

An ecosemiotic dimension of folklore: Reframing the concept of place-lore

Lona Päll¹

Abstract. Place-lore, which has been systematically collected and archived in Estonia since the 19th century, is a part of various national, communal and institutional practices. Until now, Estonian researchers have resorted to conceptualizing place-lore from the perspective of archival texts, and the focus has been on collecting and archiving the material. At the same time, theoretical study of place-lore has remained in the background. In the article I approach place-lore from the perspective of ecosemiotics and suggest a new definition of place-lore that is based on semiotic relations these narratives have with the environment they represent. Outlining different ways of how vernacular tradition and the environment it represents are semiotically related, and analysing the ways in which these relations are expressed in place-related folklore allows seeing how place-lore can be defined through (1) localizability, (2) representation of the characteristics of a place, and (3) manifestation of place experience. Defining place-lore and presenting the preliminary conceptual tools is much needed in practical collection work and archiving and serves as an important prerequisite for studying the place-related folklore in the context of contemporary challenges, such as changing textual practices, cultural disruptions, and environmental crisis. Examples are drawn from folklore associated with mires, specifically from narratives about the Kakerdaja Bog in northern Estonia.

Keywords: ecosemiotics; environmental communication; environmental signs; bio-semiotic criticism; place-lore; folk narratives

Introduction

Bog pools are believed to be bottomless – this internationally spread vernacular belief is also represented in Estonian folk narratives. In one version of the story, a pot suspended by a rope is lowered into a bog pool to fathom its depth, yet the pot never reaches the bottom. However, as it is pulled out, a blood-soaked

¹ Department of Semiotics, University of Tartu, Jakobi 2, 51005 Tartu, Estonia; e-mail: lona.pall@ut.ee.

lamb's head is found inside.² Such stories, associated with specific places and narrated to represent social and ecological reality, serve various functions, such as mediating information about the landscape, explaining the peculiarities of a specific environment, entertaining, and, more generally, emphasizing the local sense of belonging, to name a few (see Rimmel 2014b: 52–53). In this article, I approach this kind of folklore, known as place-lore (Est. '*kohapärimus*')³, as a manifestation of engagements between the environment, or extra-narrative reality, and the collective, or the individuals. As such, these stories belong to the sphere of hybrid natural-cultural phenomena that are the research object for ecosemiotics (see e.g. Kull, Maran 2014: 42; Maran forthcoming).

Although contextuality and referentiality towards the environment are apparent in the material, the role of non-human surroundings in creating and interpreting vernacular narratives has so far not been acknowledged in Estonian place-lore research. The study of place-lore has developed into a distinctive research field over the last thirty years, and has been focusing on expanding the folklore collections and mediating these in public (see Västriik 2012⁴), yet the broader theoretical analysis of place-lore remained scarce. The researchers have mainly discussed practical questions related to the archiving or fieldwork (see Rimmel 2014b). Moreover, previous text-centred research methods that until the 1990s remained central in Estonian folkloristics have led researchers to focus on the representational level of texts; even after the social and situational context of folklore started to be taken into consideration (see e.g. Jaago 1999), ecological reality still remained overlooked. Thus, the research of place-lore has so far neglected important processes and topics emergent in contemporary folklore (e.g. environmental and cultural shifts, conflicts, changes, etc.), the study of which requires focusing on the structural and semiotic complexity and dynamics of natural-cultural relations.

The lack of a metalanguage and theory for approaching place-related folklore as a polyphonic natural-cultural tradition has also resulted in a vague definition

² For other examples of similar narratives, see Hiimäe 1988: 222. More about the belief in bottomless bog pools in an international context can be found in Meredith 2002.

³ The word '*pärimus*' derives from the Finnish word '*perinne*' ('tradition') and in Estonian contexts it can be translated as '(oral) tradition'. The term became popular in the 1990s and while '*pärimus*' is often used synonymously with '*folkloor*' ('folklore'), it has a broader semantic field. Thus, '*pärimus*' can be seen as the equivalent of the English word 'lore'. On the changes in terminology and definitions of folklore in Estonian folkloristics, see Jaago 1999.

⁴ Västriik 2012 refers to an abstract in a published collection of abstracts; in writing the article I have also been able to consult the unpublished full text of Ergo-Hart Västriik's presentation delivered at the 6th Nordic-Celtic-Baltic Folklore Symposium *Supernatural Places* held in Tartu, Estonia, 4–7 June 2012.

of place-lore. The way different scholars define or frame the concept of place-lore varies highly (see e.g. Remmel 2001a, 2014b; Tuisk 2001; Västriik 1998). In this paper, I aim to propose a novel definition of place-lore that focuses on semiotic relations between texts⁵ and the environment they represent. By doing that, I show how these semiotic relations with the environment, i.e. interpretative, communicative and perceptual interactions with the surroundings, can be regarded as the core of place-lore. I am developing the new definition by establishing a dialogue between place-lore research and the theoretical framework of ecosemiotics, especially biosemiotic criticism (see Maran 2014). Devising a more comprehensive and analytical definition is a first step towards building a primary research frame for analysing place-lore in a more coherent way than before and can aid archival practices and fieldwork.

In the wider framework of environmental humanities, human experience manifested in vernacular or local cultures is seen as both unavoidably natural and cultural. The realization has led researchers to see that previous theoretical tools for the study of traditional culture are insufficient for analysing people's relations with material non-symbolic phenomena. This has been demonstrated by anthropologists and sociologists such as Kohn (2013), Descola (2013), Viveiros de Castro (1998), and Latour (1993), several of whom have been relying on semiotics. Instead of focusing on cultural representation (i.e. how humans, different groups, and societies interpret the environment or nature), researchers must turn their attention to the relationship between nature and culture, especially hybrid forms and interactions between humans and the surroundings (Kohn 2013: 9, 21–22; see also Favareau *et al.* 2017: 16–17). I consider the recent trends in ecosemiotics, e.g. connecting ecological and cultural branches of ecosemiotics, creating applied methods with a strong ontological foundation, and outlining the key principles of ecosemiotics that focus on eco-cultural diversity (see Maran, Kull 2014; Maran forthcoming; Wheeler 2008), as an integral part of the aforementioned methodological developments. Thus, conceptualizing place-lore through eco-semiotics will make it possible to integrate the study of Estonian place-lore in the dialogue taking place in contemporary environmental humanities.

This research is the first attempt to study place-lore in an ecosemiotics framework. However, various other local or nature-related representations have been studied by ecosemioticians: for example, describing the “herbal landscape” in ethnobotany (Sõukand, Kalle 2010), cultural and ecological interpretation of

⁵ ‘Place-lore texts’ indicated in the article can be loosely understood as cultural texts or textual representations in the context of vernacular communication, but not necessarily, or only, formal (recorded, written, transcribed etc.) texts.

mires (Pungas-Kohv *et al.* 2015), and sacred natural sites in national history and conflict discourses (Heinapuu 2016; Päll 2021) deserve mention. One of the branches of eco- and biosemiotics has been closely intertwined with ecocritical studies (e.g. Tüür 2017; Maran 2007; Wheeler 2008), while biosemiotic criticism developed by Timo Maran (2014) serves as one of the most relevant examples of this research trend. Several ecosemiotic models concerning textual representations of the environment have been applied in the study of Estonian nature writing (e.g. Vilu 2014; Maran, Tüür 2017). Estonian nature writing is occasionally intertwined with local folklore in the Estonian cultural context and there are some functional and structural similarities between these texts (see Maran, Tüür 2017). Besides providing models for analysing textual representations of the environment, ecosemiotics allows us to study ecological processes and functions of landscape (e.g. Lindström, Kull, Palang 2011: 104). Integrating these two dimensions is crucial for studying place-lore, because vernacular interpretations are rooted in practices and engagements concerned with non-human surroundings.

