Time borders: Change of practice and experience through time layers

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Time Borders: Change of Practice and Experience through Time Layers

Hannes Palang1, Kadri Semm2, and Lies Verstraete3 *

Abstract: This article explores how landscape practices and meanings have changed in the southeastern border region of Setumaa, in Estonia, during the last one hundred years. Geographers have treated landscapes as consisting of material and mental layers, as well as the driving forces behind them. The ways in which each socioeconomic formation creates its own landscape have also been part of their discussions. To those discussions, we add changing political borders that coincide with formation changes—processes that influence local participation and the open interpretation of the local everyday landscape. Based on this perspective, Setumaa offers a unique study area where a multitude of natural cultural landscape patches with different life trajectories can be found situated close to each other and bounded by formation borders from different time layers. Spatial practices in a landscape depend on time context, thereby creating time borders. We demonstrate how political formations have influenced the Setu region and culture across spatial and ideological borders.

Key Words: place, political formations, local actors, spatial and time borders, transition zones, cultural landscape.

Introduction

In this article, we define “landscape” as a collection of places that have relationships and interconnections with social formations, personal histories, and life-ways. In an attempt to understand how the landscape of Setumaa has changed through its different time stages, we analyzed these lived-in places from both a social-construction perspective and the perspective of the local dwellers.

The concept of cultural landscape is perhaps one of the most contested and (mis)understood concepts in (human) geography. The interpretations vary from Sauer’s (1925) old—and now rediscovered—notion that “culture is the agent, natural area is the medium, cultural landscape is the result” (p. 46) to Cosgrove and Daniels’s (1988) idea that landscape is just a cultural image. Somewhere in between these interpretations are understandings that cultural landscapes should be accepted as an area purposefully changed by man, as a palimpsest (Vervloet 1986), as text (Duncan 1990), and even as a set of interfaces between different approaches and understandings (Palang and Fry 2003).

One of the basic criteria of this article is the landscape model developed by Keisteri (1990), as it is best suited to holistic landscape research. She has divided the so-called total landscape into three parts, specifically: 1) material features in the landscape that are easy to measure and describe; 2) non-material features, such as cultural and scenic components, that are difficult to quantify; and 3) underlying processes, that is, all natural and human processes together with their interrelations, that determine the development of landscape. In this model, subjectivity and objectivity complement one another in the evaluation of landscapes, rather than being at opposite poles. And, as well as enabling researchers to distinguish between different hierarchical levels, the model can be used to study major regions on a global scale or to attempt to combine the examination of areas of different sizes into a multilevel hierarchy.

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Time Borders

The major consideration of this study is time borders as they apply to the term “cultural landscape.” In the early 1980s, Cosgrove (1984/1998), in his neo-Marxian mode, wrote about the ways in which every socioeconomic formation tries to create its own landscape by removing the uses and symbolic values of previous formations and replacing these with its own. A formation should here be understood as the set of political, economic, social, and cultural conditions prevailing in a society. In Western Europe, the change from one formation to another has been gradual, and transitions (such as from feudalism to capitalism) took decades, if not centuries. In addition, each formation has had time to develop its own landscapes. A political organization defines land-use patterns that reflect the legal system of the country (Mitchell 2003; Olwig 2002). Through the arts and communication, a landscape ideal is created, containing memories of the past and preconditions for the future, which later becomes a yardstick for policy and tourism. These representations also explain whether, for example, a new mine should be understood as a sign of progress or as an environmental hazard. Our study focuses on urban and industrial landscapes, and references back to traditional landscapes indicate the agricultural landscapes of the early-nineteenth century (Antrop 2000; Vos and Meekes 1999).

Recent political changes in Eastern Europe have demonstrated that changes in socioeconomic formations create time barriers in the landscape that are not transparent—younger people who have not lived in the previous formations are unable to understand those landscapes (Palang, Külvik et al. 2002; Palang, Sooväli et al. 2004; Palang, Printsmann et al. 2006). For example, although the elements created during the period of collective farms are still visible in the landscape, their meaning and function remain incomprehensible for the younger generation and for people living elsewhere. Both the historical and everyday contexts are thus significant for landscape study. However, the shifts in landscape and their understanding by locals are not as sharp and sudden as the political changes. There is a certain time lag. Maandi (2003), for example, argued that the physical traces linger and the stories are passed on to the following generation even if the practice has ceased.

