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Forest Spirits and Their Functions in the Traditions of Estonians, Estonian Russians and Belarusians

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This article gives a comparative analysis of data on forest spirits, including their names (terminology), functions, interactions with humans and how they protect people and animals. It examines the similarities and differences in the mythological narratives and practices of Finno-Ugric peoples (Estonians) and Slavic groups (the Russian minority in Estonia and Belarusians in Belarus). The available data reveals a wide variety of terminology and appearances: anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, phytomorphic and fantastical beings. One of the main functions of forest spirits was to lead people astray. The explanations given by narrators remain cognitively interesting to this day: while the causes are attributed to mythical beings, they are mostly related to general oral norms and values.
KEYWORDS: forest spirit, guardian spirit, leading astray, path of the spirits, mythology

Članek primerjalno analizira podatke o gozdnih duhovih, njihovih imenih (terminologiji), funkcijah in delovanju v odnosu do ljudi ter o tem, kako ščitijo ljudi in živali, ter preučuje, kako podobne ali različne so mitske pripovedi in prakse ugrofinskega ljudstva (Estoncev) in Slovanov (ruske manjšine v Estoniji in Belorusov v Belorusiji). Razpoložljivi podatki kažejo na veliko raznolikost terminologije in pojavnosti: antropomorfna, zoomorfna, fitomorfna ali fantastična bitja. Ena glavnih funkcij gozdnih duhov je bila, da človeka speljejo s poti, argumenti pripovedovalcev so spoznavno zanimivi še danes: vzroki so povezani z mitskimi bitji, večinoma pa so povezani s splošnimi ustnopravnimi normami in vrednotami.
KLJUČNE BESEDE: gozdni duh, duh varuh, zapeljevanje s poti, pot duhov, mitologija

INTRODUCTION

This article analyses and summarises the beliefs related to forest spirits among the Baltic Finnic and Slavic populations in Estonia and Belarus. It describes the common structures associated with terminology, functions and interactions with humans, as well as protective ritual practices. Comparisons are also made with the Finno-Ugric and Slavic traditions, primarily those of the eastern and northern Slavic regions.

The *longue durée* approach offers the possibility to make hypotheses on the historical origins of mythical characters and enables an investigation into how they have evolved over extended periods of time. It is common knowledge that language and belief systems

change over time (Blommaert, 2015; Pomeranceva, 1975), and interactions between cultures concern all levels, including mythology – changing names, character traits, characteristics, associated motifs and practices. As Descola (2014: 272) notes, such transformations are "important to explain the diversity of humans' perceptions of their environment". Many earlier studies have demonstrated that seemingly fantastical and arbitrary tales often exhibit striking similarities across cultures. In our research, the physical landscape also plays an important role, as both Estonia and Belarus are forest-rich European countries. Over half of Estonia's territory is covered by forests, while in Belarus the figure stands at 40 %, which means that forests also play an important role as subsistence areas.

Although folklore texts are mental constructions of reality – and only some are characterized by a realistic narrative style – changing social and economic circumstances cannot be overlooked when interpreting these phenomena, as they affect belief systems, ways of thinking, attitudes, and even possibilities for self-fulfilment. Relations with the forest were deeply influenced by socio-economic relations, as well as climate changes. For centuries, serfdom influenced life in the Estonian territory – from the early modern period until its abolition in 1816 in Estonia, and in 1819 in Livonia. Estonia was among the regions with the most entrenched forms of serf dependence in Eastern Europe (Kahk, 1992). During the Soviet period the forest belonged to the state and all forest-related activities were regulated. Belarus belonged to the Russian Empire from the 17th century, and was under the Soviet regime from 1920 to 1991.

C. Lévi-Strauss (1955) proposed in his paper study "The Structural Study of Myth" that myths were manifestations of fundamental units called mythemes, which represent relationships between functions and subjects. His famous thesis is based on the recognition of oppositions – elements that either contradict or mediate each other (Lévi-Strauss, 1955: 224). According to Lévi-Strauss, forest fairies are related to death and hunting, which stand in opposition to life and the non-hunting, agricultural environment. In this system the human experience and its representation are left aside. From the 1970s onwards, folklore texts were analysed using various approaches, including the methodology of Lévi-Strauss (Laagus, 1990). Philippe Descola's neo-structuralist classification represents a form of objectification and includes four subcategories: animism, totemism, naturalism and analogism. All of these were known and used in cultural analysis prior to Descola (2009), but his postulates help categorise human experience.[1] We usually prefer to use the works of the phenomenological school (Arbmann, 1926–1927; Hultkantz, 1953; Paulson, 1958; 1961; 1964), which also considers the social aspect of beliefs. Ivar Paulson, for example, investigated the wider Eurasian area.