The illustrative material included in this article is drawn from place-lore related to mires as these wetland areas represent a unique environment where dwelling and moving around is challenging. Thus, environmental experience tends to be clearly expressed in mire-related folklore and is at the fore primarily because of the ecological characteristics of mires. On the other hand, mires represent a type of environment which has undergone a significant interpretational shift as the attitudes towards inland wetlands have radically changed in the past fifty years in Estonia – once considered useless, they are now one of the most loved environments (Pungas-Kohv *et al.* 2015). Therefore, analysing the place-lore related to mires enables us to explore a wide variety of possible subjective and collective engagements with the physical surroundings. In order to narrow the illustrative material down to one region, the article focuses on folklore related to the Kakerdaja Bog in northern Estonia. The Kakerdaja Bog is one of the best known and most visited mires in Estonia, its popularity deriving from well-known local stories about the bog and from pieces of nature writing in which these folk narratives have a prominent role.⁶ Folklore material about the Kakerdaja Bog, collected since the early 20th century up to 2016, is rich and versatile.⁷

⁶ The Kakerdaja Bog is one of the central places in the writings of the beloved Estonian nature writer and photographer Fred Jüssi (e.g. Jüssi 1972, 1995, 2003), but the bog and its narratives have also been present in several other authors' works over time (e.g. Lunts 1936; Relve 2008; Allas 2016: 46–53).

⁷ The earlier material, most of which is collected in the 1930s, 1960s, and 2000s, includes archived folklore texts and recordings, notes on collecting expeditions (fieldwork diaries, field notes from the more extensive field trips to the region in 1965 and 2003), and photos in the

The article is divided into three sections. The first section provides a brief overview of the previous development and application of the concept of place-lore and describes how the contextuality and place-referentiality of place-related folklore have been studied earlier. The second section adapts concepts and methods of ecosemiotics to study place-lore and describes how semiotic relations with the environment are relevant in place-lore. Section three focuses more specifically on the issue of defining the concept of place-lore: relying on the previous definitions suggested by Estonian scholars, the central defining features that are characteristic of place-lore as a special type of folklore tradition are proposed. Some future directions about the study of place-lore are included in the conclusion of the article.

1. Earlier research into Estonian place-lore

The Estonian concept of '*kohapärimus*', which this article aims to reframe, has been influenced by wider trends in Estonian folkloristics and, through that, also by social and historical contexts. Understanding how the concept is developed, and what kind of semiotic relationships it has been used to describe is crucial for establishing a new definition and research frame. Thus, before placing the concept in a dialogue with ecosemiotics, I (1) discuss previous terminology and the research context where the concept of place-lore was established; and (2) outline some aspects of place-lore-centred fieldwork and archiving methods as these have developed rather independently from theory and are practically oriented.

1.1. Developing the concept

Firstly, it is important to acknowledge the consistent yet dynamic tradition behind the relatively new concept of place-lore. Since the early days of systematic folklore collection in 19th-century Estonia, folklorists have been highlighting the part of folklore that represents the surrounding environment or expresses locality in a broader sense. The terminology used by different researchers has been heterogeneous, and the description of the material has varied, ranging from

Estonian Folklore Archives and the Estonian Cultural History Archives, as well as toponymic explanations mostly deriving from the 1920s–1930s and 1950s–1960s in the collections of the Institute of the Estonian Language. Newer material includes sound and video recordings, notes, letters, and photos from my fieldwork carried out in 2011–2015 to collect place-lore related to the Kakerdaja Bog and its surroundings. I conducted interviews with nature photographers, locals, nature guides, and nature protection officials who have had professional or personal connections with the Kakerdaja Bog (for a more thorough ecosemiotic analysis of the material see Päll 2016).

using broader categories to specific terms (Remmel 2014b: 23–25). For example, two most prominent initiators of folklore collecting in 19th-century Estonia – Jakob Hurt and Johann Matthias Eisen – used the terms ‘*kohalised jutustused*’ (Hurt 1989[1896]), meaning ‘local tales,’ and ‘*kohalised eesti muinasjutud*’ (Eisen 2000[1882]), meaning ‘local Estonian folktales,’ which refer to narratives describing natural locations. Jaan Jung, an amateur historian, used the German word ‘*Ortssage*’, from which the Estonian term ‘*kohamuistend*’ (‘place legend’) was later derived (Remmel 2014b: 24).⁸ During the Soviet regime (the 1940s–1990s), the concept of the place legend came to be regarded as the definite core form of place-related folklore (Västriik 2012; Kindel 2002: 104). The contemporary term ‘*kohapärimus*’ (‘place-lore’) emerged in the 1990s and early 2000s, (e.g. Remmel 1997, 2001a; Västriik 1998; Tuisk 2001) to indicate a wider thematic category of folklore.

With the emergence of the new concept, research into place-lore also became disciplinarily independent in the 1990s when Mari-Ann Remmel founded the place-lore research group at the Estonian Folklore Archives (EFA). The emergence of the field was made possible by several developments in Estonian culture studies, for example the overall widening of the scope of Estonian folkloristics that called for the study of more genre-synthetic and loose categories for folklore (Västriik 2012; Kuutma 2010: 690), or the spatial turn, that reached Estonian culture studies in the 1990s and early 2000s (Kuutma 2010). At the same time, work of the EFA place-lore research group can be seen as a reaction to intense searches for local and national identity in the period following the restoration of the Republic of Estonia (Remmel 2014b: 19). In these discussions, nature-related tradition has an important role (see Remmel, Jonuks 2021; Annus 2020). The EFA place-lore research group have been recording additional material and making archived material available in cooperation with local communities and institutions either by publishing anthologies on specific regions (see Potter, Remmel, Valk 2001; Remmel 2004; Valper 2010; Remmel 2011; Remmel 2017) or through other forms of cooperation, such as drawing up an inventory of sacred natural sites,⁹ or contributing to local or national cultural heritage management and nature protection,¹⁰ etc.

⁸ In 19th- and 20th-century Estonian folklore studies, both the choice of terminology and classification practices were influenced by the German and Finnish research context, and since the 1940s also by Soviet research trends (further on this, see Jaago 1999)

⁹ For more, see Development Plan 2008 or <https://www.muinsuskaitseamet.ee/et/ajaloolised-ja-looduslikud-puhapaigad>.

¹⁰ For example, place-lore collection projects in Estonian national parks (2006–2017) aimed to contribute to cultural heritage management – see more at http://folklore.ee/era/teema/kohad_rakendus.htm. Place-lore research is also integrated into the mire restoration project led by the Estonian Fund for Nature, see <https://soo.elfond.ee/>.

