

THE POPULAR BALLAD, RUMOURS AND MEMORIES AS A SPECIAL NARRATIVE FORMAT

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Abstract: In principle, the new folksongs or folk ballads of the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century telling about dramatic events could also be called versified media news, as their aim was to mediate topical shocking events, in particular accidents or murders, thus serving as rumours, news and entertainment all in one. The popular ballad ‘*Saatuse vangis*’ (‘Bound by Fate’) tells a sensational story from southern Estonia. The song spread together with hearsay concerning the central event, the circumstances of the making of the song, and the characters involved. Over time, a specific type of story-telling developed, that mingled prose with parts of the song. The ballad together with the pertaining lore allows us to view the events described from different aspects, creating a broader picture of the development and meaning of a popular text. The rumours, comments and personal memories accompanying the song helped both the contemporary and subsequent generations to understand and interpret the event. The stories spreading in the community by word of mouth addressed various circumstances “beyond the song”, and the narrator’s own emotions and opinions on the matter.

Keywords: commonplace books, folk ballad, narrative, remembrances, rumour, vernacular literature

In Estonia, many versified village chronicles or popular ballads of the late 18th and early 19th centuries were created by men who held a prominent position in the village community. We know this because their creations sometimes ended up in publications and newspapers (Tedre 2003: 242–243). Quite often a song was ordered from the village songsmith to mark a special occasion. Such a folk ballad or village chronicle may have been inspired by a specific event and its characters were real living people. The songs were quite lengthy and often spread with hearsay related to the central event and the characters involved,

sometimes also the circumstances of the making of the song, such as the song's origin and details of the author (Rüütel 1974: 232; Tampere 1970: 240). In time, this developed into a kind of narrative format, consisting both of prose and fragments of the song, as people often remembered only the climax or some more remarkable part of a longer song, the rest was told in prose form, often accompanied by personal comments and rumours that spread in the local community.¹

At the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, local village songs and masterful male singers were known to exist in all parts of Estonia, in greater numbers on the poorer and more densely populated islands off the western coast and in the villages around Lake Peipsi in the east. Ingrid Rüütel has noted that at the time “Mulgimaa, wealthy but torn by social conflicts”,² was also rich in village chronicles. One of the best known singers of the region was Mihkel Rätsep, also known as Laulu-Mihkel (Mihkel the Singer), who deserves a separate study because of his personality and because of the prototypes and inspirations of his songs (Rüütel 1974: 232–233).³ Unfortunately, both the Mihkel phenomenon and his creative work have failed to attract the interest of folklorists to this day, because the study of newer folk songs (rhyming folk songs) has never been a priority in Estonian folkloristics compared to the study of runo songs. At the same time, the Estonian Folklore Archive has an outstandingly large collection of newer folk songs.

Proceeding from the historical context of the late 19th century and a ballad by Mihkel Rätsep titled ‘*Saatuse vangis*’ (“Bound by Fate”, see the Appendix for a rough translation) – which was in many ways exceptional because it was inspired by a specific sensational event and the main characters of the song were real people and the ballad was well known in the Estonian folk tradition – I will delve deeper into the context of the song in this article. I will also attempt to indicate the potential interpretations and information that a study of such an embedded genre of song and related narratives might give rise to, as well as analyse how this tradition functioned in late 19th and early 20th century society and how this special narrative format helped this event to remain in memory and tradition. Naturally, I was also interested in the event described in the song, which happened to a woman called Anu of Sambla (Sambla Anu).

To introduce this event, I have used as my source articles published in newspapers at the time as well as historical documents. In addition to written sources I have also used face-to-face interviews because I was as interested in the community's comments about the event and its placement in the historical context of its time, as about the song itself.

Here it is worth noting that I came to study this topic not as an ethnomusicologist but rather as a researcher of contemporary narratives that have a social message (rumours, legends and memories). The article proceeds from the reasoning

that texts of different genres are poetic forms of expression that represent a certain worldview and attitude towards social reality, and that texts are attributed their meaning in social circulation and context (Bakhtin & Medvedev 1991: 133–135).

THE POPULAR BALLAD AS A SUBSTITUTE FOR RUMOUR, NEWS AND ENTERTAINMENT

According to a narrower definition of the genre, the song '*Saatuse vangis* ('Bound by Fate')⁴ could be regarded as a folk ballad that tells of dramatic events in a versified form. The ballad, which merges prose, poetry and often also music, represents several phenomena in the European cultural space, for example – the Old French danced songs (*chanson balladée*), lyro-epic ballads or legends, news ballads spread at market fairs, distributed commonplace books, dramatic or lyrical romantic ballads, literary narrative, sentimental newly composed ballads. The most characteristic features of a ballad are assigning value to the personal, remarkable and rebellious, emphasis on a democratic sense of justice and its themes, including people in their existential border situations, family topics, etc. Here, anyone's personal story could capture the interest of the general public and any typical song might acquire personal significance (Merilai 2003: 797–798).

The social and legal situation of women was a popular subject in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century folk and literary ballads based on traditional material. Many Estonian poets have used these sources since the 19th century (Salu 1978: 7–59).

Somewhat more innovative are the contemporary views according to which ballads, like other old genres, are considered to have historically functioned in a similar way to today's genres. Specifically, earlier in the 19th century and before, common people could integrate a certain sensational event through various communication filters known to them: rumour, joke, belief, folk song and folk ballad.⁵ In the pre-media era, folk ballads as well as rumours were considered part of popular politics (Shagan 2001: 30).

For example, the folk ballads of the late 19th and early 20th centuries describing accidents, murders or other dramatic events could be tentatively regarded as versified media news because their aim was to mediate topical shocking events, particularly accidents or murders, thus serving as rumours, news and entertainment all in one (Kalmre 2005: 23).

It is important to note that the spread of such narrated folk songs or folk ballads was associated with both printed publications and popular written culture.

