

PERFORMING VOTIANNES

Heritage Production, the Votian Museum and Village Feasts

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This article investigates how Votian identity has been staged and performed in the context of the Votian Museum and in the course of the Luzhicy village feast. Our analysis concentrates on performative aspects of cultural heritage and ethnic identity related to the creation of specific cultural spaces. The Votian Museum is examined as the setting of the village feast, reflecting the display aspect of heritage and identity production. We focus on the key elements – the opening ceremony, the communal meal, and carnivalesque aspects – of the feast, which involve various embodied practices and articulate the manifestations of traditional culture chosen by the organisers of the festival, as well as contemporary enactments of village life.

Keywords: cultural heritage, ethnic identity, local museum, performance, village feast, Votians

Among the variety of ethnic minorities living in the Russian Federation, the Votians are the smallest indigenous group in the Leningrad Oblast of northwest Russia (cf. Viikberg 2001). Today the Votian language has been listed among the endangered languages of the Russian Federation (Ageeva 1994), and since 2008 Votians have had the official status of a small indigenous people of the Russian North (Regnum 2008). A demographic survey in the middle of the nineteenth century documented the number of Votians as exceeding 5,000 (Köppen 1867) but, after the changes in the Soviet nationality policy of the 1930s (cf. Slezkine 1994: 414), until the turn of the millennium they were not counted as a separate nationality in censuses. Long-term non-recognition and even ethnic stigmatisation during the decades after the Second World War brought with them assimilation and even a conscious repudiation of Votian identity. According to the all-Russian census of

2002, no more than 73 people declared themselves as belonging to this ethnic group (Perepis 2002), but evidently there are people of Votian descent who deliberately listed themselves (or were forced to list themselves) as ethnic Russians.

Today Votians live in two villages – Luzhicy and Krakolye – in the Kingiseppski District of the Leningrad Oblast, by Luga Bay. These villages of about 250 inhabitants are situated next to the multipurpose merchant seaport of Ust-Luga, which has been developed rapidly since 1995 by the federal authorities, and has been described by the Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin as “one of the largest infrastructure projects of European scale in Russia” (Ust-Luga 2008: 2). According to the official construction plan, publicised in 2007, the intention was to replace both villages with a modern town of 35,000–70,000 future port workers and their families. After protests by the villagers, articulated and disseminated by the

scholarly community from Moscow research institutes (*Regrus* 2008), this idea was abandoned but, nonetheless, the expansion of the port constantly threatens traditional communities in a zone of sizeable construction.

Paradoxically, the process of developing the Ust-Luga port (i.e. the threat to the Votians from outside the villages) has occurred in parallel with a considerable ethnic revival inside these villages since the end of the 1990s. The core institution in this process has been a private Votian Museum in Luzhicy, which has mobilised a group of cultural activists from nearby urban centres, as well as from Luzhicy and Krakolye. These people, altogether 15–20 in number, have different ethnic and educational backgrounds, including schoolteachers, linguists, artists, musicians, engineers, students etc. Some of them have roots in Votian villages, but they reside mostly in Kingisepp, the regional administrative centre, and in St. Petersburg.¹

The establishment of the museum instigated a number of other activities connected with the production of Votian identity that included, for example, classes on native language and cultural history in the Krakolye Basic School, the foundation of the Society of Votian Culture, two Internet sites, and the small Votian newspaper *Maaväci*. However, the most viable manifestation of the revival movement, closely related to the Votian Museum, has been the local village feast *Luzhickaia sklachina*,² celebrated as a joint community festival since 2000. This celebration is based on a traditional religious feast related to the Orthodox village chapel. In the re-invented feast, the religious function of the festival has been abandoned, with the emphasis being laid on the production of Votianness, and the celebration of the ethnic past and cultural heritage in a variety of forms.

This article investigates how the ethnic identity of an endangered minority group has been staged and performed in the context of the community museum and through the village feast. Our analysis concentrates on performative aspects of Votian heritage in those cultural spaces where the heritage of the group is produced individually as well as collectively. In the first part of the paper, we examine what kind of

museum the Votian Museum is and how this institution, based on an individual grass-roots level initiative, is used in heritage production. Consequently, we will study the ways in which official history has been questioned in a museum exposition expressing a vernacular viewpoint. Our research questions also concern the strategies of building up the museum display by relying on personal memories and particular materialities of exhibited artefacts. Finally, the reliability of the actual museum space as a memory storage is discussed.

The Votian Museum is examined as the setting of the village feast, as the latter explicitly demonstrates performative aspects of heritage and identity. The aim of the study is to analyse the key elements of the feast, such as the opening ceremony, the communal meal and carnivalesque enactments. We articulate the manifestations of traditional culture that have been chosen by the organisers of the festival to represent the Votian cultural heritage and how different understandings of Votianness are reflected in the aforementioned embodied practices. Our study demonstrates how the museum and village feast, considered as public cultural performances, are important components in the process of the revitalisation and constitution of local identity on a grass-roots level, combining traditional culture and the ideas of the present-day Votian cultural activists.

