

Earth Religion, “Forest People” and Environmental Disputes

A Case Study on a Pursuit for National Unity and Sustainability in Estonia

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Abstract

This chapter offers a comparative study from Estonia related to the following research topics of this volume: “What philosophy, secular or religious, succeeds or succeeded in promoting peace and stability?” Are there comparable philosophies of national unity from other countries? It gives an overview of the wide-spread self-identification of Estonians as nature-friendly “forest people”, an image that is selectively based on the environmental concepts found in the archival folklore manuscripts describing traditional folk religion, and the role of folklore about natural sacred sites in the rhetoric of active followers of earth religion (*Maausk*). Based on media accounts, participant observation, interviews with Earth Believers and persons who attend events in natural sacred sites, this chapter brings examples how such environmental folklore and national identity building are combined with protest activities for protecting natural objects and habitats. Based on some case analyses related to natural sacred sites, this chapter will explore the potential of Earth Believers and related grassroot initiatives in non-hegemonically supporting local and national identity and promoting environmental awareness and sustainability.

Keywords: earth religion; national self-awareness; environmental conflicts; sustainability

Introduction

The Bandung Conference in 1955 was a forum where Third World leaders committed to a cooperation in erasing oppressive political and economic approaches that had come into force during the colonial rule. However, it is only seldom highlighted that similar colonial processes also historically took place in several regions in Europe, calling forth grassroots-level or more organized reactions that bear connecting points with the ideas of the Bandung Conference or the Ujamaa-concept promoted in Tanzania, for example, valuing traditional sustainable family and kin structures and lifestyles, characterized by only minor levels of inequality and including non-oppressive relationships towards the environment (cf., Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). This chapter offers a grassroots case from Estonia. Similarly as Ujamaa, Estonian earth religion has been mainly viewed as a secular ideology but still has religious features and orientations. The processes related to the rise of national self-awareness in Estonia were opposed to canonical religion but at the same time they still contained elements of traditional local folk religion. Additionally, in Estonian environmental disputes that otherwise belong into a secular realm religious arguments are continuously used. Thus, this study exemplifies how an initiative, although geographically distant from the Asian and African regions that were the focus of the Bandung Conference, bears similarities with the Bandung Spirit in its quest for not letting hegemonic policies exploit human and natural resources, while aiming to enhance local tradition-bound identity and environmental sustainability instead.

As source material, this chapter used media accounts, participant observation, and interviews with Earth Believers (followers of *Maausk*) and persons who attend events in natural sacred sites. From earlier studies, the chapter draws mostly on some in-depth studies (Västriik, 2015; Jonuks, 2013; Jonuks & Remmel, 2020) that have scrutinized representations of Estonian national identity and the development of Estonian national myth but also the role of Estonian Earth Believers in public environmental discussions (Päll, 2021).

Background of the Estonian Case: Traditional Folk Religion and National Self-Awareness

Estonia is a small country in Northern Europe. It was Christianized and at the same time colonized “with fire and sword” (see discussion on this concept in Vahtre, 1990) in the 13th century. It remained under foreign rule, mainly executed

by German landlords, until 1918 when it became a free republic. In the previous centuries, Lutheran Protestantism has been the dominant religion in Estonia. However, traditional folk religion combining elements of nature worship and vernacular magic beliefs remained vital after Christianization, surviving partly into the 21st century (Hiimäe, 2021). In the second half of the 19th century, in the period of ‘national awakening’ in Europe, the national and romantic-heroic focus of the local folk religions gained wider importance. However, with a certain idealization of the prehistoric pagan worldviews, the foundations of their connection to national self-awareness had already been set by the last decades of the 18th century. In the period of Estonian independence (1918-1940), folklore became the dominant source of the national myth when in 1920-1930s the movement of the Taara faith was established. Its name is derived from Taara who was supposed to be the main ancient pagan god of Estonians. The movement stressed the environmental component of the Estonian traditional folk belief and related its activities to historical and natural sacred sites. For example, the followers of Taara faith were probably the first ones who used the figurative expression “The forest is the church of an Estonian.” This is a phrase that in recent years has been used repeatedly in the Estonian media. The membership of the movement was not great in number but, as they were active in socio-political discussions, the movement was well visible in society (Jonuks, Rimmel, 2020; see more about the movement in Västriik, 2015).

