

ANTHROPOLOGY OF COLLECTIVE MEMORY: ESTONIAN NATIONAL AWAKENING REVISITED

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Abstract. Collective memory constitutes a particularly important basis for nationhood and national identity. It establishes a link between generations, which creates an image of temporal continuity and legitimates the existing sociopolitical order. As anthropological studies have often revealed, however, invention and forgetting are integral to the formation of collective memory. This paper studies the politics of collective memory from the anthropological perspective in the example of Estonian national awakening in the nineteenth century and the role of ‘reservoirs of memory’ in maintaining and recreating national identity.

Nations are bound together by remembering and forgetting, and past is often purposefully altered by means of invention or amnesia. Circumstances, culture and society constrain the ways we employ our memory and recall history. Since the 1980s, anthropology and other social sciences have increasingly focused on the constructed nature of collective memory and its political implications. According to Lowenthal (1996), such shift in the social scientific focus was partly due to the fact that many nations became “possessed by the past.” This was certainly true about Eastern Europe in the 1990s. The decade was marked by an outburst of nationalism, search for ethnic identity and what one might call “memory-work,” an attempt to establish links between the past and the present to “legitimise” political changes. Today’s Eastern Europe is more preoccupied with its future, as membership in the European Union is imminent for many countries. Nation (re)building almost complete and pragmatism triumphing over patriotism, it is a “safe” moment to study collective memory and its politics in a broader and less emotional framework.

In this paper I will use an “anthropological lens” to look at collective memory and scrutinise certain aspects of the construction of Estonian nationhood in the nineteenth century from the perspective of anthropological understanding of collective identity formation and maintenance. I am particularly interested in the

creation and functioning of what I call “reservoirs of memory” – institutions, cultural practices, or physical places, which carry in themselves meaningful history and thus serve as a trigger for memories and identities. I will focus on three of them – song festivals, oral history, and the attachment to land – to exemplify the ways that anthropological perspective can help us understand the politics of collective memory.

On anthropological aspects of collective memory

“History resembles a crowded cemetery, where room must constantly be made for new tombstones,” says a French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1980:52). It is everywhere a battleground for rival attachments, a “field” where, by discovering, correcting, elaborating, inventing, and celebrating their histories, competing groups struggle to validate present goals by appealing to continuity with or inheritance from ancestral and other precursors (Gathercole and Lowenthal 1990:302). The past is thus subject to multiple interpretations and recallings. It is constantly altered by means of invention and forgetting, which, from the perspective of “memory work” or the “censorship of memory” in the psychoanalytic terminology (Le Goff 1992:94), are two sides of the same coin. *Invention of Tradition*, edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (1983), caused a major paradigm shift in the anthropological study of memory. If politics of collective memory did not constitute a particular focus of study earlier, *Invention of Tradition* set a power example, demonstrating the historically recent and inventive content of many national traditions, cultural elements and symbols, commonly regarded as old and autochthonous. Invention of the new automatically means forgetting about the old. Barnes (1947:52) has called such collective forgetting “structural amnesia,” which is another inevitable aspect of “memory editing.”¹

The collectiveness of memory, carried by what Irwin-Zarecka (1994:47) has called a “community of memory,” makes the past especially powerful as the basis for collective identity. As Lowenthal (1985:xv) puts it, “each particular trace of the past ultimately perishes, but collectively they are immortal. Whether it is celebrated or rejected, attended to or ignored, the past is omnipresent.” The unity of the “community of memory,” based on a vague notion of the shared past, is, however, imagined, as there is no face-to-face interaction between past and present generations. In bigger societies, unity has to be imagined also with one’s contemporaries. This is why Anderson (1989) calls modern nation states “imagined communities.”

¹ It is often said that official history is written by the victors. So is forgetting, as Burke (1989:106) adds. Archaeological findings, for example, have often been subject to different interpretations of political nature. The excavations by German archaeologists in 1940–42 in Biskupin in the province of Posen, for instance, attacked the earlier conclusions by Polish archaeologists and stated that Germanic tribes were the first “civilized” settlers in the area previously inhabited by Slavonic “savages” and other *Untermenschen*. (McCann 1990:84).

Halbwachs (1992) has more recently stressed the relevance of memory and its collective nature in the study of national identity formation and maintenance. Memory, according to Halbwachs, can only function within a collective context. Such a context can be evoked, for instance, by war memorials or socially significant anniversaries but also by family reminiscences or accounts of significant events in the past. These are all examples of what I call “reservoirs of memory.” Although those who ultimately remember are individuals, it is the society that determines what is “memorable” and how it will be remembered.