The Performances of Ethnic Identity: Heritage Production in Museums and Community Festivals

As a conceptual tool, *performance* emphasises the importance of culture as a process enacted in embodied encounters of people as active agents, either in mundane practices of everyday life or in more “staged” events, such as cultural performances of different kinds. *Performance*, for us, constitutes a methodological lens for analysing the village feast and the local museum as performative practices, although they are not described as performances by the organisers and participants (cf. Taylor 2003: 3; Schechner 1990: 19). As outlined by Edward Schiefelin, performance is a phenomenon related to “habits of the body more than structures of symbols, (...)”

with the social construction of reality rather than its representation” (Schieffelin 1998: 194). When seen from this perspective, cultural space is constructed and created in particular performances, perceived multisensorily in action and participation, and experienced in emotional identifications with the community involved in the events, emerging *hic et nunc*. Cultural performances are situated in certain tangible locations and, at the same time, the performance space is created when the existing materialities are transformed into a symbolically rich space, into something that is more than what is visible. These are cultural performances that give traditions and heritage an embodied form, even though, paradoxically, they are themselves transient. Cultural performances may be considered to be restorations of culture, though they are never merely representations (e.g. of ethnic identity, heritage etc.), but are also enacted presentations, pleasures of doing, and celebrations of being.³

Village feasts, for instance, are repetitive in the sense that they restore certain events regularly in time and, yet, they have a rather open structure that leaves space for personal interpretations. As a form of cultural performance the village feast “embodied ideas and enacted interpretations” that provided opportunities for increased and intensified experiences, and for reflections on both individual and social identities (Stoeltje & Bauman 1988: 590). The village feasts, which once had a predominantly religious meaning, are nowadays mostly secular celebrations, as in the case of the Luzhicy. However, the traditional feast and re-established festival share the function of creating in-group cohesion in the village community. The village feast provided, and now provides, an opportunity for the participants to feel a transient personal experience of togetherness. The re-established Votian village feast can thus be interpreted, with some reservations, as an example of “invented tradition” (cf. Hobsbawm 1983; Handler & Linnekin 1984); as here too elements of past peasant culture are selected and placed into new contexts, these elements gain new meanings that help to constitute (and support) ethnic identity, and these traditions are reconstructed in the present.

According to Turnbridge and Ashworth, heritage production is the process in which “the present selects an inheritance from an imagined past for current use and decides what should be passed on to an imagined future” (Turnbridge & Ashworth 1996: 6). So for a group, heritage may become the connection between its history and its current life, and reinforce its attachment to its dwelling place. From the community perspective, heritage production includes processes involving “performances of remembering” (Smith 2006: 47), either in the form of (re)invented feasts or museum-making processes. Those performances both explicitly and implicitly express what is valued by the group and what is worth displaying publicly. In these events, the community makes use of symbolic and imaginary realms of “collective myths and history” and creates opportunities both for confirming and transforming existing values and traditions (MacAloon 1984: 1). Heritage is what gives material reality to the community’s identity and makes it observable and perceivable in the form of material artefacts, significant places, mythologies, memories and traditions (Ashworth & Graham 2005: 4).

Furthermore, cultural performances, as enacted forms of heritage, may become an important device of the identity politics of a group (and sometimes also expressions of resistance). The museum is a public space where a community’s memory becomes mediated: produced, explored and performed. Museum artefacts have come to be seen not just as mere representations of the past but as objects that may acquire the status of agents in the process of remembering. By the selection of what to exhibit in community museums, the group controls the display of themselves and attempts to manage how others see them (Crooke 2010: 27–28). Festivals, in turn, may be considered public “commemorative ceremonies” that revitalise stories and images of the past, represent “collective autobiography” for a community, and “convey and sustain” them through ritual performances (Connerton 1989: 70–71). The village feast as a commemorative performance and the museum as a site of commemoration may both be related to the cultural *archive*, as well as being *repertoire* medi-

ated by the “process of selection, memorization, and internalization” (Taylor 2003: 20). However, nowadays one cannot ignore the fact that heritage performances are often deliberately staged, as traditions are transformational and people who want to keep them alive are trying to (re-)create means for keeping certain cultural knowledge and practices alive and educating younger community members. Performing commemorative events “engenders strong emotions, as collective memories and identities are either maintained and transmitted to younger generations or contested and remade” (Smith 2006: 69). This emotional involvement may become an important criterion for individually meaningful heritage experiences, yet it also struggles over whose heritage representations better express the community’s past.

Museums, which were traditionally related to official histories and narratives of nations and ethnicities, have become places for heritage negotiations, “contact zones” (Clifford 1997: 192–193) in which different meanings of a community’s identity are exhibited, perceived and interpreted. Furthermore, an increasing number of community museums have come into existence in recent decades as part of grass-roots initiatives by those groups who were formerly represented by public state- or municipality-run museums. Often, there are particular individuals behind these initiatives who are not trained as museum professionals but feel the need to create their own story of their heritage, together with community members. These museums facilitate the idea of community heritage as “a forum for alternative histories, voices and experiences”, which can be used to “express local identity” and to work “as an educational tool” (Crooke 2009: 421–422). In the context of small indigenous communities, it has been noted that these museums usually emerge as the result of the interest of one or a few community members, and often they survive as long as this person or group is in control of the museum-making process (Bolton 2003: 47). Thereby, the process of museum making may become a performance of both the individual and collective dimension. The same can be said of the museums established by endangered ethnic groups after the collapse of the Soviet Union

in the territory of Russia: quite often elderly community members who perceive themselves as the last carriers of community heritage feel the responsibility to organise this heritage somehow into a museum display for the younger members of the ethnic community (cf. Leete 2008; also Olsen 2000).

Analysing performances of ethnic identities as they are expressed in the museum-making process, as well as in the village festival, provides an opportunity to understand where and when, how and for whom those identities are publicly created and negotiated by different community members. Additionally, we may see what elements are considered representative and appropriate for the public display of the group’s heritage, and to whom they are directed. We argue that ethnic identity, in order to be sustainable in the changing cultural space, requires manifestations, restorations and collective celebrations, either in the form of a museum or a village feast. Both these cultural phenomena bring ethnic Votians and Votian activists, who otherwise are geographically dispersed, together into one locality and give them opportunities for spatially shared and joint embodied experiences of Votianness. Yet, a museum and a village feast can both be considered as heterogeneous performance spaces in which supportive as well as more critical voices are co-articulated and publicly staged, as well as spaces in which personally perceived identities are enacted.