One of the most influential representatives of the national perspective on Estonian folk religion and its nature-boundedness in academic circles was folklorist Oskar Loorits. He is known for the statement: “The proto-democratic equality and equal rights – these are the basic ideas of the Estonian religious and social mentality” (Loorits, 1932, p. 178). The national narrative related to the ‘ancient’ Estonian traditional folk religion determines the vernacular understanding of local folklore and culture even today (cf., Jonuks, 2013, p. 145).

After the Soviet occupation in 1940, the state atheist worldview was officially forced on people for 50 years (Rimmel, 2016, p. 238; see more about Soviet colonization in Estonia and other Baltic countries in Racevskis, 2002). At the same time, research on traditional folk religion was not forbidden and – partly with the aim to avoid persecution based on accusations in dealing with religious matters – researchers often viewed folk religion as ‘nature’ religion or a worldview independent from Christian influences and concepts (cf., similar observation by Jonuks, 2013, p. 158). The interest in indigenous beliefs grew again in Estonia in the 1960s with a general rise of the awareness of ethnic identity among Finnic-Ugric people, pointing to the need to search for one’s indigenous cultural roots. Thus, under the

aegis of studying traditional folk religion, research was made that supported the strengthening of a national perception of identity. One of the important authors in this respect, historian, film-maker and later Estonian president (1992-2001) Lennart Meri should be mentioned. He is credited for his poetical book and film cycle about Nordic indigenous nature beliefs. His work created the impression that Estonians, like several other Nordic nations, are a folk of prehistoric culture that preserved their nature-bounded lifestyle for thousands of years unchanged (Meri, 1976). Several authors (for example, Jonuks, Rimmel, 2020) have argued that in the Soviet period the local pursuits of nature protection were closely tied up with cultural and national identity and a personal, intimate relationship with nature. After Lennart Meri, Arnold Rüütel became Estonian president (2001-2006). The First Lady Ingrid Rüütel was a folklorist, devoted to the research of ancient Estonian runo-songs and her research often again touched upon the topics of national identity. Thus, the ties between traditional folk religion and national identity have been well visible even on the state level during a longer post-Soviet period.

The Rise of the Movement of Earth Believers

Since Estonia regained independence in 1991, an experiential form of folk religion has been represented in a somewhat more organized form by the vernacular Earth Believers' movement (*maausulised*). Their rise came at the same time as the emergence of more economy-focused political ideas like the program of a sustainable self-contained Estonian economy (*Isemajandav Eesti*), first introduced in 1987. This program was never realized in practice but instilled a general hope in the possibility of economic independence (see more on the topic in Hiio, 2009). Some researchers see strong parallels between the followers of Earth Religion (*Maausk*) and the ones of Taara faith from the 1920-1930s, e.g. in valuing rituals related to historically sacred natural sites (cf., Västriku, 2015). Earth Believers understand their beliefs to be a traditional indigenous Estonian worldview or faith that has not been assumed from other nations or religions but has evolved locally, on-site, thousands of years ago (Västriku, 2015). They generally perceive their views not so much as religion, but rather as a consistent worldview, heritage, and lifestyle where loyalty plays a central role; not only interpersonal loyalty but also loyalty towards natural diversity and ancestors, as well as balanced and respectful behavior. Nature is depicted as animated by nature spirits, and main sites of worship are historical, natural sacred sites (e.g., sacred groves). The movement does not consider formal structures important, such as a congregation or church, but was still officially registered

as a non-governmental organization in 1995. According to one Earth Believer, official recognition of the movement was made possible because one of the members at that time was Minister of Internal Affairs who was responsible for issues related to religion (Ringvee, 2011, p. 109). In the last dozen years, the main spokesperson of the organization has been Ahto Kaasik, who was one of the activists of the movement from the beginning.

While the activity of Earth Believers at first concentrated mainly on private outputs in the form of rituals in historical natural sacred sites, since the 2000s a public aspect of nature protection has strongly emerged (cf., Päll, 2021). The activity of the organization obtained a wider societal and political dimension. For instance, they proceeded by representing public opinions combined with their own folk-religion-based argumentations regarding the protection of natural sacred sites and condemning extensive logging in Estonian forests, through numerous media articles, public petitions, events, and legal disputes which are thoroughly documented on the organization's web page (<https://www.maavald.ee/en>). Their activity has even brought about the result that lumber companies sometimes turn to them directly for consultation when planning work close to natural sacred sites.