The contemporary concept of place-lore has largely developed based on the study of the material in the EFA collections, which were started in the late 19th century and built up mainly in the 20th century.¹¹ However, the collecting and archiving of place-lore has not been even or uniform in terms of themes, areas, and periods; therefore, the concept of place-lore has represented certain relationships with the environment and views on nature more than others. For example, the earlier body of place-lore, collected at the beginning of the 20th century, can be viewed against the backdrop of establishing a national identity, and the national romantic interpretations of this material have influenced later place-lore (see e.g. Metssalu 2008; Heinapuu 2016). A significant part of the earlier material on place-lore was collected in the course of a collection campaign of the EFA initiated by Richard Viidalepp in 1938–1939¹² (Kindel 2002; Hiiemäe 2005a: 245–247), and the aforementioned romantic motifs as well as literary interpretations are clearly noticeable in this material. Another large corpus of widely used archive material on place-lore consists of narratives related to giants such as Kalevpoeg, Suur Töll, etc. (see Valk 2002: 415–417); these were mainly collected in the Soviet period when this kind of popular mythological tradition with significant influences from literature was regarded as ideologically “safe” (Västrik 2012).¹³

Particular thematic foci on collecting and studying place-lore are also clearly noticeable, for in the context of contemporary Estonian folkloristics, place-lore research remained rather traditional and fixed. Archive-centred research (see Västrik 2012) and scarce international contacts with environmental humanities scholars resulted in the continuation of the existing research focus into the 1990s. The dominant interests have largely proceeded from the traditional 19th- and 20th-century peasant culture, including historical sacred sites and archaeological sites (e.g. Remmel 1998, 2014a; Kõivupuu 2009), or bodies of water (Metsvahi 2018; Remmel 2014c), as well as the relations between place-lore and calendar holidays and the human life cycle (Hiiemäe 2005b; Remmel 2001b) and treasure

¹¹ On the development of the EFA collections see Valk 2004, 2005; Järv, Sarv 2014; Västrik 2010. The collections hold ca. 1,528,800 manuscript pages. It is virtually impossible to determine the share of place-lore within this total folklore corpus as no topic-based differentiation analysis of the kind has been conducted yet. The number of texts incorporated in the digital database of place-lore is currently over 36,000. The database is available at <http://galerii.kirmus.ee/koobas/>. In addition to earlier material, the EFA place-lore working group has recorded at least two thousand hours of sound recordings and hundreds of hours of video recordings within different cooperation as well as independent projects since the 2000s.

¹² The campaign resulted in 16,158 pages of place-legends sent to the archives by school-children all over Estonia (Kindel 2002: 105).

¹³ This resulted in anthologies on Estonian giant lore in the series *Monumenta Estoniae Antiquae*: see Laugaste, Normann 1959; Laugaste, Liiv, Normann 1963; Laugaste, Liiv 1970.

lore (Kalda 2011). Student theses have been written about contemporary layers or interpretations of place-lore such as the use of place-lore in tourism (Kindel 2005; Reha 2014) or place-lore in urban environments (Päll 2012; Vahtmäe 2008). Outside folkloristics, studies based on place-lore as a resource have remained rare (e.g. Kama 2016, 2017; Pae, Rimmel 2006; Palang, Paal 2002).

1.2. Applying the concept

While the study of place-lore still lacks a substantial theoretical framework, its fieldwork methods and the practices of archiving recorded materials were developed intensely and rather independently from theory. The collecting and archiving practices stem from an established set of processes characterized by diachronic continuance (or reliance on older archive material), and synchronic coherence (or recording the narratives and their environmental context as a whole). These methods take into consideration the symbolic nature of place-lore, and at the same time also the semiotic reality and agency of extra-narrative space.

Ergo-Hart Västrik (2012) has pointed out that the 1990s witnessed a shift from text-centredness to place-centredness in the fieldwork methods of place-lore research. For instance, the central activity in the fieldwork methods of the place-lore research group of the EFA is visiting the sites mentioned in oral lore together with the informant (Västrik 2012). However, even earlier fieldwork materials reveal that researchers have defined the relationship of place and folklore as a relevant object of their study. Thus, in the general context of text-centred folkloristics in Estonia, the fieldwork methods of researchers interested in place-lore have been rather ethnographical and open towards the landscape, being similar to methods used by environmental anthropologists. Fieldwork notes or written (folklore) texts have been complemented with information on the environment, such as descriptions of the natural conditions and peculiarities, site plans, drawings, photos, maps, etc. For example, on her visits to the Noku farm at the edge of the Kakerdaja Bog during the 1965 and 2004 field expeditions, the folklorist Mall Hiimäe added detailed descriptions of the environment, which today well illustrate the transformation of the site from a peripheral forest ranger's house at the edge of a bog into a modern tourist object, and the impact of the changes on the mire environment.¹⁴

Semiotic relations with the environment that are expressed in the material have also affected archiving practices. In addition to being familiar with the oral tradition, knowledge of natural sciences such as the ability to recognize species,

¹⁴ Mall Hiimäe's fieldwork diaries [RKM II 195, 663/5 < Järva-Madise parish – Mall Hiimäe (1965) and EFA II 45, 243/5 < Järva-Madise parish – Mall Hiimäe (2004)].

familiarity with geological and geographical terminology, and skills in interpreting landscape by means of maps or archaeological data, has also been a prerequisite of the archiving methodology of place-lore. Historically, one of the bases of the systematization of material in the EFA has been the administrative and/or geographical region where the material has been collected (Jaago 2005: 54; more in Järv, Sarv 2014). However, for place-lore research exact topographical data and information about the environment are essential for systematizing the material: for example, metadata of texts or database keywords are not based only, or mainly, on the narratives (e.g. plots, variants, narrative elements), but also on the location or the (natural) object described in the text. Digital databases also enable linking to geographical coordinates and display textual data in their spatial context. Thus it becomes evident from the methods researchers of place-lore are using that, despite the lack of a supportive theoretical frame, they have understood and addressed the important role of environmental structures and qualities in the formation of place-related traditions.

2. Semiotic relations with the environment as the core of place-lore

In this section, I approach place-related folklore as an ecosemiotic phenomenon and explain (1) the relevance of environmental semiosis in place-centred folklore and (2) how the semiotic relations between texts and extra-narrative reality come forth through concrete representations and storytelling situations. In order to explore the complex semiotic complementarity between place-lore and the environment it represents I adapt the concepts of environmental semiosis and environmental signs and develop further the framework of biosemiotic criticism (see Maran 2014) that has formerly been used to analyse works of nature writing.

2.1. The role of environmental semiosis in place-lore

From an ontological perspective, place-lore as cultural description cannot exist outside the ecological semiotic sphere, since symbolic sign processes are grounded in biosemiotic processes (see e.g. Kohn 2007; Wheeler 2008). Therefore, when studying place-lore attention must be paid to the role of both symbolic, i.e. conventional and cultural, sign relations, as well as iconic and indexical ones, i.e. sign relations that are physically manifested or rely on resemblance. Moreover, as place-related narratives are established in the surroundings and through physical perception, it is imperative not only to study the interpretive sphere of place-lore against the background of cultural narrative processes, but also to observe this

tradition as a unique part of environmental communication. The relevance of the semiotic potential of the environment in place-lore is well demonstrated by the toponymic explanations¹⁵ of the Kakerdaja Bog:

Kakerdi [bog] has been named after long-shinned birds. They had legs under their tails and could neither walk nor fly very well. There were many of these birds and they were friendly with people. The bog came to be called the Kakerdi Bog. A bird like that could still be seen there 20 years ago.¹⁶

The example illustrates the ways in which the characteristics of the specific environment, inter-species communication, and the physical perception of people can be expressed in place-related folklore. The Estonian verb '*kakerdama*' ('to waddle'), illustrates the movement of people and other animals or birds on an unstable surface. The vernacular word '*kakerdi*' was also used to refer to loons and grebes (Mäger 1967: 13, 16), species of waterfowl that are not adapted to walking on the ground, which is why their movement on the ground seems strange. According to various earlier narratives, the toponyms *Kakerdaja* and *Kakerdi* derive from the vernacular name of black-throated loons (*Gavia arctica*), but in contemporary stories, the toponym has been interpreted more as a reference to characteristic movement on bog surface. One of the informants, a wildlife photographer, explained the relevance of *Kakerdaja* as a bog name as follows: "[...] if you consider that a waddler... it could also stand for a person's way of walking in the bog, doesn't it? That you are kind of waddling here."¹⁷ Thus, the interpretation of the unique characteristics of the mire environment such as the soft and unstable ground surface (see Fig. 1) is central in this toponymic explanation.