The Votian Museum: Creating and Contesting the Space for Votian Heritage

In his study of the museums of British Columbia, James Clifford (1997) made a distinction between “majority museums” and “tribal museums”. He outlined the basic characteristics of majority museums and compared these with the agendas of Native American museums. According to Clifford regarding the latter, (1) they are to some degree oppositional, as their exhibits reflect excluded experiences and current struggles; (2) the distinction between (fine) art and (ethnographic) culture is for them often irrelevant; (3) the notion of a unified History is challenged by local and community histories; and (4) they have no intention of including their collections

in the patrimony of the nation, of great art etc. (Clifford 1997: 121–122).

The characteristics of the tribal museums in British Columbia correspond in some respects to specific traits of the Votian Museum, and a similar opposition can be seen between the regional “majority museum” in Kingisepp, the nearby administrative centre, and the local “minority museum” in Luzhicy. Despite the fact that the municipality museum, dedicated to the history of the region, was founded in the 1960s, an exposition of the archaeology and ethnography of indigenous peoples of the area was not opened there until 2000. Therefore, the very fact of founding a “grass-roots level” Votian Museum in Luzhicy in 1997, without any institutional and financial support from local or federal authorities, can be considered to be an oppositional activity, a form of performative resistance, with the aim of drawing attention to the non-recognised ethnic group.

The Votian Museum was established as a private venture of the Efimov family, who furnished, for the sake of the exhibition, one room of their summer cottage. The *primus motor* of the museum has been, since the very beginning, Tatiana Efimova (born in 1956), a chemical engineer by profession, whose husband Sergey is a Votian from Luzhicy, where the Efimovs have spent their weekends and summers in the old wooden house inherited from Sergey’s parents. Tatiana Efimova has since then taken the leading role in the Votian revival movement and has dedicated, with short intervals, her entire energy to “Votian affairs”. As revealed repeatedly in our interviews with Tatiana Efimova, her self-awareness was closely attached to Luzhicy despite the fact that she was a Russian newcomer in the village and the Efimovs officially lived in Kingisepp. However, in 2006 they moved to Luzhicy and have since then been permanent residents of the village.

According to the hostess of the museum, the reason for the exposition was to educate her children by documenting and sharing the local history of the village she became acquainted with at the end of the 1970s. Tatiana was fascinated by the customs and attitudes she came across in Luzhicy, which differed considerably from those traditions she had been

used to in her Russian home village in the Tikhvin District of the Leningrad Oblast. In her own words, she discovered a people that did not officially exist, who were not recognised, but shared rich cultural traditions (ERA, DV 154).

On the one hand, the museum has been, for its initiator, a private endeavour to educate her children and to understand her close family members; on the other hand, this project had wider public implications as Tatiana started to question the official minority politics represented by the regional museum in Kingisepp. In this way, she took on the role of a guardian of the Votian tradition, even though she was not an expert in museology, ethnology or any related field. During her investigations, Tatiana discovered various popular and scholarly misinterpretations of Votians⁴ that were articulated from the cosmopolitan point of view. In many cases, she formulated her own alternative theories, which contested the well-established stereotypes and explanations, from the standpoint of local knowledge.

Heritage Production through Museum Display: Artefacts and Individuals

The establishment and development of this particular museum can be interpreted as a process, a series of performative acts that created a specific cultural space. As stated by Laurajane Smith, “The very act of possessing, managing and conserving (...) museum collections is itself a performative utterance of having identity” (Smith 2006: 68). Despite the fact that the Luzhicy museum was based on the individual initiative of a newcomer, members of the local community were included in the process as donors and informants. According to Tatiana Efimova, the first artefacts of the expositions were items of the household equipment of her husband’s family, but later, when villagers got to know about her “hobby”, they started to bring new exhibits of their own accord. Therefore we can speak of the museum-making process as a negotiated and collaborative performance. The hostess of the museum formulated this idea vividly in the interview recorded in August 2000:

In the very beginning, there were items that lacked any information about their application and meaning, not to mention what they were called. But it was a pity to throw them away. So I went to ask. And I got to know that, for example (Tatiana points to the artefact), this is an *astija* (vial), and this a *lännikko* (wooden vessel with cover), a container for curds or butter. This is also an *astija* (Tatiana takes another vessel in her hand), but for mashing potatoes. This is an *ušatti* (wooden pail; she again takes the artefact in her hand), a prototype of the present-day bucket. (...) Villagers themselves now bring the majority of exhibits. I have fishing nets, of course, an anchor etc. All this reflects that our village was, first and foremost, a fishermen's village, and this is what I want to show. And villagers just brought me exhibits such as, for example, a *kurviverkko* (a net for smelt), a whole set, a net for catching smelt, in its entirety. Recently, they presented me with *pullod* (floats) and weights of an archaic type. Even those villagers you would not expect to do so bring exhibits (...). (ERA, DV 157)

In 1998, when our research team visited the museum for the first time, the Efimovs had equipped a room of about 20 m² with a variety of exhibits that were labelled in Votian and Russian. During our next three visits (1999–2001), we witnessed the gradual growth of the display and explored how new layers had been added to the “home-made” exhibition. The museum display consisted mostly of ethnographic artefacts (nineteenth-century household equipment, clothes, working tools, including fishing gear, and items used in agriculture and cattle breeding), pieces of art (icons, paintings and drawings made by amateur artists), documents, books and photos donated by the villagers, as well as those acquired from archives and visitors.⁵ Half of the walls of the museum room were covered with fishing nets; clothes and working tools were attached to the walls and some were placed on long benches located at the edges of the room. For Tatiana Efimova, every single exhibit had its own story; she knew by heart the previous owners of the artefacts and all of them represented

for her certain periods in the history of the village.⁶ For example, the existence of a pre-war Orthodox chapel in Luzhicy, and the religious life of the village in general, were marked by icons donated by the Vasiliev family, in the “improvised” holy corner of the museum room, and religious literature of the pre-war period. The Swedish period was indicated by two Swedish coins, dating back to 1636, found in the Efimovs' vegetable garden and considered by the hostess of the museum to be the most precious exhibits of the display.⁷ Her relationship with the exhibits was quite emotional; when we asked Tatiana Efimova to mention her favourite exhibit she answered: “I cannot say that I have one favourite item. All these things are for me like my own children” (ERA, DV 157).