One of the reasons for their growing popularity was the fact that most Estonians do not identify themselves with Christianity or religion in general. The Earth Believers adhere to folk beliefs and traditions combined with environmental awareness, which enables them to remain outside the constraints of Christian religion. The activists of Earth Religion are rather opposed to Christianity or, at least, point to the unequal treatment of Earth Believers compared to Christians, as the state budget for renovating churches is much bigger than the one for taking care of historical natural sacred sites (See e.g., on their official website maavald.ee). Earth Believers also emphasize the Estonian nature-bound and environment-friendly culture in opposition to the over-civilized and technologized West. To get their voice over to the people, Earth Religion has used music as a medium, for example, by organizing a concert cycle, "Protecting the indigenous sacred groves", with the most popular Estonian folk metal band Metsatöll in order to point to the threat of extinction facing sacred trees and the need to adopt a law for protecting natural sacred sites (maavald.ee).

It is noteworthy that according to a representative national survey of 2014, only 4% of the respondents defined themselves as Earth Believers. However, 61% of the respondents considered Earth Religion to be the proper religion of Estonians (RSE, 2014) – probably because they resonate with its environmental and non-doctrinal beliefs. According to a public poll from 2014, 84% of Estonians consider the protection of Estonian natural sacred sites to be important or very important (Hiite Maja,

Faktum Ariko, 2014). Thus, in the 21st century the ‘ancient’ folk religion, mainly represented by handwritten archival sources from the 19th and the beginning of 20th century, has not ceased to play a role in the discourse of national identity combined with nature protection. Quite the opposite – environmental aspects have been added to the public discussion even more than before. With this, the Earth Believers’ approach tries to offer alternatives to the dictation of modern neoliberal lines of market economy thinking that tend to leave out aspects of local identity and traditional environmentalist spirituality. So, it bears parallels with the Ujamaa-concept and also the ideas of the spirit of Bandung theorists who express criticism on the one-dimensional orientation of neoliberal politics, while additionally stressing that alternative developments and collaborations should take place not only amongst states, but also on the level of the civil society (e.g., Lay, 2016; Haug, 2016; Demenchonok, 2017).

Eco-Nationalism, Sacredness, and the Arguments from Folklore in Environmental Disputes

Based on the motive of Estonians as an ancient nature folk or forest people,¹ a concept of eco-nationalism has developed, tying the continuation of national culture to the preservation of the local historical natural environment (Jonuks, Rimmel, 2020, p. 459). The component of traditional Estonian folk religion and national identity is a consistent part of environmental discussions. It has indeed proved to have a pivotal role in making political, economic, and other decisions. When huge infrastructure or industrial projects arise, such as the pan-European railway Rail Baltic (to ongoing debate), or the planning of a cellulose factory in 2019, the opponents of these projects on a local community level organized mass demonstrations. They used claims based on folklore, related to animated nature and historical sacred sites, alongside arguments of having the right to have a say about the future of their environment (Kõiv, 2020). Thus, these were in line with the arguments of heritage protection, nature preservation, religious freedom, and human rights that the Earth Believers had already highlighted. In 2011, a special political support group for natural sacred sites was formed in the Estonian parlia-

1 The romantized concept of the Estonians as “forest people” started spreading in the media since the 19th century and has continued so in the 20th-21st century on the backdrop of several environmental debates with the contribution of a number of authors (e.g., folklorists, semioticians, Earth believers), thus it is a general self-identification of the Estonians and not related to a specific subgroup or community.

ment after a case of logging activities in one of the forests identified as an indigenous sacred grove in Maardu, near Tallinn (Västriku, 2015).

On the ideological use of folklore in environmental disputes, the emphases and ways of narrating can change based on the circumstances of the situation. For example, the importance of a historical sacred site as a place of active ritual activity can be stressed when there is a danger that the place may lose its status of belonging under nature protection or being a cultural heritage site, because of a lack of archival sources that would prove its sacred status (see more on the topic in Remmel, 2020). Yet in other cases stressing the existence of plentiful archival sources is the main strategy for proving the site's cultural significance. It is repeatedly stressed in connection with historical natural sacred sites that, historically, these were permitted to be used only for ritual activity. Such a claim occurred, for instance, in a public petition for the protection of natural sacred sites (more about it in Pöördumine, 2014; cf., Päll, 2021, p. 210). However, in traditional folklore this understanding is not that absolutist and a multifunctional use of sacred sites, or their division into ritual spheres and pragmatically used spheres, is also mentioned. Since the 1990s, debates about the logging policy as well as protection of natural sacred sites emphasize the image of Estonians as forest people. They point out that intuitively nature-friendly behavior has been inherent in Estonians from ancient times. At the same time, archival sources show that besides the perception of certain places as sacred, the attitude of the peasantry towards the forest was primarily pragmatic and utilitarian (Jonuks, Remmel, 2020). Thus, the folklore-based rhetoric is somewhat selective in order to better serve its particular purposes.