A different explanation arises from the triadic categorizations of space and studies on everyday life by Henry Lefebvre (1991 [1974]), as well as from the human and non-human relations described by social anthropologist Tim Ingold (2015: 152). According to Ingold, three elements are important: "/…/ in my triad, intention is replaced by attention,

[1] Marshall Sahlins' (2014) article is an alternative reading of Philippe Descola's ontological scheme, arguing that animism, totemism and analogism are but three forms of animism, namely communal, segmentary and hierarchical, often found in various degrees of salience in the same society, and they all are versions of anthropomorphism.

the subject by the verb, and human agency by the doing-in-undergoing of humanifying. Together, these three components add up to what I call correspondence." All these aspects, especially the notion of humanifying (as opposed to anthropomorphism), are valuable for analysing the data.

METHODOLOGY

We employed a mixed methodology that combined academic folklore studies (incl. local Estonian and Belarusian schools – mapping motifs and terminology, typology, descriptions of actions in narratives, etc.) with comparative studies, ethnolinguistics and universal explanatory models such as animism.

The article is based on archival data and field materials, including data from the folklore archives of the Estonian Literary Museum (ELM; Skriptoorium), where searches using the terms "*mets(haldjas)*" and "*eksitaja*, *eksitamine*, *eksimine*" yielded approximately 3,500 Estonian texts and 108 Russian texts, dating from the 19th to the 21st centuries. Belarusian folklore sources include the BFELA, ABPA (Alena Boganeva's personal archive), expedition records collected by Belarusian folklorists from 1998 to 2020, and the BREST digital folklore archive and database (each comprising around 300 texts), as well as earlier publications.

COMPARISON OF ESTONIAN, ESTONIAN-RUSSIAN AND BELARUSIAN FOREST SPIRITS BASED ON THEIR NAMES

The semantics of the depictions of forest spirits and spirits wandering among different peoples are predetermined by the attitudes of rural people towards the forest. On the one hand, the forest provides various benefits for households and people, significantly diversifying the diet, providing pasture for livestock and construction material for objects and buildings, etc. On the other hand, a common belief among various rural cultures is that the forest is a place inhabited by forces hostile to humans, or the location of hell, where evil creatures dwell, or that the path to the realm of the dead passes through it (Ivanov, 1992: 49–50). Nionel Krinichnaya identifies oppositions in the spatial structure of the forest based on Slavic folklore: "here, ours, domestic, sometimes the right side" versus "other/another, not here, opposite, left side, woods" (Krinichnaya, 2011: 111–112). She concludes that the forest is not merely a place of oppositions, or an unfamiliar, poorly developed space, but another, parallel realm, in the literal sense – the other world (ibid.: 112).

Folklore studies have repeatedly emphasised that the traditional worldview, when in interaction with people, perceives the world as a subject of communication rather than as an object. This fully applies to certain spatial *loci*, such as embodied spaces and places. These locations are obviously important for the community because they are imagined as places where powerful spirits live. The mental selection of these places determines their humanification, endowing them with spirits that govern a given place and oversee

the observance of unwritten laws, rules, norms and prescriptions. It was forbidden to speak loudly in the forest, to whistle, to shout or to call someone's name. For example, animals and people in the forest were called together by the sound of a shepherd's horn, herding songs with meaningless words, or only by voice (Est. *helletamine*, the screams of shepherds). Besides their acoustic properties, these may also have held a magical meaning. Swearing, cursing, using bad words, fighting and stealing were all prohibited in the forest. Meanwhile, hunting and fishing were prohibited at times when church services were in progress. Similar data exists on the Karelians (see Ivanova, 2012: 143, 181–182), the Livs (see Loorits, 1926: 78), the Estonians (see Paulson, 1971: 70; Laagus, 1990: 123), the Russians (Bayburin, 1993: 153; Novik, 1994: 110–163; Adon'eva, 2004: 72–84; Stepanov, Saifieva, 2006) and the Belarusians (Volodina, 2019: 319).

As a rule, the names of mythical beings speak of their linguistic and cultural contacts, their place in mythology, and their historical and axiological aspects. The names given by Estonians, Estonian Russians and Belarusians to forest spirits also demonstrate the humanification of the forest as well as the endowment of spirits with quite specific properties, which vary according to local cultural context. We also think that names help to solve the problems of origin.

In the Baltic-Finnic languages, there exists an older, likely more archaic, general term – *metsarahvas* ("forest people"), as well as *metsa-inimene* ("forest man"). Both expressions (forest people and *haldjas*) fit the belief system and the conceptualisation of the forest as a home and space for others where one must behave politely.

In contemporary Estonian society the common term for all the spirits that live in the forest is *metshaldjas*. The word *haldjas* is a common term in all the Baltic-Finnic languages (including Votian, Estonian, Finnish, Izhorian and Karelian), and probably comes from the Old Scandinavian *haldija,* meaning "owner" or "protective spirit". Clarifications (whether the spirit or fairy is associated with land, home, forest, water or other domains) are formed by means of compound words, where the first element indicates the field of activity (e.g. *metshaldjas* "forest spirit" or "forest fairy"; *vetehaldjas* "water spirit"). If the domain is evident from the context then such qualifiers are usually omitted. In Estonia, the term *haldjas* was traditionally known in northern and central regions, and on the western islands.