Thus, the exposition of the museum was built up from objects that supported remembering and dictated the narrative of the museum creator. In addition, for the sake of the exhibition Tatiana Efimova had ordered, from the Russian Ethnographic Museum in St. Petersburg, copies of photos taken by Soviet ethnographers in the 1920s. These photos mostly depicted villagers of that period and were mainly focused on personal aspects and genealogies of the villagers. Individuals were also dominant in the old family photos donated to the museum and exhibited together with ethnographic artefacts. According to Tatiana Efimova, one of her aims in putting together the exposition was to commemorate and present native inhabitants and to “show how talented our people are” (ibid.). One of those gifted personalities was, for example, Nikolay Nesterov, born in 1921 in Luzhicy, who worked for decades as an electrical engineer in St. Petersburg, and donated to the museum his drawings that were made during and after the war. Nikolay Nesterov had never studied art, but his talent allowed him to earn additional money and survive as a prisoner of war during the Second World War (FM 2000).

The hostess of the museum had accumulated a considerable amount of information on the genealogies of the villagers, so that we witnessed how she (as a newcomer) explained, with the help of museum photos, the genealogical relationships of

the one-time villagers to the native inhabitants of Luzhicy (ERA, DV 266). Tatiana Efimova thus had a somewhat ambivalent role in the heritage production process: she collected knowledge of local matters from state archives and scholarly literature and by interviewing local villagers, but also shared this knowledge with the village community, gaining the status of local heritage specialist *per se*.

Two opposite trends in the practices of arranging the display appeared. On the one hand, there was restoration of local history and heritage through artefacts, documents and photographs; these were accumulated and displayed in order to create a valid depiction of the past, to support and recreate Votian identity among villagers. On the other hand, due to the creative nature of the performative process, new interpretations were put forward that re-scripted various cultural phenomena from the vernacular perspective and articulated new “cultural myths”, which placed Votians at the centre of the universe, and contested cosmopolitan views of centre and periphery (cf. Tuan 1974: 239; Gradén 2003). For example, Tatiana linked the term for public assembly in medieval Novgorod, the *Veche* (Russian *вече*), with the Votian word *vāci* – ‘people’. She also interpreted, with the help of Votian words, many local place names and thus presented various folk etymological explanations (see Efimova 2006, 2009, FM 2003).

The museum attracted both inhabitants of Luzhicy and visitors (mostly relatives who came to the countryside during the summer vacation), as well as groups of schoolchildren and tourists whose sight-seeing routes passed through the region. However, the scarcity of museum space set a limit on the number of visitors who could enjoy the display at any one time.

The Community Museum as a Contested Site of Action

The museum as a symbolically rich cultural space and memory site may become a stage for contesting common views, and sometimes even a battlefield of identity, as well as local politics, especially in unstable socio-cultural situations. The story of the

Luzhicy museum is a characteristic example of such developments, and it culminated in two dramatic events that destroyed not only the museum building but also the Efimov household. There was a fire in their house in September 2001 that resulted in the destruction of the whole building, including all of the museum holdings (around 70 ethnographic objects, 200 photos and documents). The causes of the fire were not identified, but local villagers associated the casualties with vengeance against the Efimovs’ appeals to officials concerning the illegal logging going on in the forest. The Efimovs’ activities in the field of the Votian revival and their fight for the rights of local inhabitants were evidently opposed by those people who were interested in developing and earning from the plunder economy due to the lack of control and changing political situation in the Russian Federation.

However, after the fire, villagers continued to donate new objects to the museum, and even two years later our research team found a new temporary exhibition set up on the veranda of the Efimovs’ new house. In these years, Tatiana and Sergey Efimov attracted a group of activists from St. Petersburg and other nearby urban centres, who brought along new ideas to advance the Votian revival. For example, classes on native language and local history were initiated in the local Basic School of Krakolye, the first Internet homepage dedicated to Votian matters (see <http://vadjamaa.narod.ru>) was opened and brand-new Votian ethnic symbols (a flag, a coat of arms and an anthem) were invented. Activities also included the publication of a bilingual collection of Votian folk tales, which gave rise to a discussion on Votian orthography and the possibilities of creating a literary language. While at that time “Votian affairs” were predominantly based on individual initiatives, it was logical that a phase of institutionalisation followed. In April 2005, the Society of Votian Culture was established, and since then it has been the core institution of the Votian revival. In order to share information and present its ideas, the society started to publish the small-scale Votian newspaper, which is free and distributed to all villagers.

In October 2005, a half of an old-style Votian

peasant house was donated to the Society of Votian Culture by the Filipov and Kuznetsov families, and it was renovated with the help of the village community and volunteer enthusiasts. The following year a new exhibition, displaying the interior of a Votian house at the beginning of the twentieth century, was opened. While visiting the museum in May 2006, we realised that the new museum space was much bigger; the living room of the old-type Votian peasant house was furnished with old household equipment, including a large oven, a bed covered with home-made textiles, fully functional looms, a spinning wheel, a long table and benches. There were several shelves for displaying ethnographic artefacts, which were organised according to the materials the tools were made of (wood, clay or metal). In addition, an old-fashioned woman's folk costume was exhibited. The log walls of the living room were covered with textiles and panels with photographs depicting outstanding villagers and recent activities of Votian activists.