Some modern arguments have been also added that draw parallels with Native American attitudes towards nature in stressing the uniqueness of the local beliefs related to natural sacred sites and their importance in preserving national identity. One such case was a comment by well-known Estonian singer Tõnis Mägi in a documentary on sacred sites (ETV, 2014). An additional dimension was given to the perception of local unique nature traditions by semiotician Valdur Mikita who highlighted wider eco-philosophical and mystical trends in his books that became bestsellers in the beginning of the 21st century.

However, despite stressing the rich folklore related to a place and its status of being a cultural monument or under nature protection, environmental conflicts still emerge. In the case of the famous cross trees in the Maardu sacred forest or in South-East Estonia, where they have been felled in recent years, it happened despite the fact that they were under nature protection and their traditional meaning has been publicly talked about a lot (cf., Harju, 2021). Several researchers

and policy makers have raised the question of which group's reasoning should be preferred in a situation where archival texts contain contradictory information (Vaarmari, 2007, p. 282). The question also arises as to how many folk narratives or how many people who define a place as a sanctuary are enough to consider it part of the cultural heritage, and not just someone's individual activity (Päll, 2021). As these issues are not unambiguous in the case of intangible cultural heritage, rhetoric based on the interpretation of folklore on sacred sites remains an indispensable part of the respective environmental conflicts.

Case Analysis 1: Paluküla Sacred Hill

Paluküla Hiimägi or Paluküla Sacred Hill, in North Estonia, is related to one of the longest-running and most heated environmental conflicts in Estonia. In its rhetoric, folk religion and traditional folklore texts form an important axis. Although Palumäe Hiimägi was part of a landscape protection area and partly under heritage protection, in 2004 the local Kehtna municipality initiated a development plan to build a recreation and sports center on it. The reaction of local people split into two: some had nothing against the new facility, but others shared the views of Earth Believers and found it inappropriate to change the landscape and scale up commercial activities on a historic sacred site (see more on the topic in Päll, 2021). Narratives related to traditional folk religion were used not only by representatives of Earth Believers and local communities to defend their interests, but also by their opponents to refute these claims.

The conflict between the developers of the recreation and sports center and the defenders of Hiimägi became especially acute in November 2004. The Kehtna municipality then tried to start construction work on the hill, even though the defenders of Hiimägi had brought the case to court and the process was still ongoing (Delfi.ee, 2007). People gathered on Hiimägi and, while singing old runo-songs, prevented the bulldozer from starting excavation works (Vaarmari, 2007, p. 264). The newspaper *Eesti Päevaleht*, which covered the event, took the side of the Earth Believers, postulating in its report: "The right for a sacred hill is a human's fundamental right" (Päevaleht, 2004). At the same time, the development plan for the center to be built in Paluküla had already been approved by all relevant institutions, including the heritage protection board – none of them found here a conflict with the rights of local residents, and the municipality clearly did not want to cancel the plan, as an agreement had already been reached with an investor regarding the new facility.

Meanwhile, the non-governmental organization Maavalla Koda, the official body of the Earth Believers, collected nearly 2,000 signatures against this construction work and sent these to the Ministry of the Environment. The Ministry of the Environment came to the conclusion that the conflict around Paluküla Hiimäe was primarily heritage-related and concerned local life, and delegated the resolution to the Ministry of Culture and Kehtna municipality, stating in a covering letter that in doing so the ministry contributed to supporting the Maavalla Koda in valuing and protecting Estonia's original indigenous heritage on the state level.