Having spread as cheap popular prints in the European and Scandinavian cultural space since the 14th or 15th century, when there were no newspapers, the circulation rate of books was low and people were largely illiterate, ballads mediated ‘newsworthy’ daily events. Depending on the style and place of performance, such songs have been called street or news ballads, and sometimes ‘bench songs’ (*pingilaulud*). This means that news about a shocking event, accident or murder was versified by a local songsmith, the ballad was printed and people (mainly women) performed it on the street or in the marketplace, at the same time selling the printed ballad sheets.⁶ The print usually consisted of two sheets folded into four pages, with little attention paid to the literary value of the text. News ballads directed the attention of large crowds to dramatic and exciting songs, which were printed, read and sung using a familiar melody (Salu 1978: 38–44; see also Würbach 1990).

This phenomenon is connected with oral culture and the evolution of folk literature and reading habits. While many ballads circulated in print, there is no doubt that they were also circulating orally. Until modern times, reading would have generally meant reading out loud and in terms of the ballad, singing turned the audience into a “community of readers” or a “textual community” (Atkinson 2013: 126; and others). These notorious street prints of ballads have been viewed as the forerunners of newspapers because they helped modern journalism to develop. This is exactly how the eighteenth-century bench song type performance (where an exciting song was sung on a stage with the performer pointing at certain images on a board) was the predecessor of both cinematography and popular music concerts (Merilai 2003: 798).

The street, news and bench songs described here were connected with both business and entertainment, mainly through urban culture, markets and fairs which brought together large crowds, but also through the development of general literacy and reading habits and the availability of printing. There were no big cities in 18th–19th century Estonia, and urban culture also developed somewhat later. In Estonia this type of early culture of printed street or news ballads quite likely did not emerge, or at least if it did it has not been documented. There are only a few known poets from the end of 19th century, who drew their examples from village singers, whose works published in print and who would have been set to music and sung by the people (Vinkel 1966: 270–271). On the other hand, in Finland, this use of folk prints (*arkiveisut*) published in the border areas of oral and written song culture took place much more intensively in the 19th century, and their influence on folk lore was probably greater (cf. Hakapää 2013). The effects worked both ways: scholars never doubted that the ballads partook of a popular oral tradition, their discourse is shot through with the rhetoric of oral performance and adaptation (Cowan 2018: 81).

Here, local master singers and the village songs and folk ballads that they created served the same function – to memorise, interpret and spread information about an event. This period coincided with the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, which is considered the period of convergence of local folklore and literature, with the increase in printing activities, the increasing popularity of newspapers and magazines and the publishing of single verses from village poets in newspapers and as separate booklets. The spread of similar rhymed folk songs, as well as poetry written by poets and writers, were greatly facilitated by the widely popular establishment of personal written archives by Estonians in the final decades of the 19th century, its most characteristic representatives being the notebooks where people wrote down local poetry and song repertoires (see Kalmre 2015; Tedre 2003: 243).

ABOUT MIHKEL, THE SINGER FROM MULGIMAA, AND HIS FOLK BALLAD ‘BOUND BY FATE’

The Mulgimaa in the first decades of the 20th century is characterised as a region of early capitalist society, i.e. a region of noticeable social stratification, with many large properties and farmsteads possessing fertile land, excellent cultivation technology, and the majority of people involved in agriculture. Since the large farms required many workers, the number of hired labourers was larger here than anywhere else in Estonia. At the same time the rate of marriage was low and a significant number of young people left the region for other counties. The region was also characterised by a larger share of people with secondary and higher education (Pullerits 1936: 26–29). These changes took place in the second half of the 19th century, during the era of the national awakening, when fertile Mulgimaa stood out as a wealthy and self-aware region in Estonia.

From the end of the 18th century growing flax became one of the most important sources of income for the people of this region. The shortage of cotton caused by the American War of Independence (1861–1865) had raised the price of flax on the world market and the profit made from selling flax accelerated the buying out of farmsteads and contributed to the general growth in wealth in Viljandi County. Here, changes took place gradually and the transition from corvée labour to levy happened sooner than elsewhere in Estonia. During the first period of independence in Estonia (1918–1940), there was even a discussion about whether the people of Mulgimaa could be considered minor nobility, because they lived in large modern country houses, with soft furnishings and often a piano (Riisalo 1968; Murakin 1936: 36–38).

The song creation of Mihkel Rätsep (1858–1900) gained popularity at the end of the period of the national awakening. “A poet who was ‘one of us’ and sang about the common people of the Viljandi County, about romantic love stories, everyday work and tragic or dramatic events in his community’s life, was well suited to the period.” (Valtsük 2008: 19). In fact, little is known about Mihkel Rätsep’s life, and even the accounts that can be found in printed sources, travel guides, and overviews of local history and literature (of varying degrees of credibility), tend to be similar to personal stories. The sources will be summarised in the following.

It is speculated that Mihkel Rätsep did not come from Mulgimaa, but was born to a cottaer’s family at Veltsa, Mihkli parish in western Estonia.⁷ In the 1890s, in search for employment, he moved to Viljandi County, settling temporarily in Laatre, Vana-Kariste, Uue-Kariste, Abja, Kõpu, Õisu and Rimmu, also living in the vicinity of Mõisaküla, etc. During the winter he worked as a flax thresher and in summer as a ditch digger. In Mulgimaa, such migrant workers had the special name ‘bag men’ (*kotlased*, *kotimehed*) (Riisalo 1968:11).

Reportedly, he could speak Russian and German and play a psaltery and the bellows. In his poem ‘*Kimbatus*’ (‘Quandary’, 1902) he also claimed he could play the violin. The farmhouses where he stayed often became places that drew people together to hear Mihkel’s singing and playing skills. In addition, he sang and played instruments in taverns. Before settling in Halliste parish he had already created songs about great noble love and performed them to the accompaniment of his instrument. In Halliste, his songs were about local events. For example, he sang about Sepa tavern, which ruined poor people’s lives, about his bellows, which had been sold at auction, the stinginess of large farm owners and their attitudes towards the poor, about how he was left without pay, etc. Mihkel Rätsep died unexpectedly at a young age at Tõõtsimõisa farm, Peraküla, Abja parish. The location of the singer’s grave in Halliste cemetery is unknown (Priidel 1966: 123–124; Riisalo 1968: 7).