The expanded museum space made it possible to carry out a variety of activities initiated by the Society of Votian Culture. The new building was used enthusiastically as a community centre; it served as the venue for classes of native language and local history, and workshops of traditional handicraft and cuisine, under the guidance of elderly villagers. In 2006, the museum was the scene of the annual village feast and the celebration of the Day of Indigenous Peoples of the region. This new space provided an opportunity to experience nineteenth-century peasant life through old household interiors and artefacts. As seen in the photos taken by the Efimovs, these opportunities were taken advantage of by Votian activists, as well as members of the children's folklore group, who dressed in folk costumes and participated in workshops dedicated to learning the Votian language and old crafts (see ill. 1). The museum space promoted more intense involvement in old-time everyday practices, such as baking pies, weaving with looms, singing folk songs etc. It concentrated the activities of the villagers and their guests, who participated in common get-togethers and experienced the physical closeness of their com-



Ill. 1: Workshop of baking traditional pies in the Votian Museum. (Photo: S. Lotov, 2005)

panions in the intimate atmosphere of the feasts.

Due to its successful activities, the new museum received a great deal of attention in local newspapers and on local TV channels. All this marked the achievements of the revival movement before the museum was burnt down again in September 2006. This time, some of the exhibits were saved thanks to the rapid action of the villagers. The cause of this fire also remains unclear.

It is clear that the repeated destruction of the museum has caused a considerable reaction in the Votian revival movement. The idea of founding a third museum has been raised, despite the fact that the Efimovs have refused to accept new artefacts donated by the villagers. New exhibits have been partially photographed and a virtual museum has been set up on the homepage of Votian activists (see www.vatland.ru). However, the destruction of the museum house did not diminish the enthusiasm of the initiators of the Votian identity display; quite the contrary. The process of establishing and constantly

re-establishing the Luzhicy museum reflects the performativity of the enterprise – it is not just the building and material objects that can be related to the museum but also the people and the activities of creating the exhibition of Votianness.

Considering the above-mentioned events, the question arises of whether the museum space is an appropriate mode for storing Votians' memories and mediating their identity.

The Village Feast as a Performance of Ethnic Revival

The Luzhicy museum as a cultural space integrates private and public representations, individual and collective depictions of Votian heritage. Once a year, the museum and museum yard are used as a “stage” for hosting the village feast *Luzhickaia sklachina*.

In pre-industrial rural societies of northwest Russia, village feasts were expressions of collective activity that included certain religious, social and economic functions. This phenomenon of collectively celebrating certain days of the church calendar, which included a religious ritual, a common meal, singing and dancing in the course of three or four days, was a part of the common Russian Orthodox tradition shared by several ethnic groups in the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth.⁸ The religious ritual, consisting of a procession and a service in the local chapel, once an important part of the event, has been abandoned and the celebration of the ethnic community is now the focus of the feast. The village feast, once a tacitly religious testimony that enforced the sacral ties of the community, has now become a consciously re-established event by a group of Votian activists, the “stage directors” of the Votian ethnic identity, and has become a public display for self-reflection.

From the performative perspective, ethnic traditions have always been constantly re-invented by different agencies involved in the process and presented for an audience (either for the group itself or for outsiders) (Bendix 1989). Beverly J. Stoeltje states that all festivals display certain characteristic features, being “calendarically regulated intervals, public in nature, participatory in ethos, complex

in structure, and multiple in voice, scene, and purpose.” The varied opportunities for participation and, at the same time, integration of the whole group because of a common purpose is what makes this kind of event so captivating for participants (Stoeltje 1992: 266). Thereby, festive events become performances of a group's ethnic identity that involve diverse political interests and various articulations of the past realised in communally shared involvement in both real and imaginary cultural space (cf. Gradén 2003; Hoelscher 1998; Mathisen 2009). Though public displays of ethnic identity are always more or less collective creations, they may be initiated by particular individuals serving as “directors” of these events.

The local village feast in Luzhicy, *Luzhickaia sklachina*, was re-established in 2000 to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the village.⁹ Since then, Tatiana Efimova, the hostess of the Votian Museum, has been the main organiser of this community festival celebrated each year, usually on the third weekend of July.¹⁰ The venue of the village feast has varied, but for several years it has taken place on museum property. The main participants in the feast are local villagers, their families and relatives who come to visit their home village for this very event. Therefore, the feast also functions as a space for family reunions, in which Votian ethnic identity is celebrated by creating the feeling of temporary *communitas* (Turner 1969). In addition, the village feast has attracted the attention of Votian activists from St. Petersburg, researchers and students of linguistics, ethnology, and folklore, journalists and representatives of local and federal governments. However, folklore experts play a minor role here in comparison with large-scale public folk-life festivals – the village feast in Luzhicy is a collaboratively created event encouraging participation (cf. Bauman & Sawin 1990: 288–314). Tatiana Efimova, along with other cultural activists, has created the general directorial concept for the whole event by structuring it, and by doing so has provided value and legitimacy to certain elements of Votian heritage.

The number of festival participants has varied too, over 200 in the first year but stabilising in re-

cent years at an average of 100. The dominant secular aspect of the village feast and the involvement in ethnic revival has, on the other hand, evidently excluded some members of the village community. For example, in 2003 one of the native inhabitants, a lady in her eighties, for whom the religious aspect of the feast day was more important, refused to participate in the celebration and, instead, that weekend she attended the liturgy in the nearest Orthodox church (ERA, DV 792). Some villagers of Votian descent might have missed the community festival due to the opposition of their non-Votian family members, who perhaps felt embarrassed in an unfamiliar ethnic society (ERA, DV 795). The village feast was also consciously rejected by those villagers, mostly *datshniki* (summer-cottage owners) of various ethnic backgrounds, who had moved to Luzhicy during the post-war period and were not connected with age-old family networks, thus lacking the motivation to communicate with other villagers (FM 2004). Therefore, the feast has been oriented towards a certain segment of the village population: native inhabitants and their closer family members, as well as Votian activists. These people appreciate the organisers' endeavours and they have given positive feedback – for them the festival has increased the in-group coherence of the village community (ERA, DV 154). The village feast can be characterised as a heterogeneous cultural space where different “voices” preserve their varied intentions.