In southern Estonia, kinship terms are used instead of *haldjas*, a practice common in Finno-Ugric belief systems (Harva, 1948; Konakov, 1999; Kuznetsov, 2005; Limerov, 2019; Devjatkina, 2008; Ivanova, 2012). In addition to family and kinship terms (such as father, mother, son, daughter), there are also names that refer to a higher status, such as Lord, Queen, Master, Mistress and King. Examples include *metsaisa* ("father of the forest"), *mõtsa-piiga* ("forest maiden"), *metsa-vana* ("old man of the forest"), *metsa-vaim* ("forest spirit or ghost"), *metsa-oidije* ("guardian of the forest"), *metsataat* ("forest grandfather"), *mõtsa-kuningas* ("forest king"), *metsaisand* ("forest master"), *metsaemand* ("forest mistress"), *mõtsa-jumal* ("forest god"), *metsa-peremees* ("master of the forest") and *metsa-poisid* ("forest boys"). A small number of terms refer to evil spirits, such as *metsa-kurat* ("forest devil"), *metsa pagan* ("forest pagan"), *metsa-hirmutus* ("forest monster") (Saareste, 1997, s.v. (*mets)haldjas*).

In southern Estonia, spirits believed to cause people to lose their way are known as *eksitaja* or *essütaj* ("misleader") (Loorits, 1951: 162–184). The same phenomenon is known under different names and belief systems in northern Estonia.

The whole related system is much wider. Respect for certain trees, wild animals and birds also affects the system of protective spirits (Karelia: Ivanova, 2012: 143–165; Veps: Salve, 1995; Vinokurova, 2006; Livs: Loorits, 1926: 78). For example, for the Livs, certain trees, shrubs, foliage and berries, as well as swamps, have their own spirits or fairies. Loorits (1926: 86 ff.) indicates that, for example, in Liv folklore the juniper has a mother while bushes and trees have a mother and a father (Loorits, 1926: 78). The same system exists in Estonia (Loorits, 1949).

If we address the materials of Estonian Russians, the most common names for the forest spirit are *leshy* ("forest goblin"),[2] *lesovik* ("forest man"), *lesnoi ded* ("forest grandfather"), *lesnoi tsar* ("forest king"), but also *lesnoi duh* ("forest spirit"). The naming system is similar to that of Estonian, especially the southern Estonian, Baltic-Finnic and Finno-Ugric systems (cf. Mordva: Devjatkina, 1997; Udmurts: Panina, Vladykina, 2021[3]), where terms such as forest people and kinship terms, as well as forest spirits with a higher status, are central. The general term *lesnoi duh* (Rus. "forest spirit") is also used, along with loanwords from the Estonian language such as *mets(h)aldias* ("forest spirit"), and *(h)aldias* ("spirit") (Kõiva, Boganeva, 2025).

The most common name for a forest spirit among Belarusians is *lesavik* ("forest man") (cf. Romanov, 1891: 93, 215; Czarnowska, 1817: 407–408; Nasovich, 1983: 135). Other known names include *lyasny dzed* ("forest grandfather"), *lyasny khazyain* ("master of the forest"), *lyasnaya khazyayka* ("forest mistress") and *verasovy dzyadok* ("grandfather"). The figure known as *dabrahot*,[4] *dabrahochy* or *vadun,* meaning among other things "forest man", "misleader", "demon", "devil" or "evil spirit", shares characteristics with the forest man who helps people in the forest (Lobach, 2011: 275; ABPA and BREST). Other known terms include *khokhlik* ("devilish creature, demon, the evil spirit") (Dahl, 1882: 580), and *charti lesaviya*, *lyasny chertsi* ("forest devil"). This data comes from Western Belarus, end of the 19th century (Federowski, 1897: 17; Kibort, 1899). As for the names *lesnoy khozyain* ("master of the forest") or *lesnaya khozyayka* ("forest mistress"), they are typical mainly for the Belarusian-Russian or, more precisely, Mogilev-Smolensk borderland (Eastern Belarus). In general, in the Mogilev-Smolensk borderland, the situation with terminology regarding local spirits, including forest ones, looks somewhat atypical compared to other Belarusian regions. Often here, all the spirits

[2] This is the same word that is used among Russians in the northern Pskov and Novgorod regions (Pskov, 2020).

[3] The *nyulesmurt* ("forest man") is unambiguously considered the main mythological being who acts as the keeper and warden of the woodland. Depending on local traditions, this figure is also known by other names, such as *chachchamurt* ("forest man"), *njulesnjunja* ("forest father/uncle"), *bydz'zym njunja* ("great father/uncle"), *njuleskuz'e/chachchakozjain* ("forest master"), and *leshak* (a borrowing from Russian representing one of the variants of *leshy*) (Panina, Vladykina, 2021).

[4] Also known as invisible bogatyrs, invisible people and blind people, i.e. they are independent mythological characters (Lopatin, 2005: 34–37; 2008: 183–217; Boganeva, 2009a: 14–16; 2017: 16–20; Dorokhova, 2016: 36–40).

of nature and the economy are called by one word *khozyayeva* ("owners") or *domovye* ("house spirits") (ABPA).