Estonian national awakening revisited

How were the Estonian reservoirs of collective memory created? Estonian “national awakening” in the nineteenth century was in many respects a Baltic German initiative if not an enterprise. Their interest in the Estonian peasant culture was strikingly similar to the interest of early Victorian anthropology in the exotic cultural “other” of the colonies. The nineteenth century, as Lowenthal (1996:63) puts it, was the period when folklore, “the authentic voice of unlettered ancestors,” became a prime facet of patrimony, princely collections were converted into public museums, commemoration shifted from personal to collective, elite to popular subjects, and patriotism demanded democratic memorials.

The Estonian case is a lucid example of how the past that people consider as if “made by their ancestors,” and with what they seek continuity, was an invention, at least to a certain degree, by foreigners. The lack of glorious and heroic past constituted a problem for the emerging Estonian nationalism in the nineteenth century. Hroch (1985:84), for example, has pointed to the difficulties of the development of territorial and cultural nationalism in Estonia. Estonia never formed a distinct political entity at any time of history. Even in the nineteenth century it was divided into provinces of Estonia and Livonia with different political destinies and identities. Nor did linguistic and cultural situation furnish sufficiently powerful bonds to promote the formation of a nation. There existed no written language, nor did religion play a crucial role as the basis for collective identity because church was a part of the ruling apparatus and associated with Germans. Until the 1850s, even the ethnonym “Estonian” (*eestlane*) did not exist and Estonian peasants simply referred to themselves as “country people” (*maa-rahvas*) (Kahk 1985:17, Hobsbawm 1990:62). German terms *Estland* (Estonia) and *Livland* (Livonia) had only geographical meaning, the former referring to the northern and the latter to the southern part of contemporary Estonia and the northern part of Latvia. It was only in 1857 that *Perno Postimees* (“The Pärnu Courier”) used the term “Estonian people” (*eesti rahvas*) for the first time in an Estonian publication (Raun 1991:55).

The emergence of the collectively accepted ethnic label was definitely an important factor in the formation of national identity in a Russian province where the land had been owned by Germans for centuries. However, like in the case of

African and other colonial nationalisms, it was the foreign nobility and intellectuals, in Estonian case the Baltic Germans who, through the study of folk songs and customs, helped to provide economic and cultural foundations for nationalism. As Smith (1976:8) claims, the cultural dimension of nationalist movements has two aspects: a populist and Rousseauan nostalgia for the simplicity and sturdiness of agricultural life, and an academic, scholarly component. The latter often comes first. Although Estonians view national awakening in the nineteenth century as a period when “their ancestors raised their heads and spoke out,” it was the scholarly work by Baltic Germans or germanised Estonians that actually laid the basis for Estonian collective identity. Often it was not even their explicit intention or strong conviction. Masing, the founder of Estonian written language, for instance, never considered himself an Estonian. Kreutzwald, a germanised Estonian who compiled the Estonian national epic *Kalevipoeg* (“The Son of Kalev”) seriously doubted whether Estonians had the capacity for independent development (Raun 1991:56).

Baltic Germans were greatly influenced by German Romanticism, especially Herder, who was also the first to give “Estonian culture” a broader audience through the inclusion of eight Estonian folk songs in his *Stimmen der Völker in Liedern* (1807). Herder emphasised the role of language in the definition of a nation or *Volk* (“people”). The ancient origins of the language were supposed to prove the ancient origins of the particular nation.

The second half of the nineteenth century was also the period when the term “culture” (*kultuur*) or “national culture” (*rahvuskultuur*) became increasingly popular in Europe. It was acknowledged that “culture” was a plural term that defined nationhood. To perceive itself as a nation, a group has to be able to look back into a glorious past, or, in its absence, mythologise and romanticise it in other ways. Estonian nationalism had to choose the second option by romanticising folk traditions, peasant life-style and attachment to land. These became the “basic values” of Estonianness. The same has been pointed out by Smith (1976:17) in the context of Slovakia and the Ukraine, where new historical consciousness was constructed with the help of folk-tales and poems, because of the relative paucity of materials documenting the distinctiveness of these *ethnies*, as he calls them. Engman (1994:51), studying Finnish history, similarly insists that for many Finns the lack of a political Finnish history was compensated by “a long and glorious past” discovered in folklore.