Luzhickaia sklachina, as a contemporary secular village festival, has the following basic elements: (1) an opening ceremony; (2) a communal meal (food and drinks); and (3) carnivalesque activities (games, sports, dancing and a visit by disguised *Chudi*) (cf. Stoeltje 1992: 2; Turner & McArthur 1990: 85). Yet, the overall structure of the event is open and one might also note the preparatory and aftermath phases of this process. The event is pre-planned and certain elements of it are rehearsed by the organisers and key performers. Likewise, there is no formal conclusion and the feast disperses in space, continuing in private celebrations in people's homes. The beginning, the official programme, is carefully staged by organisers and, therefore, a clear distinction be-

tween the performers and the audience can be noted; the festive part that comes after is more improvised and involves all the participants. Thus, two distinct performances meet in the village feast: the opening ceremony, which corresponds to a staged folkloric programme in the form of a gala consisting of carefully selected heritage elements, and the more spontaneous celebration that follows, involving improvisatory self-expression, commensality, dances, games, etc. Although, in the course of ten years, the village feast has had a stable structure, the following analysis is based on participant observation of the performances in 2003 and 2004, supplemented by later photos and descriptions.

The Opening Ceremony of the Village Feast: Staging Votianness

The most explicitly staged and rehearsed part of the event is a gala that includes speeches, arranged poems, musical pieces and other performances. These parts of the programme were, in 2003 and 2004, introduced by the main organiser of the feast, Tatiana Efimova, who, through her commentaries and short presentations, framed the whole official part of the feast. The opening ceremony usually reveals some significant social roles in the community and confirms dominant community values (Stoeltje 1992: 264). Yet, the way the ceremony is staged reveals the organisers' values and principles regarding what should be brought to the stage as representative of the community's heritage. A considerable amount of attention has been paid to the opening ceremony through various acts of commemoration, including the presentation of elderly villagers and certain events in the history of the village. In 2003, the idea of “commemorating all past members of the village community” was manifested in the ritual placing of candles in front of a wooden cross erected temporarily on the site of the former village chapel. This performance of remembering was introduced by reading the Orthodox Church court protocol from the 1730s, which accused the villagers of Luzhicy of carrying out vernacular cultic practices, not approved by Church officials, in the chapel. The performance of remembering peaked with the reading

of the Lord's prayer, translated into Votian for the sake of the festival by one of the elderly villagers.

Since 2003, the compulsory element of the celebration has been the hoisting of the Votian flag,¹¹ which was presented publicly for the first time during the village feast. In addition, the Votian coat of arms and anthem (an arrangement of a folk song) were introduced to the participants of the feast, establishing the legitimacy of the village community. For the sake of the festival, a distinctive cultural space with its own rules and aesthetics was created, where participants could sense and perform "genuine" Votianness. Ethnic identity was manifested vividly in the folk dresses of the performers, which stresses the role of material objects in the process of establishing cultural heritage. These enactments of hybrid performance have historical roots (peasant life of the nineteenth century), but also contain modern elements.

The ambivalent nature of contemporary Votianness was vividly represented in the performances of the local folklore group at the opening ceremony. Schoolchildren, most of whom had neither an indigenous cultural background nor knowledge of the native language, performed Votian folk songs for the audience, among whom only a small minority could understand the lyrics.¹² In 2004, Votian heritage was re-introduced in staged performances of folk dances, as well as in the fragments of the wedding ritual of the nineteenth-century peasant's life cycle. Besides the songs, Votianness was stressed in these performances through dialogues in the native language, and marked with folk costumes that were reconstructed according to the descriptions of eighteenth-century scholars (FM 2004). Here the tendency to explore more archaic forms of traditional culture is manifested in order to create a feeling of authenticity. The same concerns the clothing of Tatiana Efimova, who during the 2006 village feast was dressed in a folk costume from the beginning of the twentieth century, but since 2007 she has worn a stylised and more archaic costume designed according to archaeological findings.

These representations of past cultural traditions in a new context reflect, however, only one possible

way of performing Votianness. While analysing the field materials, we also found an alternative way in which the Votian identity was celebrated in the programme of the festive gala. These were various performances, for example rhythmic gymnastics, solo singing, etc., that were included in the programme because of the fact that they were performed by the community members or their children. According to this approach, everything that was presented by the local inhabitants, that is, people of Votian descent, represented Votianness.

The opening ceremony of the village feast can be interpreted as a conscious act of remembering and commemoration that is oriented to aural and visual perception. Only certain elements of traditional culture are selected and presented by the "stage directors" as Votian heritage.

The Local Cuisine and the Communal Meal

Another aspect of Votian identity that has been manifested and celebrated vividly during the village feast is the local cuisine. Compared to the opening ceremony, the communal meal is clearly a less staged part of the event. According to Beverly Stoeltje, the food eaten during the feast "embodies the identity of the group and represents the particular occasion"; the food as it is performed (prepared, served and chosen) communicates a tradition of the community (Stoeltje 1992: 265). "Through the choice of food and drink and the way they are served, people are bonded into groups through commensal activity" (Stoeltje & Bauman 1988: 594). In this ritual-like event, which carries both traditional and modern meanings, a temporary *communitas*, the feeling of an "extended family", is created.

In the first revived village feasts, the presentation of local "forgotten" delicacies was initiated by the organisers of the feast, and this was carried out in the form of contests: traditional food (mostly pies with different shapes and fillings) was prepared by the older female members of the community; these were judged by a jury and finally shared with all participants in the feast. This kind of activity helped the Votian activists explore and revive local food traditions, bring them forth from the memories of elderly

people and, in this way, turn certain manifestations of former traditional cuisine into celebrated cultural heritage.

