

VIRANTANAZ – AN EPIC IN VEPSIAN? ABOUT THE FIRST ATTEMPT AT AN EPIC

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Abstract. The paper is a brief account of the events of the past 20 years, which have been essential for the fate of the Veps, and brought the author, who found herself in the very heart of the processes of Vepsian language and culture revival, to the idea of creating the epic. Can one create an epic in the language of a people (Vepsians in our case) whose memory has preserved no epic-style pieces of literature, no large oral literary forms, whose folklore heritage is not so rich, the nation itself is a minority, and its language is already red-listed? Or should one? Writing the work was a chance to retrieve from the people's memory many facts, real or imaginary events, rituals, customs and legends, melodious idioms and sayings, which might help revitalise the people, its language and culture. The paper demonstrates the folklore and mythological background of the epic, represents and substantiates the key aspects of the style poetics, its folk heritage roots.

Keywords: Vepsian, written standard, revitalisation, folklore, epic, tradition, mythology

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.12697/jeful.2015.6.1.09>

1. The Vepsian people at the turn of the century: ideas and methods of revitalisation

The late 1980s in Russia were marked by emerging possibilities to work towards the revitalisation of minority languages and cultures. The Institute of Language, Literature and History (Karelian Research Centre, Russian Academy of Sciences) has become an important actor in the processes of revitalisation, primarily for the Karelian and the Vepsian peoples. Scientists from the institute, whose research profile was the named ethnic groups and their languages, and who regularly undertook expeditions to their settlement ranges, were very much aware of the depressing and disastrous condition of the languages and cultures of indigenous Finnic nations of Karelia and adjacent regions – Karelians and Vepsians, as evidenced, first of all, by the dramatic decline in their

numbers (see Ethno-cultural development: 157). In the new political situation giving the possibility to contribute to language and culture recovery, many scientists responded immediately, momentarily, in many senses even taking the lead in the revitalisation process. Researchers of the Karelian and Vepsian languages and cultures were the ones to chair the first conferences on the Karelian and Vepsian nations with wide involvement of the public, peoples' representatives, and authorities. The teams of leading specialist began to work out alphabets, prepare school and university textbooks and manuals, participate in the Terminology and Spelling Commission under the Governor of the Republic of Karelia, anxious to advance the newly-scripted languages, expand their capacity to portray modern realities, and produce modern vocabulary bulletins, various dictionaries, phrasebooks, and other aids to this end. The list of such activities is quite long.

Let us note that while the undoubtedly successful progress of newly-scripted languages, including Vepsian, has been generally highly appraised, one may still see some comments claiming that “only a narrow circle of scholars and a minor part of intelligentsia are involved in the process of creating the written language. Most people of Vepsian nationality do not care about these processes pivotal for the development and preservation of the language” (Myznikov 2012: 366–367). We believe this is too categorical a statement. Expeditions to the Vepsian range, interviews, questionnaires, etc., prove that people are concerned about their national fate. The ELDIA project (see European Language Diversity for All), implemented in 2010–2012 and comprising Vepsians in its study domain, has demonstrated that Vepsian people themselves value their culture highly, as well as their language, its usage and future well-being. Furthermore, having even one specialist who is a native-speaker of the language he/she is studying is a fortune for a minority. The Vepsian national revival was led by ethnographers, linguists, writers, teachers, so that the revitalisation process has advanced considerably within a short period of two decades. Unfortunately, there are other factors in these processes that scientists and intelligentsia cannot drive. After all the success of the first steps on the way towards revival, one can now see some decline in the revitalisation processes. Vepsian national community activists strive to turn the tide using various methods and instruments.

In the late 1980s concepts and programmes were prepared aiming to re-establish the Karelian and the Vepsian languages in school. At that time, such a programme (see *Programma*) was recognised as one of the

most advanced in Russia. The programme comprised quite a number of measures to strengthen the standing of the Karelian and the Vepsian languages in schools, with many hopes attached to it. The programme also envisaged the inclusion of the languages as subjects in the curriculum, and expansion of their functions: the authors of the programme believed that elements of the languages could be integrated in nature study, industrial arts, fine arts, music, physical education classes, given that the teachers were familiar with the languages. This principle did work at first, but the number of schoolteachers speaking the languages decreased rapidly: older teachers left, and younger ones had poor command of the languages, if at all.