¹⁵ Estonian toponymists have studied vernacular place names in some Estonian regions in more depth and analysed the role of nature in creating place names. On the relationship between toponyms and the environment and the principles of naming see e.g. Saar 2008. On place names connected with birds and animals see Faster, Saar 2013, on hydronyms see e.g. Faster 2018.

¹⁶ *Kakerdi on saanud oma nime pikakoivaliste lindude järgi. Nende jalad olid olnud saba all ja nad pole kuidagi käia saanud, ega lennata hästi. Neid olnud sääl palju ja olid inimestega väga sõbralikud. Inimesed hakkasin raba kutsuma Kakerdi rabaks. Kakerdis oli näha veel sellist lindu 20. a. eest.* [ERA II 219, 448 (22) < Järva-Madise parish, Albu municipality, Peedu village, Aida farm – Harry Loog < Richard Loodis, 43 years old (1939).]

¹⁷ [...] kui mõelda, et kakerdaja... see võib ka olla inimese liikumine soos, eksole. Et sa nagu kakerdad siin. (Interview with nature photographer I. M., 28.04.2015).

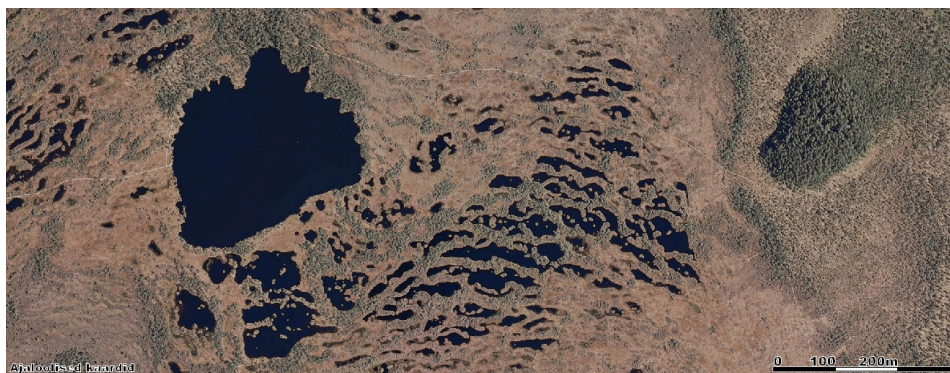


Figure 1. Orthophoto of the Kakerdaja Bog: the lake where black-throated loons were spotted, tricky bog pools system, and the bog island Hiiesaar on the right (Source: Republic of Estonia Land Board's Geoportal, 2007).

Narratives related to wetlands make it possible to explore different ways of expressing semiotic relations with the environment in place-lore. The uniqueness of the mire environment is reflected in narratives about people drowning or sinking in bog pools, or supernatural narratives in which mires swallow people or lead them astray (see e.g. Meredith 2002; Hiiemäe 1988; Pungas, Võsu 2012). At the same time, this kind of cultural interpretations are always influenced by human biology, such as perception modalities or the way of moving – in other words, these interpretations are *umwelt*-specific (Wheeler 2008: 141, 144): for example, humans' ability to move and operate in a mire landscape without special devices (e.g. bog shoes) is hindered. Also, the markings of communication and expressions characteristic of non-human species are often evident in texts representing nature (Maran 2014: 304) – in the case of toponymic explanation of the Kakerdaja Bog, it is the activity of the black-throated loon.

Anthropologist and folklorist Elizabeth Bird has explored how local narratives, including place-related narratives, are attached to the surroundings. Bird discusses the issue in the context of local and immediate interpretative relations, rather than on a wider historical geographical scale, which makes the discussion approachable for ecosemiotics. She inquires why narratives are attached to some places more easily than others (Bird 2002: 525). Mall Hiiemäe, who has studied Estonian nature-related lore, has discussed the same tendency: the qualities or peculiarities of landscape (e.g. prominent relief forms, single large trees, and boulders) are attached to relatively similar migratory motifs so that one could say that “the location inspires” it (Hiiemäe 2001: 94). Bird (2002: 526) suggests that place-related stories can be seen as an attempt to explain the ambiguity, distinctiveness,

or prominence that people notice in the environment. Ambiguity, in the present context, can be seen as a certain semiotic potential in landscape, something that is noticeable or distinguishable or catches attention.

Explaining the ambiguity or distinctiveness in the environment can also be seen as an interpretation of environmental signs in the vernacular semantic frame. Environmental signs are physically manifested causal and non-conventional sign relations (Maran 2017: 356) that are open to cultural interpretations (Maran 2017: 360). In conventional language signs, the code that connects the sign (representamen) and its object is internal to culture and immediately accessible to humans. In environmental signs, on the contrary, the correlation between the sign and the object originates outside of human culture. This creates ambiguity, fragmentariness and obscurity of various kinds (Maran 2017: 360). For instance, in folklore a circle of mushrooms is interpreted as a “fairy ring”, or various folk narratives describe people seeing will-o’-the-wisps on mires.¹⁸ In these cases, the ecological sign relations between the object and the representamen remain non-accessible for the perceiver (Maran 2017: 359–360). Furthermore, the objects behind sign relations may be general or manifold in themselves and therefore difficult to perceive (Maran 2017: 362). These kinds of situations may inspire a variety of potential culture-specific interpretations. The lack of information or need for an explanation that motivates new vernacular interpretations has also been pointed out by Elizabeth Bird (2002: 526) as she discusses the ambiguous objects or phenomena of landscape.

2.2. Representing environmental semiosis in place-lore

In the previous subsection I discussed how vernacular interpretations can be rooted in environmental semiosis to a considerable extent. However, semiotic relations with the environment are not directly expressed in concrete folkloristic representations, but are intertwined with the tradition-based logic of folk narratives, such as migratory and local tale motifs, genre traditions, and storytelling practices. Timo Maran (2014) has addressed a similar dynamics between environmental experiences and the tradition of nature writing in the context of biosemiotic criticism proposed by him. He has described the relationship of

¹⁸ Non-accessibility of sign relations pointed out by Maran is a good example of the semiotic impulse in the origin of folk narratives: according to Maran, the missing part of the sign relation is compensated by narrative. However, in the actual vernacular communication the persistence of motifs like fairy rings mostly remains an issue of choices on the symbolic or narrative level (i.e. the level of the interpretant). Although people can be aware of the biological context of the phenomena, they can choose to consider alternative explanations.

literary texts and the nature they represent as integration of two semiotically complex and multidimensional spheres, which can also be seen as a modelling relation (Maran 2014: 301). Combining the levels of modelling suggested by the Tartu-Moscow School on the one hand and those described by Thomas A. Sebeok on the other, Maran (2014: 303) illustrates how, in nature writing, modelling takes place in close interaction between zoosemiotic, linguistic, and artistic levels. These three levels can be studied also in place-lore texts. While the linguistic and artistic dimensions of modelling are more dependent on the characteristics of a particular tradition (e.g. language, genre logic, and performance contexts), zoosemiotic modelling takes place through the environmental perception of the storyteller and is manifested in texts, for example as references to the environment and other species or as descriptions of physical and environmental experiences (Maran 2014: 304).