In a publication of the defenders of the natural sacred sites, a reference was made to the abundance of relevant folklore related to the site, pointing to the historically sacred zones, and creating a contrast with the intended new use: "Six-meter-wide trails were also planned in the central sacral zone, which has traditionally been a sacrificial place on the hill" (Keerberg, 2006, p. 25). Kristiina Ehin, a well-known poet who belongs to the ranks of the defenders of natural sacred sites, insisted upon the timeless continuity of the tradition while talking about sacred trees: "It doesn't matter how big or small the tree is, they are the descendants of those trees who have been there and have been sacred" (Keerberg, 2006, p. 25). The incongruity with the mentality of the developers, who were mainly thinking in economic categories, became even more obvious in a statement based on identity and belonging: "For me, already knowing that the sacred site is there is really important. You don't have to go there very often, but already knowing that it is there is necessary for you" (Keerberg, 2006, p. 25).

In 2008, in the annual competition initiated by the organization of Earth Believers, the title Friend of Sacred Groves was awarded to a family involved in the protection of the Paluküla Hiimägi. In her congratulations, the then Minister of Culture, Laine Jänes took over the vocabulary and views of the earth believers: "Not only me, but many Estonians still subconsciously continue to be earth believers, even if they do not think about it or admit it to themselves on a daily basis, because we already have it in our blood – to get power from the nature!" Also in 2008, the decision of the Supreme Court was delivered, acknowledging the lawfulness of the development plan, but major construction works were still not carried out on Hiimägi – possibly due to the opposition of defenders both at the local level and in the media.

Once again, the Earth Believers raised concerns in a public letter that the new facilities might hinder the performance of their religious rituals on Paluküla Hiimägi because the developers had not informed them when planning their project. Representatives of their opponents, on the other hand, emphasized that the ecosystem is a public good, which must take into account the overall use of the site,

and at least a run for snow tubes was built in early 2015 (see a longer discussion in Aadna, 2016). In 2017, the landowner applied for a permit to fell 800 cubic meters of wood. Soon, by a precept of the National Heritage Board, an illegally established disc golf course built in 2014 was removed from Hiimägi and the cutting of trees on the top of Hiimägi was restricted (Kaasik, 2018, p. 16). However, the developers were still interested in realizing the project and tried to find support from statistics. Among the 376 people in the region who answered a survey, only 32 of the respondents stated that they visit the hill as a sacred site or for participating in prayers, while 209 indicated that they go there for sports (Aadna, 2016, p. 32). However, the symbolic value of a sacred place is clearly difficult to measure. Earlier studies (e.g., Hiimäe, 2019) have shown – similarly to the remark by a respondent cited above – that sacred places are meaningful to a high percentage of Estonians irrespective of whether they visit them frequently, seldom, or not at all, and in the development of such views the media work of Earth Believers has surely played a role.

In summary, this case exemplified that the neoliberal agenda that focuses on the utilitarian side or economic gain perpetuates one-sided colonist thinking that neglects aspects that are less tangible but still important (e.g., notions of perceived sacrality). Thus, initiating a dialogue that also takes into account the mental-spiritual dimension has more potential to lead to environmentally and culturally respectful results (see a similar thought in Behrens, 2010); local grassroot movements have often proved to be a successful starting point for such dialogues. There have been comparable initiatives in Africa and Asia (e.g., youth groups described by Assie-Lumumba, 2015) that have grown from identity-based small groups into forces with wider political impact.

Case Analysis 2: Cross Trees in South-Eastern Estonia

The custom of cutting a cross into a living tree during funeral ceremonies on the way from home to the graveyard has been known throughout Estonia in previous centuries. The cutting marked a kind of farewell act between the deceased and the living. This tradition was shared also by neighboring Latvians and Finns and today it is still part of the funeral customs of South-Eastern Estonia. While during the Soviet era (1940-1991) cross trees were, in some places, taken under nature protection, during the last few decades individual cross trees and cross tree forests have been cut more intensely in dozens of places. The removal of cross trees in Rosma, Põlva County in 2005 was widely covered in the media (e.g., Ritari, 2005), as it was one of the oldest and most characteristic of such forests. The officials of

the local government justified the removal as required by the Road Administration, claiming that the trees occupied the building zone. According to the officials who authorized the felling, their quick decision was legal, as they were forced to consider the road repair schedule. However, some officials involved in the case said they had only heard about the removal of the cross trees from the press and some of them condemned the behavior (Vaarmari, 2007). New narrative versions, in line with the motives of the older tradition related to natural sacred sites, reached the media. For example, a newspaper article emphasized that, according to folklore, the person who harms a cross tree will be afflicted by an accident. A reference was made to how the local pastor reminded the road builders of this belief and the men indicated that they just had to follow the command of the authorities. According to the narrative, shortly afterwards, a tree fell on two roadbuilders' minibuses, damaging these but leaving the men uninjured (Ritari, 2005).