The church records of Mihkli and Halliste congregations (available at www.saaga.ee) reveal more reliable information about Mihkel Rätsep’s life and background. Mihkel Rätsep was born on 6 January 1858 to the family of overseer Writs Rätsep and Liso Ostmann in Mihkli parish. The family’s connections with the gentry and its more privileged status is indicated by the fact that all three of Mihkel’s godparents were German, and by the fact that he received confirmation in 1874 at Jaani Church in Tallinn. In 1894, Mihkel married Jula Saarahof in Halliste; he died on 5 August 1900 at the age of 42. The Russian-language entry on the cause of his death reads “internal injuries”. Thus, Mihkel was by no means an ordinary landless labourer. He had seen the world, and could probably speak several languages as well as being able to play several musical instruments.

Mihkel's song creation also captured the interest of the local educated people. For example, the local schoolteacher Mats Laarman (1872–1964) collected his songs and biographical information. Another former schoolteacher, Mihkel Ilus, mediated the publishing of the singer's songs in Viljandi (Riisalo 1968: 11). The first songbook of Mihkel's songs was published in 1895 (*Laulu Mihkle vana kannel* 1895), the second book and its reprint were issued posthumously in 1902 (*Laulu Mihkli Uus ja vana kannel* 1902) and 1903 (*Laulu Mihkli Uus ja vana kannel* 1903), respectively. The print runs of the songbooks were reportedly quite large: 1,000 copies in 1895; 2,000 in 1902, and 3,000 in 1903. Both collections contain mainly romantic poems ('To My Loved One', 'True Love', 'The Lost Maiden', etc.).

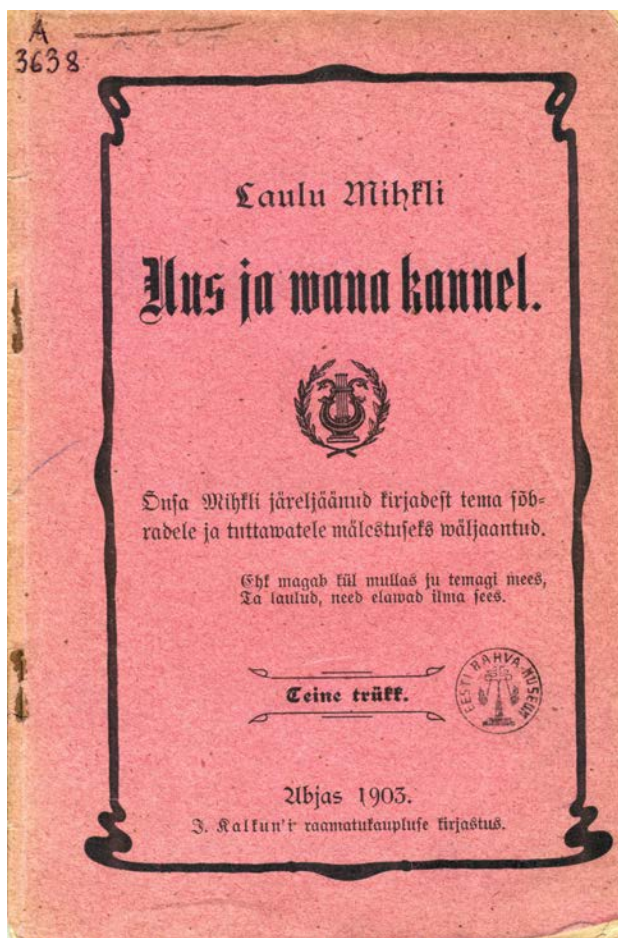


Figure 1. *Laulu Mihkli Uus ja vana kannel* (*The New and Old Psaltery*). Published in Abja, Mulgimaa in 1903.

Mihkel probably created 'Bound by Fate' at some point in the late 1890s⁸, as the ballad was first printed in the posthumously published 1902 booklet *Uus ja vana kannel* (The New and Old Psaltery), and its reprint in 1903. In the following decades the ballad became known not only in the Mulgimaa region, but also spread widely over the entire country; it was copied in manuscript songbooks from hearing the performance or from printed songbooks. The catalogue of newer folk songs in the Estonian Folklore Archives reveals that the song was known all over Estonia, and was also collected on the islands. The greatest number of song variants was collected in Viljandi and Pärnu Counties. The titles of the variants are different as well: 'Bound by Fate', 'Anu of Sambla', 'Juula of Sambla', 'The Fate of Kaie of Sambla', etc. The material stored in the folklore archives indicates that the rumours and narratives explaining the events which circulated alongside the song were quite important, and regardless of the fact that the lyrics of the ballad do not refer to any specific person, even 70 years later comments about the song connect it with an existing person (Anu) and place (Sambla farm). There is generally no doubt about the truthfulness of the event.

During fieldwork carried out in 1970 near Tartu, folklorist Ingrid Rüütel recorded the song and a highly typical comment about the song and the event that inspired it.

This interview demonstrates how the story that spread as hearsay alongside the ballad was strongly associated with the event, with the song's creation, and with the characters of the song.

I. Rüütel: *I don't know, was it a true story or what?*

J. Vään: *Yes, a true story. This really happened in Viljandi County.*

I. Rüütel: *Where did you hear it?*

J. Vään: *I got it from another boy. He had written it down.*

I. Rüütel: *You mean that he had handwritten it down himself?*

J. Vään: *Yes.*

I. Rüütel: *And where were you living at that time, in Kambja, was it?*

J. Vään: *I was living in Kambja, yes.*

I. Rüütel: *And so he also told you that this was a true story.*

J. Vään: *He had written it on a sheet of paper, and I took the sheet and learned it by heart.*

I. Rüütel: *But did he also tell you that this really happened?*

J. Vään: *He did. An elderly person told me that. I used to be a farmhand at Sirvaku Lintsu's place in Kambja. And people used to sing this song there, and some older person had come there from Viljandi. I don't know*

which Mari he was talking about, the song of which Mari it was, that this was a true story.