The concept of zoosemiotic modelling makes it possible to notice iconic and indexical sign relations of environmental semiosis in textual representations and thus allows seeing place-lore texts as a dynamic part of environmental communication. Moreover, this kind of modelling based on perceptual and physical relations with the surroundings is relevant in environment-related folklore because these narratives are mostly created and interpreted through tangible and immediate engagements with the surroundings (see e.g. Kohn 2013). For example, in mire-related lore, the level of zoosemiotic modelling is mainly expressed in descriptions, place names, experiences, etc. related to the terrain or surface. Moving and operating in a mire environment is physically challenging and requires careful interpretation of environmental signs (e.g. weather conditions or the composition and colour of vegetation). Also, avoiding sinking into the mire surface or getting lost in an unvaried disorienting landscape requires a sharpened perception and awareness of one's physical body and movement. This is the reason why folk narratives related to mires predominantly describe the dangers and struggles of physical movement or the surrounding environment (see Hiimäe 1998; Meredith 2002).

Ecosemioticians have mapped complex semiotic relationships between the environment and texts, through which the references to the environment are established and created in texts. These relationships describe how creating of specific representations is based on both the semiotic agency of the environment and the recognition of the storyteller. For instance, a *motivated* and *mimetic relationship* describes the occasions when the motivation or impetus that inspires the creation of specific representations proceeds from nature (Maran 2014: 301; Maran, Tüür 2017: 289–290). The motivated relation correlates with the ambiguity of the landscape as a stimulus for place narratives referred to by Bird (2002: 526–

527). The *representational relation* describes how the environment is mediated at the textual level through the modelling, and the *complementary relation* enables us to describe how literary works are not entirely understandable without their environmental context (Maran 2014: 301) and, at the same time, the extra-narrative space can be interpreted through the textual knowledge (Maran forthcoming). In the case of vernacular interpretation, however, the semiotic activity of the environment can also have a direct impact on narratives through the storytelling practices, which requires complementing the relationships described in previous ecosemiotic research.

I am hereby proposing a *situational relation* to describe spatially and temporally (more) immediate semiotic relations between textual interpretations and environment. A place or an environment presented in a folklore text often coincides with the site where the narratives are told – in this case, the represented environment itself is present. The situational relationship describes the occurrences when semiotic activity of environment interrupts and engages with the interpretations in storytelling situations such as hiking, tour guiding, etc., and directs people to varying or changing the stories by offering hints, twists, or new meanings. This way, the environment as an interface plays an important role in mediating and retaining vernacular narratives (Gunnell 2009: 307–308). Interviews conducted with wilderness guides, local people, and photographers in the Kakerdaja Bog illustrate how interpretation and variation of well-known narratives is often a response to the experiences of the environment or changes in its appearance (see Päll 2016). For instance, the species that one can see in the environment, or, for example, the time, place, season, weather, and context of narrating can lead to telling the stories differently. A situational relationship differs from motivated or complementary relationships as it describes not an interpretational frame, but an immediate feedback loop between the environmental and textual spaces.

Consequently, it is fair to conclude that compared to, for example, nature writing, place-lore is semiotically more open towards the extra-narrative space as non-human semiotics is present through a shared communicational space without major temporal or spatial distances. One of the possible ways to analyse the situational relationship in representations is by means of the same level of zoosemiotic modelling (see Maran 2014: 304), and, in addition, by observing the variations of the narratives and motifs in different contexts. Although the changes, shifts, and reactions in narratives motivated by the situational relation can be visible at the representational level, the interpretive context of specific representations becomes analysable only by using fieldwork methods that enable the study of the storytelling context and practical engagements with the surroundings.

3. Reframing the concept of place-lore

In the following, I briefly address previous definitions of place-lore and propose a new definition that focuses on semiotic relations between narratives and the environment. So far, the lack of an analytical definition of place-lore has been causing difficulties on various stages of place-lore research ranging from preparing for fieldwork to the digitization of archival material. For instance, how we distinguish place-lore from local lore in general has a direct influence on the content and extent of collections and public applications, and also on possible research topics. The number of texts in the database depends on the range of the boundaries of the concept of place-lore (see Remmel 2014b: 35–36). The new set of defining characteristics I am suggesting here can provide the basic criteria for the primary levels of description, such as database keywords or fieldwork questionnaires for collecting place-lore.

So far, the most widely used definition of place-lore is the one formulated by Mari-Ann Remmel: “Place-lore is mostly narrative lore which is bound to some toponym, site or landscape object, and which includes (place) legends, place-bound beliefs, descriptions of practices, historical lore, memories, etc.” (Remmel 2001a: 21). Other folklorists have either used definitions of place-lore similar to Remmel’s (e.g. Kindel 2005; Valk 2008, 2009), or suggested somewhat different definitions of the concept in introducing specific topics, e.g. Västriik (1998) in the context of Votian folklore; Tuisk (2001) in the tradition of Estonian communities in Siberia; and Hiiemäe (2001, 2004) in the context of landscapes-related vernacular practices.

As Remmel’s definition illustrates, scholars have tried to delineate place-lore by genre, naming for example legends, beliefs, descriptions of practices, historical lore, reports, memories (Remmel 2014b: 31; Västriik 1998: 132) or vernacular knowledge about landscape (Hiiemäe 2004: 66). The usage of genre-specific descriptions stems from the previous research tradition; however, when introducing place-lore as a broader and hybrid term to replace the former term ‘place legend’, researchers already acknowledged that genre criteria are not decisive and place-lore can be seen as a thematic field (Remmel 2014b: 29; Västriik 1998: 132). Ülo Valk (2008: 10) has pointed out how place-lore serves as a “synthetic device to study various genres in their connection with environment”.

Leaving aside genre typologization, the definitions of place-lore so far have proceeded from

- (1) (natural) objects represented in place-lore (see Västriik 1998; Hiiemäe 2001, 2004). Hiiemäe (2004: 66), for example, has listed “both natural and artificial objects such as mounds, valleys, forest groves, bogs, bodies of water, fields, rocks, primeval trees, graves, chapels, churches, roads, administrative units”;

- (2) topics of place-lore, or information place-related folklore mediates: place-lore represents places and tells tales associated with places (see Rimmel 2001a, 2014b; Västrik 1998). Västrik (1998: 132), for example, argues that in place-lore, “information is mediated [...] about places and archaeological monuments, their origins, special features, the events that have occurred in that place or the rituals that have been performed there” (Västrik 1998: 132); or
- (3) the (subjective) relationship between an individual and a place (Tuisk 2001: 78).

The definitions proposed so far have highlighted important characteristics but remain descriptive and dependent on the context of the specific topics or landscape type the earlier material represent. The objects and topics of place-lore and the ways in which it is related to the environment change in time – for example, next to natural objects, also urban spaces or places of artificial environments are represented in place-lore (see e.g. Vahtmäe 2008); or else the folklore of village communities has been replaced by folkloric interpretations in heritage tourism (Kindel 2005; Reha 2014) which, in turn, represent an altogether different experience of place. Thus it is important to describe characteristics that can reveal the more general reciprocal relations between the environment and textual space. Considering the former definitions introduced above, but focusing on the relations of folklore and the extra-narrative environment, in the following I am proposing three key criteria for defining place-lore.