In the mid-1990s, the “Concept of the Finno-Ugric school of Karelia” (see *Koncepcija*) was prepared with the mission of establishing a scientific baseline for teaching the Karelian, Vepsian, and Finnish languages in school.

In 1988, the Karelian and Vepsian language alphabets were re-created using the Latin character set as the basis. The Vepsian alphabet was broadly debated in the media (see *Vepsy*: 101–125), but the decision was to keep up the tradition from the 1930s of using Latin characters, and to preserve the common Finnic language space cemented, in addition to linguistic affiliations, by the graphic presentation of words, making them more comprehensible to all Finnic nations.

In the 1930s – the first period of Vepsian script development and application – over thirty Vepsian language textbooks of all kinds were published. Unfortunately, because of their highly politicised and obsolete content, they cannot be applied in schools now, at a time when the Vepsian script is being restored. Apart from this, the criteria for the newly-scripted language and its spelling are somewhat different in this new period of the Vepsian language revival and teaching (*Zajceva* 2006). Let us stress that the authors of the new school textbooks, who had all the information on Vepsian language dialects at their disposal, did their best to promote their development by including many dialectal words and forms in the textbooks (after the equality sign), using folklore texts from different regions, annexing glossaries to familiarise language-learners with the whole diversity of Vepsian dialectal speech (see for example *Zaiceva* and *Mullonen* 1991). Thus, the author of this paper has in the course of two decades, prepared, either individually or with co-authors, 13 books of various types for students of the Vepsian language: a primary, four textbooks for grades 2 to 9, three textbooks for university students, a Russian-Vepsian phrasebook, and four dictionaries

of different profiles, including the latest spelling dictionary, which is a kind of summary of newly-scripted Vepsian language development over 20 years (Zajceva et al. 2012).

The leaders of Vepsian language revitalisation and founders of its writing traditions have attempted to enrich Vepsian vocabulary in order to activate its practical use and provide a wider coverage of modern realities. To this end, three bulletins of new Vepsian vocabulary were published, where new words were created using inherent word-building patterns, and the range of meanings of authentic lexemes was considerably expanded (see *Lingvistine termišť*; *Školvaihišt*; *Novaja leksika*). It suffices to say that the best known dialect dictionary of the Vepsian language (Zajceva and Mullonen 1972) contained just around 9,000 words, whereas the Vepsian spelling dictionary published in 2012 already comprised 17,000 words (Zajceva et al. 2012), demonstrating a nearly doubled Vepsian lexical pool.

In addition to educational editions, the Society of Vepsian Culture, established in 1988, set forth another critical priority – the development of fiction and non-fiction in the Vepsian language, to facilitate enrichment and progress of the language. In the 1930s – the first period of designing the Vepsian script – this issue didn't even make it to the agenda. Only one very short translated story was published.

In 1993 the Vepsian-language newspaper *Kodima* was founded; it was edited for 8 years by the author of this paper. This was the first publication in which content was devoted to the Vepsian language as a whole. The Veps live in the territory of three regions: the Republic of Karelia, Vologda Oblast and Leningrad Oblast, so the newspaper's main goal was to unite the people into one nation. Until the end of the 1980s many of the nation groups thought they were the last Vepsian-speaking groups. Even the self-designation of the nation groups was different: the southern Vepsians (Boksitogorsk District in Leningrad Oblast) as well as western Vepsians (Vologda Oblast) called themselves mostly *Chuhar* or *Chud* and very seldom Vepsian; some middle Vepsians and northern Vepsians called themselves *Lyydik*. Many Vepsians used to call themselves *ičemoi rahvaz* (our people), and speak *ičemoi kelel* (in our language). In the process of the nation revitalisation by the Vepsian Cultural Society the main target was to unite the nation and to cultivate the sense of unity. The newspaper *Kodima*, 'Motherland' served as a uniting basis describing the problems of different Vepsian groups. The newspaper is published in two languages, Vepsian and Russian: the Vepsian language texts are the texts that are easy to be written in Vepsian,

the texts in Russian tell about politics because there is not enough political vocabulary in Vepsian. This decision seemed to be right because the youth did not speak their mother tongue well despite their interest in nation revitalisation being sincere. Apart from that, the newspaper was a method by which many representatives of the Vepsian people started getting used to the written word as well as the spoken word. At the beginning, the newspaper consisted of the texts written in all dialects and sub dialects that helped the people to understand the texts. However, there are some columns in which dialects are used. At the beginning of the revitalisation process the Society of Vepsian Culture made a decision to form a unified written language based on the fact that there were not great differences between the dialects, and as the nation was quite small and there was no need to divide it according to different written languages.