Landscape as a “Collection of Places”

Cultural landscape can be treated either as a living environment or as a reflection of human actions (Jackson and Smith 1984), observed in its social, political, and cultural contexts. This notion is connected with the neo-Marxist explanation whereby social formations, ideology, and symbolic interpretation are important for explaining social behavior and cultural values (Mels 2003). Here, landscape can be understood via a semiotic approach—as codes, symbols, or iconography. For example, in his representation of landscape, Olwig (2002) used outward appearance and adaptation as a visualization of different political ideologies.

A semiotic approach puts greater emphasis on the context and processes through which cultural meanings are involved and shape a world that is simultaneously natural and human. As Claval (2004b) explained:

During the late 90s, some of the criticisms developed earlier against the cultural approach vanished: geographers were discovering that culture was not a set of new and independent forces working in social life, but was the way all the social, economic and political factors were expressed by human groups. As soon as society was conceived in terms of communication, perception, representations, codes and conventions came to the fore. To adapt the cultural approach was not to negate the social nature of human life, but to use the appropriate tools to study it. (p. 2)

Thrift (2002) emphasized that social structures are characterized by their duality. Social theory tends to recognize either the compositional or the contextual approach.
The former is connected with the Marxist approach, the latter with phenomenology and the cognitive approach, where direct time-space bounded placement, human practice, personal wishes, thoughts, and material needs are significant. This leads us to various places and life stories.

Soini (2004) suggested coming back to places:
Place and landscape are in many ways intertwined with each other, but they do have certain differences. In academic geography, landscapes are seen more as objects of interpretation than as contexts of the experience—as place is typically seen as (Relph 1989). Places are lived in: they permeate everyday life and provide meaning in people’s lives, whereas landscape is predominantly thought of as a visual concept, as an image. Visual appearance is an important feature of all places, too. However, a scene may be of a place, but the scene itself is not a place, as Tuan (1974) has put it. Accordingly, all place experiences are not necessarily landscape experiences (Relph 1976). (p. 85)

Buttimer (1993; 2001) departed from Vidal de la Blache’s classical concepts of “lifeway,” “patterns of living,” or “ways of life” to describe the connections between livelihood, social organization, and cultural tradition within particular bio-physical settings. Each life-way includes a symbolic world, which is closely tied to group identity and to characteristic behavior routines and interaction networks that are linked to the socio-spatial ordering of everyday life.

“New Cultural Economy”
Change has been a constant part of the Estonian landscape. In Estonia, landscapes consist of several time layers, each of which has had different social and cultural settings. As soon as we start talking about “authenticity,” we have to define the timeline: we can speak about what was authentic for a certain time period or we may create the illusion of authenticity (Dovey 1989; Gustavsson and Peterson 2003; Sooväli 2004). The timeline is also different for insiders and outsiders. The insiders of the place are about continuation, humility, appropriateness, memories, today, and tomorrow. Outsiders are about control, conservation, and museumization—and usually lack both a physical and a temporal connectivity between and to the places. Landscape-management programs, which might be regarded as a sign of the new cultural economy of space, may finally result in the emergence of museums of local lore, with the hope that tourists will come and bring money. A part of the tradition, formerly communicated orally from one generation to another, is thus transformed into easily consumable cultural wrappings.

This process, in turn, creates another layer in the landscape, the dichotomy of places meant for insider consumption and non-places meant for outsiders. For outsiders, an authentic illusion of places is being staged and landscape managed so that it looks beautiful, although it does not necessarily involve the functions it used to. A human characteristic is to desire what is not present, especially when people feel that they have been left out and forced into the role of a passive observer or a chess piece in a decades-long political game. Postmodern landscapes provide a multitude of various interpretations of ways of seeing and practising landscape (Jauhiainen 2003).

