans’ assistance in product development efforts.

None of the artisans we interviewed expressed a pessimistic view regarding the viability of their livelihood in the future. At the same time, the respondents were satisfied with the level of income they gained from the practice of their trade. Despite certain traditionalist attitudes that are held by many male artisans in Estonia (such as the predisposition against active self-promotion and against any institutionalised cooperation), those practising traditional woodworking and building crafts displayed a willingness in this respect to adapt to the changing economic and cultural environment. We have in fact recently observed that male artisans have also
started to stress the symbolic value of their crafts – as female artisans have done for some time already. Traditional crafts appear to hold considerable potential for creating added value and offering real alternatives to conventional options of rural production. Thus, the implementation of a development agenda combining educational and practical economic needs with the goals of protecting intangible cultural heritage is highly relevant and appropriate in a situation where conventional modes of rural production have been rendered more or less marginal in many regions.

The results of the project carry certain implications for attempts to draw practising male artisans into cooperation with various institutions. First, when involving them in the work of educational institutions, care must be taken to remain sensitive to their self-image as a ‘skilled workman who performs serious work (as opposed to handicrafts, cultural work and the like)’. Second, since many of the crafts mentioned and their practitioners define themselves to a considerable degree through their everyday environment, any training events involving them as instructors should be held in that environment, or as close to it as possible and in conditions as similar as possible. This poses significant challenges to educational institutions – it may not be easy to reconcile the necessities of artisans’ lives and livelihoods with institutional routines. One possible solution may be to offer vocational education programmes and courses in a variety of diverse and flexible forms, such as in situ apprenticeship training.

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Notes

1. According to a study (Kalmus and Keller 2004, p. 101) conducted in Estonia, 2% of male respondents regarded themselves as actively engaging in artisanal activities, and 4% in fine woodcutting activities. Respectively, 14 and 37% of male respondents said they had tried their hand in those fields at some point. Among women, however, the pursuit of handicrafts was and is far more popular both in the past and the present (Teppor 2008). There are currently at least 227 clubs and societies in Estonia who pursue (hand)crafts in one form or another (Vanamölder 2009, p. 5).

2. The Development of a Crafts Cluster in Viljandi County project (2007–2008) was initiated by the Department of Native Estonian Crafts of the University of Tartu Viljandi Culture Academy and supported by the Enterprise Estonia Foundation in the framework of the Development Programme of Regional Colleges as Local Centres of Excellence. The project comprises the following actions: (1) Developing advanced training and retraining courses for log builders. (2) Launching a traditional Estonian woodworking course at Olustvere School of Land Economy and Services. (3) Introducing log building as a trade specialisation in the Viljandi United Vocational Schools. (4) Launching the specialisation of traditional Estonian textiles at the Olustvere School of Land Economy and Services. (5) Setting up a research centre for inherited Estonian technologies.

3. With respect to this project, the priorities of researchers were determined by the fact that two programmes are already taught at the University of Tartu Viljandi Culture Academy Department of Estonian Native Crafts: Estonian Native Textiles (since 1994) and Estonian Native Construction (since 2005).

4. We were inspired by the programmatic ‘relaxed attitude’ of the family of developmental approaches and methods, which has also been referred to as ‘relaxed rural appraisal’ (although it is probably better known as ‘rapid rural appraisal’, ‘participatory rural appraisal’, etc.). The goal of these approaches is ‘to enable local people to share, enhance and analyse their knowledge of life and conditions, to plan and to act’ (Chambers 1992, p. 1). In addition to that, emphasis is also placed on methodological flexibility, ability to improvise and to be economical (‘principles of optimal ignorance’) (Mikkelsen 1995, p. 69).

5. As a Finno-Ugric language, Estonian lacks grammatical gender – the word käsitööline (literally ‘handworker’) is not gender-specific. However, as described in the Discussion section, the words käsitöö ((handi)craft) and käsitööline (craftsperson, artisan) do have gender-specific associations in contemporary Estonian. These words are associated with what have traditionally been regarded as female crafts, such as textile arts. In the course of the research project, this fact was to prove the cause of many misunderstandings and funny incidents.

6. Kale is a traditional clinker-planked sailboat used for trawling on Lake Võrtsjärv (Viljandi County). For further information, see the webpage of the MTÜ Kaleselts [non-profit organisation, the Kale Society] (in Estonian): http://www.kaleselts.ee/?keel=est.

7. See, for instance, the blog site of dugout carvers: http://haabjas.blogspot.com or http://www.soomaa.com/?id=139&lang=eng.

8. Database of Viljandi County Artisans Possessing Inherited Skills: http://rahvuslik.kul-tuur.edu.ee. Full access to the database is limited to the group of researchers involved in the project.
9. The interviews were conducted in Estonian. The excerpts used in this paper have been translated by Meelis Leesik.


12. When the fieldwork of the project was carried out, the 2008 economic downturn had not yet hit Estonia. Still, some of the interviewees mentioned that the situation was likely to change. They also pointed out that the change could bring new opportunities – in a tighter economy, it would be easier to hire employees, and those hired would probably be more motivated (Mart Vaiksaar, DAPIS 2008).


15. The Information Centre for Sustainable Renovation (http://www.srik.ee) also has a branch office in Viljandi, at which training events are organised on a regular basis (http://www.srik.ee/index.php?region=3&amenu=0).

16. In the Soviet Union, everyone was supposed to be employed with a state or collective employer. This meant that everybody was supposed to have a ‘day job’ – in fact, not having a job carried a stigma and could make one liable to sanctions.


18. Rules for implementing workplace-based programmes of study – a regulation of the Estonian Ministry for Education and Research (see References for details).

19. The assessment of Inna Soonurm, specialist at the Vocational Education Department of the National Examination and Qualification Centre (from the interview conducted by Parts, 23 July 2010).

20. The corresponding training primarily includes product development, entrepreneurship, online marketing, etc. ESF measure 1.3. ‘Inclusive Labour Market’, project No. 1.0301-0144 ‘Handicrafts as a job’ (2004–2007) and ESF measure 1.3.1 ‘Increasing the Availability of Qualified Labour Force’, project No. 1.3.0102.09-0036 ‘Handicraft for Job 2’ (2009–2010).

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