3.1. Localizability

Localizability, the association of a narrative with a specific location in the extra-narrative landscape, has been emphasized as a particularly characteristic aspect of place-lore (Rimmel 2014b: 39; Hiimäe 2001: 87; Västrik 1998: 132). Mentioning or highlighting a particular place in folklore is also seen as a primary criterion of place-lore (Kindel 2005: 11). Place-lore is therefore clearly different from folklore that relates to certain environments or landscapes as such, e.g. narratives about forest spirits, haymaking, or hiking stories that are not place-specific.¹⁹ In general, localizability is about creating a primary association between a place and a narrative, a spatial framework marking the semiotic relations between the location represented in folklore and the external environment. Consider, for example, the

¹⁹ Proceeding from the Finnish cultural anthropologist Matti Sarmela's concept '*ympäristökertomukset*' ('tales of the environment') Mari-Ann Rimmel has proposed the term '*keskkonnapärimus*' ('environmental lore'; Rimmel 2014b: 28), which can point to non-localized narratives; she also refers to the more general 'landscape-related narratives', the so-called geographical lore.

toponymic explanations of the name Seljapealis,²⁰ a prominent sand ridge located in the southeast of the Kakerdaja Bog:

Seljapealis – an old path dating back to the period of Swedish rule, a sand ridge right through the bog. It is wider in some places and the width of a road in others. It runs up to Kervenurk, through the spruce forest.²¹

Toponymic explanation in general illustrates a *motivated relationship* between landscape and narratives (Maran 2014: 301) and, in the case of Seljapealis, also the relevance of iconic sign relations in place-lore: place names, or narratives about the origins of places are often motivated by the similarity between landscape and certain objects. However, localizability of place-lore does not necessarily have to mean mentioning concrete place names in texts. Adding place names or explicit descriptions often serves as a methodological need motivated by a fieldwork situation: collection methods and questions have encouraged the focus on place names or more detailed descriptions. In local vernacular communication, location specificity often manifests in a much more implicit and at the same time manifold manner because the environment is already present in the narrative situation, and it is familiar both physically and through socially shared experience (see e.g. Gunnell 2009: 308–309). Thus, the localizability in folklore can be expressed by referring to specific ecological conditions, activities related to locations, descriptions of the environment as illustrated by the example of Seljapealis, but also the self-positioning of the narrator. For example, Hiiesaar ('the sacred grove island', see Fig. 2),²² situated in the Kakerdaja Bog, has been described through differences in the landscape which is distinctive from the surrounding bog: "In the middle of the Kakerdi Bog there rises a sacred mound. It is surrounded by impassable wetland and bog pools and only a single pathway leads there. [...]"²³

²⁰ The Estonian name translates literally as 'of the ridgeback'.

²¹ *Seljapealis – vana ruotsi aegne tie, ravast läbi, liva seljandik. Menes kohas läheb lajemaks ja menes kohas on tie laijune. Läheb Kervenurgale kuoksemetsast läbi.* [EKI, KN Place-names from Järva-Madise parish, collected by Velly Roots from Ludvig Palmiste, 66 years old (1960).]

²² In Estonian, the word 'hiis' stands for a sacred place.

²³ *Keset Kakerdi raba asub kõrgemal kohal hiiemägi. Ümberringi on läbipääsmatu raba ja laukad ainult üks tee viib sinna. [...]* [ERA II 219, 447/8 (21) < Järva-Madise parish, Albu municipality, Peedu village – Harry Loog < Richard Loodis, 43 years old (1939).]



Figure 2. Mire environment in the Kakerdaja Bog; the higher forested area is the bog island Hiiesaar (photo: Lona Päll, 2015).

In any case, localizability reveals the defining and framing of the represented place in one way or another, proceeding from the extra-narrative landscape, a specific place, its cultural (e.g. objects of cultural landscape) or ecological elements (e.g. species composition). For instance, a mire environment is a visually uniform expanse, and lacks clearly distinctive points of reference or boundaries (Pungas, Võsu 2012: 92). Thus the localizability in place-lore related to wetlands is often based on sensory experience of the environment and expressed on the level of zoosemiotic modelling. The boundaries and transitions in the mire landscape can depend on the weather, seasonal changes, biological composition, or the colour of plant coverage. On the other hand, framing a locality or the surroundings in mire-related place-lore depends on the way a person moves in the mire, either using bog shoes, skis, or a boat on the bog pools. The spatial boundaries are constructed through interpretation of environmental signs and ecological conditions.

Even though the localizability is the basic characteristic and pre-condition of place-lore, the location specificity is not the only or the main characteristic of place-related narratives. Connecting the narrative events with specific locations is a defining feature of legends (Tangherlini 1994: 22) and characteristic of local (historical) tales that are told as true stories (Gunnell 2009: 308). Naming

a place, but also naming the time, characters, etc., and describing the details of the environment, trajectories of movement, is part of the rhetoric of truth and renders the narration lively and believable (Oring 2008: 147–148). Thus, naming or describing a specific place in folklore does not necessarily mean that place is in any way relevant or significant, considering the function of the plot or the narrative.

3.2. Representation of place

In addition to naming and structuring a place, semiotic relations with the environment in folklore are also expressed on the level of theme or content – place-lore describes or represents features characteristic of an environment through the events, characters, or information it gives. Place-centredness primarily on the thematic level (place-lore “speaks” about places) is what Remmel had in mind when she argued that place-lore is a thematic area of folklore involving a diverse range of genres (Remmel 2014b: 39). Västrik (1998: 132) has also stressed the function of place-lore as a defining characteristic – place-lore mediates information about origins of places, qualities of places, or events related to places.

In other words, representation of certain environments in place-lore is semiotically more complex than being explicitly referential towards extra-narrative space (e.g. naming, framing or describing). Place does not only serve as a contextual background of an event but is continuously reconstructed as a special location (Bird 2002: 524). Characteristics of extra-narrative environment can be seen as shaping the course of a narrative, i.e. conceptualizing an event, person or emotion. At the same time, not all local stories, for example stories about local characters or belief narratives, explicitly represent the specific place. The place or location may be irrelevant in these stories and the focus may be on life stories, historical conditions, etc. What differentiates place-lore from other local narratives is semiotic complementarity between the environmental and narrative spheres that is similar to texts of nature writing (Maran 2014: 301). Place-lore is not easily transferrable – a narrative cannot be recounted about another physical place or type of environment without a change of meaning (Tuisk 2001: 74–75).

Place-lore related to mires illustrates how characteristic ecological conditions have been shaping possible motives and narratives. In addition to various stories about the origins of mires, mire-related lore includes reports about supernatural beings and/or experiences, bottomless bog pools, will-o'-the-wisps or sinking through the bog surface (being “swallowed up by a quagmire”; Hiiemäe 1988). In the lore about the Kakerdaja Bog, specific environmental characteristics are expressed, such as its unique stretches of bog pools, and expanses of low areas, a deep bog lake formed of merging pools, and the steep elevation in the western part

of the bog. Among the many narratives about the Kakerdaja Bog, the most popular one, which is also featured in the archives with the largest number of variants, is the story about the drowning of Aksel Pokmann, the son of a family living on Noku farm at the edge of the bog, and his friend:

There [is] this cross in the Kakerdaja Bog (see Fig. 3), set up to commemorate the young men who perished; it is a juniper cross. It is the original cross. It must have been in 1943 when the two of them – one was the son of the old man of Noku – decided to come through the Kakerdaja Bog on Martinmas Eve, they even had the instrument [accordion] with them. They had nearly come out from among almost all of the bog pools, only a last few were left, when they sank in [and drowned].²⁴



Figure 3. Cross marking the place where two young men drowned in the 1940s (photo: Lona Päll, 2015).

