Continuity and Change in Media Representations about Estonian Native Faith (Maausk) in the 21st Century

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Introduction

• **Maausk** ‘the faith/belief of the land/earth’
• **Maausulised** ‘followers of maausk’
• New religious movement (manifestation of modern Paganism) **vs** native or indigenous religion
• Finno-Ugric **vs** Baltic, Germanic and Slavic paganisms
Introduction 2

• Institutionalized (i.e. officially registered as religious organization) in 1995 – Taarausuliste ja Maausuliste Maavalla Koda (Estonian House of Taara and Native Religions)

• Largest and fastest growing non-Christian denomination in Estonia today:
  – The Population and Housing Census of the year 2000: 1058 adherents of taarausk and maausk
  – Population and Housing Census from 2011: 1925 adherents of maausk and 1047 followers of taarausk (total: 2972)
Empirical source material

- Searches in the web archives of three Estonian dailies (*Postimees*, *Eesti Päevaleht* and *Õhtuleht*)
- Searches in the web archives of two weeklies (*Eesti Ekspress* and *Maaleht*)
- Homepage of the official umbrella organization for the maausulised – Maavalla Koda [http://www.maavald.ee](http://www.maavald.ee)
- Thematic periodicals, among them monthlies dedicated to culture and nature (*Vikerkaar*, *Kultuur ja Elu*, *Maakodu*, *Loodusesõber*, etc.)
- Ca. 400 articles between 1987 and 2014
18.11.10227 (2014) Maavalla Sacred Natural Sites Photo Contest Winners Announced

The seventh photo contest of Maavalla sacred natural sites drew entries from 11 countries, mainly from the Finno-Ugric peoples. The 1000 euro grand prize remained in Estonia. It was won by a photo titled “The Põhjatu Spring” taken at the sacred spring of Põhjatu village on Suuremaa island, Estonia. The winning photo was shot by an amateur photographer Janno Loide of Tartu, Estonia, who succeeded to depict the sacred site in a manner that is both bewitching and true to nature.

17.10.10227 (2014) Survey: Estonians Expect Pre-Christian Shrines to Be Protected

According to a public opinion survey, most Estonians highly value sacred groves and other natural shrines, and expect the government to protect them.

30.01.10227 (2014) Parliamentarians Push for Inventorying and Signposting Sacred Pre-Christian Sites

In recent days, Parliament’s natural shrines support group has been discussing ways of funding a development plan that calls for inventorying of the natural sites venerated by people from the pre-Christian era to today’s neopagansists.

20.03.10226 (2013) Documentary on Sacred Groves Released
Examples from web archives of Postimees, Eesti Päevaleht & Õhtuleht

Title: Yuletide (Christmas) is an ancient feast of native religion (Õhtuleht 23.12.2010)

Title: Logging is carried out in ancient Estonian sacred site (EPL 7.04.2011)

Title: Unique sacrificial stone was stolen from holy grove in Muhu Island (Postimees 18.09.2011)
Prayer ceremony of maausulised in Tammealuse sacred grove on Whitsunday (Suvistepüha), May 24, 2015. Photo from Facebook. Courtesy of Maavalla Koda.
Ideological background

• Ideological principles formulated in the 1960s and 1970s: essay ‘Maarahvast’ ([About the people of the land] by Kalle Istvan Eller
• Criticism against the mainstream western orientation of Estonian national culture
• Influenced by the national religious movement of taarausulised (literally ‘Taara Believers’ < Taara usk ‘Taara faith’) of the 1920s and 1930s
• Advocated the use of vernacular personal names and introduced an alternative calendar
Runic calendar of the year 2013. Photo: www.maavald.ee
Alternative time recogning and vocabulary

• ‘In the runic calendar Sirvilauad, the vernacular ‘creation of the world’ was dated to 8213 BC, based on the occurrence of the Billingen catastrophe’ (Kuutma 2005: 64).