After Rosma's case, a more systematic mapping of cross trees took place partly on the initiative of the activists of earth religion, and their cultural meaning was explained to the authorities. In 2006, a map of cross trees was completed by the Estonian Green Movement; since 2012, institutions operating with the participation of Earth Believers have mapped cross trees and disseminated information about them. Later, cross trees were included on a map layer of the map application of Republic of Estonia's Land Board. Currently, the Estonian National Heritage Board has appointed an expert council of natural sacred sites where two members are from the Earth Believers' organization and yet another member is a university lecturer and local heritage activist who is of the opinion that religion-based understanding of nature conservation can sometimes be more effective. So, this is an example where a grassroots initiative has obtained a significant role in national authoritative bodies.

However, the cutting of cross trees has continued intermittently. In most cases, it is followed by public explanations given directly to the companies involved in felling by folklorists or Earth Believers about the cultural significance of cross trees (e.g., Kõivupuu, 2020). Partly because of this information exchange, some cross trees have been left to grow. When the Rauskapalu cross forest was felled in 2014, a spokesman for the State Forest Management Center appeared in the media after the media coverage denouncing it, stating that "heritage culture is an important part of our culture and national identity and the Forest Management Center plans its felling activities so that these values are preserved" and encouraged local people to inform about cross trees (Uustalu, 2014). At the same time, the State Forest Management Center manages nature trails, which often have information boards inviting visitors to notice and value environmental traditions, combined

with wooden sculptures inspired by folklore (see more about using such sculptures in Kõiva et al., 2020).

In 2016, a list of cross forests that need to be counted under nature preservation was compiled. Only eight of the 20 cross forests listed there have survived fully intact by 2020. Folklorists, Earth Believers and conservationists have pointed out that single cross trees left alone or at the edge of a clear-cut site are not a sustainable solution, as such trees break easily even with a slight wind, and thus a wider area needs to remain unlogged. One of the next environmental conflicts arose on this basis, when in 2020 the media covered an approach of the forest industry that was called “barbaric” – the cross trees had been cut down so that the part with the cross remained standing, but the upper part of the tree was removed. According to the company’s representatives, the felling was carried out for safety reasons, as the only remaining cross trees could have fallen onto the road due to wind, which led the Road Administration and the National Heritage Board to demand cutting the trees, but this excuse was not accepted by the public who saw greed and intentional disregard of sacred traditions as the only motives of the company.

The National Heritage Board later took a supportive position towards cross trees, at least in words, claiming that the board was not among decision-makers because it can only give recommendations, and emphasized: “Undoubtedly, the cross trees are a very important part of the cultural heritage of Southern Estonia, and therefore the destruction of every cross tree is regrettable” (Loim, 2020).

It can be said that through public coverage of locally occurring cross-tree-related conflicts, public awareness of the sacredness of cross trees has increased throughout Estonia, as well as a general opposition to extensive logging in Estonian forests. In the same year, 2020, the above-mentioned Rosma Cross Forest was declared a cultural monument by a directive of the Minister of Culture, aiming to protect it from damage caused by people’s ignorance and negligence.

All in all, one of the common denominators in the example above and in the Bandung philosophy is the idea of dispersing political power, so that it would not serve just the interests of an economic-political elite but also consider the voices of the civil society with more focus on tradition- and identity-bound values. Thus, it can be seen that even in some regions of Europe like Estonia awareness of dynamic “decolonial alternatives” (Shilliam, 2016, p. 4) is topical.

Case Analysis 3: Kassinurme Hills

The Kassinurme Hills complex is situated in Eastern Estonia. While debating about the protection value of natural sacred sites, Earth Believers and many others have mostly used reference to their historical sacral use. Yet regarding some sites that are currently used in the function of sacred groves, the spokespersons of the Earth Believers have argued that these are not “true” or “real” sacred sites because there is no recorded older tradition (Kõiva, 2014, p. 152). The active Earth Believers themselves perform their rites in historical natural sacred sites. The opposite is true of Kassinurme sacred grove – there are no data of its historical use as a natural sacred site, and Ahto Kaasik as spokesperson of the Earth Believers has called it a “new” sanctuary. However, the development of the Kassinurme complex has been supported by a similar reasoning that Earth Believers use about historical sites, namely idealizing the ancient pagan Estonian folk religion and seeing Kassinurme as a place for the continuation of this spirituality (see a longer study on the topic in Hiimäe, 2017).