I. Rüütel: *But you don't know who created the song?*

J. Vään: *A farmhand had made it, composed it. The woman's farmhand. She had a farmhand, and when the story was over, the farmhand had created the song.*

I. Rüütel: *Do you know the name of this farmhand?*

J. Vään: *I don't. I don't know.*⁹

The ballad 'Bound by Fate' was not only a poetic interpretation of a dramatic incident that happened to a young woman, but also a personal story typical to folk ballads, with its alternation of the protagonist's lyrical and rhetoric monologues, and a poetic narrative that is built upon smaller scenes (see also Merilai 2003: 799).

MM ♩ = 108
G5#E♭4 3. Tul-gu kurb-tus, vi-let-sus, va-na-dus või mu-re, lap-se-põl-ve mä-les-tus e-la-des ei su-re.
Mi-na e-ma sü-les, silm rööm-salt põ-les, kust sain mi-na mõt-te, mis tu-li et-te.

Figure 2.¹⁰ *The ballad. RKM, Mgn. II 1740, singer Juhan Vään, born 1881, recording from 1970 by Ingrid Rüütel, Estonian Folklore Archives. Scores written by Janika Oras.*

Choosing this approach enabled the song's author to draw, by means of simple devices, a picture of a girl's carefree childhood with her loving parents. But carefree maidenhood is interrupted by harsh and unjust obligation, which is imposed on the protagonist by her parents and leaves no room for sentimentality or dreaming. These loving parents forced her, still pure and innocent, to marry a rich old man, of course without love. Then follows a description of life with the elderly husband, which first brought only suffering to the young wife. Still, as the ballad continues, it suggests that it is possible to become accustomed to this life and find peace in it. The period of peace lasted a short while and ended when the old man died and left his young wife a considerable fortune. The large inheritance would be the cause of further problems. Despite

this, everything seems to be correct and the will comes into effect. The wife acquires her husband's house and money as a reward for her wasted youth. But there was more suffering in store for the young woman. First, her husband's heirs questioned his will:

*Vastaliste kaval püüd,
viimati läks nurja.
Testament ei kandnud süüd.
Ei ma kartnud kurja...*

*Sain mehe koha
ja tema raha.*

The adversaries' cunning plan
was all in vain,
the will was without fault.
The evil ones would not scare me...
I got my husband's house
and his money.

Then the heirs accuse her of murder. A court trial follows and the husband's body is exhumed for criminal investigation. The ballad's protagonist expresses her emotional suffering because of these serious allegations. However, everything seems to go well and the young woman is found not guilty. But the dramatic story does not end here. The first forensic test proved unreliable and the grave is reopened for another test. The ballad's ending is rather confusing, as it appears that the grave was opened one more time, the third time ("*Ja kolmat korda, said kaevjad murda*"). In addition, the song does not clearly say whether the wrong person was exhumed the second or third time. In any case, this dead person had a beard ("*habe suus*"), which could not have grown in the grave as the deceased husband did not have one.

THE STORY OF ANU OF SAMBLA IN HISTORICAL AND NEWS SOURCES

'Bound by Fate' was a poetic folk interpretation by Mihkel Rätsep of a sensational event that took place in Mulgimaa. In fact, at the end of the 19th century, this scandalous story also captured the attention of newspapers, which allows us to date the course of the events in greater detail. First, on 29 May 1897, the newspaper *Sakala*¹¹ mediates news from Pärnu County about a dead

man who had been buried three and a half years before and was disinterred in Halliste graveyard on 20 May the same year on suspicion of poisoning. The same news is discussed in greater detail in the daily paper *Postimees* on 9 June 1897. Towards the end of the year, on 11 December, *Eesti Postimees* mediates news from Halliste Pärnu County: “The grave of a man buried four years ago, was reopened for the second time. Reportedly, a wrong grave was pointed out and so the grave will be reopened for a third time. The reason for that was suspicion of poisoning.”

Less than a month later (on 1 January 1898), the same newspaper published a longer overview, which deserves to be reproduced here in full as it reflects the typical points of emphasis of the period:

There’s more to the case of poisoning described above than an accusation. There was a rich owner of a manor farm, but he was older, over 50 years of age. He married a 15-year-old girl who was forced into the marriage by her parents. The defendant had made a will, stating that upon his death, be it sooner or later, all his movable and immovable assets would be left solely to his young wife, and he had had the will notarised. A year later the man got cancer and even though he visited all the doctors and tried all the treatments, he still died from the disease. Now the dead man’s brother sued his sister-in-law, first claiming that his will was made after his death, second, that his brother had been insane when he made the will, and third, he had other complaints, so that the case was tried three times, but the widowed wife still won. Seeing that his complaints about the will gave no results, the protester heard years later that his brother could have been poisoned. Now he had to try this way to get his brother’s fortune back from the widow. Upon his complaint, the dead body was removed from the grave, but no sign of poisoning could be found. Now there was the problem with the wrong grave being pointed out, but the complainant had been present during disinterment and had not shown the right grave to his knowledge. Now the same grave had been opened once more, but what was searched for is not yet known.

Since the dead man had cancer, which had destroyed his body, he could not have lived anyway. And since his wife had already been named as his sole heir, – why would she have to poison the sick man. Still, the court has an obligation to hear out the complaint, even if it is ungrounded.

However, the grave was reopened for a third time, as briefly also mentioned in the ballad (“*Ja kolmat korda said kaev’jad murda, kirst oli näha, mis jälle teha*”, ‘And the diggers went to work for the third time, the coffin was there,

what's there to do'), because *Sakala* writes on 2 April 1898: "On the 24th day of March, a grave was opened in Halliste's Lutheran graveyard upon the request of Volmar [Valmiera] County court investigator, and it was already the third opening of the grave. The investigation was brought about on suspicion of poisoning, expressed by someone because of the inheritance left by the testator. Reportedly, the investigation did not bring any clarification."