In Estonia we find more forest dwellers, such as the *külmking* (the "cold shoe" or restless spirit) on Saaremaa, and *mardus/margus* (a doppelgänger who forecasts death) in northern Estonia, along with many other creatures that live in the forest.

A Belarusian newcomer is *vadun* (a misleader, the one who leads you astray), which was found in texts from 2005 to 2020 (ABPA, s.v. *vadun*). It is an invisible force, or a character. According to Western Slavic beliefs, many forest and swamp spirits were believed to mislead travellers, including the Polish *leśne rusawki* ("forest mermaid"), *czerwona Pani* ("red lady"), *baba jagodowa* ("berry woman"), *borowiec* ("forest man"), *wierzbicki*, *łożiński*, *rokicki* ("devil from willow"), *diabel błotny* ("swamp devil"), and the Czech *divý muž* ("wild man") and *divá žena* ("wild woman"). In addition, Western Slavic mythology includes a large group of spirits known as misleaders (e.g. Polish *błąd* "misleader", *błędnik* "mischievous gnome from Łużyce", *błędny ognik* "white light"). We can find the same types of spirits in Slovak and Czech folklore. They typically appeared at night – most often on Advent nights, on Christmas Eve, but also in spring or autumn – taking the form of people, animals, little people, or remaining invisible (Budovskaya, 1995: 197–199). In Baltic-Finnic, Estonian-Russian and Belarusian folklore, we can find names and creatures with similar semantics. The same features seem to exist in Western Slavic folklore, but there is not enough data to support broader generalisations.

THE BEHAVIOUR OF FOREST SPIRITS TOWARDS PEOPLE

If we consider the appearances of forest fairies, the folklore of all three peoples shows certain coinciding features. Forest fairies have distinct voices, vocalizations and cries. Their forms include phytomorphic elements and each variation also displays richly imaginative traits.

The main figures are as follows (according to Laagus, 1990; Kõiva, Boganeva, 2025; BFELA, BREST, Skriptoorium):

1. phytomorphic forms such as a haystack, an alder bush or alder leaf; a pillar with a wooden hat; a spirit's dress made of spruce bark; a grey beard made of pine bark; or three large spruce trees that later transform into men;
2. zoomorphic representations of a forest spirit include: two white calves, a dog, a white dog, a white bull, a great blue forest bull, a furry, dog-like beast, a cat-like creature, a pig without bristles and a rooster;
3. anthropomorphic representations of forest spirits are the most frequent, with various human figures – mostly men of various ages – described as follows: a man in grey clothes wearing a large, broad grey hat; a naked man with a broom between his legs; a man or a boy; a man with red shins or knee-length black pants, a grey sweater or a white shirt with money jingling in it, etc. In Karelia, female forest spirits are rare (Ivanova, 2012);

4. multiform, half-human appearances have the following features: goat's legs; one horse leg and the other human; a tail; a hoof; a long beak; a human leg;
5. mythical creatures: werewolves.

Forest spirits can be either visible or invisible to humans. The multiformity of spirits is well summarized in a record from the Brest region of Belarus, and it is also true for all other regions:

> Like all other forest spirits, the forest master is invisible, but you can hear him. And he loves to make noises. One can hear whistles, clicks, shouts in different voices, claps, mumbling sounds from the river. The wood goblin loves to perform pranks. He turns into a pine tree, then becomes a stump or a hump, or lures a mushroom picker or a hunter off the path. It is difficult to describe him because everyone sees him differently: some with long hair and a long beard, others all covered with moss, still others say he looks like a person. (BREST 1)

While nudity is very rare in forest fairy traditions,[5] clothing often features striking elements. In Estonian folklore, for example, we find the following features:

1. grey clothing – either entirely or in part (e.g. a grey sweater, grey fur coat); black knee-length trousers, a Russian caftan, white clothes, a red hat, a pink dress, a jacket and trousers that look like birch bark;
2. a strange body – long and thin like Goliath, with a large head, a grey beard, rags, or loose hair;
3. voice – often described as loud or frightening;
4. other features – sometimes something strange is held in the hands.

We see a combination of the unconventional and the ordinary, with highly variable exterior forms. In addition to the gentlemanly forms, these spirits are often portrayed as wild, messy and different from the ordinary, although ordinary shapes also occur.

In the corpus of Estonian Russian folklore (Kõiva, Boganeva, 2025), we encounter a similar division, with additional associations between real and supernatural animals – such as wolves, owls and dogs (often described as black, soft and shaggy) with werewolves. The forest spirit is said to live in a wooden house and to harm cattle. Explanations for the origin of such beings are also rich in imagination and frequently associated with forest people (beings of the wild): "Forest beings are people who fled from their parents to the forest when they were little. They grew up completely wild, lived in trenches, robbed and killed" (ERA, Russian 15, 624 (12)).

Mythical beings living in the same realm are presumed to have common features regarding their habitat, way of life, time of appearance and activity. While narrators speak of the same elements, the forms that convey this content are highly individual and varied (Laagus, 1990).

[5] Water spirits are also rarely naked in Estonia (Kõiva, 2023).