Because the genre of contest was not successful in the context of village feasts (as the food was not distributed evenly), this idea was later somewhat transformed. As the programme of the annual feast has, from the very beginning, included a communal meal, where participants share their home-made dishes and drinks, the presentation of traditional cuisine has become a compulsory part of the festive menu. We can also examine this issue from another perspective: a tradition was re-invented to prepare certain dishes for the sake of the village feast, and this has given them a new function and thus helped the recipes of past delicacies to survive.

Our fieldwork team also witnessed a deliberate invention of heritage in the sphere of cuisine: in 2004, a herbal tea made of the fermented leaves of Rosebay Willowherb (*Epilobium angustifolium*) was presented during the village feast as a local drink that had once gained international fame for the Votian people (cf. Nikolaeva 2005). This interpretation was based on a vernacular Russian designation of the drink *копорский чай*, “tea of Kopyrye”, which linked the origin of the tea with the medieval centre of the Votian land, Kopyrye.

According to Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “feasts are prominent in rites of incorporation, where commensality, the act of eating together, is an archetype of union” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2001: 23). The communal meal can be regarded as the starting point of the unofficial part of the Luzhicy village feast. When we attended, the meal was arranged on long tables, where home-made dishes and drinks were shared and served by the participants themselves. While up to that point performers and audience were separated, during the meal these borders disappeared and the activities were no longer directed by the organisers but by the village community itself. People sat around the tables grouped into families and kinship groups. However, there were no rigid hierarchies and people were welcome to change their places, as the meal served as a venue for active communication. People, some of

whom did not meet face to face more often than once a year, had the opportunity to share news, to recall past events or to just have a good time in the company of their relatives and neighbours. It was evident that, through the communal meal, kinship ties were continuously strengthened and the same was true of the local village identity.

The meal included short greetings and toasts, as well as communal singing. However, these were no longer old Votian songs, performed within the gala by the folklore group, but popular Russian songs, learned from and distributed by popular movies, radio programmes, and other mass media. The very act of singing together, the pleasure of collective performance, united villagers, relieved tensions and clearly created a feeling of cohesion. These performances also reflected contemporary Votianness, which is not defined so much through the native language as through shared past and common activities.

Music and dancing are important factors in generating the shared experience and celebration so crucial to the success of the festival (Turner & McArthur 1990: 85). However, in 2003 we witnessed, in this respect, contested approaches, as more educated “guardians of authenticity” (cf. Annist 2009: 132) from St. Petersburg intervened to control the repertoire of common singing, to avoid popular music and choose traditional songs, as well as to oppose the disco dancing favoured by villagers and their guests.

Carnavalesque Elements of the Village Feast

The final part of the feast is minimally staged and much more spontaneous and improvisatory as a performance. As Michail Bakhtin (1984: 196–277) has argued, popular festive forms in culture, especially carnivalesque events, involve all the participants and are often a humorous and playful mix of the high and low, the sacred and the profane. In 2003 and 2004, the feast reached its culmination with a variety of games and contests between the participants, dancing and visits by disguised “guests”, called the *Chudi*, who appeared suddenly to the participants of the feast.¹³ These were mostly elderly villagers, accompanied by their grandchildren, who had disguised themselves and brought in carna-

lesque elements that finally broke down all borders and conventions, freeing the participants in their bodily expressions through joy and merriment. The mummers entered the “stage” of the feast singing a Russian song, and then joined the dancers and asked the participants to dance with them, repeating their provocative movements and gestures. The Chudi also made attempts to get those people who were sitting at the tables into the dance area, thus causing overall disorder and joy. After public “presentation” of their masks and costumes, some of the mummers, playing certain roles, asked the participants questions. For example, in 2003 one of the elderly women was disguised as a soldier and asked the guests to show their certificates that allowed them to be in the border zone (ERA, DV 798).

The institution of visiting mummers is based on a nineteenth-century peasant tradition, a custom

related to midwinter feasts of the folk calendar, weddings and other communal get-togethers (cf. Ariste 1969: 142–148). In the contemporary village feasts, this phenomenon was not restored deliberately by the “directors”, but it re-emerged spontaneously as an initiative of older community members, thus being an autonomous vernacular creativity uniting various aspects of bodily expression. The selection of disguises also echoed, on the one hand, topical problems of the village community (for example, restrictions in the border zone, and the construction of the port; see also ill. 2); on the other hand, the masks of mummers reflected villagers’ spontaneous inspiration, as these represented a variety of folkloric and fictional characters (for example, Baba Yaga, the Booted Cat and the Gypsy Woman).

Carnavalesque elements may articulate alternative modes of self-expression and they often integrate



Ill. 2: Chudi disguised as a soldier, a bride and a sailor. (Photo: Sergey Efimov, 2007)

different groups within the community through amusing games, contests etc. Through laughter, tensions and even traumas of everyday life may be collectively derided and overcome. Individual and social identities become transformed; as in the case of the Chudi, at the time of our visits, villagers wore grotesque costumes and masks while performing the roles of imaginary characters. The costumed performer was more than just a particular person; she or he became a “bearer” of symbolic messages (from the past) (cf. Stoeltje 1992: 270). Dance and music, likewise supporting carnivalesque solidarity, engaged all the participants in the same action, creating emotionally enhanced memorable moments. Thus, the integration of various participants, members of the village community and cultural activists into one *communitas* was realised by carnivalesque laughter, play and games.

Conclusion

The Votian Museum and the Luzhicy village feast are “heritage practices” (Hafstein 2009: 11) in which the cultural identity of an ethnic group is publicly performed and negotiated through the creation of a symbolic space. These acts of commemoration make it possible to establish and revitalise the collective myths and images of the past, reflect upon the present condition of the community, and ensure the sustainability of an endangered minority group.

