Heterotopia And Hegemony: Power And Culture In Setomaa
Aet Annist

To cite this article: Aet Annist (2013): Heterotopia And Hegemony: Power And Culture In Setomaa, Journal of Baltic Studies, DOI:10.1080/01629778.2013.775853
To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01629778.2013.775853

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Introduction: Heritage and Authenticity

I started my fieldwork in Setomaa (Seto country), a region on the southeast Estonian border with Russia, just prior to Easter 2003. The next day, I joined a crowd of people at Easter Vigil, and participated in a traditional egg-rolling event in another village the following afternoon. A week later, having joined a local leelo choir of ladies mostly in their 50s to 70s, I learned that April was the beginning of a season of various events and celebrations. A few days later, we traveled in an ancient yellow Soviet PAZ bus to a Seto singing event, which brought together choirs from all over the region. Soon, Jüripäiv (St George’s Day) celebrations followed, with many villagers bringing food and drink to the graves of their ancestors buried at the cemetery of St George’s church and celebrating there with their friends and relatives.

This density and intensity of parties subsided only in the autumn. I was exhausted from the sheer number of events that I participated in, which was in itself in stark contrast to my earlier experiences in Estonian villages. Swept away by the richness and passion of the Seto culture, I quickly joined the ranks of enchanted ethnographers and Seto fans, and enjoyed the full opportunity to participate with them in all kinds of events, even though I did not own an authentic Seto costume and was at first not fully able to follow the words of the leelo singers.

Seto cultural heritage has been studied by numerous researchers for nearly two centuries. From Schlegel’s 1831 admiration of “the harmony placed in the souls of those people” (Kalkun 2011, 58) and Jakob Hurt’s immense collections of Seto songs (Hurt 1904–1907), conceptualizing Setomaa as the source of the most ancient and authentic Estonian folk songs, to Armas Otto Väisänen’s expedition in 1913 (Väisänen 1992); from Soviet research on the apparent disappearance of Seto traditions (Richter 1979) to recent research by Jääts (1998) and Runnel (2002) on Seto identity building, to Kuutma’s (2005) study of Seto epic traditions and Kalkun’s (2011) dissertation on
the part Seto songs have played in the history of Estonian folklore studies — throughout, Seto heritage has been at the very center of research on Estonian cultural heritage.

The region has been so imbued with cultural heritage that it has been labeled “heritage culture” (pärandkultuur) — an environment where the lasting presence of heritage artifacts, skills, and heritage-related activities and values is experienced as larger than the sum of the individual elements. Whilst the more widely used term is still “cultural heritage” (kultuuripärand), distinguishing between the two seems useful, although the exact meanings have not yet been wholly spelled out. The term pärandkultuur is borrowed from and most heavily used in forestry (e.g., Tarang 2007), and refers to certain ecosystems that exist in symbiosis with human activities, but it is also increasingly applied to certain Estonian peripheral regions. In addition to Seto pärandkultuur, there are Peipsiveere pärandkultuur and Kihnu pärandkultuur, presumably in all those cases referring to a sociocultural “system” where the inheritance from past generations is considered to have survived in some sort of complete form, even in a symbiotic relation with the present. Although commonly seen as a characteristic that links us with our past, the concept of “heritage” itself, as well as its process and practices, are characterized by “presentness” (Harvey 2005; see also Bendix 1997), i.e. by the temporally varying circumstances within which a specific selection of past phenomena is construed as “heritage” or “heritage culture”. Such constructions inevitably require somebody to do the construing, leading Harvey to note that “heritage is a present-centered cultural practice and an instrument of cultural power”. This relationship with power means that the presentness has to be concealed in order to render the phenomenon of heritage “natural”. According to David Lowenthal (2003, xix), “the past, once virtually indistinguishable from the present, has become an ever more foreign realm, yet one increasingly suffused by the present”.

The following article studies what happens when the image of the past in the present is enacted, used, and institutionalized. I concentrate on how locals use for their own ends the representation of Seto life as an authentic heritage culture. I will discuss the process of re-appropriation of outside interest for authentic heritage experience by the active cultural elite in Setomaa, and consider some other actors and institutions besides the hosts and guests involved in this process. The development of heritage culture is intertwined in surprising and peculiar ways with local interest groups’ needs and quests for identity and, in such an interaction, new landscapes of power which cannot be ignored by those acting within/on them are created.

Whose Authenticity?

One month after the festive start of my fieldwork, I traveled with my choir to a nearby open-air museum to a paid performance for a group of IT specialists and businesspeople from Tallinn. I had so far been present only at parties, where spontaneous singing brought together singers (usually in folk costumes), listeners (mostly locals, often from other choirs), and a select group of fans who often follow Seto groups from one event to another. At such events, leelo singing played a very central and inclusive role. The singers formed a full circle during the singing. Such
circles were free for everyone to join either by squeezing in between the singers or by standing behind them and singing or listening as an equal partaker in the experience.3

As I had not been to a paid performance before, I was intrigued by my friends’ suggestion that singing at such events, in contrast to parties, was fairly restrained and somewhat uncomfortable. Dressed up in folk costumes that were a mixture of inheritance from their families and their own more recent creations, we gathered in a semi-circle separated from the listeners, and sang various songs from the usual repertoire. The tension and stage fright were palpable, in contrast to the mood at the parties, but the singing and performance did not seem to be affected.