These were the media reports of the events at the time. The news confirms what was said in the song, that the reason for exhumation was indeed suspicion of poisoning and also that the first exhumation took place as late as three and a half to four years after Anu's husband's death. The news also confirms that in the second exhumation, the wrong grave was opened, although the right man was exhumed later, and about five years after the burial the third exhumation took place. The last newspaper report indicates that for some reason the third exhumation was not carried out on the demand of the local court, but rather by Valmiera's (i.e. Latvian) court. This fact suggests that the complaint may have passed through several levels of the Livonian court system ("*nõnda et asi kolm korda palatis ära käinud*") and eventually became the responsibility of the Valmiera county court investigator. According to the song, the widow herself was present at the first exhumation and pointed out the right grave. The second time, the accusing relative pointed out the wrong grave and Anu had nothing to do with it, because, as the song suggests, she was not even present in the graveyard.

Thus, media articles basically confirm the main facts that the ballad has brought to us in a more poetic form. Delving into the contents of the news and the song even suggests that both mediate the public opinions of the period, demonstrating the emergence of certain discourses in the Mulgimaa region at the turn of the century.¹² These are the themes of financial disparity and social stratification, but also the fate of women. A lengthier review of the event, published on 1 January 1897 in *Eesti Postimees*, gives justice to the young widow and condemns the avarice and cunning of the deceased man's brother in trying to get his hands on the inheritance. The news piece emphasises the widow's young age (only 15), contrasting it to her husband's old age and affluence, and how the parents forced her into the marriage.

The media articles and the ballad 'Bound by Fate' about this event, which happened a century ago, describe true events that occurred in Mulgimaa and the real people involved with them. But who were these people? A more thorough investigation of the archive material would, no doubt, disclose more detailed information about Anu and her family, but here I limit my study to the more general information provided by church registers (available at saaga.ee) and genealogical studies (geni.com).¹³



Figure 3. *Burial place of Anu and her family in Halliste graveyard. Photograph ERA DF 32847, by Vahur Kalmre 2016.*

The Halliste church registers reveal that on St. John's Day, 24th of June, 1890, Hen Kase of Samla farm, the son of Jaak and Tina, was married to Anno¹⁴ Raba of Allika farm, the daughter of Hans and Reet Raba. According to the church entry, Henn was 50 years old and Anu was 17. Henn was born on 18 March 1840 and Anu on 28 October 1872. Thus, while Anu was quite young, she was not 15, as was argued in the newspaper article, and Henn was middle-aged, but the age difference of more than thirty years was still rather remarkable. Anu and Henn lived together for barely three years (not a year, as the news articles suggested), because Henn Kase died on 20 October 1893, indeed from cancer as mentioned as the cause of death in the church registers. Anu and Henn did not have children, but Henn Kase had four brothers and three sisters.

Anu married her second husband Hans Mikk on 25 March 1899, nearly a year after the third and final exhumation of Henn Kask in Halliste graveyard. Anu and Hans lived a long life together. Anu died on 2 November 1949 at the age of 76 at Veske farm in Abja parish from myocarditis, according to the church register. The birth date of Anu's second husband, Hans Mikk, was 1864 and

the date of his death 1937. Anu and Hans were buried in Halliste graveyard in the same plot, number 51, section 30, as Anna Matson (1905–1982), Ants Mikk (1908–?) and Juhan Raba (1883–1970). The inscription on the large tombstone – *Perek. MIKK SAMLA* (‘MIKK SAMLA Family’) – emphasises the relationship of the deceased family members with the former large farmstead in Mulgimaa.¹⁵

In sum, in light of the historical sources, Mihkel Rätsep probably created his ‘Bound by Fate’ after Henn Kase’s third exhumation in 1898, because the song also mentions the third opening of the grave. Mihkel had composed the song either before Anu’s second marriage or during her first year of marriage. So, in fact, Mihkel was able to perform this ballad, based on a sensational event, only in the final two or three years of his life.

ANU’S SONG AND THE STORY IN THE RIVERBED OF MEMORIES

There is no doubt that the lyrical interpretation of this spectacular event – the read, sung and heard narrative – helped it to spread and gain popularity among other songs of the time, and in the end, laid the foundation for the perpetuation of the event in memory. We would know nothing about this sensational late-19th-century event if Mihkel Rätsep had not created his ballad ‘Bound by Fate’. At the same time, it is safe to assume that even during the most active spread of the ballad few people were familiar with the most striking episodes of the song. One of the most memorable parts of the song was Mihkel’s verse: “*surmul näha habe suus, haudas habe tulnud*” (‘the dead man had a beard, a beard grown in the grave’). Even if a person did not know any other word of the song and the story was retold in prose, this verse was usually known by heart.

The Folklore Archives holds comments and memories recorded in two different periods. As the above interview conducted by Ingrid Rüütel shows, the material collected earlier includes informants’ short responses acquired during fieldwork about the song, the circumstances of making it, its characters and the events that happened.¹⁶ Regardless of the laconic nature of the comments, one can sense here several themes that emerged in the song and the newspaper texts, such as financial disparity, social stratification and the fate of the woman. One of the earliest comments on the song ‘Anu of Sambla’ that I could find was documented by Mari Sarv in 1934. This gives us some idea about the creation, spread and popularity of the song, and about Anu and Mihkel Rätsep individually.

So, 35 years ago the song was very new. Everybody used to sing it, be they children or adults, so that people of today more or less know this song over here, and there aren't many who don't know at least some verses of the song, but I couldn't get the sequence from anyone. Luckily I happened to come across the handwritten songbook of a school child who had written down the song in 1927. The origins of the song can be traced back to Kariste, where a young and beautiful motherless farmer's daughter had been forced to marry a rich old farmer. I'm not sure whether she used to be at Sammle farm before or if she was married there, but when after being widowed she drove her fancy horse and carriage to Abja Paluoja, then people always looked at her, saying there goes Anu of Sammle, so she must have been at Sammle farm later. Around that time there used to be this deadbeat fella called Laulu-Mihkel in the area, and he arranged this woman's life story into a song, for which the woman had even paid. This is what they said about it back then.¹⁷

The informant's characterisation – “a young and beautiful motherless farmer's daughter had been forced to marry a rich old farmer” – not only expresses his attitude towards a clearly unequal marriage, as revealed in the song, but also gives it a special emphasis by using a familiar formula from folk tales. According to this comment, Anu had come to wealth and an honourable position through marriage and had ordered the biographical song from Mihkel Rätsep. Most commonly, however, the comments conveyed the content of this unusual event, which was popularised by the song and reflected on the event from a personal perspective. The content of many comments can be found in the Estonian Folklore Archives. The reason for the rumours that spread following the events was probably the criminal aspect, i.e. speculation on the poisoning, and on the exhumation of the body. Informants remain ambivalent on the question of Anu's guilt. Generally they take Anu's side, but like the ending of the ballad, which remained ambiguous, many informants also expressed their doubts about what happened and how it ended. In general the comments characterised Anu as a meddling woman who despite initial hardships and an unequal marriage shaped her own life and successfully managed her property. Ordering the song to be written was also considered a clever move. Yet, the question whether the ordering of the song might have been a way to remove the burden of guilt from her own shoulders was left in abeyance. What if Anu really murdered her husband? The vague verses at the end of the song neither confirmed nor refuted it. All these subjects and points of emphasis are present in the following comments, collected by Otilie Kõiva in 1961 in Halliste.

*Anu [of Samla] was a farmer's daughter. She was married off to a rich old man, who went by the name Veermann. Old Veermann died quite suddenly. Then he was taken from his grave. He had been poisoned, of course. The police demanded that he be exhumed, but they intentionally opened the wrong grave – the body had grown a beard in the grave. ... she [Anu] was also in the graveyard when the body was taken out.*¹⁸

*[About Anu of Samla] She was a good person! Anu's husband had been sick for quite some time, fighting illness, and didn't die all of a sudden as he would have if he had been poisoned.*¹⁹

*The woman was 18 and the husband over 70 years old. Her parents forced her into the marriage. I think she poisoned him. Got married young. A year later the husband's brother had the grave opened. The woman [Anu of Samla] commissioned this song.*²⁰

Anu of Sambla was a kind woman, understanding and industrious. She didn't live long with her first husband. Was married at the age of 16, while the man was over 60. Anu came from Allika farm. This was also a large farm, not much smaller than Sambla farm. Her husband died and people said that he had been poisoned. There was all this commotion around it. A dead body was exhumed from Halliste graveyard. It happened to be some other dead person. It could have been that Anu had poisoned him, but there was no way to find out – there was money involved.

Laulu-Mihkel was a traveller. Came from someplace else. Didn't he come from Saaremaa? The boy stayed at Anu's farm, I think, for two years. And made this song right here. This is what really happened. Anu paid him 25 roubles for the song.

*Anu's second husband was Mikk. He was a builder and a stonemason. He worked here as a builder, they became friends and got married. The old man was already dead when the two met. There were three houses for farmhands at Sambla, and the girls lived upstairs in the main house. There was a brick kiln in the forest and many workers. In Pärnu, Anu owned two houses, and stocks of ships and a linen factory. On the other side of Lake Peipsi there were two forest manors – Loodna and Sitinga.*²¹

The earlier comments above are somewhat different than the longer interviews from the years 2006–2008²² about Anu of Sambla and her fate. In connection with her research Sirle Valtšuk, a student at the University of Tartu's Viljandi Culture Academy, interviewed five people from her home village of Sarja, and

in Tõõtsimõisa.²³ (Anu lived in the Sarja village and the dramatic event also took place here, whereas Tõõtsimõisa was the last place where Mihkel Rätsep lived.) These interviews may be regarded as memoirs or biographical narratives in which people talk about their past from the perspective of their life history and their community's history (see Jaago 2001: 231–233; Ukkonen 2000: 140; etc.). Three of the informants interviewed in the 2006–2008 period were born in the 1930s and two in the 1950s. In addition to the ballad and the related events, the interviews focused on the war and post-war periods, with Anu's fate described in this context. One comment emphasises that she was forced into marriage to pay off a larger debt, and that Anu had promised Mihkel dozens of gold roubles for writing the song but had cleverly wiggled out of paying the whole sum. The stories of older informants characterise Anu as a wealthy privileged woman (“she was no labourer, she gathered wealth”) and emphasise an incident in which she courageously saved a man from her home village from imprisonment by the Nazis during World War II: “She [Anu of Sambla] was such a beautiful person in these olden times.” It is believed that this incident, or some other fact, saved the elderly lady from Sambla farm from being deported to Siberia. The interviews, conducted by Sirle Valtšuk, reveal that the community's memory and narrative repertoire includes a story about the burning down of the main building of Sambla farm in 1941, according to one version, by a Russian destruction battalion.

The women informants were born in 1953 and 1956, and had had no direct contact with Anu and her time. They had heard about what happened to her from their grandparents, who spoke about the large Sambla farm as an important place in their and the community's life during the period of the Soviet regime because Sambla had become the centre of a department of the local state farm. For the children and young people, the old farm and its ruins were an exciting playground where they used to play and dance and have midsummer bonfires in the oak grove and the barn. People remembered that there were always stories about hidden treasure there and both informants recalled digging in the ruins as children. The fact that the case was never solved and there was no clear and definite answer ensured that the rumours about hidden treasure and a hidden body continued to spread.

Anu practically lived there at Järvekuru.²⁴ The threshing room was turned into a bed chamber and all. But the ledge in the threshing barn was high and there was empty space between the two ceilings. People were saying that the dead body was buried there, or in Järvekuru farm flower garden. She used to grow so many flowers there, and kept her dead husband there, this is what people were thinking. This is what people were saying. The treasure was most sought after. (Valtšuk 2008)

CONCLUSION

At the beginning of the last century, the ballad 'Bound by Fate' was a popular song which communicated and described a sensational event that happened in Mulgimaa, southern Estonia. Information about the origins, prototypes and contexts of such folk ballads has generally been forgotten and 'Bound by Fate' is thus one of the few songs in the then Mulgimaa region and in Estonia in general that gained popularity, leading to the context and content of this song being explored in this study. While we know very little about the person and creative life of Mihkel Rätsep, it is safe to say that he and his creative work played a culturally pioneering role in mediating written and oral culture, and 'Bound by Fate' stands out among the creative work of the songmasters of the period, and also among Mihkel Rätsep's own sentimental songs, because it depicts the fate and inner world of a contemporary woman and discusses a serious and topical event.

This distant tale of the fate of a woman has been brought to us by special narratives composed of a mixture of folk ballad, prose and song fragments, rumours and newspaper articles – in other words, by both oral and written traditions. The folk ballad and the narrative lore around it enables us to view the events from different angles, constructing thus a broader picture of the development and meaning of a popular text. After all, the influences and fragments of the folk ballad which interprets these events become reflected in folk culture and are topical in regional tourism even today.

The stories helped the knowledge of the song, and the event and characters it describes, to be perpetuated in the tradition. It is likely that the availability of written sources, manuscript songbooks and prints from which to check the full text of the ballad also played an important role in the process. In addition, it is reasonable to conclude that the fact that Mihkel's songbooks were printed and widely read (a songbook could very well have been owned by every family in the Mulgimaa region at the beginning of the last century) possibly influenced and established the tradition about Anu of Sambla and the song's creator Mihkel Rätsep (see Valtšuk 2008: 9).

The rumours, comments and personal memories accompanying the song helped both the contemporary and subsequent generations to understand and interpret the event. The stories that spread in the community by word of mouth addressed various circumstances that remained 'outside of the song', as well as the narrator's own emotions and opinions on the matter, rumours about Anu's subsequent fate, and about Mihkel as the author of the song. Thus, the song and the related stories and comments have a clear social dimension. The public opinion of a Mulgimaa village community, expressed by means of a song, the

informants' brief comments, the news pieces, and rumours, clearly condemned marrying for money, but also criticised the significant age gap and the lack of opportunities for women to shape their own destiny. Even in the rather wealthy Viljandi County in the late 19th and early 20th centuries opportunities for women compared to men were far from equal, making women's participation in the economy and business quite uncommon. However, notwithstanding this it was still possible, and Anu was able to become successful in these spheres.

In the recollections recorded between 2006 and 2008, in which the events of the past are assessed from today's viewpoint, the story of Anu's fate was viewed in a wider context and associated with dramatic events in Estonian history, whereas the stories mainly emphasised Anu's positive character traits. In the light of depicting a woman's sad and harsh fate, the folk ballad 'Bound by Fate' in a way bears a similarity to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literary and folk ballad lore about the tragic fates of women who are permitted to love according to their social positions rather than according to their free will. At the same time, the recollections reveal that the event with its exceptional beginning has a rather realistic ending, characteristic of the modern world, or, to be more precise, it could have had more than one possible ending. The woman's story with an unfortunate beginning, as described in the song, could and should end on a much happier note in the informants' narratives, with a happy family, a wealthy life and a fancy farmhouse, had the families not been scattered and the homes destroyed by the war. Thus, the story and the song about Anu's fate also tell about the fate of many Estonians.

NOTES

- ¹ On the relationship between song and prose in narratives, see also Mägi & Toulouze 2003: 70, 81.
- ² Historically, Mulgimaa encompassed the wealthiest parishes of Helme, Halliste and Karksi in central Estonia, covering southern Viljandi County and southeastern Pärnu County. Newer studies also include areas in Paistu and Tarvastu parishes (see Entsüklopeedia.ee/artikkel/mulgimaa1).
- ³ Rüütel limits her comments about him to this remark, but has given a more extensive overview of village songs and master singers of Saaremaa Island, off the western coast of Estonia (Rüütel 1974).
- ⁴ Hereafter I will refer to the song by its translated title.
- ⁵ Cf. in contemporary media practices, a similar phenomenon has been called *newslore*, suggesting that the newslore that has emerged around a particular event and has been discussed in the media and social media may take multiple forms: rumours, jokes, urban legends, songs and parodies of songs, commercial advertisements, digitally edited images, cartoons, etc. (Frank 2011: 7).