One of the most important goals was to develop different literature genres in Vepsian within the framework of the newspaper: poems, prose, translated literature. By form *Kodima* was a newspaper, while by content it was a public relations and artistic mini almanac that started helping the formation of a Vepsian literary language and style. The newspaper started being a scene for Vepsian language prose writers and poets. The first poems of contemporary accomplished authors Nikolay Abramov, Alevtina Andreyeva, Yuri Bashnin, and Viktor Yershov were published there. Thus, the Vepsian literary and written language started to develop. Currently the annual literary magazine in Vepsian, *Verez tullei* 'Fresh Wind' (Verez tullei 2011, 2012, 2013), formed as a part of the *Kodima* newspaper, demonstrates the development of a literary style that has its own characteristics and priorities.

Translations of the Bible were a special item on the list. The author of this article has since produced basic translations and published 9 books on the Bible (see *Apostoliden tegod*; *Evangeliij Joannan mödhe*; *Evangeliij Lukan mödhe*; *Evangeliij Matvejan mödhe*; *Iisusan elo*; *Lapsiden Biblii*; *Markan evangeliij*; *Psalmoiden kirj*; *Uz' Zavet*), opening new horizons to the Vepsian written language. The volume of collected papers published in Moscow and devoted to Vepsian literature names many authors, who either write in Vepsian or address Vepsian issues, and remarks that "nothing could stop Vepsians from creating their own original culture and literature" (Vepsskaja literatura: 2).

2. The principles of writing the epic legend *Virantanaz*

The new happening in 2012 was the epic *Virantanaz* (Zaitseva 2012). *Virantanaz* is a toponymic item, the name of a community, tribe, etc.), which was made possible by the activities described above.

The Vepsian-language *Virantanaz* epic, or heroics, which was created in modern times, in the ‘post-dialect’ period and alongside the establishment and solidification of Vepsian written language traditions, is an alloy of folklore, historical lore, recent scientific findings, as well as the observations and fantasy of the author as a representative of the people who own the language of the epic.

Unfortunately, the Vepsian nation lacks rich folklore heritage in the form of long texts. No Kalevala-metric song (songs recorded by Elias Lönnrot and by other collectors on Finnish and Karelian territories) marks were determined in Vepsian territory. The *Kalevala* texts were segmental texts that did not represent the united poem. As all know, Lönnrot chose the text versions mostly appropriate to his poem idea by content, also using other songtexts for the poem and adding his own verses. The aim of uniting the folk arts into one poem, describing both heroic events and the everyday life of the people, stimulated the author to create the epic legend *Virantanaz* based on historical and ethnographical material. Recently a Finnish translation of *Virantanaz* was published (Zaitseva 2013). Markku Nieminen, a writer, one of the managers of the Juminkeko Foundation (Finland) has supported both the idea of creating the poem and Vepsian language writers in general in many ways. He was the initiator of the Vepsian writers congresses in 1992, 2002 and 2012 that positively influenced nascent Vepsian literature.

As was already mentioned, Vepsian folklore heritage is quite small compared to Karelian, Finnish and Estonian folklore and is represented mainly by fairy tales, *chastushki* (humoristic short songs), nursery rhymes, and several historical legends published by linguists in the Vepsian language samples and in some research. Ritual lamentations play a special role in the heritage. They are the important components in the spiritual culture of the nation and have the special characteristics of the Vepsian language. It is remarkable that the folklore texts have lately enriched the lexicon of the nascent Vepsian written language.