At the end of our performance, I was approached by Toivo,4 the leader of the group we had performed for. Explaining that he knew I was doing some kind of research there, he asked me to tell his group about the actual life in Setomaa. I explained that I had only been there for a month, and the local ladies would be far better at answering any questions about the local life. He insisted that I would add some reality with my account, since this performance was, after all, nothing but an idyllic picture and, presumably, the ladies would want to cling to that image rather than reveal the truth. Toivo compared Setos to “Red Indians”, suggesting that both cultures are only remnants kept alive by similar commercial events that allow the locals to earn some money and at the same time escape their grim reality both financially and spiritually. Behind the scenes, in his view, people lived cultureless, probably miserable lives. From such a viewpoint, he felt that the tourist ordered the event and was thus in charge of creating the Seto heritage culture, actually in existence only for commercial performances for the sake of the audience. He felt that this commercial nature inevitably limited the opportunity to access the authentic culture, and wanted the experience of his group to be made more real. In this case, a researcher was helpfully at hand to overcome the fake experience Toivo seemed to have felt he witnessed.

This example serves as a surprisingly comprehensive opening to the main issues in heritage research, where questions about “fakeness” and truth, ownership of the local imago and commercialization have become increasingly central. At the core of the exercise of establishing a certain present selection of phenomena as heritage is authenticity. In the context of heritage, authenticity could be described as a set of characteristics symbolizing something belonging to an era or other phenomenon in which the identity of a group is seen to be rooted. More than heritage, authenticity in social sciences is now generally considered to be a construed phenomenon: an imagined value, attributed to a certain space, experience or item, oftensurfacing in the context of tourism (e.g., Abram, Waldren and Macleod 1997; Urry 1990; and more recently, Knudsen and Waade 2010). Wang (1999) has disentangled the theories of construed authenticity as follows: according to such theories, there is no absolute origin forming the basis of the authenticity of an original. Both the origin and the traditions are the objects of invention and construction, where differing interpretations of history compete.

The authenticity of heritage is projected primarily outside the modern era in terms of time, or outside modern society in terms of space, which in our still modernist thinking is often seen as the same thing. Thus, we do not look for authentic heritage among our daily chores in a modern urban setting, or even in rural environments.
Authenticity in Estonia is seen, in public discourse, to reside in Setomaa and the island of Kihnu, both peripheral regions where “pastness” is considered to have survived; it is not sought in regions where no obvious heritage features have entered the public consciousness, or where, instead, recent modernist processes, such as the Soviet occupation, have overridden any possible links to a “valuable”, heritage-related past. Social discussions of authenticity play a vital part in pinpointing its location. Among the consumers of authenticity, objective features are given subjective assessments (see, for instance, Spooner 1992), which turns these features into shared cultural decisions about authenticity. Those discussions also form the environment where the pretension to authenticity acquires validity and energy. Over time, certain localities become increasingly solidified in their position as the carriers of lived authenticity.

Since the mid-twentieth century, both the global margins and the western peripheries have experienced an ever-increasing flow of tourists, whose purpose is often to gaze at otherness, whether in the form of the exotic or of cultural authenticity, in far-off lands or closer to home. This has triggered the intensified interest and concern of scholars (e.g., Smith 1989). Much of the literature that considers authenticity as a construed phenomenon does so in the context of tourism (Urry 1990; van den Berghe 1994). Mostly, the struggles over authenticity are positioned in an unequal power framework, where the tourist comes from the affluent West and the local from non-Western societies. As a result, especially earlier studies frame research in terms of the loss of local genuineness due to tourist demand. Greenwood (1989) describes how tourist interest generates an “authentified” version of local life; Graburn (1984) describes how tourist-oriented items go through a process from authenticity to memento; MacCannell (1984) researched the process of musealization of culture. MacCannell (1992) uses “ex-primitive” and “performative primitive” to mark the staged aspects of authenticity encountered by the tourist and points out the dangers in this process. As the tourist demands the exotic “other” to be placed at the center of the culture, the “self” in the sense of the real local appears to be pushed to the margin. There is an inevitable paradox in the meeting of the tourist and the local, as the more the tourist’s desire for authenticity defines and channels local life, the more difficult it is to encounter what is considered locally authentic (see also Meethan 2001; Swain 1989).

However, authors have never really agreed on the effects of tourism on the local culture: for instance, Cohen (1988) considers authenticity a negotiable concept, where innovation plays a considerable role, leading to “new authenticity” rather than its disappearance. Wang (1999) notes that authenticity depends on personal interpretation or perspective, and that cultural authenticity is a projection of the expectations, convictions, preferences, stereotypes and conscience of the tourist. The tourist faces symbolic authenticity, which is the product of social construction – thus, authenticity is the measure of a socially defined quality. But this is not a mere submission to the definitions of the tourist. Even when it means sanitizing culture, cutting out local social problems and places or visual signs that undermine local authenticity, this may be in response to the deviations such features are considered to possess by the locals themselves, who desire to control their self-representation. I encountered such a desire to have control over the representations of the local on several occasions in
Setomaa, and this certainly indicated a preference for avoiding attention to negative features.

Indeed, as my own allegiance to Seto performers had quickly grown rather strong, I felt insulted and annoyed as I faced Toivo’s invitation to offer a private “behind the scenes” overview of the “real” Setomaa to the group from Tallinn. At the time, I felt it was the tourists who had chosen to pay for a performance rather than joining a party set up in locals’ own terms. No wonder, then, that they got what they paid for. Unwilling to be singled out from the group, I declined the request, even though it meant losing an opportunity to discuss such views in greater detail. I was also embarrassed about the expectation that a researcher with just a few weeks of local experience would be perceived as some sort of bearer of truth, superior to the local ladies who had lived there all their lives. Overriding their knowledge and their self-representation would have been, in my view, both arrogant and disloyal.