Legends have a common structure: the action begins when a person enters a place outside the domestic sphere – typically a forest, though sometimes a pasture, field or overgrown cemetery – and meets a forest fairy. The introductory part usually highlights the action that triggers the appearance of the forest fairy, followed by a description of the fictional human character's behaviour during the encounter. Sometimes action is taken against the forest fairy. The story usually provides details about the time and place of the event. These are universal elements that frame the unfolding action.

The following groups of narratives occur in the folklore of all three cultures:

1. Human actions associated with the forest – A person enters the forest to hunt, gather firewood, mushrooms or berries, to graze cattle or simply to pass through. These actions provoke the appearance of a forest spirit. The spirit may also be triggered when a person violates prohibitions associated with the forest, such as making a fire and lying beside it, sleeping on a trail used by a forest spirit, or performing any other prohibited activities. Tales belonging to this category emphasize that the forest fairy appears to protect animals or birds, or their own home. The narrators' comments on what not to do in the forest resemble the norms of social etiquette expected in another person's home (including prohibitions on making noise, getting drunk, etc.): "[y]ou just need to be gentle" (Volodina, 2019: 317–349). "A forest spirit presents himself as an extremely tall person or 'tree-tall', wearing bast shoes, and with a long whip in his hand. He is a shepherd of animals, and is always an enemy of hunters in every possible way, leading them away from wild fowl and making them lose their way" (Romanov, 1912: 258).

   The most frequent victims are half-drunk individuals. A forest spirit may lure them into water, shove them into a retting pond (a depression in the ground, pit, etc., for retting flax or hemp), or place them on a stone in a bog – a motif common in all three nations. However, such pranks never end in the person's death. Those who use foul language may also find themselves wandering aimlessly: "There is a master everywhere. But avoid cursing. One must not curse" (BFELA 7).

   In Estonia the motif of finding an unknown child (the child of a forest spirit) and taking them in one's arms ends with the arrival of an upset forest fairy and the human contracts an incurable skin disease (Eisen, 1893: 15). Meanwhile, in 21st century Belarus a person can be rewarded for showing mercy towards a child in the forest, who later turns out to be the child of a *lesovik* or *dobrohozhyi* (Boganeva, 2013: 676–680).
2. People see a forest spirit and what it is doing. No taboo is violated, a person simply sees a spirit walking (meeting them on the way, passing by, going ahead), swinging on a tree branch, sitting on a stone and breastfeeding a child, hanging upside down from a tree, standing still, sometimes leaving the forest with a lot of noise, running, dancing, knitting a stocking, singing, walking around a fire and muttering, whistling, crying, calling out or coming to a fire to warm up.
3. A forest spirit reveals itself through various actions: a) the encounter has negative consequences – for example, a person falls ill or the forest spirit frightens berry pickers; b) the encounter has positive consequences – the spirit leads someone to

the right path, gives a fir cone that turns to gold, teaches hunters the language of animals, indicates the location of a lost horse, or comforts an orphan.

4. There are two main reasons for getting lost in the forest: first, a person can unwittingly follow the tracks of a forest spirit; second, the spirit can deliberately lead people astray (Eisen, 1909: 21).

MAGICAL TRAILS

Leading a human into the forest is considered the most common type of action attributed to a forest spirit. According to Saareste's dictionary (1997) and ETÜ (Metsmägi et al., 2012), the Estonian verb *eksima* ("to wander") is defined as "to accidentally deviate from the right path", "to ride a dead horse", "to end up somewhere accidentally", or "to make a mistake". It is related to *eksitama* ("to lead astray"), which means "to deviate" or "to distort". Semantically related meanings also include "to go into the forest", "to lie down", "to deviate" and "to lead" (Saareste, 1997).

Wandering and straying can occur even close to home, though the person's condition is depicted as changed: "a veil covered my eyes", "my eyes faded with fear", "my mind was misty", or "he forgot his name and no longer knew who he was". There are also descriptions of people going around in circles: "suddenly a large forest appeared before him and there was no escape from there" or "he walked around several times, but kept returning to the same spot" (Scriptorium, s.v. *forest*). The descriptions resemble those of a mental disorder. Uno Harva indicates that a lost person comes into contact with "another world, where everything is different from here, where the course of time is not perceived, where 'right' is replaced by 'left', etc." (Holmberg (Harva), 1923: 18–27). Similar changes in time and space, as well as deformations of perception, are characterized by the common motif of different paces of time in the world of the dead and that of the living, as well as in the worlds of gods, saints and demons (Loorits, 1946: 437; Jason, 1977; Kaasik, 2013; Kõiva, Boganeva, 2023).

In her monograph, Aino Laagus (1990: 32 ff.) identifies three forms of spatial transformation associated with straying: a space may become closed, excessively open, or a once-familiar place may become alien. A person cannot escape a closed space in any way – the forest keeps them within its bounds and refuses to release them from its sphere of influence. In an open space, the person is unable to find a way out and may wander for several days until they find themselves far from home (Laagus, 1990: 135). In her monograph, Laagus also refers to V. Propp, who argues that in fairy tales the forest serves as a barrier: "The forest in which the hero finds himself is impenetrable. It is a kind of net that catches outsiders" (Propp, 1946: 45). In the case of legends, this barrier works with certain story types.