Local processes have always been influenced by the outer world, and all innovations reach even the most remote periphery. Rural life driven by agriculture is being replaced by a mixture of work-leisure-tourism; local functions, tasks, and knowledge are undergoing change, becoming easily consumable and much less local/personal. Urry (1995) has noted that the various demands in the countryside may “leave no stone unturned” by the twenty-first century. He doubts if much of the mystery, memory, or surprise left in the countryside will remain, because such places may well have been consumed, used up.
However, although it is easy to criticize landscape-management interventions for standardizing places and landscapes and encouraging local people to make “unauthentic” places, they may arouse an interest in taking a closer look at one’s landscape, place, and identity in new ways, as if for the first time.

Formation of Territorial and Cultural Borders in Setumaa

Historical Background of the Border

Setumaa lies in the southeastern part of Estonia and continues across the border into Russia. It formed a separate Estonian county in the inter-war period but is currently divided by the national border. Manakov (2004) called this area an ethno-contact zone between Russia and Estonia, where the Estonian, Russian, and Setu languages are spoken and both Russian and Estonian cultures have certain Setu influences. For our study, cultural, spatial, and political borders have importance, as each of these has different historical origins and interconnected influences to Setu areas.

The history of Setumaa goes back to the formation of the border between Setumaa and “Estonia proper.” (Fig. 1). The border was established in the thirteenth century during the crusades and the Christianization of the present-day Baltic area; the boundary between the Catholic invasion originating from the West was carried out by the Brotherhood of the Sword (later to join the Teutonic and then the Livonian Order), and the Orthodox expansion from the east was pushed by Russian princes. While the German crusaders managed to Christianize the rest of present-day Estonia, the Setus remained under Russian influence (mostly from Pskov) and turned to Orthodoxy. This border remained in existence until 1917. The Setus’s location in Russia, next to its western boundary, made it possible for them to develop into a specific ethnic group, with a specific dialect (the Setu language), religion (Orthodox mixed with pagan rituals) and material environment (village types, settlement, land-use patterns, etc.).

After 1920, when Estonia had become independent and a border treaty had been signed with Russia, the Setumaa area became Estonian territory and a national border was established on the eastern side of it. The former border west of Setumaa now served as a county border. The newly formed county was named after its most economically and socially advanced center, Petersi (Pechory). Thus, the beginning of the twentieth century could be seen as the starting point of the westernization of the Setu areas.

The Estonians created, for example, the systematic written Setu language (Sarv 2000, 25–27).

In 1945, after Estonia had been annexed to the USSR once again, a new border was drawn, dividing Setumaa between the Estonian SSR and the Russian SFSR.

Figure 1. The boundaries of Setumaa. Black lines indicate communities, the dotted line the current border between Estonia and Russia, the grey lines the boundaries of Setumaa.
Since this border was meant to be a division line between two Soviet republics, it followed neither property limits (land had been nationalized), nor main communications, nor language boundaries. And, as the border had mostly administrative consequences, it did not influence everyday communication. The name Setumaa was not recommended for use because of territorial demands (Sarv 2000, 75).

In 1991, the border that was drawn on the map in 1945 was turned into a national border between Estonia and Russia, becoming a “real” border in the historical heart of Setumaa. This closed border resulted in the partial loss of the Setus's former social contacts, jobs, and markets on the Russian side. Indeed, during the 1990s, it was only on church holidays listed by the local government that Setus could cross the Russian border easily; it amounted to thirty-seven free border crossings a year, with the right to stay there for a maximum of two to three days. Sarv (2000, 34) has argued that, by that time, the church no longer concentrated on the Setu people at the ethnic level and that religion and customs, together with the role of the Petseri monastery (which was now on the Russian side), were of importance mainly for the elderly. This is an illustration of what happens to cultural practices in light of changed ideological formations. If local practices do not adapt to present social and ideological formations, they will scatter or integrate completely.

In the mid 1990s, a significant change took place in the behavior of the Estonian political elite and in Estonian public opinion regarding the border problem and the historical Estonian areas on the Russian side. Although Estonia had been eager to recover the areas it had lost in 1945, the current border had become more acceptable, for various reasons. First, people were convinced that Russia would not give up a part of its territory, and they were afraid that the problems with the border would prevent the entry of Estonia into the European Union (EU) and NATO. Second, Estonia did not want to have to deal with the Russian-speaking population of Petseri. Third, the integration of the economically and socially underdeveloped Petseri district would be difficult and too expensive for Estonia (Jääts 2000). The border problem was formally solved on May 18, 2005, when a new border treaty was signed and the borderline was straightened.