Marshall Sahlins (1999) discusses the empowerment of the local, inherent in the process of encounters with the tourist: people living in cultures that have become tourist destinations are increasingly recognizing the value of their culture for commercial purposes, and not simply in the sense of voluntary submission to commercialization. Instead, tourist efforts to consume culture are incorporated into local cultural systems of meaning and transformed according to local values. This also retains the culturally authentic difference and the tourist interest in it. The author of authenticity is not the tourist triggering local responses but the local in conversation with the outside, “recreating” the imagined tradition. Sharon MacDonald (1997) points out that the locals themselves perceive the power, experiencing the process in which a relationship between commerce and the tourist is established as the localization of commerce, developing tourism for the local people. Similarly, Bunten (2005; see also Shiner 1994) considers hosts’ view of themselves in re-appropriating the “tourist art”. Art created for commercial use becomes part of the authenticity of the culture for the locals. It is part of the power of the locals to craft their own selves (Bunten 2008). Those developments in research place the two parties involved in the quest for authenticity – the tourist and the locals – increasingly on an equal footing and even declare heritage inalienable by the tourists.

Tourism has undoubtedly had a pervasive influence on the way local authenticity is generated. The changes, however, are not necessarily tourist-directed. A considerable proportion of activities related to cultural heritage, whether living or performed, does not exist to serve the tourist. By extension, cultural performances are not necessarily directed at tourists, and participation in cultural events and celebrations has other audiences than just tourists. This fits within the framework of “serious leisure” (Stebbins 1992), which sometimes even becomes the professional identity of the representative of a culture (cf. Stebbins 2004), “performing” culture independently of the presence of tourist consumers. In addition, exotic otherness need not be seen only as a label from the outside, developing somehow against the local views. Otherness itself may well be adopted as part of the identity of the locals, and even become part of their self-empowerment.
Setomaa as Heterotopia

Seto history, as well as present Seto life, offers numerous examples of linking its peripheral position and otherness with empowerment. To present this idea more clearly, the concept of heterotopia is useful. The concept was originally offered by Foucault (1986), who referred to “the place of otherness”, the temporal or environmental space alternative to daily normal life. Foucault considers a heterotopia to be an environment which has an ambivalent relationship with the rest of space. Originally referring to “parts of the body that are either out of place, missing, extra, or, like tumours, alien” (Hetherington 1997, 42), heterotopia reflects and contests simultaneously, as Johnson (2006) notes. This alien, out-of-place character makes it possible to fruitfully conceptualize certain regions within a country as heterotopic. Various heritage venues have been considered through the prism of heterotopia (e.g., Hetherington 1997; John 2001; Soja 1990).

Foucault (1986, 24) defines heterotopias as “counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality”. The Setos have been considered a deviation from Estonianness since the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries, people who need to be normalized and civilized, yet left as they are, contesting and reflecting the essence of what is Estonian as well as non-Estonian. During their history, they have shared administrative and political borders with both Russia and Estonia. A particular version of Orthodoxy, and several hybrid customs and traditions are seen to have evolved as a result of the Setos’ borderland existence and presence in Russian territory. Their separation from Estonians and their linguistic difference from Russians have been considered the main sources of the uniqueness of their identity and culture. Yet there are signs that they may also have experienced or preferred to present themselves as others in terms of their surroundings more generally: Mägiste (1977) reports Setos to have described themselves as the King’s people from Sweden.

Seto history is tightly linked with the fluctuation of the borders of Estonia (see also Saar 2003). At the end of the War of Independence in 1918–1920 between Russia and Estonia, Russia signed a peace treaty with the newly established Republic of Estonia. With this agreement, known as the Tartu Peace Treaty, Russia officially recognized the new republic, paid considerable reparations and surrendered approximately 2000 km² of land around the Petseri (Pechory) Orthodox monastery and around the northeastern border city of Narva. This territory corresponded roughly to the front line at the time of the peace negotiations. Since then, the territory around Petseri has been considered the historic territory of the Setos. The border agreement, seen to be based on the “ethnic principle”, was also important as it established a strategic military border that included municipalities that had very small proportions of Estonians or Setos (Mattisen 1993).

During the years of the Estonian Republic, many efforts were made to enlighten and educate Setos. In 1921, a campaign to give them surnames was launched. The Estonian school system was extended to Seto parishes. As early as the nineteenth century, Setos had been seen as the Other because of their problematic and exotic
features. Primitive and Russified (Manninen 1924), Slavic and quick to party, drink and fight (Põldmäe 1938; see also Lõuna 2003), socioeconomically backward and illiterate (see Tammekann, Kant and Veski 1928), they were now to be civilized. At the same time, having provided a vast and rich heritage of folk songs to folklorists, their authentic link with the past was also highly valued, even by the same authors (e.g., Põldmäe 1938).

During World War II, as the Soviets advanced through Estonian territory in 1944 and 1945, approximately two-thirds of Setomaa (Petseri County) was attached to the neighboring Russian Soviet Republic (Pskov Oblast): 1135 km² and 40,709 inhabitants, of whom 5898 were Estonians (Uuet 2002, 80). Estonians in those areas were allowed to move to the newly formed Estonian Soviet Republic. The rest of Petseri County became part of Võru County in Estonia. Further changes to the border were made until 1957, always to the territorial benefit of the Russian Soviet Republic (see also Tannberg 2005, 260–61).

During the Soviet period, Seto culture narrowed down into fairly private traditions and customs. Its public face was represented by the female leelo choirs’ performances. The choirs became the pillars of salvaging Setoness, but this was recognized to have been in a changed and folklorized form (Sarv 1995). In the 1960s, many small folk groups performed and practiced folk songs, folk dances, and folk music. This return to “ethnographic” roots was an attempt to move away from the Soviet slogan of “national by form, socialist by content” that characterized many Soviet cultural reproductions (Kuutma 2008, 591). Instead, the people fueling the folklore movement desired to achieve a more genuine connection between the ethnographic past and modern performers.