The trail with magical properties exists in the mythology of the Finns, Livs, Veps, Estonians, Finnish Swedes, Russians and Belarusians (Harva, 1948: 293; Ivanova, 2012: 212–213; Vinokurova, 2015: 312–313; Paulson, 1964; Volodina, 2019; Lobach, 2010: 190; San'ko, 2011: 274–275; Boganeva, 2017: 16–20; Laagus, 1990; Kõiva, 2020).

Ordinary people cannot see the trail. A person may become lost by stepping onto the path of a forest fairy or other being, mentioned earlier among the Belarusian, Polish and Slovak traditions. Even more common sites of disorientation are the trails of underground spirits (Kõiva, 2020). A person may be misled by the path of a house spirit, the devil, or a creature called *hüüp* or *hüübjas* (*Botaurus stellaris*). Places where people (including soldiers) have died, the place where a murdered child was killed or buried, or even snakes' trails and mushroom rings, may also lead people astray (cf. Jürgenson, 1996, 1997). In addition, abandoned or unkempt cemeteries or burial places also lead people astray, as illustrated in the story recorded by linguist Paul Ariste in 1934 concerning the old burial site of the Rõngu landlords near the city of Tartu.

There is a German cemetery in Rõngu where people become disorientated. Whoever goes there cannot get out and becomes lost. One day my aunt went there with her children, and they crossed the cemetery several times because they couldn't get out. The children were already crying with fear. They were able to leave the cemetery when they approached a rain puddle but ended up in a different place. (ERA I 7, 36 (20))

In folk narratives, a person may become lost either before meeting the forest fairy or during the meeting itself, although this state of wandering is often associated with the person's own behaviour in the forest, which triggers the subsequent events. However, there is another possibility – the person is misled by the forest fairy's invisible trail, which causes them to experience the above-mentioned mental confusion or cognitive perception disorder, including a change in the perception of time and space.

In Belarus, especially in the central and western regions, it is forbidden to step over a tree that has been knocked down by a whirlwind (*vyvaratsen*). This is due to the belief that such whirlwinds are the weddings or revelries of evil spirits (see Boganeva, 2006/2: 519–520; Boganeva, 2009: 575–578; Boganeva, 2011: 522–524).

The connection between wedding rituals and the motif of wandering becomes clearer when you consider that the bride's departure from her father's house is regarded as death. In wedding songs, the bride's departure from home is depicted as a tragic moment in her life. The groom is depicted as a dangerous figure, associated with forces alien to the bride. Her journey to the new home usually leads through the forest. Meanwhile, the groom and his house are threatened by the bride. The holding back of horses and other delays in the wedding ceremony reflect ideas about the difficulties involved in transitioning from one socio-emotional state to another (Honko, 1964; Laagus, 1990: 140).

Let us take a closer look at one particular figure, a unique form of the forest spirit known for its terrifying voice. In the western and northern coastal areas of Estonia, people believe that the voice of an animal or bird is made by a forest fairy that leads people astray. For example, hunters may go in the direction of a call they think is an animal or bird, only to become lost. Similarly, mushroom-pickers might hear the roar of a bull, follow the sound and lose their way. The sound, reminiscent of a bull's roar, is characteristic of a bird known as the *hüüp* or *(h)üübjas* (*Botaurus stellaris*). This elusive member of the heron family nests in the reed beds of Estonia's western coast and islands, as well as on lakes. Its eerie call is part of the misleading motifs based on the mythical creature *hüüp* (Eisen, 1909; Jürgenson, 1996, 1997; Hiiemäe, 2016: 53–58).

PROTECTION AGAINST FOREST SPIRITS

The appearance of one episode in the narrative triggers the next, creating an interconnected chain of events. The mythology of the Baltic Finns, Estonian Russians and Belarusians offers numerous stories about becoming lost and remedies against it. You can lose your way both near home and far from it. Those who are lost no longer know where they are and cannot reach a familiar path. They may meet a being known as a forest spirit, and usually will not find their way home until they have performed a certain action. Numerous cases and methods of resolution may be grouped into specific subcategories.

The following measures are commonly used to avoid getting lost:

1. Reversal – turning the world back around, freeing oneself from an enchantment, restoring the former order to which one belongs.
   a) Turning the world upside down by standing on one's head, rolling over, or bending down and looking between the legs;
   b) Turning outer clothing such as an apron, skirt, socks or stockings inside out, or swapping shoes (putting the left shoe on the right foot and vice versa). In the Mogilev and Gomel regions of Belarus, a widespread belief associated with the forest master *dobrohozhyi* holds that you must swap your shoes and turn your clothes inside out (Boganeva, 2014: 12).
2. Achieving balance with the soul substance by breathing or spitting. One common method is spitting into one's fist. Many traditional healing and control techniques involve symbolic (or real) spitting (Paulson, 1971; Loorits, 1949; Ivanova, 2012).
3. Prayers or incantations accompanied by ritual actions, such as stepping backwards three times or reading the lines of the Lord's Prayer in reverse, are characteristic of all three peoples (Kõiva, 2011; Novik, 1994; Kõiva, Boganeva, 2025; Boganeva, 2014: 12–13; Volodina 2010: 190; Volodina, 2019: 317–349).