The sources used in the preparation of *Virantanaz* were Vepsian folklore and *chastushka* books by Rürik Lonin (Lonin 2000a, Lonin 2000b), a scientific edition of Vepsian speech samples by Maria Zaitseva and Maria Mullonen (Zajceva and Mullonen 1969), Vepsian fairy tales by

Nina Onegina and Maria Zaitseva (Onegina and Zajceva 1996), and books by Irina Vinokurova, a researcher of Vepsian mythology (e.g. Vinokurova 2006). Of much help was the well-known book *Veps* by Vladimir Pimenov (1965) in which numerous historical legends the author had collected from various sources were supplied in addition to scientific investigations.

Yet, the biggest lead to the idea of creating the Vepsian epic was the work for preparation and publication in 2012 of the book of Vepsian lamentations (Zajceva and Žukova 2012, see also Podkorpuz pričitanij). The idea that lamentations were the key component of original Vepsian spiritual culture has been expressed by scientists before, but since there was no large published collection of Vepsian lamentations the idea was purely intuitive, was not supported by sources and was under-substantiated. Preparation for the book gave the authors a deeper insight into Vepsian inner life, mythology, life principles and rules.

We find the content of funeral lamentations especially striking, as they represent a fully-fledged philosophy of man's transition to the netherworld. There are clear motifs portraying:

1) disbelief in death, in departure to the netherworld, and the wish to revive the deceased, draw them back into talking: *Užeske minä probuin lodeižoitta i pagištoitta ičiin da sizaruden*, 'Let me now try to get my dear sister to chat and talk' (Zajceva and Žukova 2012: 139); *Aveida-ške ičeiz zorkijad sil'meižed-ne i sulada ičiiz sula da suhut-se*, 'Do open thy shrewd eyes, unseal thy sweet mouth' (ibid. 144); *Užeske-ku minä nuustatan i libutan ičiin' i sulan l'ubovnijan laskvan da čžoihuttein-se*, 'Let me now wake and rouse my sweet darling sister here' (ibid. 168);

2) the urge to help the deceased, and the request to other late relatives to help by addressing the deceased brother: *jasni sokol, vessel viikoihudem, mina poprosin i umolin: pane-ške bibučihe da sohuzihe dubovijad da siibheižed-ne, zakaži-ske sina vesel da veneihut, kasarda-ske rodimi roditel' sōtei mamoihut, ehtata-ske sina levedas merudes*, 'fair falcon, jolly brother, I ask you and beg you: pave thou the marshes with good oak logs, hire thou a good merry boat, carry thou the darling genetrix mother, ferry her across the widest sea' (Zajceva and Žukova 2012: 155); and addressing the deceased father: *rodimi roditel', kabarda-ske sina ičiiz oiktou kädudou, primi-ske ičiiz armhaze da arteližhe-se*, 'thou native parent, do embrace with your right arm [the deceased mother], do admit her in thy fine company' (ibid. 155);

3) metamorphosis of the deceased into a bird, in Vepsian beliefs mainly the cuckoo: *kerazitoi i kogozitoi vast käbedaha kezaižehe*,

kärouzitoi libedaks linduižeks, käbedaks kägoihudeks, ‘gathered and passed away before the warm fair summer, turned into light-winged bird, sweet cuckoo’ (Zajceva and Žukova 2012: 138), etc.

Let us stress that it was lamentations, or *voikud* in Vepsian, that underlie the concept of the epic on which the plot was built, and where the author is also a character and the driving engine of the plot.

We know that the epic is a reconstruction of the action unwinding in space and time. A specific feature of an epic is that the speaker or narrator reports the events and their details as something bygone and recollected, while at the same time being a character in the epic. Classical epic forms celebrate historic (or pseudo-historic) characters or events using ritual-mythological models, national memory, etc. It was relying on these features of the epic, and involving all the sources available to the author, that the plot now found in the *Virantanaz* book was created.

3. Mythological themes of the *Virantanaz* legend

The story in the *Virantanaz* epic is told by its creator. The author may be either a certain character or appear in the form of a bear – the mythological progenitor of the tribe, and, according to the epic, the keeper of all Vepsian secrets. The story can also be told by the main hero’s (Vir) sister Anni and daughter Tal’oi, the keepers of the Vepsian home and culture, and the herdboys Van’oi, who personifies the entire Vepsian identity and mentality.