The term “culture” was consciously incorporated into the “base” of Estonian collective identity. An Estonia pastor Jakob Hurt was the first to suggest that the Estonian contribution internationally could be in the “cultural” rather than the political realm (cf. Raun 1991:242). This was a strategic move because culture in the broad sense can be more easily “created” than territory or population size. Strongly influenced by German romanticism, Hurt viewed each nation as a community of culture with distinctive traits such as language, national character, customs and a particular role on the Earth. Culture was supposed to be the only “salvation” of the distinct Estonian nationhood. It is thus not a coincidence but rather part of the “plan” that the major landmarks of Estonian “national culture”

date back to that era. As examples, one could mention the foundation of the Estonian Learned Society, the compilation of the Estonian national epic, the organization of the first all-Estonian song festival, and the emergence of national journalism, literature and music.

The compilation of the Estonian national epic *Kalevipoeg* (*The Son of Kalev*) which later served as an important “reservoir of collective memory,” played a particularly important role in creating the glorious past and constructing the Estonian nationhood. The existence of a national epic has often been regarded by people themselves as a proof of their distinct culture and long history, and thus a legitimisation of their nationhood. This is especially true about relatively small ethnic groups who lack otherwise glorious and heroic history and invent it in a form of an epic. After the publication of the Finnish national epic *Kalevala* in 1835, for example, Linsén, the then chairman of the Finnish Literature Society, had allegedly claimed that Finland could now proudly say that “I too have history!” (Engman 1994:51).

Why is an epic so significant for collective identity? It is generally regarded as a compilation of folk stories and oral histories. Meletinski (1976:269) considers it as the final step in the three-stage sequence *myth – fairy-tale – epic*. In evolutionary terms and from the anthropological point of view, an epic may also be regarded as a precursor of the transition from oral to written culture. Jack Goody, a distinguished Cambridge anthropologist, argues that modes of thought in oral and literate cultures are different and calls the shift from oral histories to formalised texts and writing “the domestication of the savage mind” (Goody 1978). An epic is one way of such domestication. Compilation of the Estonian national epic is on the one hand an example of such transition, on the other hand it is an example of the invention of “a nation with history.” Although there were numerous stories about the heroic figure Kalevipoeg in Estonian folklore, *Kalevipoeg* as an epic was not their true recollection. Kreutzwald never identified himself with the Estonian peasant culture although was deeply interested in it. Many of the verses that make up *Kalevipoeg*, some argue that even more than half of them, were actually created by Kreutzwald himself, while other well-known ones were omitted.² The same has been argued about the Finnish national epic *Kalevala*, compiled by Elias Lönnrot (e.g. Engman 1994:52). *Lācplēsiš* (*The Bear Slayer*), the Latvian equivalent of a national epic written by Andrejs Pumpurs in 1888, is argued to be a similar invention (Hiden and Salmon 1994:17).

The fact of invention does not, of course, diminish the cultural and political importance that *Kalevipoeg* had both during the national awakening and in the Soviet era. Few people really read it, but the mere fact of its existence was a powerful symbol that enabled people to regard themselves as “a civilized nation.” The power of an epic, however, does not lie in the mere belief that its existence

² Lieven (1993:119), for instance, refers to a story in which Christ caught Kalevipoeg by the testicles and threw him into a marsh as punishment for his sexual license. This story that most probably emerged together with Christianisation and symbolised the victory of Christianity over old deities, was improper and thus omitted from the epic.

justifies long national history and distinct culture, but in the moral value of its mythical content. Ideally, an epic has no author and like the Bible, its strength derives from its anonymity or the co-authorship of the past generations. The moral message of these generations is personified in the mythical hero. Heroes, as Irwin-Zarecka (1994:58) argues, provide the essential exemplars of core values, selective memory of outside forces affecting people's fate, and, most importantly, the narrative of shared suffering. Kalevipoeg is a tragic hero, who cuts his legs with his own sword, and is in the end chained to the gate of Hell. This fact, although originally symbolising the serfdom of Estonian peasants under German landowners, was especially metaphorical in the Soviet context. Moreover, although an epic narrative is first of all a myth of origin, it at the same has to present visions about the future. Indeed, *Kalevipoeg* ends with the declaration that "[...] one day an age will dawn/ when all spills, at both their ends,/ will burst forth into flame; /and this stark fire will sever/ the vise of stone from Kalevipoeg's hand./ Then the son of Kalev will come home –/ to bring his children happiness/ and build Estonia's life anew." (translated by Kurman, cf. Oinas 1985:517). This is a millenarian statement that foretells the bright future when Kalevipoeg returns and past moral order is re-established. Such millenarianism has been a traditional topic of anthropological research, especially in the studies of certain Melanesian and African cultures.

Reservoirs of memory

How did cultural elements and practices that emerged or were invented during the period of national awakening serve as "reservoirs of memory" later, especially during the Soviet era, when the authorities themselves were very much pre-occupied with inventing and forgetting the past in order to create an alternative history and legitimise the present? In these conditions, the "reservoirs of memory" acquired a particularly strong political meaning and were actively employed, for example, during the "Singing Revolution" in the end of the 1980s. I will discuss song festivals, oral histories and attachment to land as the anthropological examples of such "reservoirs."

Song festivals – commemorative ceremonies

A great deal of collective memory and identity is preserved in rituals, ceremonies and social events. The most striking of them in Estonian context were and to a certain extent still are the national song festivals. Lieven (1993:110) considers them the most powerful vehicles for the creation of national-cultural symbols. Under the Soviet rule song festivals were the only legitimate opportunity for large numbers of people to gather and show their national allegiance. This somewhat surprising phenomenon can be explained by the fact that the tradition of song festivals actually fit neatly into the Soviet concept of mass participation in

culture and seemed to offer fruitful ground to the application of the principle “nationalist in form, socialist in content.”

The first all-Estonian song festival was held in June 1869 with an aim to “awaken” people to national consciousness (Tall 1985:451), as well as to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the abolition of serfdom. Consequently, these festivals turned from merely musical events into a unifying political action and periodical reassertion of collective identity and solidarity. This role they retained, although in a less explicit form, during the Soviet era. Song festivals at that time were subject to “syncretic” modifications, both in form and content, and the mixture of ethnic Estonian and Soviet elements. This was especially pronounced during the Russification period in the end of the 1970s and early 1980s. Speeches during the festivals were often held in Russian. Stages were decorated with communist slogans, symbols, and portraits of Lenin and other prominent party leaders. Festivals were dedicated to particular anniversaries or events like the establishment of the Soviet rule in Estonia, Lenin’s birthday, the anniversary of the Soviet Union, or a major Communist Party congress (Thomson 1992:253). Yet this did not diminish the role of song festivals as a reservoir of memory and a vehicle of collective identity.

Anthropological literature is rich in analyses of the relationship between rituals and memory. As Connerton (1989:4) points out, images and knowledge of the past is often conveyed and sustained by ritual performances. These performances he calls *commemorative ceremonies* which share various features with other forms of rituals – formalism, performativity, and their functioning as mnemonic devices (Connerton 1989:61). Repetitiveness as one of the important features of ritual should also be added. In commemorative ceremonies, community is reminded of its identity as represented by and told in a master narrative. This is a collective variant of personal memory, making sense of the past as a kind of collective autobiography. Like all rites, commemorative ceremonies are repetitive and repetition implies continuity with the past. By repetition, collectiveness is periodically remade. Song festivals were repetitive reminders of the Estonian national awakening in the nineteenth century, distinct cultural and ethnic identity.

In anthropology, one way to categorise rituals is to distinguish between *rituals of passage* and *rituals of intensification* (Lessa and Vogt 1958:134). While the former mark the transition of an individual or a group from one stage of life to another, the aim of the latter is to restore social equilibrium by intensifying social interaction. Song festivals could in certain respect be regarded as rituals of intensification. This is a complex issue, however, because the intensification worked for both sides – the Soviet authorities and the people. For the authorities, it was a way of making concessions and letting people to express their ethnic identity with minimum harm done to the ideological base and political structure. For the participants it was an intensification of the sense of ethnic unity and community by means of collective performance and audience. In Durkheim’s (1971:349) opinion, society is able to revivify the sentiment of itself only by assembling. The same applies to an ethnic group. For people, song festivals were

the moments of “creative effervescence” which, following Connerton (1989:50), provided them with a symbolic representation not only of past and present categories, but of utopia. Thomson (1992:251), for instance, refers to her interviews with people who told that during the song festivals they could almost believe that Estonia was *still* their homeland.

In order to understand the politics of song festivals, it is not enough to view them simply as mass gatherings of people that periodically reasserted Estonian “collective conscience” and continuity with the past. The act of singing is also relevant as such. Folk songs, folk-dances and folk music are manifestations of ethnic identity. Establishing a connection between folklore and ethnic identity originates in German Romanticism which, as noted above, had a great impact on Estonian national awakening in the nineteenth century and retained much of its meaning also during the Soviet era. Folklore, as Gramsci (1992:187) has argued, should not be regarded as solely consisting of cultural “fossils” and “survivals.” It is rather a part of cultural complex lying outside the institutionalised norms and official conceptions propagated by the organised sectors of society, and thus constitutes a potential for resistance and hence a reservoir for alternative memories. People regard them as “primitive,” “wild” and “pure” creations by their ancestors.

Not the content of the songs *per se*, however, but, and may-be even more so, their social and collective meaning that they acquired at the moment of execution, was important. This is characteristic of all creative action. Fischer (1963:62), for instance, stresses that in case of dancing, Jaremko (1983:60) in case of music. What is crucial is the performance that can be viewed as an act during which a brief social, ideological and cultural balance is won. One should regard not just songs but the act of singing, not just dance but the act of dancing as meaningful. Vikis-Freibergs (1975:19), commenting upon *dainas*, the Latvian folk songs, claims that the act of singing itself became one of the identifying qualities of being Latvian. It is often said about Estonians that they have twice sung their way to freedom – in the end of the nineteenth century, and in the end of 1980s. This claim, although romantic, has much truth in it. What is behind the singing is the collective ethos. The singing of anthems, folk songs, and poems creates a feeling of simultaneity and univocality. This is a physical realisation of Anderson’s “imagined community.”

Oral histories – hidden transcripts

Another important factor of identity and memory maintenance I would like to focus on, are oral histories. Oral and written histories never coincide perfectly and this is particularly so during the era of conscious censorship of history writing, officially imposed forgetting and invention of collective memories. This was especially characteristic of the Soviet Union. In such context, oral histories became not just alternative but also counter-histories. While historiography, the writing of history, was done by the authorities, oral histories were based on individual life-histories, grassroots’ collective memory and were sometimes also

constructed as an intentional counter-strategy in the form of stories and anecdotes. As Thompson (1988:21) argues, oral history is the history built around people and offering a challenge to the authoritarian judgement inherent in the accepted myths of history.

The role of family as a “reservoir of memory” cannot thus be overestimated. According to Irwin-Zarecka (1994:83), telling stories among family members and friends was the most effective method of preserving the unofficial narratives in Eastern Europe. Irwin-Zarecka (1994:55) suggests that the explosive “recovery of memory” in the beginning of the 1990s was a proof of how familial stories can successfully resist ideological encroachment. In the conditions of “moral scarcity,” close family members were the only persons who could be trusted and with whom doubts and cynicism about the existing political order could be openly shared. Family thus constituted a microsystem of communication, the only secure context for the smooth transmission of memories. As Connerton (1989:39) argues, “to study the formation of memory is to study those acts of transfer that make remembering in common possible.” Halbwachs (1980:64) also stresses the role of family as the locus of transmission of oral histories between generations. The parents’ and grandparents’ stories to their children and grandchildren were crucial because what is fixed in the memory is not just facts about the past but past attitudes and ways of thinking. Through reconstruction of their life-histories, older generations gave voice to what otherwise would have remained voiceless.

Politically relevant oral histories in Estonia dealt primarily with the memories of the first republic in 1918–40, Soviet occupation in 1940, the Second World War, mass deportations into Siberia in 1941 and 1949, and purges later. In case of those histories, it is not merely the content of the stories that was important, but their oppositional character to official discourse and the political meaning that oral histories acquired. As Connerton (1989:19) argues, oral histories of subordinate groups will produce another type of history – one in which not only will most of the details be different but in which the very construction of meaningful shapes will obey a different principle. They will have a different rhythm from that of the dominant discourse.

Scott (1986:41), studying the resistance of peasants in a Malaysian village, distinguishes between “onstage” and “offstage behaviour.” By onstage behaviour one should understand behaviour, histories, and ideologies determined by the authority and performed for the authority; offstage behaviour comprises counter-behaviour, counter-histories, and counter-ideologies. Another relevant distinction introduced by Scott (1990) in anthropology is the division between “hidden” and “public transcripts.” By hidden transcripts Scott (1990:xii) means a critique that every subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal, behind the back of the dominant power. Dominant groups may, in turn, have their own hidden transcripts. Public transcript, on the other hand, is a way of describing an open interaction between the subordinate groups and those who dominate (1990:2). To combine the two distinctions, hidden transcript is the discourse that happens “offstage” and public transcript the one that happens “onstage.” Scott (1990:137) has also referred to

rumours, gossip and euphemisms as hidden transcripts or forms of political disguise. Their source, like that of all oral histories, is anonymous, and for this reason it is especially difficult for dominant groups to exert control upon them.

Land – an intergenerational link

Land constitutes another “reservoir of memory” and is a particularly dominant metaphor of nationhood and collective identity in Estonia. As Abrahams (1994:5) argues in a historical study of Estonian family farms, has a dual nature – it is a fundamental element in a symbolic system of moral and social values, as well as a commodity. With the development of socio-economic system, one is generally substituted for the other, but in this process, the former meaning does not necessarily vanish altogether.

As pointed out in the discussion of Estonian national awakening during the nineteenth century, in order to create images of continuity, the lack of glorious and heroic past was compensated by the romanticisation of folklore, peasant life-style, and attachment to land. The latter was an especially important although hidden form of identity maintenance in the Soviet era. It was a dominant metaphor employed during the early years of *perestroika*, when claims were made for “the piece of land belonging to the Estonian ancestors since 5000 years ago.” Land was perceived as the link between different generations and eras, and this link was employed to legitimise claims for independence. Seeking continuity with the past through space in general has been stressed by many authors. Lowenthal (1985:42) has argued that people often seek connection with the past selves through attachment to natal or long-inhabited locales. Halbwachs (1980:140) insists that every collective memory unfolds within a spatial framework of physical surroundings because space is a reality that endures. The metaphorical meaning of “land” refers to the spatial setting to which one is naturally tied, and which is thus part of the collective self. Hence, the term “land” is often presented in the vocabulary of kinship (e.g. motherland, *das Vaterland*, *la patrie*, or *isamaa* [fatherland] in Estonian), or that of home (e.g. *der Heimat*, *homeland*, or *kodumaa* [homeland] in Estonian).

Living on the “forefathers’ land” thus came to be considered one of the basic facets of Estonian identity. Attachment to land as a defining feature of Estonian-ness was stressed by romantic writers and poets at the beginning of the twentieth century and their novels carried these values during the Soviet times. Tammsaare’s *Truth and Justice* is an ode to land and a peasant way of life, to which Indrek, the central character who is disappointed in urban life, ultimately returns and where he finds the “real” meaning of his existence. The land of the ancestors was used as a metaphor of identity and resistance also during the Soviet era. Jaan Kaplinski in his allegorical poem *Vercingetorix said*, for example, lets the Celtic warrior king Vercingetorix tell Caesar at the moment of his surrender: “Caesar you can take from us the land where we live but you can’t take from us the land where we died.” (translated by Kitching 1988:336).

Concluding remarks

Historical facts can be interpreted in different ways. Recent anthropological studies on nationalism, collective memory and ethnicity have highlighted the “creative” aspect of identity formation and the politics of memory construction. This paper looked at certain aspects of the construction of Estonian nationhood in the nineteenth century and how the “invented” ideas and cultural practices of that era transformed into “reservoirs of memory” that served as the bases for collective identity later.

The topic of Estonian national awakening is, of course, not new and was particularly dominant in the scholarly and political discourse during the first years of Estonian independence both in the early 1920s and 1990s when it formed an integral part of the national discourse of the newly independent Estonian state. The treatment of these topics has thus generally been emotional and politicised. Moreover, Estonian national awakening has been studied primarily by historians and hardly ever by social scientists, let alone anthropologists. As I have tried to demonstrate in this paper, however, an anthropological approach may offer interesting new insights and perspectives for the understanding of the construction of Estonian nationhood and the politics of collective memory in Estonia.

Certain aspects of Estonian national awakening resonate greatly with the classical themes in social anthropology, particularly the British version of it. Estonian “national awakening” was to a great extent initiated by Baltic Germans whose interest in the “exotic other” was similar to the interest of early Victorian anthropologists in the “savages” of the colonies. Estonian nationalist movement and its ideology bear a similarity with the millenarian movements that anthropologists have described in various political settings. Transfer from oral to written culture has been regarded by anthropologists as “the domestication of the savage mind,” and mass rituals have been interpreted as moments of periodic reassertions of collective communal identity. I have focused on song festivals, oral histories and attachment to land in order to introduce an anthropological perspective into the study of Estonian national history. Rather than aiming at an all-inclusive analysis, I have at this point tried to set an example for further anthropological studies of the topic.

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