   Here are some examples from various Belarusian archives that belong to the same group: In the region of Brest Polesye and Grodno Ponemanye, a short prayer or phrase is often used for protection: "My mother used to tell me that when you enter a forest for the first time, you must say, 'Christ is risen!' Do that three times" (Boganeva, 2009: 578). Another version is "'Go away Evil One, Jesus Christ was born here, go up an aspen tree, on which Judas choked [hanged himself].' The prayer is so short. When you go to the forest, you must recite it" (Boganeva, 2009: 578). In Luninyets District, the Ascension is referred to – when entering the forest, one was supposed to say, "Ascension is always on Thursday" (Boganeva, 2009: 579–580). According to Aino Laagus, connections with important calendar holidays are not significant in Estonian legends (Laagus, 1990).
4. Carrying frightening objects, foods, etc., that the mythical being cannot tolerate, such as holy bread or a boar's/pig's snout into the forest (Boganeva, 2009: 578).

An account recorded from Russians in Estonia describes a ritual in which one must say three times: "I have a pig snout at home." According to the legend, this declaration prevents the forest man from leading you astray. Another record from the village of Nina in Kodavere Parish recounts that when a pig is slaughtered, its snout should be cut off, dried,

put on a stick and attached under a ceiling beam. If someone becomes lost in the forest, they must say, "Pig snout, where are you?" The words must be repeated three times and you will come out of the forest (Kõiva, Boganeva, 2025). A similar motif of a protective action was recorded in Belarus by V. Dobrovolsky: if you get lost, you must remember that a pig's head is traditionally cooked on New Year's Eve (Dobrovolsky, 1908: 4–5; for more details, see Dobrovolsky, 1891; Antropov, 2014: 16–24; Tsykhun, 2012: 188–196).

DISCUSSION

We propose models inspired by the Ingoldian, Lefebrian and animistic perspectives, for understanding different approaches to forest spirits and systems of protection against becoming lost, as the functioning system of communication with the surroundings. The animistic view of nature and belief in the soul form the basis of beliefs about forest spirits and shape attitudes towards local spirits and nature. Paulson argues that these beliefs are universally pluralistic, indicating the existence of multiple spirits or life principles (Paulson, 1958). Natural phenomena had "force" or "power", which appeared in the form of both certain objects and places, but also through the embodiment or appearance of a specific being – whether in zoomorphic or anthropomorphic form, or as items or objects. According to records, there were a number of different mythical creatures living in the forest, known by various names, some of which are genetically linked to other subtypes or categories of beings. Narratives with highly variable exterior forms (across six subdomains) differ in subtle details of content and axiology. There are four to five different narrative subtypes, and a comparable number of magical protective techniques, common to all the examined cultures.

The character of forest fairies is seen as ambiguous, and their names are chosen depending on whether their benevolent or malevolent aspects dominate in a given context. The devilish nature of spirits is expressed not only through their direct attacks on human beings, but also through their fear of the sign of the cross and Christian formulae (Salve, 1995: 414), their smell, and their ability to invert human perception. In Belarusian tradition (San'ko, 2011: 274–275), and among Estonians and other Baltic Finnic peoples, the forest is seen as good, or at least not inherently dangerous. A trip to the forest will be successful if one strictly adheres to prohibitions and regulations.

Interestingly, in Belarusian (Romanov, 1912: 289), Votic (Arukask, 2000), Seto and Estonian tradition (Kärner, 1996; Jürgenson, 1996, 1997), the echo is attributed to the devil or the forest devil. According to these beliefs, devils send an echo as the only answer to people who are lost and calling for help. Echoes are the voices of devils.

In stories about forest spirits, the main character – the experiencer – is often a man (a hunter) whose success may depend on the forest spirit. Based on the practice of offering sacrifices to forest spirits (see Paulson, 1958; Salve, 1995), it can be inferred that these spirits were once the guardians of animals and birds. Their function was to protect, that is to regulate and sanction human behaviour – an idea that became a broader universal principle. Paulson writes: "Forest spirits were, in any case, guards, protectors, guardians of the

forest and forest birds" (Paulson, 1966: 65–66). The idea of a protective spirit associated with a certain territory (*genii loci*) or wild species (*genii speciei*) also coincides with the idea of a protective spirit of an individual animal or an entire species (cf. Mencej, 2001).

Reports about forest spirits are individual and variable in form, although they draw on specific categories found in belief narratives, such as the spirit's appearance, its activities, experiences of getting lost, and the actions and rituals used to protect humans from both the spirit and getting lost.