In 1991, the nominal border between the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic and Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic became the new border between the Estonian Republic and the Russian Federation. Instead of including the Tartu Peace Treaty from 1920 in the list of restitutional reforms to be carried out, the Estonian political elite accepted the Soviet border as it was in 1957. Setomaa, which was born in 1920 and was in practice relatively untouched by the Soviet border arrangements, now became divided between Russia and Estonia, de jure as well as de facto. For many Setos, this was a betrayal of the Tartu Peace Treaty and the restorative ideals of independent Estonia, which were to overcome the injustices done during the Soviet years. The new border line, both officially and locally referred to as the control line (kontrolljoon), has a much greater impact on the locals’ lives, as it restricts their movement to the Russian side of Setomaa and limits access to previously owned land, as well as relatives, acquaintances, and graves of deceased relatives – these are important, as regular visits to and celebrations on the graves form a significant part of the Seto identity. Runnel (2002, 51) suggests that the divided state of the Seto territory has been vital for Seto revivalism, as it brought the Setos into the public arena and mobilized their elite. This elite formed alliances against Estonian state politics, helping to consolidate local identity not only on the cultural but also on the political level. While many younger Setos do not consider the topic of an undivided Setomaa to have much significance for today’s Realpolitik and everyday life, they share the discourse of separation with those still calling for a political resolution to the border issue. Today, fewer than 4000 people inhabit the four Seto municipalities in


Estonia. The southeastern Estonian region has experienced a steady decrease in population because of both a negative birthrate and increased emigration since at least 1990 (Eesti Statistikaamet 2011), and Seto municipalities are no exception. According to Setomaa Valdade Liit (2006), about 1500 people in Setomaa declare themselves to be Seto. Only a small fraction of them publicly and visibly display their Setoness, through clothing and attendance at Seto parties and events. Yet, their effect is considerable.

The Seto region combines several incompatible, yet meaningful qualities. On the one hand, Setos’ presence in, on the other, their absence from Estonia; their “backwardness” on the one, and the enlightenment hidden in their relation to the lost past on the other hand; the victorious possession of the Seto territory in 1920 on the one hand, and on the other hand, the struggle to unite the territory culturally and, later, politically. Seto traditions offer an alternative to a modernized Estonia that has lost connection to its roots and to its political elite, and that has failed to protect its own early restitutional ideals. Samuels (2010) defines heterotopia “as real spaces that, by juxtaposing incommensurate spatial, temporal, or social systems, generate a jarring, disorienting, or disturbing alternate ordering. These spaces are most usefully understood as generating new kinds of meaning, rather than foreclosing them”. Foucault (1986, 24) refers to a mirror as the ultimate example of heterotopia as in it “I see myself where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space”. This virtual image paradoxically also “gives my own visibility to myself that enables me to see myself there where I am absent” (Foucault 1986, 24). Setomaa is such a mirror for Estonia, still defined by the constitution according to the Tartu Peace Treaty borders, yet having relinquished its territorial demands on Russia.

The best-known and highly public annual event in Setomaa is the Seto Kingdom Days, which represent a further, spatially and temporally more contained example of a heterotopia in relation to Setoness. The idea of the event is borrowed from the Forest Finns on the border of Sweden and Norway, who celebrate their “mock republic” (see Matiesen 2009) every year. In a similar manner, for one day in August, Setomaa is declared a state and unified across the borderline. An enthusiastic crowd of locals and guests listens to the leelo choirs’ competition for the title of the best sönoline, spontaneous singer, and watches an array of traditional and invented competitions, ranging from kargus-dancing to handsa-making, from horse-harnessing to wife-carrying. The day of joyful celebrations sees the election of the Seto King (sootska) for the following year and ends with a mock parade of the Seto “army”, complete with battalions consisting of leelo singers razing the enemy with their singing, cooks swinging wooden crockery and fearlessly banging pots, and various machinery, from wooden planes pulled by small boys to ancient Soviet cars pulling trailers with witty cardboard constructions. This lighthearted event “overcomes” the Russian-Estonian borderline that tears Setomaa in two, and at the same time it brings the painful topic to the very center of attention. Seto Kingdom Days have been attended by Estonian politicians, including the President, and the Metropolitan of the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church. It is a normal day of commerce and partying, yet it is also a day which brings the Seto question to center stage in Estonia. This one day traverses borders, repairs the rupture, unites the broken, while also establishing borders against the rest of Estonia (and, supposedly, Russia). The Seto Kingdom
Days are also an intensive depiction of Seto culture as a temporal heterotopia, a musealized environment that forms or at least represents the daily experiences of otherness by looking backwards, into the mirror of the past, yet it is also a contemporary touristic event which has a keen eye on the present. In this, Setomaa also becomes fully congruent with Seto heritage culture.

**Institutionalizing Culture – Creating Hegemony**

Setos are still, and even increasingly, identified as distinctive and their land has become an environment that has preserved the authentic, ancient culture the rest of Estonia has lost (e.g., Piho 2003, 121). Seto leelo singing has been entered in the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. On the official website of the Estonian Tourism Board, Setos feature as the main highlight of cultural tourism and are presented as one of the foremost “Estonian cultural treasure”, of which Estonians “are immensely proud”. Setomaa is used heavily in “branding” Estonia for tourists. For instance, the “official gateway to Estonia”, a collaborative website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Brand Estonia, and Enterprise Estonia, presents a large image gallery of pictures, whose cover photo features a Seto leelo choir in full folk costumes. Tourism brochures and websites construe Setos as the symbolic Other that has brought a unique culture straight from the past to today, and as such must be supported and preserved.