The revival of the Votian ethnic identity in the last decade has been initiated by particular individuals, cultural activists, who have taken the role of guardians and “stage-directors” of contemporary Votian-ness. Both in the case of the Votian Museum and the Luzhicy village feast, certain elements of the ethnic past are consciously selected, combined with popular cultural practices, and publicly displayed by the activists. However, staged performances also include spontaneous enactments that produce hybridity, blending traditions of different origins and thereby maintaining the vitality of heritage practices, as well as the identity of the group. These performances provide opportunities for active participation and facilitate in-group cohesion.

Our research proved that a museum, traditionally

considered to be a static archive of cultural heritage, may also be seen as a process of performative acts. Furthermore, this archive is not eternal and can be a challenged space of resistance. Thus, a museum is not only a set of rooms with artefacts but also a conglomerate of ideas that are reified in exposition, as well as being articulated in various practices and performances attached to it. The Votian Museum, as a “minority museum”, exhibits the local history from a subjectively perceived alternative perspective that contests the story of the “majority museum” in the regional administrative centre and brings forth the excluded experiences of Votianness.

The Votian Museum has been the main setting for staging the most vibrant manifestation of the Votian ethnic revival. Although the re-invented feast is based on the traditions of Russian Orthodoxy, religious elements have been discarded in the context of the contemporary festival, which provides an embodied multisensory experience of heritage and a temporary feeling of *communitas*. While analysing the *Luzhickaia sklachina*, we outlined three basic components that had been staged to different degrees, starting with the most arranged part, the opening ceremony, and concluding with the most spontaneous part, the carnivalesque revel. It seems that the elements of the latter, especially mummies, joint singing and dances (not necessarily folkloric), are the most vital aspects, as these encourage participation of all attendants and, at the same time, they are the most sustainable, as they can be adapted to changing cultural conditions. The commensality of the festive meal supported this claim: communal sharing of food and drinks proved to be more important than including traditional recipes in the menu. The Luzhicy village feast as a performance of culture (cf. Schechner 2002: 38) produces ethnic identity and consolidates the village community; it allows for communication with the imagined ethnic past and, at the same time, educates younger participants. Furthermore, the village feast creates a space for the increased and intensified experience of ethnic identity through the collective commemoration of the past. It gives rise to festive joy and a celebration of shared moments for families and kinship groups.

We claim that, in the contemporary socio-political situation, the Luzhicy village feast, through its material objects and sensory involvement, has proved to be a more productive and sustainable mode of creating and supporting ethnic identity than the more transient exposition of the Votian Museum.

In conclusion, an ethnic cultural space can be created in either more stable places, such as a museum, or in temporal, performative spaces, such as the village feast. Yet, both cases indicate that the cultural space is actively produced by particular individual agencies, who, in their embodied actions and experiences, constantly negotiate the present and the future of ethnic survival.

Notes

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- 1 All the activists were interested in “Votian affairs”, but only few of them possessed active knowledge of the Votian language.
 - 2 We use the term “village feast” to mark a subcategory of a festival, a collective phenomenon that creates and supports in-group cohesion within the particular community. A more specific term is preferred here in order to stress the one-time religious and communal function of the celebration (cf. Shevzov 2004). The term *Luzhickaia sklachina*, literally translated as “clubbing of Luzhicy” (*складчина < складываться* ‘club together; pool one’s resources’), refers to the communality of the event. Activists also use the Votian parallel term *Luutsan vakkovõ*.
 - 3 Richard Schechner’s (2002: 22) basic definition of performance as “restored” behaviour indicates not only the repetitiveness of cultural practices, but also the way identities (whether personal or collective) and traditions are enacted in multiple acts that are unique, yet

always contain some remnants of what was done in the past.

- 4 For example, Soviet scholars, as well as authorities, did not make the distinction between various indigenous peoples of the region and labelled them all as Izhorians, another Balto-Finnic ethnic group living in the Leningrad Oblast. That is the reason why local Votian villagers started to identify themselves voluntarily as Izhorians and, due to long-term non-recognition and assimilation in recent decades, also as Russians. Tatiana Efimova stressed the importance of the “enlightening” aspect of her activities in interviews recorded in 1998 and 2000. (All interviews with Tatiana Efimova cited below were conducted in Russian.)
- 5 Both scholarly books on Votian folklore and LPs and CDs with music received from visiting researchers as gifts had been put on display.
- 6 These periods mentioned by Tatiana Efimova in the interview included the Swedish rule of the seventeenth century, the growth of the village at the end of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Stalinist repressions of the 1930s, the calamities of the Second World War, and the insecurity of the post-war period (ERA, DV 157).
- 7 The Swedish period is marked in vernacular place-related lore by medieval burial mounds that are interpreted as “Swedish cemeteries” (Votian *švetaa kalmõd*, Russian *шведские могилы*), despite the fact that these mounds date back to an earlier period. Memories of seventeenth-century Swedish rule are a part of the common knowledge of the native inhabitants of the region.
- 8 On the phenomenon of local feast days in popular Eastern Orthodoxy see, for example, Shevzov 2004 and Västriik 2008.
- 9 Luzhicy was for the first time mentioned in written sources in tax lists of the year 1500, documenting the inhabitants of the Votian Fifth, a former administrative unit of the Novgorodian Republic.
- 10 This date generally corresponds to the Day of Sts. Peter and Paul in the Orthodox church calendar, celebrated traditionally as one of the feast days by the Luzhicy village chapel up to the 1960s (cf. Västriik 2008: 106–107).
- 11 On the flag, designed by Votian activists in 2002, there is a red cross on a white centreboard, which is framed by two blue triangles.
- 12 There are only a few dozen people, elderly men and women, who have an active knowledge of Votian. Nonetheless, the native language is an important symbolic value for the Votian revival movement.
- 13 The word *Chudi* (*чуды*) denotes, in the folklore of Russians and several Finno-Ugric peoples, mythological Others. In Votian folklore, the *Chudi* correspond to the Nordic mumming tradition (cf. Gunnell 2007).

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