• Thus, 2015 = 10228

• The compound maausk and its derivatives are not vernacular concepts but introduced in the 1990s

• Maavald (genitive, Maavalla) denoting in the movement’s ideology the territory populated by maarahvas, i.e. Estonians, Setos and Votians
Some principles of maausk

• Maausk has been described as a ‘conception of the world and the frame of mind of our ancestors’ reflected in a particular way of life and culture
• No one ever constructed maausk; it developed ‘together with our ancestors’ and for at least five thousand years adjusted traits of other cultures;
• These fusions took place according to certain principles that include the ideas that
  – everything that exists has power,
  – nature is animate,
  – the ancestors are holy,
  – all deeds have consequences (everyone is responsible for his or her deeds) and
  – one’s creed is one’s personal business (Kaasik 1993: 3–8).
Media representation of maausk (1)

• Late 1980s and early 1990s – irregular articles in journals of dedicated to culture and literature (no religious connotations)
• Early 1990s – “niche” periodicals of narrow distribution (e.g., journal of the Heritage Protection Club Tõlet)
• Since 1995 (i.e. after official recognition) – articles in “mainstream” national dailies
• Since 2000s – conscious media work by the spokespersons of Maavalla Koda regarding religious freedom, religious education, and safeguarding natural sacred sites
Media representation of maausk (2)

• Since 2005 – spokespersons of maausk regarded as experts in the field of cultural heritage and folklore
  – Interviews and expert opinions before folk calendar holidays (such as Midsummer, Christmas, Easter, All Saints’ Day, etc.)
  – Articles about holidays (incl. suggestions for “proper” behavior) published on the homepage of Maavalla Koda re-published by weekly Maaleht
News piece on the homepage of Maavalla Koda about Midsummer celebrations
19.06.2015 http://www.maavalde.ee/uudised/uudised/pyhad/4904-suured-paevad
Et tule ääres oleks hää:

- Koristage enne tulele minekut kodu ja peske põrandad, ehtige toad kaskedega ning käige saunas
- Põimmige saunavihta 9 liiki puid ja lilli

- Võtke söögid-joogid kaasa korvides ja kaunites nõudes, toitудe alla valge lina ja istumise alla tekk
- Pange selga piduröivad, kui on siis rahvaröivad
- Minge tule juurde võimalikult pikk maa jalgsi, see on meie rahva palverännak
- Võtma tule jaoks kaasa kasvõi raokese
- Pange tulle yksnes puid ja muid taimi
- Las tule syytab kõige vanem ja väärikam koos lastega
- Jagage tulega raasuke kaasa võetud söögist-joogist
- Käige kolm korda päripäeva ümber tule
- Sõõge, jooge, olge rõõmsad, hypake yle tule ja hõisake julgesti. Pidage aga meeles, et tuli ei salli purjus ega kurja inimest.
- Könelege vanu lugusid ja pärimusi, laulge, mängige murumänge, kiikuge, mängige pilli, tantsige
- Nautige selle imelise öö hääli, värve ja lõhnu
- Minge lähimale allikale silmi pesema
- Jalutage jaaniusse ja sõnjalaöisi otsima
- Peske enne koitü end rohule langenud kastega

Suggestions for Midsummer celebrations on the homepage of Maavalla Koda
19.06.2015 http://www.maavald.ee/uudised/uudised/pyhad/4904-suured-paevad
Media representation of maausk (3)

• “Normalization” of ideological notions of maausk in media

• “Discursive expansion” of the ideas about maausk in media
  – National dailies and weeklies
  – Nature journals
  – Women’s and lifestyle magazines

• Acceptance of the specific “indigeneity discourse” by journalists
Some conclusions

• A considerably positive image of maausulised and their aspirations has been mediated in, and created by, print and online media

• The movement’s ideas have found support because they are based on a national narrative that is intermingled with rhetoric and activities related to religious freedom, indigenous rights, natural sacred sites and cultural heritage

• The preconditions for the creation of a positive media image have been created through the rich and well maintained homepage of Maavalla Koda, effective use of social media, and spokespersons’ conscious and active networking with journalists, both in the mainstream media and alternative online publications
Thank you!

For more information see: