

## Ethnic identity of Setos in the light of constructivism and positivism

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### Abstract

Seto people are an indigenous ethnic and linguistic minority in South-Eastern Estonia and North-Western Russia. Seto language belongs to Finnic group of Uralic family. There are about 15 thousands of Setos around the world: 214 of them live in Pechorsky District of Pskov region (Russia) and the rest live in Põlva and Võro counties (Estonia). Also there is unverified information about some Setos in Siberia. In Pskov Region Setos are officially recognized as a protected minority. In Estonia Seto idiom is considered as a variant of Võro idiom: this case is a notable illustration of extreme positivism approach to ethnic identity. Such approach hardly can be considered as productive since proximity of idioms can't be obstacle for recognition of an ethnic group as separated; also due attention should be paid to narratives about self-identification, i.e.: ideas of both approaches (positivism and constructivism) should be taken into account.

**Key words:** Seto people; ethnic identity; language revitalization

### Introduction: general notes about Seto people and Seto language

Seto people are an indigenous ethnic and linguistic minority in South-Eastern Estonia and North-Western Russia. Seto language belongs to Finnic group of Uralic languages. Nowadays all Seto people are bilingual: beside Seto language they also speak Estonian or Russian. Most of Seto belong to Orthodox Christianity; also traditions of folk religion are widely spread and maintained.

There are about 15 thousand of Seto people around the world<sup>1</sup>. The most of Setos, however, live in the region of Setomaa (lit.: “the land of Seto”), which is divided between South-Eastern Estonia (Põlva and Võro counties) and North-Western Russian Federation (Pechorsky District of Pskov Region)<sup>2</sup>. In Estonia there are about 13 thousand Seto and about 214 in Russia<sup>3</sup>. Also there is some information about Setos who moved to Siberia by Stolypin's program, and some of descendants of those Setos still live in Siberia and maintain their ethnic identity. In Pskov Region Setos are officially recognized as a protected ethnic minority.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Setos> - accessed February 2016

<sup>2</sup> Pic. 1

<sup>3</sup> Russian census of 2010

The origin of Seto is a matter of discussions. Some scholars suppose that Seto are descendants of Ests<sup>4</sup> who fled from Livonian yoke to Pskov lands. Others think that Seto have formed by the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century on the base of Chud<sup>5</sup> substrate and also included latter migrants from Estonia who converted into Orthodoxy. Also there is opinion that Seto people are a relic of an autochthonous ethnicity that was as separate as, for instance, Livs, Vods or Izhorians<sup>6</sup>. Finally, there is an opinion that Estonian and Seto people both are descendant of ancient Chud. The latter hypothesis is corroborated by presence in Seto culture a tangible layer of ancient pagan elements and almost complete absence of Lutheran elements (Manakov; Potapova 2012).

The culture of Seto blossomed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when many national societies of Seto were organized. In 1905 the number of Seto people reached its maximum. However, after Estonia got independence its authorities started a policy of Estonification of its population, which eventually led to disappearance of Seto as a distinctive linguistic entity of Estonia. In USSR due to the influence of Estonian language schools, high rates of mixed marriages and due to emigration to Estonia, the number of Setos drastically decreased as well.



Pic. 1 Map representing contemporary geographic location of languages mentioned in the text. Seto language is marked by red, Võro is marked by violet, Liv language is marked by orange, Vod language is marked by brown and Izhorian is marked by dark green. (Map has been made after Google map screenshot.)

<sup>4</sup> Ests are seemed to be direct ancestors of modern Estonian people.

<sup>5</sup> Chud was a term used in early Russian annals to denote some tribe that spoke a Uralic language of Finnic group, its location can be seen in pic. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Pic. 1

Nowadays Seto people in Estonia are not officially recognized as ethnic and linguistic minority and so they seek a greater recognition, rather than having their idiom considered a dialect of Estonian or as a local variant of Võro idiom<sup>7</sup>.



Pic. 2. Scheme representing location of some historical tribes mentioned in the text (source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chud> - accessed February 2016).

### Two approaches to ethnic identity determination: constructivism and positivism

In ethnology there are two basic approaches to determining of ethnic identity: positivism and constructivism.

<sup>7</sup> Võro language is a language belonging to the Finnic branch of the Uralic languages. Traditionally it has been considered a dialect of the South Estonian dialect group of the Estonian language, but nowadays it has its own literary language and is in search of official recognition as an autochthonous regional language of Estonia (Pic. 1)

Positivism is generally based on the ideas that determining of certain ethnicity should be based mostly on objectively observed facts rather than on narratives created by people belonging to certain culture.

Constructivism, on the contrary, pays more attention to narratives created by people belonging to certain culture and tends to pay less attention to facts observed by anthropologists.

Classical anthropology was based on positivist ideas, positivism was norm that wasn't discussed and wasn't undergone any doubts.

Constructivism started to spread with the raise of so called 'left movement' in 1960-ies as far as main ideas of constructivism correlate well with those of 'left' ideology.

Both approaches have good and bad features. For instance, constructivism taken in its extreme form lead to complete devaluation of anthropologists reports observations and thus to complete deconstruction of scientific procedures used in anthropology. From the other hand extreme form of positivism would say that cultural identity is determined by physical anthropology/genetics and specific individual can't change anything. Needless to say that extreme form of both approaches is completely off base.

However, if we take both approaches in their moderate forms they both are helpful and useful: positivism shows us general cultural context of considered culture, while constructivism allows a badly determined culture to determine itself. In other words: if we can see that from the point of view of positivism two groups are rather close, but from the point of view of constructivism we can see a strong tradition of narratives about distinct self-identification of one of considered group, then we should nevertheless pay due attention to corresponding narratives/discourse.

### **The case of Seto identity**

In the case of Seto we can see the following: from the point of view of positivism Seto language is a dialect/variant of Võro language. Estonian officials in this case follow patterns of positivism: they pay attention to proximity of Seto and Võro languages only and ignore Seto narratives about Seto identity. The case of Estonian attitude toward Seto is actually rather typical for small nations that got their independence not long ago and so they are still in the period of elaboration of their traditions and due to this they decline to allow existence of other minority inside their culture.

Also should be noted the following: great proximity of languages from the point of view of linguistics actually can't be base of declining to recognize certain ethnicities as different, for instance: Belorussian and Ukrainian languages are mutually intelligible and can be considered as variants of the same idiom, but the fact of their great proximity of two languages doesn't mean that ethnicities are not distinct; another good example can be the case of Hawaiian and Maori that also are rather mutually intelligible and can be considered as variants of the same idiom, but Hawaiian and Maori people are, by the way, considered as different ethnic groups.

From the point of view of general linguistics Seto language can be considered as variant of Võro language, however, Seto people have strong traditions of self-identification narratives, they understand the importance of their own idiom, and they strictly distinct their idiom from Võro and Estonian. It is rather notable example that one informant of Seto once said the following: "we [the Seto] don't recognize Võro lexicon".

Also should be taken into account serious cultural distinctions between Estonians and Võro from one hand and between Seto from the other hand: Estonian and Võro are Lutheran while Seto are of Orthodox Christianity and also Seto widely maintain ancient traditions of folk religion (atmospheric cults) that are not maintained in such degree among Estonian and Võro people. All this clearly evidences that though Seto people are rather close to Estonian and Võro people, but they should be considered and recognized as a distinct ethnic group.

## **References**

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