The Vepsian epic is imbued with mythology, which some Vepsian families may still respect. For instance, the idea of introducing the birch figure, and a lamentation addressed to it, appeared during an expedition to Vepsians in the Village of Ladv, Podporozh’e District, Leningrad Oblast in 2012, when the mother of the Vepsian poet Nikolay Abramov started telling how much Vepsians appreciated birch. Its leaves in a steam-bath besom can ‘fix’ a person, its sap is good for health, birch bark was a major raw material for our ancestors’ shoes and dishes, and birch wood produced the hottest flames in an oven, warming up northern houses in winter.

Mythologies also were connected with the work of the shepherd – the central figure in the old life: the yield of bread cereals in northern lands was rather poor, and hopes were bound to the cow as the nurturer. The shepherd was a relished and highly valued person in the village, receiving the best pieces of food when he lodged with a family; it was

he who safeguarded their livestock, and treated sick people using folk mythology. The shepherd, in turn, was instructed to behave ‘as quiet as a mouse’, avoid disturbing forest wildlife, breaking branches without proper reason, trample down berries, etc. Thus, Ivan the herdboyc in *Virantanaz* asks his father whether the shepherd’s job is really that hard, and gets the following answer:

<i>Jügedad-se rados midä?</i>	What’s so difficult in being a shepherd?
<i>Siš i om-ki radon viga.</i>	Now, there’s a snag.
<i>Ei voi lüz nimidä koskta</i>	You can’t touch anything around,
<i>mechine voib kädes otta.</i>	lest the ‘forest spirit’ seizes you by the hand.

(Zaiceva 2012: 61)

Judging by Vepsian mythology, the shepherd’s work was hushed, and involved many vows, charms and rituals (see for example Heikkinen 2006: 159–187). A shepherd could get down to work only after a specific ritual, which is partly described in the epic:

<i>Minä nevon sinei, Van’oi,</i>	My advice to you, Van’oi,
<i>andan nene käsköd ani,</i>	even an order,
<i>sid’-žo ümbärduz sä tege,</i>	do it as the tradition tells you,
<i>kodišpäi sä seglas ve-gi:</i>	put it all in a sieve:
<i>karvoid sinna vähän pane,</i>	some animal hair,
<i>lukkol, avadim i muna...</i>	a lock, a key, an egg...
<i>Homencel völ oldes küläs</i>	In the morning, while still in the village
<i>kirvhen ota, teral ülüz,</i>	hold an axe blade up,
<i>sido ottud kaik sä paikha,</i>	tie it all up in a scarf,
<i>ala kacu, prihač, aigha,</i>	take your time,
<i>ümbärda sä živatkogo</i>	walk around the herd
<i>koume kerdad...</i>	thrice...

(Zaiceva 2012: 63)

The principal rule in the life of the Vepsians, recorded repeatedly during expeditions to the Vepsian settlement range, is to treat nature as a living creature that has a soul and feelings. There is a proverb known in different modifications among many nations, the Vepsian version being “*Mecas mechaane i se kuleb i nägeb*”, ‘A tree in the forest can also hear and see everything’ (Vepsa vanasõnad: 351). To Vepsians, this was not simply a proverb, but a life rule. Well-known Vepsian writers, first of all Vasily Pulkin and Anatoly Petukhov, who built their Russian-language books on Vepsian material, often utilised this trait. Thus, V. Pulkin wrote in his book *Laps’aigan abekirj* (translated into Vepsian by Nina

Zaitseva): “*Jogahine pičuine heinut eläb, ihastub i lankteb opalaha. Sikš ku hänes-ki heng om...*” (Zajceva 2000: 421) ‘Each little grass blade lives, feels the joys and sorrows of life. For it has a soul, too’. Finnish researcher Kaija Heikkinen kept saying that Vepsians ‘merged into the nature’, that they were in a way nature’s children, and women were especially sensitive to nature (Heikkinen 2006). This idea has been reproduced repeatedly and in various forms as a core message of the *Virantanaz* epic:

Vepsläižile amu sel’ged: Veps have always known this:
nägeb pu-ki mecas, velled, even a tree in the forest can see everything, brothers,
pu-ki kuleb mecas kaiken, even a tree can hear everything,
olgat hilläd mecas, vaikne. in the forest you be quiet, be noiseless.
 (Zaiceva 2012: 64)

As mentioned above, Vepsian lamentations, especially funeral lamentations, are particularly rich in mythology. Vepsians fancied that after passing away they would go on living in the netherworld clan-wise, and that their deceased relatives were waiting there to meet them in a “light boat on luminous water” to help with this formidable crossing:

<i>Anni-baboi om jo keranus,</i>	Grandmother Anni has died,
<i>sinunnokse om jo kogonus.</i>	moved to the netherworld.
<i>Kasarda-ške leved tehut-se,</i>	Clean up the path for her,
<i>pane parded kuti sildut-se</i>	put tree logs like a bridge
<i>bibučijas sos-se päliči,</i>	across the swampy marsh,
<i>mustan mecan ladvoiš aleiči.</i>	underneath the dark branches.
<i>Tariče-ške vessel venoihut,</i>	Offer her a light boat,
<i>ehtata-ške sõtei baboihut...</i>	ferry the dear grandmother over ...
<i>Olijad sil čural ičhižed,</i>	And ye, the relatives in the next world,
<i>vastkat baboi kuti ičetoi,</i>	meet grandma as one of your own,
<i>otkat händast teiden sebraha,</i>	let her be with you,
<i>algat jätkoi üht-se kerdaha...</i>	don’t leave her alone ...

(Zaiceva 2012: 71)

In lamentations the cuckoo is the bird that liaises between the worlds of the living and the dead. Many lines in lamentations are devoted to this. The cuckoo is called on in trying moments; Vepsians address their requests to “bring news about late relatives” to the bird. This is also the role it plays in the epic:

<i>Tulleihuden kartte ištte</i>	Land as wind
<i>sinä minun uugale,</i>	on my shoulder,
<i>kukku vestid, sanu püštäs</i>	cuckoo for me, bring news,
<i>sinä, hahkut suugaine.</i>	thou, the gray-winged.

(Zaiceva 2012: 69)

Another important source for the plot of the *Virantanaz* epic was historical legends – for instance the legend of hunter Martyanov, widely known among Vepsians. There is no name of the hero in the nation’s memory, there is no exact information about his life, but the legend about his bravery, the great respect towards his knowledge of the forest and the animals still inspires respect and is transferred from lip to lip. That’s why Martyanov was chosen as a prototype of the poem’s main hero – Vir the hunter, who is a character in many stories in this epic. The legend tells about a real event, the centre of which was the Veps hunter Martyanov, whose fame in the 17th century reached as far as Moscow. According to the legend, Martyanov could hunt bear with nothing but a knife, and still succeed. Hunting on Vepsian land, however, also followed certain rules and customs of respectful behaviour, with as little harm to nature as possible. All these ideas representing Vepsians as a forest people are a crucial constituent of *Virantanaz*.

4. Fiction and fact in *Virantanaz*

The title of the epic is built upon the name of Vir. There is in reality a settlement named Virantanaz. It is part of the bigger Voilaht village cluster in Babaevo District, Vologda Oblast – the land of eastern Vepsians, which is now, alas, declining. One can say Vir is a relatively rare male name also used in Vepsian territory. Near the Village of Virantanaz~Virantanh there is the Village of Markutanaz~Murkutan(h), and a little further away Aksintanaz. In the names of the latter two villages one can easily discern the names Mark and Aksen (Mullonen 1994: 101). This is the area where stories about house, forest and water spirits are quite common. Aleksandra Kalinina, a woman from the village of Pondal, situated 24 km from Voilaht, once told the authors of the book *Vepsian Speech Samples* about the forest spirit as of a living creature she saw “with her own eyes”: “*Ühtnägi tuli barbikospäi mez’, mecauk, rusked kušak viiu vöstnukso, balaŋon pit’k...* ‘Suddenly a man came out of the forest, the master of the forest, the forest spirit, red band around the waist, long loose garment...’ (Zajceva and Mullonen

1969: 119). Such legends are plentiful in this area. They have, in fact, inspired to the author of the epic, who was also born in Voilaht, to bring in the character of Anni, to whom many pages in the book are devoted, and who is one of the central figures incorporating the Vepsian identity. Anni is a herbalist who treats people and who knows all the customs and rituals of the Vepsian people. She attends the first delivery of Aira, Vir's wife, uttering many birth-giving incantations, partly authentic and partly made up by the author of the epic:

<p><i>Mänen minä uks'he, verajišpäi veraihe, lagedaha püudho, vihandaha normhe. Vasttan sigä vellid, koumeühca eläb lagedas püudos, vihandas normes. Taugud heil kädes, kingitadud väges, pandud jo noled: ampkat kaik holed...</i></p> <p>(Zaiceva 2012: 44)</p>	<p>I shall walk through the door, from gate to gate, to the flat field, to the green meadow. I shall meet brothers there, three by nine of them live in the flat field, in the green meadow. They're holding bows with the string stretched, with arrows set: do kill all the troubles...</p>
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Let us note that some things in the epic are fiction, which arises from the issues the author has encountered during scientific studies. We know that Vepsians had at some point been in contact with the Sami. The *Comparative Onomasiological Dictionary of the Karelian, Vepsian and Sami Languages* (Sopostavitel'nyi slovar') prepared by linguists from the Institute of Language, Literature and History of the Karelian Research Centre may not be an etymological one, but having compared lexemes falling within the same family with similar meanings the author of *Virantanaz* decided to make one of the epic's female characters (Aira, Vir's wife) a Sami national. It is clear that the author used a time shift: the Vepsians had contacts with Sami people much earlier than the legend of *Virantanaz*. However, the poem is not a historical text, it is a literary piece, allowing the author to include a Sami character.

Aira is in some ways different from others, she can speak Sami, which, according to the legend, is the source of some words borrowed into the Vepsian language spoken by Vir's family:

<p><i>Erašti hän sanoid tundmatomid sanui: “torok, ližm i čapta”... Velled, vaiše kackat, tul’ba sanad mel’he, ka i vepsän kel’he suliba ned ani... (Zaiceva 2012: 27)</i></p>	<p>Sometimes she’d utter unfamiliar words: “storm, silt, cut”... But look, brothers, these words were liked, and entered the Vepsian language, fused into it...</p>
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This episode gives the example of three lexemes that might have been borrowed into Vepsian from the Sami language. As for the lexeme *torok* ‘storm (on water)’, present in the North Vepsian dialect, one can assume it is a Sami borrowing that reached the Vepsian language via North Russian vernaculars (cf. Rus. *torok* ‘storm, gust of wind in the sea’ < Notozero Sami *toarak* – Fasmer, IV: 84). The lexeme *čapta* ‘cut, chop’ is not found in any other Finnic language but Vepsian. The above-mentioned comparative dictionary placed it into the same family as the Sami lexeme *čuohpped*, *čuhppē* ‘cut, chop’, which is very similar in sound and meaning (Sopostavitel’nyi slovar’: 226). Some Sami etymological plots may also be affiliated with the Vepsian lexeme *ližm* ‘silt’ (see Zajceva 1988: 26).

5. The style of *Virantanaz*

A big challenge in writing the epic was the choice of metrics. While working on the translation of the abridged version of the *Kalevala* epic into Vepsian (see *Kalevala*), the author of *Virantanaz* gained the skill of so-called *Kalevala* metre. The translation job showed that although the contents could be easily rendered by the Vepsian language vocabulary, since the chores and concerns of Finnish, Karelian and Vepsian families and characters were largely the same due both to the kinship of the peoples and to their geographical range, the octosyllabic trochee proved to be a little too lumpy for the Vepsian language. Owing to the apocope of the final vowel in certain positions, the Vepsian words grew shorter, many final vowels were lost, and contractions took place within many words, making the Vepsian word shorter, more labile and lightweight. Therefore, to reproduce the lingering melodic metrics one had to use many short words in a line, the result not always being satisfactory as the line was broken.

By the time of the publication of *Virantanaz*, Vepsian literature already had some of its own artistic style. In addition, the author of this paper had some experience writing lyrical poem in her own style mainly from the structure of the Vepsian language (see, for example, Zaitseva 2005, 2008; Verev tullei 2006; Kodirandaine).

The verb system in Vepsian is very rich and has been preserved in its fullness. There are many fewer adjectives (which are so widely used in Russian literature). A famous Vepsian writer Anatoly Petukhov said in a Vepsian writers' congress that this is one of the problems that did not allow him, who was used to writing in Russian, to start writing in Vepsian. This problem found its solution in the work of the author of this paper. While researching the Vepsian grammar, and especially the verbs, it became clear that Vepsian is very rich in verb constructions and forms when there are participles and verb constructions rather than adjectival attributes. The verbs and participles add some motion and facility while the adjectival attributes are more static, colourful and gorgeous.