Since the entry of Estonia into the EU, the strategically important border zone has strongly influenced the Setus's local everyday landscape. The Koidula border station is now a social and political open-society landscape, where major changes are connected not only with development processes (new buildings and jobs and different learning programs) but also with environmental problems and the breakdown of the local villagers' everyday practices. These border issues are still used by Setu ideologists and local cultural activists, who often raise these issues in the public media in an attempt to restore the historical integrity of the region. For instance, in 2005, picketing on January 26 and again on February 2 became news items on Finnish television.

In reality, however, the border with Estonia has less meaning these days because it is dominated by the problems of the Russian border. When people speak about the “border,” they speak about the Russian border. The border between Estonia and Setumaa is still there, but some Setus have said that the border is not important to them, for example:

This border is only a mark because people don’t think about it anymore, everybody leads their own life. (Female, 21)

This border is no border because it is just an artificial border from a distant past. The border with Estonia isn’t important; on the other hand the border with Russia is an important fact for Setus and non-Setus. There is good contact between the Setus and the inhabitants of Estonia. (Male, 55) (From the interviews made by L. V.)
Socio-cultural Borders in Presenting the Setu Landscape

Three interest groups can be identified in the Setumaa landscape. The first group, the local Setu people who constitute the majority of the population in the landscape, live their everyday lives and concern themselves with everyday problems. Being less receptive to innovations, they maintain the characteristic ways of life. Because of high unemployment, they cultivate land, pasture animals, and raise income from picking mushrooms and berries. They go to church and carry on their customs. Annist (2004) called this group “everyday-locals”—they keep the authenticity of the culture alive and could be considered the existential insiders (or dwellers) in Relph’s (1976/1986) sense. Local everyday life provides more of an impression about the mentality and differences connected with this area.

The contemporary everyday landscape in Setumaa is similar to that of other villages in the peripheries of other parts of Estonia. The economic base is the forest industry, mineral water, services, and some agricultural production and marketing. The recreational landscape is growing in importance, as it is strongly connected with selling the past living-heritage landscape and pure local nature.

A 2009 study by Alumäe, Külvik, and Palang of the landscape preferences of those living in the village of Obinitsa in Setumaa revealed that the respondents shared a fear of ultimate agricultural collapse. The results of an additional question in which respondents were asked whether they would prefer changes in certain features or attributes in the landscape indicated a preference for fewer neglected households and more modern farm buildings. People were satisfied with features such as small fields of crops, pastures, hay meadows, and stands of trees but preferred maintenance or an increase in the number of these features. In general, the villagers wanted to see increased development and life quality, as well as tidier households, in the area that would embellish and enliven the landscape.

The second interest group consists of local Setu activists and intellectuals of Setu origin living elsewhere whose goal is to maintain the traditions erased during the Soviet era. The members of this group have an important effect on today’s landscape. They are concerned about retaining the area’s heritage for both local residents and the broader public. As they often live based on memories rather than the actual situation, they believe they are able to judge what is authentic and what is not, thereby being able to define traditions. Runnel (2002) has described how local authorities try to coddle this feeling of communal society, which is valued only by the old local people. Local culture tends to be influenced by mass media.

Although from a contemporary viewpoint, the Soviet period is interpreted as one reason for the disappearance of the Setu ethnic group, the Setu people adapted to the Soviet way of life but in a locally specific context: the agricultural way of life was maintained, and people were employed in kolkhozes. The Setus preserved their specific everyday habits because of the remaining routes of communication—links with Petseri, which had strong economic and religious connections—and through connections with Russian culture. Interviews with local people have shown that the heritage of the Soviet era remained important (kolkhoz life, houses of culture, cattle sheds) and that the end of this way of life was viewed as rather tragic. Indeed, local people voluntarily sang folk songs about the Soviet-period environment (Tutt-Pütt, 1995). This example demonstrates once again that local people create their own culture through their way of life, which at the same time reflects an adaptation to changing socio-political formations.