The Kassinurme complex consists of steep hills surrounded with forest, some water ponds, and large stones – everything else is manmade in the recent 20 years. Nevertheless, in the recent decades Kassinurme has served as a crystallization point for mythological and other expectations of various groups and has become very popular among them. As prerequisite for functioning in such a role, the complex combines several attractive components: a long history, visual appearance (dramatic landscape forms and a newly reconstructed wooden stronghold with wooden sculptures of mythological characters that make the place look “ancient”), proximity to a separated sacred grove area with impressive entering gates, large stones, and wooden wheel crosses. Moreover, a number of folk legends about Kassinurme relate to the mythological giant Kalevipoeg, who is a popular figure in Estonian traditional folklore and who in the second half of the 19th century became the main character in the Estonian national epic *Kalevipoeg*. In recent times, additionally, the place was claimed to be an ancient cult place that centers around a powerful energy pillar.

Archeological findings prove human activity in the place until the beginning of the 13th century. However, there is no information about the later period until the second half of the 19th century, when Kassinurme Hills became a place for folk gatherings, festivals, and students’ daytrips. In the first period of Estonian independence (1918-1940), various cultural events took place here, such as theatre plays or choir singing events. During the Soviet time, social life in the surrounding villages ceased and the Kassinurme Hills became overgrown with bushes. Only

in 1989 (together with a new era of national awakening that resulted in Estonia regaining independence in 1991) a new initiative came from a local non-governmental organization to clean up the site. A big swing and fireplaces were built, later a fragment of the wooden stronghold was erected. Cultural events started taking place again, many of them connected with folk culture, e.g., warrior role-plays re-enacting ancient battles between Estonians and foreign conquerors (Hiimäe, 2017). The most elaborated event, a special festival named Mytofest with the idea of reconstructing ancient Estonian culture, is organized yearly.

The perception of the place as a special site with a unique aura is supported by the narrative part. All popular sources stress that namely the sacred grove of Kassinurme is thousands of years old as a cult place, although there is no such archeological evidence. For example, the web page of the Forest Society of Jõgeva (the NGO that has been dealing with reconstructing the place since 1989) stresses a long historical continuation:

Our ancient forefathers found on the territory of the holy grove an emanation place of Earth energy and started exercising cultic activities. In order to protect themselves from evil forces, a wooden stronghold was erected close to the holy grove. [...] This stronghold here has never been conquered due to its peripheral location (<http://www.kassinurme.ee/kassinurme.html>).

According to the text, ancient people were aware of the emanation of earth energy and the energy pillar, yet in the Estonian preserved older folklore accounts energy pillars are never mentioned. Even the expression ‘energy pillar’ itself has emerged only in the recent decades in the context of the modern esoteric tradition. However, the behavior in the sacred grove of Kassinurme follows the same elements that are described in folklore and promoted by Earth Believers: the visitors knock on the gate with a wooden hammer, leave coins or food on the sacrificial stones, and bind ribbons on trees and bushes. Moreover, ancient-looking pseudo-folkloric innovations as part of role plays were invented in the holy grove of Kassinurme, for instance group charms accompanied by a dance with burning torches. Thus, Kassinurme is not threatened with physical damage or reconstruction works but there are conflicts based on the perception of the ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ use of a place defined as natural sacred site.

Earth Believers have not given longer comments on Kassinurme Hills in the media; they have rather ignored it as a “non-ancient sacred site”. For example, photos of it were not accepted to the Earth Believers’ yearly photo contest of natural sacred sites in 2013 and the web page of the organization points out that there

are no historical or folkloric data of the place as a sacred site. Thus, power and authenticity conflicts have here a rather spontaneous character, but are still fueled by the general discussions on natural sacred sites that are visible in the media with the participation of Earth Believers. The Forest Society of Jõgeva was still mentioned positively in the Earth Believers' 2011 event of appointing Friends of Sacred Groves of the year, in recognition that they had contributed a lot to the awareness of natural sacred sites, but along with the reference to the lack of historical data about Kassnurme as a sacred place (Bioneer, 2011).