The idea then came up of casting an eye over Vepsian folk heritage in order to create an individual style. Of much help in this were Vepsian short nursery rhymes, such as:

<i>Libui härg kuzhe</i>	The bull climbed a spruce tree
<i>savižiš sapkooš,</i>	in boots of clay,
<i>kivižed kindhad,</i>	gloves of stone,
<i>roimaht', räimäht'...</i>	plumped, tumbled...

(Zaitseva and Mullenon 1969: 207)

It appeared that this short rhymed line, created by the people themselves, would be the best choice for the epic. Later on, a 12-line stanza was designed. And eventually, the concept of using different poetic styles in sections devoted to specific characters was invented. The narration comprises four big sections dedicated to the four main characters of the epic – Vir, his mother's sister Anni, daughter Tal'oi, and Van'oi the herdboy. Thus, four major metres were used, forming a kind of additional character of the epic. For each transition from one metre to another there is an explanation in the story: the reason in one case was to keep secret Anni's encounter with the forest spirit, and the change in metre in a way to safeguard Anni's secret (she had to kiss the forest spirit once) when lost in the forest; on another occasion, Van'oi the herdboy was obliged to keep the secrets of the shepherd's trade; a third example is the legend of hunter Martyanov, which already had its established metre, and abandoning it was undesirable. With this variety

of poetic styles, the possibility appeared to seamlessly integrate folklore samples of different types and metres into the epic: wedding and funeral lamentations, songs, nursery rhymes, incantations.

6. Conclusion

The language of *Virantanaz* characters resembles dialect speech rather than the newly-scripted language of the Vepsians, but it includes many of the most successful neologisms quite widely used in modern Vepsian language, such as *meletada* ‘think’, *olii* ‘creature’, *tozioiged* ‘righteous’, *rohked* ‘brave’, etc. This feature gave the epic a somewhat supra-dialectal nature, demonstrating the aspiration to utilise the entire creative potential of the Vepsian language, which was disclosed also with the active participation of the author of this paper and the *Virantanaz* epic.

Let us note in conclusion that *Virantanaz* contains much information about the life of Vepsians, but not in ancient times, as the *Kalevala* does. *Virantanaz* covers an observable time period, perhaps the time when the legend about Vir appeared – the 16th–17th centuries – and facts about this time period can be collected from scientific studies. The idea of further ‘ageing’ the epic had no scientific, folklore or other grounds, and would thus have made the book nothing but fiction.

The *Virantanaz*, which is the subject of this paper, is evidence that some of a nation’s epic traditions can be reconstructed in modern realities, and developed further. Hopefully, people will be tempted to adapt the epic for the stage or transform it into pieces of music, as happened with the Vepsian version of *Kalevala* (songs by Lyudmila Melentyeva), and thus contribute to the revitalisation of the Vepsian minority and its culture, and help to establish a literary tradition for the language.

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Kokkuvõte. Nina Zaitseva: Virantanaz – vepsakeelne eepos? Eepose loomise esimesest katsest. Artiklis antakse ülevaade viimase 20 aasta sündmustest ja arengutest, mis on olnud olulise tähtsusega vepsa rahvale ning mis viisid autori, kes on olnud kõnealusel perioodil vepsa keele ja kultuuri taaselustamise protsessi keskel, ideele luua rahvuseepos. Kas on võimalik luua eepost keeles,

mille kandjatel pole säilinud eepilist pärimust ning mis ise on juba väljasuremise äärel? Eepose kirjutamisprotsess andis võimaluse tuua inimeste mälust välja palju fakte, tegelikke ja kujuteldavaid sündmusi, rituaale, kombeid ja legende, kõnekaid väljendeid ja ütlusi, mis on olnud abiks rahvuse, selle keele ja kultuuri taaselustamisel. Artikkel käsitleb eepose folkloorset ja mütoloogilist tagapõhja, esitab poeetilise stiili põhiaspekte ja seletab selle pärimuslikku olemust.

Märksõnad: vepsa keel, kirjaviis, rahvuslik ärkamine, folkloor, eepos, traditsioon, mütoloogia