- ⁶ In the Anglophone cultural space such prints have been referred to as *broadside (printing)*. Historically it was a large sheet of paper or a poster, printed on one side that could also be hung on a wall. In Early Modern Europe, the popular literature made available in print in this manner was also represented by *chapbooks*. Chapbooks could consist of one or several sheets folded (into a booklet) (see also Atkinson 2013).
- ⁷ See 'Forgotten poets' at <http://www.nlib.ee/eesti-looduse-fond/index.php?id=17953/>.
- ⁸ The estimated time of writing 'Bound by Fate', based on available data, will be given below in the article.
- ⁹ Juhan Vään, born 1881, recording from 1970 by Ingrid Rüütel, RKM, Mgn II 1740 c, Estonian Folklore Archives, Tartu.
- ¹⁰ The ballad follows a simple rhyme, using simple rhyming words and paired and alternate rhymes: *näha-teha, uus-suus, harvad-karvad, kaua-haua, lahti-vahti*, etc. A closer look at Mihkel's other songs reveals similarities in the use of words and rhyme pairs. The ballad combines two melodies in major scale. It is not clear whether the melodies were combined or composed by Mihkel Rätsep, who adapted the lyrics to an already combined/composed melody, as was a common practice in newer folk songs (including village songs). Regardless of this, the melody of the ballad of Anu of Sambla was a popular one in the early 20th century, used among others to sing the Estonian and Russian macaronic folk song 'Vihma sajab kak s vedra, skoro budet Narva...' ('It's raining buckets, we'll soon be in Narva...').
- ¹¹ Hereinafter all information published in the press is from the bibliographical catalogue of the Archival Library of the Estonian Literary Museum, databases references DEA and DIGAR.
- ¹² On the social context of media texts and their role as promoter of particular discourses as well as how they serve to have effect, see Lõhmus 2006.
- ¹³ The entry about Anu of Sambla in *geni.com* was added by Priit Last, who claims that the information derives mainly from *saaga.ee*.
- ¹⁴ Hereafter the modern Estonian name forms Henn and Anu will be used.
- ¹⁵ Information for locating the grave was acquired from the 2006–2007 Halliste congregation graveyard inventory list; see Rajari 2007. Information about the tombstone inscription is provided by the author, who visited Halliste graveyard on 12 September 2016; see photos of this visit in the photo collection of the Estonian Folklore Archives, ERA DF 32843-32847.
- ¹⁶ All the following comments (except no. 16) about the song and its context were collected during fieldwork carried out by the Estonian Folklore Archive in Halliste parish in 1961.
- ¹⁷ Anton Sarv, 49, from Karksi parish, recording by Mari Sarv in 1934, ERA II 74, 321, Estonian Folklore Archives, Tartu.
- ¹⁸ Nelli Vomm, 63, from Halliste, recording by Otilie Kõiva in 1961, RKM II 103, 379/80 (12), Estonian Folklore Archives, Tartu.
- ¹⁹ Mari Tamme, 79, from Halliste, recording by Otilie Kõiva in 1961, RKM II 103, 378 (11), Estonian Folklore Archives, Tartu.
- ²⁰ Märt Tiks, 76, from Halliste, recording by Otilie Kõiva in 1961, RKM II 103, 399 (50), Estonian Folklore Archives, Tartu.
- ²¹ Mihkel Holtsmeier, 64, from Halliste, recording by Otilie Kõiva, RKM II 103, 300/302 (1), Estonian Folklore Archives, Tartu.

²² The interviews are held in the Estonian Folklore Archives, catalogue ERA, DH 71, see also Valtšuk 2008.

²³ The author of this article supervised Sirle Valtšuk's BA thesis on *The Folk Song and Tale about Anu of Sambla: Sung and Narrated Reality*, part of the course for Leisure Manager Creative Activities Instructor at the University of Tartu's Viljandi Culture Academy (Valtšuk 2008). The interviews carried out in the course of the thesis uncovered several intriguing details about the topic.

²⁴ This was said to be Anu's second home after Sambla farm burned down.

ARCHIVAL COLLECTIONS

ERA DK – Estonian Folklore Archives collection of digital photographs

ERA KK – The Estonian Folklore Archives, collection of unpublished research and manuscripts

ERA – The Estonian Folklore Archives, manuscripts (1927–1944)

RKM – The Estonian Folklore Archives, manuscripts (1944–1996)

RKM, Mgn – The Estonian Folklore Archives, sound recordings (1953–1993)

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APPENDIX 1

Bound by Fate

(Uus ja Vana Kannel, Mihkel Rätsep, Abja parish, 1902)

A baby, tears glistening in her eyes, is picked up and tenderly cuddled on mother's bosom. She is cared for and tended for, so than no harm would come to her. If I was carried by mother's caring arms until I die, no others would know or rock me. Let there be sadness, misery, old age and worries, but a childhood memory will never die. And in my mother's lap, when my eyes were shining with happiness, how could I know what lay ahead? How could I predict my future, that I would be defamed, my honour and life destroyed... Since I left my mother's bosom, I went through the fire of life, to live in honour or shame!

Maidenhood was not happy – it was soon gone! I lived at home under my parents' protection. I had not been touched, I had not been changed by the fire of love as others had been. The hearts of others beat for a young man, but I was taken and I was dragged so it broke my heart. I wasn't captured and held by the force of love, but by cold hands.

Who asked me: who do you love? Who was I to tell? Had I refused him, the fear of beating made me step forward. I was dragged from my bed like a thief from a prison; do what you will, I had to lay with him...

A prisoner in the court of death repents the crime; like a lamb I was silently dragged to the furnace of suffering. My eyes were red from crying – and the shadows of death surrounded me, chasing me.

I felt little consolation in my husband's arms. I didn't care. Life was ruined! Year after year, I grew accustomed, the cruelty was gone. And after a long time I was again at peace...

The Righteous Judge turned another page; the Saviour from all troubles took my husband. Death will come to help, with keys in hand, which will save many.

Once again I was a lone bird. Still young... Only father was there to protect me from the heirs. It was no fun, I had to step up and defend myself at court. The adversaries' cunning plan was all in vain, the will was without fault. The evil ones would not scare me ... I got my husband's house and his money. Everything was calm – I have my soul back... I thought all my troubles that were holding me down had ended. But the well of woes was not yet full. My adversaries, like blisters and boils wouldn't disappear, but burst.

A horrible story went around: the man had been given the drug of death! The adversaries were quick to sue me. They wanted to see me in chains and look into my husband's grave.

Grand courts and police arrived at the graveyard. They demanded to see the man's grave. I showed them where his body was laid. People laughed at me, the rich and the poor. The grave was opened, the body was exhumed. I was tortured in vain, my heart was burning in my chest. I tried to show that I was innocent. It was all in vain, there was nothing to do.

The body was laid back to his sanctuary. Rest in peace, again, there will be noone to cut you!

It didn't take long before the grave was reopened, to take another look at it. There was a strange smell, when they cut it, I was not there. They filled the jars with the stinking pieces. Now a doctor was found, who would soon tell whether it was all about the drug of death. Another grave, right next to it, was opened. They didn't know where the right body was buried. And the diggers went to work for the third time, the coffin was there, what's there to do.

The news again – what's new and wasn't known before...: the dead man had a beard, a beard grown in the grave. Though thin, he still had black hair growing on his face. Like a miracle...

It is believed that anything would grow and bud in soil. Whatever you sow, will wake with the force of creation. It's still a miracle where the seed came from, from old wood or clay?

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