Tourism strengthens the importance of local heritage and identity. Cole (2007), studying the perspectives on authenticity of the government, tourists and villagers in Indonesia, concludes that tourism offers a political resource to manipulate. With tourism, groups studying and valuing regional and local identity have gained a significant, economically powerful reason to demand resources to hone their local distinctiveness, Setos have come to be taken seriously. The preservation of Seto cultural authenticity and uniqueness has come to be seen in regional and national politics and in the public arena as both central to the Setos’ identity as well as vital for rural economic diversification and for the attraction of business potential. The attention to the Seto difference also fuels the significance of authenticity and heritage in the local setting, and has generated a professional body of people for whom Setoness is both identity and business. Setos involved in representing the heritage culture use to their advantage the commercial interests of tourists and the tourism industry as well as the national and global quest for authenticity and attractiveness. Although the people who practice the Seto heritage culture publicly form only a small fraction of the overall number of Seto inhabitants, their significance cannot be overestimated. They fill the Seto ethnoscape regularly with the eye-catching, unique folk costumes and jewelry, exotic partying, singing, and musical traditions that have turned Setomaa into an important destination of cultural tourism, both nationally and internationally (e.g., Bain 2009, 126).

McCoy Owens (2002) describes the modern transformations in devotional activities in UNESCO monumental zones in Kathmandu: the longstanding heterotopic devotional site has become a newly heterotopic arena of transnational, local, and ethnic dispute. There have also been developments and changes in Setomaa as a
heterotopia. The Seto present suggests that the non-hegemonic position has become empowering, allowing Setos to lure the outsiders with their otherness, their playfulness, and mockery of even their own holy goal of a reunited Setomaa. However, some of the particular mechanisms changing Setomaa trigger more than just “a new heterotopia”. Although, according to Foucault, the conditions in a heterotopia are non-hegemonic, Seto example suggests that certain changes and transformations which trigger specific processes of institutional support can turn the heterotopia hegemonic.

In the neoliberal climate of project-based activities, earmarked funding has become a necessary condition for local and regional survival in terms of retaining population, especially younger people, and socioeconomic well-being. A heritage-related focus has been supported by programs and development projects sponsored by national and, in some cases, international sources. At the core of such support is heritage maintenance but also shaping and perfecting the settings of heritage culture, such as historical housing and settlements, and ancient customs, as well as museums and publications that represent the heritage. This is becoming an increasingly important instrument that particularly influences the peripheral regions by framing and defining, structuring, maintaining, and channeling the authenticity of local environments. The creation, establishment, accentuation and use of Seto heritage and its authenticity have acquired similar funding.

Seto heritage culture is being developed by a multitude of external bodies, state institutions and agencies (see Annist 2009 for a detailed history of funding for Seto culture). Since 1997, the Seto region has received considerable sums from a state-funded special program which is somewhat clumsily translated on the Ministry of Culture website as “the State Programme ‘Setumaa Cultural Programme’” (Setumaa Riiklik Kultuuriprogramm, SRK; see Estonian Ministry of Culture 2008). In 2003, this was separated from other programs oriented to regional development and, since then, its emphasis has been on the development of the cultural aspects of the region. The program aims to support and preserve local traditional identity and, with its yearly budget of roughly €190,000 (for four municipalities), this has a considerable impact in the region, where the typical municipal yearly budget without earmarked state support is between €400,000 and €550,000, and only about a tenth of this goes to culture.

The Seto Cultural Program is restricted to the heritage culture and language of the region, i.e., funding is given exclusively and in accordance with the baseline documents, to Seto heritage activities. In 2006, the Seto Development Program was separated to support entrepreneurship. However, this program supports not entrepreneurship in Setomaa per se but entrepreneurship oriented to Seto heritage culture. This has meant that, largely, the projects funded (and possibly also applications filed) are those of either tourism entrepreneurs or various NGOs and foundations whose applications are related to Seto (heritage) culture in one way or another.

SRK funds registered NGOs (mittetulundusühing, MTU); local voluntary associations (seltsing) can be supported only if an NGO takes on the financial responsibilities. This means a high level of organization and commitment (including the process of founding the NGO, establishing statutes, registering, electing a board etc.; see Mittetulundusühingute seadus 2011) or cooperation with other bodies is required. Indeed, NGOs have increasingly sprung up in the environment of project-based funding, and are mostly composed of the cultural groups (choirs and village societies)
already in existence, some of them even before the collapse of the Soviet system. Money is offered specifically to Seto heritage-related activities: the aim is to “assist in the preservation, restoration and development of Seto material and mental cultural heritage in the most authentic form possible, and the extension of the circle of people participating in Seto culture, especially connecting the young to the language and cultural heritage of their forebears” (Seleuskiri n.d). The funding has gone to producing CDs of leelo choirs, buying folk costumes for the choirs and dance groups, and cleaning and restoring Seto jewelry, as well as to handicraft courses, primarily related to Seto costumes. Over the years, certain changes have occurred; for instance, funding increasingly goes to organizing various Seto events and Seto advertising campaigns (radio broadcasts and information directed outside Setomaa), adult choirs no longer receive support for acquiring folk costumes, etc. Handicraft courses have remained an important recipient of funding and the largest proportion of funds still goes to the museums in the Seto region. The program has provided a relatively stable income for Seto cultural NGOs, offering sustainable support over several years for specifically Seto skills and for the preservation of cultural heritage.

SRK assessment criteria are guided by specialists in cultural heritage and various representatives from the national and regional government and some local organizations. The choice of specialists and advisers is determined by their established positions as specialists in Seto heritage culture, and many, if not most, of these specialists are also self-confessed Seto heritage enthusiasts. Some of these “guardians of authenticity” (Annist 2004) are academics, and some have a long track record of practical involvement in Seto handicrafts or other heritage-related activities. The assessment criteria according to which funding is allocated reflect both the expectations of the local elite and national and international expectations, which have become increasingly oriented to authenticity. This is most obvious in the expectations on folk costumes, but the stress on authenticity has increased in the whole cultural space, no longer only in terms of social norms but also via formal, funding-related regulation.

The Seto Leelo-Wizards’ Council (Seto Leelotarku Kogo) is an interesting example of changes that have recently happened and that have had a clear practical influence on the locals. A representative of that council offers expert opinion on all matters that concern leelo choirs and any projects related to Seto leelo. Rather than being restricted to the authenticity of songs, the Council members also express strong opinions on the authenticity of the choir members’ clothing, which may affect the choirs’ chances of being funded. Such efforts to both socially and formally control the representation of authenticity also appear to have influenced the Seto party culture. The relaxed and open attitudes regarding who can participate as a full-scale member of Seto activities, still observable in 2004, have clearly subsided. Such a change in attitude has several reasons, for instance the presence of chroniclers of Seto life (photographers and film recorders in particular), who pay greater attention to details reflecting late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century visual depictions promoted by the new “guardians of authenticity”. SRK and its representatives are likely to heighten this shift.

To some degree, the current debates on the full costumes and headgear that Seto ladies are increasingly expected to wear reflect the increased strength and independence of the culture, which no longer embraces its admirers to the same extent that it did in 2003 and 2004. This signals a new, much more exclusive form of identity in the
making. In some recent debates, Setos have clashed with the advertising industry, which has offered inauthentic versions of Setoness on some Estonian TV channels. The strong opinions that have been expressed demonstrate outrage over the “incorrect” way of wearing Seto clothes and the lack of control over the representation of their own culture. A desire to prevent this and to create an environment where Setos’ preferred way of representing themselves is respected has been widely expressed. One opinion from a Seto activist is quite elaborate and uses irony to reject any modern change to Seto attire (Taro 2011):

Well, we need now to work; Setos need to agree on how and where this Seto culture is allowed to develop. When agreement has been reached between ourselves, then we can set limits for the outside[rs] regarding who and how much and with whose permission [Seto cultural heritage is presented]. After that, such adverts should also happen less – such things would then not happen that someone would come up with an idea for a Seto strip-tease club or that there could be one Estonian folk costume which would not be made of such thick, rough and woolly cloth but of light and thin cloth. That it wouldn’t be so long, and wouldn’t get caught in one’s feet as it used to.13

Such pressure is remarkable on its own, but it acquires special significance in a context where state institutions are involved in perfecting authentic features. Defining and identifying authenticity and its control forms an important connection with the funding to the region, especially since the area is economically disadvantaged overall, local tax returns are low and municipal budgets are small. In institutions oriented to the protection of heritage, defining what heritage is and is not, what the preferred means of achieving the “most authentic form possible” referred to above are, is in the hands of the experts and local cultural activists. The active rejection of elements that do not fit the authenticity defined by its guardians has become a part of funding decisions. The personal opinions and assessments are anonymous and are strengthened in the institutional framework of SRK decision-making and are not visible to the outside world; yet their influence is considerable. Encouraging and establishing certain activities as valuable has the effect of supporting the shaping of the Seto region as a living environment in a specific direction. Its symbols are employed in a manner that reflects the preferences and understanding of the Setos active in heritage culture and the developers of the Seto region. But even more, this means channeling the flow of finances, and shaping the exclusions and inclusions related to access to resources in the local cultural, spatial and social setting.

The vision of the current and future potential of various tangible and intangible phenomena in the region expresses the consensus of the guardians regarding what (and, by extension, who) is worth considering authentic and deserves promoting to the supported environment of cultural heritage. Just as any locality building has a colonizing effect (Appadurai 2008, 183), Setoness is established as a well-functioning cultural hegemony. Such an environment becomes restrictive to the inhabitants who do not actively promote a particular, heritage-related form of Seto culture. As Seto culture is defined in relation to cultural heritage, many cultural activities there become defined as non-Seto, even if practiced by Setos or others living in Setomaa. These activities are treated as unimportant or insignificant, or even as damaging to the
authentic setting. Accordingly, efforts to get funding for such activities end in rejection or redirection to other sources of funding, where competition is considerably greater, stability smaller, and where arguments supporting the funding effort are not pre-defined, as they are in the case of heritage culture.

**New Sites of Heterotopia**

In the summer of 2004, I participated in a traditional open-air village party, a kirmask. Some of the people at the party were non-Seto, some were returnees after years spent studying outside Setomaa, and some were locals known in the Seto heritage setting. Many were wearing Seto costumes or parts of costumes. A group of younger people were playing karmoškas, Russian button accordions. Leelo singing sprang up spontaneously here and there, and a few foreigners with some exotic instruments were making the environment even folksier.

In the opposite corner of the party grounds, a group of local youths set up their own alternative musical environment – with a CD-player and pop music. They played it loud enough to disturb some of the Seto music and made a few attempts to bring their music more to the center of attention. Although their attempts were occasionally successful, control remained in the hands of the Setos and their fans. Eventually, the local youngsters returned to the opposite part of the field and, possibly, regained the grounds after the Seto musicians and their fans left for the night.

Interestingly, one of the Seto activists commented to me in passing that a traditional Seto party would have been exactly like that – everyone doing their thing without being bothered by the neighboring singing or dancing “corner”. Of course, this could be interpreted as an attempt to demonstrate the all-inclusive, permissive nature of the Seto culture. It might equally be seen as the ultimate demonstration of the success of Seto hegemony, so successful that any attempt at resistance would simply become incorporated into the schema of the dominant culture. But from the point of view of the local youngsters, it was another experience of exclusion, as the party grounds remained dominated by the folk event.