²⁴ *Kakerdaja raba peal see rist, mis on pandud hukkunud noormeeste mälestuseks, see on kadakane rist. See on originaalrist. See pidi siis olema 1943. aastal, kui nad kahekesi – üks oli Noku taadi poeg, hakkasid üle Kakerdaja raba tulema mardiõhtul, pill veel seljas. Tulid laugaste vahelt peaaegu juba välja, veel viimased laukad olid, kui nad olid sisse vajunud.* [EFA II 45, 185 (12) < Järva-Madise parish, Albu municipality, Mõnuvere village – Mall Hiemäe < Age-Li Liivak, born 1941 (2003).]

The story is motivated by real events, in the course of which two youngsters drowned due to misorientation in a tricky environment and difficult weather conditions in late autumn. Events of sinking or losing the track in mires easily become part of place-lore, and these narratives are usually widely known and re-told because they carry a warning function: mire environment can be dangerous. The above narrative is not easily transferrable to a different environments, or even a different mire as the specific bog environment with its major seasonal changes and tricky bog pools constitutes a central interpretation frame of the narrative. Moreover, in the specific case the complementarity between the narratives and the environment is further established by the cross erected in the bog to mark the specific location of the events. The cross itself has become a material reference of the events and the story, and motivates re-telling of the story (see e.g. Bird 2002: 539–540).

3.3. Manifestation of place experience

Place-related narratives do not just concern the place or environment itself but also the particular meanings and experiences connected with or proceeding from these. In other words, place-lore explains the relations between individuals and places (Tuisk 2001: 78). In Estonia, the manifestation of experience in a sense of subjective perception or interpretation in nature-related folklore has been studied mainly in the past couple of decades (e.g. Väljaots 2013) and it has been associated with the widening scope of Estonian folkloristics since the 1990s (Remmel 2014b: 21). In the folklore collecting practices before the 1990s, the subjectively expressed experience of informants was often not considered worthy to be recorded or outlined. Sometimes the focus on experience has been considered characteristic of specific topics or genres, e.g. personal experience stories or memorates – personal experience narratives that often include a supernatural aspect (e.g. Remmel 2014b: 31). Therefore, most of the earlier researchers or folklore collectors have not regarded the expression of place or environmental experience as one of the primary or core characteristics of place-related folklore as such.

However, mediation of place experience can be considered a significant criterion for defining place-lore because place-lore is to a great degree based on interpreting the physical environment. A place or an environment is not mediated in place-lore only as narrative wisdom – place-lore is motivated by pre-symbolic sign relations and related to physical experiences or practices related to the surroundings. Subjective experiences and perception of environment are often manifested in place-lore through local ecological knowledge: folklore is related with practically or symbolically relevant places, it is associated with knowledge

of the topography of the place and is part of the communication and vernacular interpretations related to the environment. However, experience is not always explicitly expressed in the text – it can be manifested in descriptions of activities, knowledge of place names, and descriptions of environmental conditions, species, etc.

Widely known narratives or motifs (e.g. drowning in bog pools or losing orientation in a mire) are also contextualized in relation to the familiar environment that the person knows or associates the stories with. For instance, the above story of the young men who drowned in the Kakerdaja Bog is known in dozens of variations, which, at a closer look, may be associated with the environmental experience of the narrator, including seasonal changes or various other environmental conditions he or she notices. Sometimes the same person retells the story differently depending on the storytelling context or situation. Studying these different variations reveals a *situational relationship* between texts and the environment, the interpretations of a well-known story depend on the narrator's experiences with a certain environment in a particular time. The following example of how one of the nature tour guides I interviewed interprets the story of the boys drowned in the Kakerdaja Bog illustrates this:

[...][The boys went across the Kakerdaja Bog] to meet some girls at the Martinmas village dance, and they took a shortcut over the bog pool because the roads are too far away over there. And as they had crossed [the bog] a hundred times, [...] there must have been something leading them off the path. It usually snows on Martinmas for the first time and there may be ice and so it is very easy to get lost and sink in a bog pool, even for those who know the bog.²⁵

The impulse of vernacular interpretation can be the immediate environmental experience; this, however, does not mean that in place-lore the environmental experience is modelled mainly on the so-called zoosemiotic level, or through the subjective prism of “the experience of being in an environment”. For example, the unique environment of mires has shaped the imagination of mires as liminal environments characterized by being “in-between”, or “on the threshold”. The ecological liminality of wetlands is obvious and based on the water regime: the mire is neither mineral land nor a body of water (Pungas, Vösu 2012: 88, 91). At the same time, in folklore mire-related narratives also refer to liminal and supernatural

²⁵ [...] [Poisid läksid üle Kakerdaja raba] Mardipäeva simmanile tüdrukutele külla, aga üle lauka on poole otsem, sest et seal teed lähevad muidu ju väga kaugelt. Ja kui nad on sada korda [üle raba] käinud [...], siis pidi olema mingisugune eksitav juhus. Mardipäeval on esimene lumi ja jää võib olla ja ongi see, et väga lihtne on ka nendel, kes tunnevad raba, ära eksida ja laukasse jääda. (Interview with nature tour guide T. P., 02.04.2012)

forces and experiences (Pungas-Kohv *et al.* 2015: 247). Mire-related lore entails characters who are often either marginalized – paupers, hermits, healers, spinsters, madmen, partisans, etc. – or in the role of a social trickster (Pungas, Vösu 2012: 93). Thus, the place experience in folklore is ambivalent and mediated variously through different ways of modelling.

According to the above-mentioned features, place-lore can be defined as a part of folklore that is localizable, represents the characteristics of place, and mediates place experience. These three characteristics are built up by semiotic relations between folklore and the environment it represents, and they constitute a core or ideal form of place-lore. While the localizability – the connection to a certain extra-narrative location – is a fundamental pre-requisite of place-lore, the way how and to what extent these three characteristics appear depends on the specific representations and the storytelling situation. Moreover, in concrete vernacular interpretations, these three levels of characteristics are inevitably integrated. For example, the name of the Kakerdaja Bog, which alludes to both a bird and a way of moving, entails location specificity, mediates information characteristic of, or central to, the referred place (which species inhabit the place), and mediates the experience influenced by the unique environment (waddling as a way of moving).

Conclusion

My aim in this article was to propose a novel definition of place-lore that considers the semiotic relations between place-lore and the environment that it represents. While the fieldwork methods that Estonian place-lore researchers have developed aim to record to a certain extent the semiotic complementarity between environment and folklore, the previous research has been lacking a theory for considering place-lore as a dialogical eco-cultural phenomenon. Adopting ecosemiotics enables the developing of much-needed dialogical models and methods for place-lore research. The question of environmental sign relations is central and unavoidable in the theoretical conceptualization of place-lore because these narratives are shaped at the convergence point of ecological sign systems and tradition-based cultural sign systems.