Another example of the contradictions of reality and contemporary narratives is reflected in the local development plan of Värska County. For example, in describing village culture, the planners counted thirty-five villages with a total of 1,595 inhabitants. Without the local county center, these thirty-five villages had just 1,005 people; nine of the villages had only 10 people. These numbers illustrate how villages, and village culture, have been dying out in the local landscape. The plan also highlights the general passivity of villages.
The social reality of the Värska County landscape often reflected both passivity and purposefulness, in which local social conditions and culture were unfortunately based on the traditional culture taught in schools and on the development of village museums and their practices (Värska valla arengukava (Local development plan Värska County) 2003–2010). The role of the local community as a creator of identity has clearly weakened. As Annist (2004) concluded, village life is now sustained by tourists, which has turned rural life into a strange disrupted, fragmented, and seasonal event.

Articles published in the Estonian media introduce scattered Setu ideology and local everyday practices through historical narratives and habits relating to Setumaa. Typically, these articles present a lively region, with strong cultural roots and everyday practices. An analysis of the media representation of Setumaa can lead to the conclusion that the new generation of Setus become acquainted with their culture through newly produced cultural practices and ideologies, mixed with historical heritage. Circular referencing (Olwig 2004) can be found in the Setu ideological landscape, newly produced by the younger generation. This is particularly so in Estonian cultural literature, where authors discuss the Setu landscape as poetic and different, describing it through both newly produced symbolical elements and old tradition (Vikerkaar 2005, 7–8; Kunst.ee, 2005; Teater.Muusika.Kino, 2005). The media has also participated in introducing a strict narrative of the Setu areas. For example, the 2003 documentary Kate ilma veer pääl (Between Two Worlds) hinted that festivals that include cultural symbols of Russia were no longer Setu festivals; Setu festivals were identified through specific clothes and songs. However, local people from Estonian Setu areas still attend festive events on the Russian side.

When people attempt to create an ideal mental image of their area, parallels with Cosgrove’s (1984/1998) ideas about fixating on the iconographic landscape can be drawn. For example, tourist booklets often offer photos of traditionally characteristic building styles, women dressed in folk costumes singing, or cultivated rural fields (Semm and Sooväli 2004). At the same time, Olwig (2004) has demonstrated how this representation of the landscape creates a circular reference between the representation and “real” life. Once a landscape is depicted in a tourist brochure or described in a travel guidebook, visitors will look for that very image and be disappointed if they do not find it. Thus, in order to avoid that, the “real” landscape is rearranged to match the representation, to show tourists what they want to see. The consequences, however, might be seasonal effects (tourism-oriented show time, plus tourist-free real time) and a kind of schizophrenic misunderstanding of what is “real” and what is not. In addition, the media and other types of communication increasingly make use of old Setu language terms; despite the Russian and Estonian border, the Setumaa landscape is introduced as one entity.

Finally, local activists and intellectuals have exploited the border problem in terms of its “cultural economy.” Before the border was readjusted in 2005, it was a tourist attraction, known as “between two worlds.” One part of the border, the so-called “Saatse boot,” was a particularly strange zone. Anyone who wanted to go from Estonia to the Estonian-Setu village of Saatse had to cross the border twice. No visa was needed, but since walking was prohibited, the only way to reach the area (approximately 800 meters away) was by car or bicycle.

The third interest group includes those who view the landscape of Setumaa as tourists—they treat the landscape as scenery, and they bring economic revenue into the region. Since the fall of the Soviet system, an increasing number of summerhouses have been built and, instead of residing in the area permanently, more people now visit Setumaa mainly in the summer. The meanings they attach to the surrounding environment differ greatly from those of the year-round inhabitants. For them, the symbols of the landscape may be chapels or museums displaying the area’s natural and cultural objects, which may in turn bolster the Setu people’s self-assurance and prevent the Setumaa landscape from being understood as simply a beautiful summer landscape.
This particular way of seeing Setu areas may also be connected with the Soviet era. During that period, recent history was connected with more distant history, while history that was chronologically close seemed and could be interpreted as archaic. The Estonian ethnologist Vaike Sarv (2000) has explained how during Soviet times, Setu culture was interpreted through terms and narratives that were characteristic to it, thereby turning it into a traditional and folkloristic culture (p. 73). It may also be viewed as a continuation of the produced narrative of Setu culture, interpreted not as real everyday life but as folklore.