Funding schemes inevitably create or affirm exclusions. Establishing a cultural hegemony triggers the weakening or omission of alternative versions of local culture; institutionalized activities lead to the success of certain spheres, approaches and values, while alternatives wither. The impact of such processes is remarkable when we consider the numbers of Setos involved in heritage culture in the Seto region. Many people in my fieldwork village expressed the view that they were “no longer Setos”, referring to the fact that, although they may have been raised as Setos or born into a family that could be considered Seto, there was very little, or possibly nothing, in their lives which linked them to this ethnic group today. The majority of the people in my fieldwork village did not recognize themselves as Setos. A young woman explained that her mother was from the Estonian territory, from “the other side of Määdajõgi”, and her father was Seto. Both parents now live in Setomaa and she grew up there. Although she goes to her parents’ village day, she remarked that:
it feels somehow that that is mostly for the elderly, all this Seto stuff (*setundus*). That maybe I will go when I am 40–60 years old, [but for now I feel] that this is this old people’s business that they must pursue. (Karmi village, Sept 2003)

One lady explained her complicated background as follows:

I am from the Võro region but my husband is a pure Seto (*sulaseetu*), a Räpina Seto. […] My husband does not accept (*ei tunnist*) that he is a Seto, there is none of this culture [in our household]. Well, Räpina is not [Seto], really. He is southeast Estonian (*kagueestlane*); even their folk costumes are different. But I’d say we don’t have that [folk] thing [at all]; his lifestyle is actually – being a medic. (Karmi village, August 2003)

Indeed, many people recognized involvement in Seto heritage culture also as a lifestyle rather than an identity. The same lady referred to the people who are actively involved in performing Seto heritage culture, and suggested that they “need this recognition [from others]”.

People did not automatically accept the all-pervasive importance of Seto heritage culture. During an interview, a mixed couple of a Seto husband and Estonian wife living in a larger Seto village expressed their feelings about the support of Seto culture in the following way:

Wife: He [referring to her husband] thinks the [Seto] Kingdom Days are a circus. Husband: Economically inefficient … if they need additional money put into it. Tourism is a great thing if no additional money needs to be plowed in. […] There is no point in conservation [of heritage] for eternity. […] Seto culture is a vanishing culture and nothing can save it. (Karmi village, Nov 2003)

The husband, the owner of a small local enterprise, felt the money that was “plowed into” Seto culture should go to enlivening the village life. This environment is what would preserve the culture, otherwise “it is not a culture; the singers are trained to sing!” Another local complained about the municipality, exclaiming that “It cannot work, [all they concentrate on] is those Seto dances”. I spoke to a local entrepreneur who admired the Seto, yet in his opinion “That Seto stuff, it’s a good product (*müügiartikkel*) but you can’t live on it. Perhaps twenty–thirty people do, but no more”.

One of the most obvious restrictions that establishing cultural hegemony in the region has triggered from the point of view of the people not into the folk lifestyle was the lack of non-Seto dancing parties in the village. The data presented in Annist (2011, 272) on 2003 demonstrates how leisure activities in the local region are dominated by Seto culture: more than half of the activities are directly related to local cultural heritage at the cost of a loss of more “modern” parties, such as discos or dance parties with non-Seto musicians performing. My research indicated a clear local desire for non-Seto clubs and events in the village. The heritage-oriented lifestyle, with a historical dimension that dominates the heritage-oriented Seto culture, is unappealing to the majority population, whether or not they consider themselves Setos. The non-Setos, as well as the “passive”, or rather, “non-folksy” Setos, vary in their attitudes to the domination of Seto heritage culture, from gentle moans to direct resentment. Yet
these attitudes have very little force or effect. Occasional phone calls to the municipal council demand the stopping of all that “setotamine” (literally “Seto-doing”); harsh criticism abounds in anonymous Internet comments. As we have seen, in some cases there are attempts to recapture the “lost space”, but even these remain within the limits of occasional non-folk intrusions.

Brown (2004) has studied a somewhat similar phenomenon in the nearby region of Võrumaa (Võru County). She describes how the Ministry of Culture and local NGOs offer strong support for the teaching of regional languages. Yet, the rest of the locals resist. Without the “supportive teachers, school directors and students, the school-based language program […] flounders even though it has the vocal and financial support of international organizations, the government, and local NGOs” (Brown 2004, 122). Similar attitudes are also a headache for the Setos active in heritage culture, especially in some villages where Seto heritage activities are particularly publicly present and visible. The explanation for such attitudes is twofold: on the one hand, the complaints come from people who are seen to have no capacity to organize anything themselves and who lay the blame for this on the “active Setos”; on the other hand, and partly deriving from the former, these attitudes are seen as a pure expression of jealousy (cf. Buchowski 2006). The reality is, as usual, more complex: exasperation over the lack of non-heritage choices may be the main trigger, along with the inability to find a common ground for those new Others within the Seto heritage cultural scene. Without a common denominator, coming from all walks of life, those people have nothing in their daily lives to spark off a well-founded and functioning alternative support system. The group of non-Setos and “non-folksy” Setos is as amorphous as any modern formation of people, or, considering the post-socialist history, an even more fragmented group.

As a result of those developments, the population that is not involved in Seto cultural representation becomes the new social and topological Other, living their lives in a heterotopia which has no place in the musealized life that has been established within the Seto borders (see also Silverman 2010 for a collection of studies on erased and excluded aspects of heritage). The Other and their locations – for instance the apartment blocks of ex-Soviet centralized villages – are seen as a hybrid, as a challenge undermining the effective representation of Setomaa as a cultural heritage landscape. In the neo-liberal atmosphere of project-based funding and tourism-related diversification efforts, additional local funding institutions become the mechanisms through which certain cultural activities are favored, and such bodies may reject the hybrid, non-heritage culture in their financial decisions, as well as in their shaping of public attitudes. Differently from heritage-related Setos, the new Others have no real power to benefit from their otherness.

**Conclusion: Heterotopic Everyday?**

Contrary to my early outraged loyalty and unwillingness to override my Seto friends’ self-representations all those years ago when I met Toivo, I have since offered overviews of the local reality to outsiders on several occasions. I have overridden many local versions of reality both privately and in public. Partly, this has been due to
a recognition that, indeed, the culturally active locals do have an interest in presenting a specific version of reality which not only hides from view the socioeconomic problems and realities in people’s lives, but which also actively seeks to deny resources to what is classified as being outside the heritage culture. Verena Stolcke (1995) has identified cultural fundamentalism as an important contemporary neoessentialist base for human differences. This is observable in more than the nationalist imagery of the right-wing politicians. Defining the local space, activities, clothing, and parties as “valuable” and “valueless” can push the local cultural elite in the direction of exclusive fundamentalism, which is further underscored by funding schemes that depend on such exclusions.

The problem with hegemony is not that Setos are better positioned to pursue their culture. The problem is connected with defining Setoness as restrictively heritage-related. Tobin (1994) has criticized all cultural constructivist arguments as in some way undermining the authority of the people to resist hegemony. What he has failed to recognize, among other things, is that a native cultural project of resistance is rarely the project of a unanimous subaltern group. Even a local heritage culture can become a hegemony which becomes a problem when it becomes exclusive: fundamentalist regarding outside influences, and exclusivist towards people sharing the same space but not the same predominant interest in the heritage culture in their daily or leisure lives. My long-term fieldwork allowed me to engage with the society beyond the colorful heritage culture and emboldens me to suggest that the local heritage culture may need to recognize, rather than ignore or deride, the everyday lives outside the culture, yet within the “Seto” cultural space.

The Setomaa population has effectively divided into those who create or contribute to Seto heritage hegemony, whose living spaces and activities are at the center of funding, tourism, public attention, and the creation of Seto identity, and the rest, whose alternative, non-folklorized self-expressions do not fit into the cultural space, which has been redefined according to authenticity. The relative poverty of the rural regions means dependence on external funding and a considerable need for institutional support for cultural activities. Where funding depends on the ability to demonstrate the contributions to a particular heritage culture, all the other cultural and social activities and groups that represent the rest of the population come under pressure to adjust their aims to that particular direction of development and to the tourist industry, or else to become much more restricted.

In circumstances in which some regions are socioeconomically peripheral and have an alternative, heterotopic relation to power and success, culture is becoming the resource to secure the livelihoods of well-defined but limited groups of people, whose activities then start defining all of the local space, including the experiences and opportunities of the locals who are not oriented towards heritage. Non-Seto cultural events and hybrid forms of local life acquire a new, heterotopic status as they are pushed into the non-funded, thus more limited, margins. The daily realities not saturated with heritage culture become the deviant heterotopia, to be denied in public interactions with the outside. When the cognitive landscape of a region is occupied by the imagined past, daily life in the present, with its problems and issues, is pushed into the background. This may increasingly limit the opportunities for dialog with the state, and opportunities to challenge regional and social inequality (see also Buchowski 2006).
on the “new normal”). The local elite would do well to support and fuel a dialog between heritage-oriented Setos and the rest of the population, two factions that have reason to feel that their way of life is threatened. They would do well to recognize the unity of Setomaa, not so much in the sense of a cross-border merger as in the sense of concord within the Seto culture – in both its heritage-related and non-heritage forms.

Acknowledgements
This research was supported by the European Union through the European Regional Development Fund (Centre of Excellence CECT) and the target-financed project ‘Landscape heritage and practice,’ No. SF0130033s07. I am very grateful to the reviewers, and to Anton Pärn, Triinu Mets and Kadri Koreinik for their comments and suggestions on various drafts of this article.

Notes
1 Ancient polyphonic throat singing, performed primarily by women repeating the sometimes improvised words of the leading singer, the iistlauja.
2 Peipsiveere is a region near Lake Peipsi with strong fishing traditions and strong cross-border links with Russia, and some influences from the Russian Old Believers, who have lived in the region since the seventeenth century. Kihnu is an island off the south-western Estonian coast, and its cultural space and traditions were declared by UNESCO a Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2003. Setos followed suit as their leelo singing tradition acquired the same status in 2009.
3 See also Sillaots 2006, 85–86.
4 Names of the individuals and villages have been changed throughout the article.
5 The Republic of Estonia was re-established restitutionally, i.e., by re-establishing de jure the pre-1940 republic instead of declaring the foundation of a new republic. The land reform carried out in post-Soviet Estonia was restitutional; the constitution accepted in 1992 was a combination of the constitutions of 1920 and 1938.
6 As Seto territory does not directly correspond to the municipal territories, the census data on Seto inhabitants is a somewhat random estimate.
7 The Union of Setomaa Municipalities
8 Although the event lasts two days, only the second day is characterized by the particular aspects reported below. The first day is specifically oriented to the school children in the area and has few participants from outside the circle of pupils, teachers, and parents.
9 A local alcoholic beverage.
10 Estonian Tourist Board website Visitestonia.com, accessed February 14, 2012
11 Estonia.eu, accessed February 14, 2012
12 Which is not necessarily “being a Seto”, as there are several Seto fans who have settled in the area without any roots and, due to their dedication to Setoness, have become “honorary Setos”.
where the web commentators object to the misuse of Seto clothing.

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Ühendus: Riigiarhiiv.


Aet Annist received her PhD in anthropology from University College London in 2007 and is currently ERC Mobilitas Postdoctoral Fellow at Tallinn University and Senior Researcher at the University of Tartu. She is the author of the first anthropological monograph in Estonian and of articles on anthropology of development and postsocialism in Estonian and international social scientific publications.