New, noisy rituals held in Kassnurme sacred grove are changing the behavior of some more serious and spiritually minded visitors who would want to go there for contemplation and now give up visiting the grove. On the other hand, the looting of the stronghold by vandals in 2010 was widely condemned by the public, without reference to the question of whether it was an authentic sanctuary or not. Thus, people can be expected to act in diverse ways at sacred sites, but there are still some common identity-related ethical values that the Earth Believers' movement has promoted and that have gained wider relevance in the society. Finally, the example above has shown that certain shared ethical and moral principles need to build on local cultural-historical roots in order to be able to function as non-authoritarian tools of personal moral responsibility and shared co-existence – an idea that is expressed also in a number of works on the spirit of Bandung and philosophies of national unity (e.g., Demenchonok, 2017).

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to explore the potential of Earth Believers and related grassroots initiatives in supporting local and national identity and promoting environmental awareness and sustainability, describing a geographically distant case that nevertheless resonates with the ideas of the Bandung Conference. This chapter showed that, somewhat paradoxically, one of the anchors of the national identity and worldview of contemporary, largely urbanized Estonians is natural sacred sites, and that there is an interaction between this phenomenon and the activities of Earth Believers that bind together belief, tradition, and environmental protection. In disputes over natural sanctuaries, regardless of whether they belong under nature or heritage conservation, it often becomes decisive if a practice of using a natural sacred site is considered to be part of a cultural heritage process that takes place in the public interest and whose knowledge is given a dominant role in defining cultural heritage.

Thus, narratives based on folk religions and bringing religious dimensions to otherwise secular ideologies will continue to play an important role in environmental conflicts, and this will in turn play a role in the historical connection of Estonian folklore with national self-consciousness. As oral tradition and intangible cultural heritage are not something that can be unambiguously determined – as indicated above, there are discrepancies in the archival records – various stakeholders need to continue to prove and substantiate the weight of their positions in conflict situations.

Due to their active role in the current folk religion-based national narrative, the representatives of the Earth Believers are in a significant position. Representative statistics, according to which the majority of the population considers Earth Religion to be the right religion of Estonians and the protection of natural sanctuaries important, confirm that the Estonian folk religion and the vision of the Earth Believers have been presented convincingly and in a suitable manner for the public. In this respect, it can be argued that the Earth Believers' movement has played a unifying role for the public, including in promoting environmentally friendly views validated through references to tradition. Undoubtedly, the widespread 'environmental turn' in Western countries and the growing general interest in neo-pagan groups also had a supportive and guiding effect here.

At the same time, it must be still noted that although the impression may be created that the movement is homogenous there are remarkable variations among its members, for example there is only a limited active group who are engaged in public work (cf., similar thought by Västriik, 2015). The movement has sown even more controversy, leaving some people with the impression of being dogmatic and at times selective when interpreting folklore (for example, ignoring some sacred sites, or strictly accepting only certain limited behaviors related to sacred sites). However, other people are nominally supportive of their clear and persevering views which have, in turn, inspired new grassroots movements, for example the non-governmental organization *Eesti Metsa Abiks* (Support of Estonian Forest, founded in 2016) that opposes strongly the extensive logging; their arguments involve concepts of the forest as a living being and center of culture that are based on the works of the spokesperson of Earth Believers, Ahto Kaasik.

Emphasizing certain aspects of the traditional folk religion as rhetoric device, while defending the movement's agenda and interests, has been at times successful and effective in making the public think more about its land, environment, national belonging, and heritage, and has in many cases at least temporarily been able to stop environmentally damaging projects. At the same time, national consciousness has been attached more to the positive perception of nature and environmental

protection. The narrative of the unique ancient customs of Estonians, their love of nature and still-existing untouched nature has spread far beyond the level of folk religion; it is used in individual-level identity creation, but also in the rhetoric of mental health, tourism, and advertising, and resonates well with global ecological thinking trends.

Bringing finally a parallel with the meaning of the Bandung Conference, it can be said that although the ideas of the Bandung Conference could not be realized in respective countries in practice as planned. The continuous emergence of similar ideas related to tradition-based unity, equality and sustainability in the world seems to show that such ideals and ways of democratic thinking have not lost relevance in contemporary societies all over the world. Even if these imaginations have often not yet been successfully transferable into real life, they offer food for the soul that has an important role in national identity-building, environmental disputes and dynamic visions for the future.

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