I have demonstrated how place-lore is not only part of vernacular communication, but also part of environmental communication as it expresses characteristics of a specific environment, inter- and intraspecies communication, and perception

of people who engage with the surroundings. These narratives are rooted in indexical and iconic sign relations present in the environment, they are based on interpreting environmental signs or explaining the environmental distinctiveness and ambiguity. At the representational level, in concrete texts environmental interpretations are, of course, mediated through symbolic interpretations, but manifested also on the level of zoosemiotic modelling: as descriptions or references to perception, movement, or characteristics of the environment (for more, see Maran 2014: 301). Thus, the place-centredness, which previous researchers have highlighted as a fundamental aspect of place-lore, is not only about instrumental references, such as mentioning place names in folk texts, but folklore has complex and dynamic semiotic relations with the extra-narrative environment.

Different kinds of semiotic relationships between textual space and the environment have been outlined by previous researchers, mostly on the basis of the study of nature writing (see Maran 2014; Maran, Tüür 2017). I have shown how the motivated, mimetic, representational, and complementary relationships can be used to describe how the semiotic potential of the environment is actively engaged as motivating also in vernacular interpretations, representing the environment in place-lore texts, and interpreting the narratives. However, I claim that place-lore is semiotically more open towards the environment than nature literature as an authored text, as in the case of folklore the semiotic potential of the environment actively guides meanings also through immediate storytelling situations. Thus, I have developed the existing types of relationships further and suggested adding the situational relationship between texts and the environment to study place-based textual practices where the environment itself is present, for example storytelling in the context of field trips or nature tours, etc.

Outlining various ways of how the semiotic potential of the environment is manifested in folklore has enabled me to show how semiotic relations with the environment are at the core of place-lore. Therefore, I suggest defining the concept of place-lore not by textual characteristics of the material but through semiotic relations that these texts have with the environment. I propose three defining features of place-lore: place-lore is localizable, it represents the characteristics of a place, and mediates place experience. On the most practical level, these three components can serve as a methodological tool to organize or describe the material in archival and fieldwork practices and thus address the increasing interest as well as the need to work with the material. However, and most importantly, a new and analytical definition is a necessary precondition for a more in-depth study of place-lore than has been carried out so far.

While previous researchers framed place-lore based on certain topics or engagements with the environment (e.g. traditional village life, sacred natural

sites, etc.), an analytical definition I propose makes it possible to study place-lore as a dynamic and polyphonic tradition. It is necessary to include new topics and research foci because both the landscape-related practices and performance contexts and media of folklore (e.g. tourism, heritage protection) are changing rapidly. The definition provided in the article can serve as a primary research level for describing how the aforementioned changes are manifested on different levels of place-related folklore – localization, representation, and mediating the experience. For example, could the construction of board walkways, informational signs, and developing apps for orienteering in bogs neutralize narratives of fear and uncertainty that are persistent in narratives related to wetlands? Or how is digital and transmedia storytelling affecting the narratives that are mainly re-storied in the same physical and social context they are representing?

Finally, and most importantly, focusing on the sign processes between cultural expressions and the environment allows a more efficient analysis of folklore in the context of changing or conflicting ecological and social circumstances, such as increased mobility, environmental conflicts, social disruptions, etc. Due to the semiotic feedback loop between vernacular interpretations and the environment they represent, possible conflicts are immediately reflected on some interpretative level in folklore. For example, changes in how people localize narratives or describe the environment can also indicate the changing relationship with certain species. Studying place-lore as a dialogical natural-cultural phenomenon also has an ethical relevance. David Low (2008: 47–48) has argued that environmental conflicts and problems can be regarded as “disconnections between our ways of thinking about an environment, and the ways an environment asserts its own being”. The study of environmental relations in place-lore provides an opportunity to identify potential conflicts and cases of miscommunication and address them directly.

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- EFA – Manuscript collection of the Estonian Folklore Archives (1996–...)
- EKI, KN – Place-name Collection of the Institute of the Estonian Language; electronically accessible at <https://www.eki.ee/kohanimed>
- ERA – Folklore collection of the Estonian Folklore Archives (1927–1944)
- RKM – Manuscript collection of the Estonian Folklore Archives (1945–1996)

Ekosemioottinen näkemys folkloristiikasta: paikallisperinteen käsitteen uudelleenkehystäminen

Paikallisperinteillä, joita Virossa on järjestelmällisesti tallennettu jo 1800-luvulta lähtien, on tärkeä rooli erilaisissa kansallisissa, yhteisöllisissä ja institutionaalisissa käytännöissä. Virolaiset tutkijat ovat tähän mennessä käsitteellistäneet paikallisperinteitä arkistotekstien näkökulmasta, ja pääpaino on ollut aineiston keräämisessä ja arkistoinnissa. Samalla teorian kehitys on jäänyt taka-alalle. Tässä artikkelissa lähestyn virolaista paikallisperinnettä ekosemioottisesta näkökulmasta ja ehdotan uutta määritelmää paikallisperinteen käsitteelle, joka asettaa semioottiset yhteydet perimätiedon ja siinä esitettävän ympäristön välillä keskeiseen asemaan. Analyysissäni tarkastelen, millä tavoin erilaiset ympäristöyhteydet ilmenevät perinneteksteissä, ja sen kautta voidaan hahmottaa, miten paikallisperinteitä luonnehtivat (1) paikallistettavuus, (2) tietyn paikan tai ympäristön esittäminen ja (3) paikkakokemuksen välittäminen. Paikallisperinteen uudelleenmäärittely ja sitä kautta myös alustavan analysointikehyksen luominen on erittäin tarpeellista käytännön keruu- ja arkistointityön kannalta, mutta toisaalta se luo myös perustan jatkotutkimukselle, jonka avulla voidaan tarkastella paikallisperinteitä nykypäivän kehityksen kontekstissa, kuten esimerkiksi tekstikäytäntöjen muuttumisen, kulttuurihäiriöiden ja ympäristökriisin viitekehyksissä. Artikkelissa esitetty esimerkkiaineisto on soihin liittyvää paikallisperinnettä, tarkemmin Pohjois-Virossa sijaitsevaan Kakerdaja-rämeeseen liittyviä tarinoita.

Ökosemiootiline vaade folkloorile: kohapärimuse mõiste übermõtestamine

Kohapärimus, mida on Eestis süstemaatiliselt talletatud 19. sajandist, on ühtlasi oluline osa erinevatest rahvuslikest, kogukondlikest ja institutsionaalsetest praktikatest. Kuni praeguseni on Eesti uurijad kontseptualiseerinud kohapärimust arhiivitektide perspektiivist ning fookus on olnud materjali kogumisel ja arhiveerimisel, samas kui teooriaarendus

on jäänud tagaplaanile. Käesolevas artiklis käsitlen Eesti kohapärimust ökosemiootilisest vaatenurgast ja pakun välja kohapärimuse uue määratluse, mis tõstab keskmesse semiootilised seosed pärimuse ja selles representeeritud keskkonna vahel. Analüüsin, mil viisil erinevad keskkonnaseosed pärimustekstides avalduvad, mis võimaldab näha, kuidas kohapärimust iseloomustab (1) lokaliseeritavus, (2) konkreetse paiga või keskkonna representeerimine ja (3) kohakogemuse vahendamine. Kohapärimuse uue määratluse ja selle kaudu ka esialgse analüüsiraami loomine on väga vajalik praktiliseks kogumis- ja arhiveerimistööks, ent loob ka aluse edasiseks uurimistegevuseks, mis võimaldab käsitleda kohapärimust selliste kaasaegsete arengute kontekstis nagu muutunud esituspraktikad, kultuurilised katkestused ja keskkonnakriis. Artiklis kasutatud näitematerjaliks on soodega seotud kohapärimus, konkreetsemalt Põhja-Eestis asuva Kakerdaja rabaga seotud lood.