At the beginning of the 20th century, folklorist M. J. Eisen hypothesized that perceptions of the forest spirit predate the linguistic terms used to denote it – terms that may have changed over time (Eisen, 1919: 69), yet seem to be still valid. Among the three groups examined (and in some other ethnic groups), the use of terms such as "forest people" and kinship terms suggest an older layer of belief. All the data point to close cultural connections, which resulted in the borrowing of the term *haldjas* into Estonian, and subsequently into the traditions of Russians living in Estonia. The names vary, as do the main themes, such as those concerned with the spirits that cause people to become lost in the forest.

Among the topics of interest is the origin of forest spirits. According to legend, the Archangel Michael, together with the angels who defied God, was cast down to Earth and became benevolent or evil forest spirits. In folk texts, there are rare reports of forest fairies rising from the dead, yet scientists at the beginning of the 20th century and even in the 21st century claim this was very popular. In their opinion, the prerequisite for the emergence of fairies and spirits was the cult of the dead. Looking at the thematic divisions, this connection does not seem to be true, as the connection with demonic forces is not exclusive but rather reflects different functions and experiences. Also noteworthy is the fact that, in transcripts from the 19th to 21st centuries, encounters with the forest fairy are experienced by different groups: hunters (men), berry-pickers (especially women and children), forest workers (mostly men), those who take horses to night pasture (young people, particularly young men) and those who spend time in or pass through the forest.

SOURCES[6]

ABPA – Alena Boganeva's personal archive.

BFELA – Database of Belorusian folklore and ethnolinguistics, Centre for Belarusian Culture, Language and Literature Research, National Academy of Sciences, Minsk.

BREST – Database of Belorussian folklore and mythology, National Academy of Sciences, Centre for Belarusian Culture, Language and Literature Research in Brest, Belorusia.

H, E, ERA, ERA, Vene, RKM – manuscript collections of ERA (Eesti Rahvaluule Arhiiv; Estonian Folklore Archive), located in the Estonian Literature Museum (ELM, Eesti Kirjandusmuuseum) in Tartu, Estonia. ERA Vene contains 17 volumes or 10.656 pages of records made from 1927 to 1944.

Skriptoorium, Estonian Literary Museum, Department of Folkloristics, digital archive and tool.

[6] Detailed metadata for this article are stored in the repository at www.folklore.ee/repo/metshaldjas.

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ЛЕСНЫЕ ДУХИ И ИХ ФУНКЦИИ В ТРАДИЦИЯХ ЭСТОНЦЕВ, ЭСТОНСКИХ РУССКИХ И БЕЛОРУСОВ

В этой статье мы рассмотрели верования, связанные с лесным духом, в трех этнических группах (эстонской, русской и белорусской) и пришли к выводу, что, хотя в лесном хозяйстве участвует больше мужчин, чем женщин, в сказаниях отражены встречи людей разного возраста и пола с лесным духом - духом-защитником леса.

Названия лесных духов указывают на различных групп: 1) термины родства; 2) защитники или покровители леса, также как фигуры более высокого статуса (например, господин или госпожа); и 3) демонические существа или дьявол. Последние встречаются в основном в славянских преданиях, где более заметны вредоносные функции и действия. Обилие названий лесных духов отражает жизнеспособность преданий внутри отдельных этнических групп. Контактные зоны отличаются переносами и заимствованиями из соседних языков.

Примечательно, что связь между лесными духами и мертвыми, или представление о лесных духах как персонификациях умерших, в нашем материале практически отсутствует. Это, по-видимому, связано с более ранними теоретическими попытками объяснить мифологические иерархии и персонажи.

Мифологические рассказы эстонцев, русских Эстонии и белорусов содержат ряд ярких параллелей в мотивах о причинах гнева лесных духов (например, человек слишком шумно ведет себя в лесу, аукает сам и отвечает на ауканье лесного духа, наступает на *след* лесного духа, у белорусов еще может нечаянно пересечь *переход* – невидимую дорогу доброхожих и др.). Также имеются типичные совпадения в способах защиты человека от лесного духа – чтение молитв/заговоров при входе в лес, выворачивание одежды наизнанку, переобувание и др.

В комплексе текстов о блужданиях у рассматриваемых народов отражены в большинстве случаев представления о нечистой силе, сбивающей человека с дороги, а также запретах и предписаниях, которые человек должен соблюдать для безопасного посещения леса.

белорусов и русских Эстонии восходят к общим славянским корням, к тому же значительная часть русских пришла в Эстонию из Псковской области, которая граничит с белорусским регионом Подвинья.

Примечательно также, что связь между лесными духами и мертвыми или представление о лесных духах как персонификациях умерших в нашем материале практически отсутствует. Это, по-видимому, связано с более ранними теоретическими попытками объяснить мифологическую иерархию и персонажей с культом умерших.

В нарративах часто рассказывается об индивидуальном опыте и событиях, и, как правило, в них представлено одинаковые количество действий и табу для всех групп. Постоянной темой является важность соблюдения установленных социальных границ и норм, что объясняет значительное число эпизодов, связанных с заблуждениями.

Наши результаты указывают на необходимость пересмотреть данные, собранные за длительный период времени, и использовать их для переоценки характеров и функций мифологических существ.

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