An important symbol in the present cultural landscape of Setumaa is the Setu village museum in Värskä, which was established in 1998. It plays a vital role in introducing forgotten past narratives and building the new identity of Setumaa. Today, landscape elements from about one hundred years ago are valued, as they are still part of people’s memory (Alumäe, Printsmann, and Palang 2003) and are useful tools for producing new cultural narratives of the landscape, which is strongly connected with tourism and recreational vision (Värskä valla arengukava (Local development plan Värskä County) 2003–10, 10–11).

The Setu village museum’s presentation of the past can conflict with contemporary needs, however. The difficulty of presenting elements of the pastoral landscape in what is also a modern recreational landscape was highlighted in 2001, when a cell-phone tower was erected near the village museum. This quickly became a problem because tourists come to Setumaa to see a pastoral archaic landscape, not cell-phone towers. The incident reinforced the idea that the purpose of the museum is to keep and produce the historical heritage of Setu culture and, as the conserver of authenticity, to dictate how the cultural landscape should be interpreted and what should be considered heritage. The conservationists are trying to take over the role of time itself (Lowenthal 2002, 328). The process of developing and preserving traditional activities (such as agriculture and ways of life) has resulted in a Setu cultural landscape of living heritage in which cultural heritage is mixed with history and local people are represented for tourism purposes in ways that produce historical amnesia and avoid everyday reality, thereby blurring the place itself (Albers and James 1988). And, according to the data on the number of visits to the museum or Setu Kingdom Day (a large gathering at the beginning of August that brings together the Setu people and those interested in Setu culture) and on the accompanying need for lodging, this is what the public likes.

The presentation of the Setu landscape as a “trademark” is reflected in the many competitions that are held to find local logos and slogans; for example, the Värskä slogan is Värskä – hüia olõmise kottus (Värskä – a place for well being, in the Setu dialect/language). Since 2004, the Setus have had their own flag, and in 1994 the Seto Kingdom Day tradition was introduced. All of these signs describe a new narrative of the Setu cultural landscape, which is enjoyed by the general public, the Setu ideologues, and the local inhabitants.

Discussion and Conclusions

Our study demonstrates how changing time borders of political formations influence landscape changes and how those changes are understood. Estonia has a multitude of time layers (fig. 2) in its landscape, each of which has been subjected to powerful forces. On one hand, all traditions (in terms of value systems, symbolism, and land tenure) have been interrupted by the sequence of changing socioeconomic formations; on the other hand, this uprootedness has caused cultural resistance, a (re)valuing of landscapes reminiscent of the past, and greater awareness of past values. At the same time, these cases have provided an excellent opportunity to examine which features survived the formation changes and which were the most volatile. After Estonia regained its independence, two processes unfolded: 1) marginalization and an outflow of both population and economic activities; and 2) a growing interest in revitalizing traditions.
This links directly with the process of “deworldment,” as defined by Terkenli (2005: 172): a society of spectacle with a new collective sense of place based on transcending geographical barriers of distance and place, articulated at the global scale, widely palatable, and consumable by virtually everyone around the world.

This dilemma is viewed by some as a power play between different interest groups (Alumäe, Printsmann, and Palang 2003; Palang, Alumäe, et al. 2004), which leads to a discussion about the role of different actors in a landscape with different time layers or about whether landscape should be seen in ideological terms, as practice (for local people with their meanings and everyday actions) or as scenery (for tourists to gaze at). While some places are lost in one way or another, new places are emerging. In places such as Setu, people try to revitalize the past and convert it into something new, usually into places that can be used by the tourism industry. Taking the Setu landscape as an example, in the context of capitalist society, a tourism orientation may offer some solutions to the poverty and economic purposelessness of the Setus, while their lived environment and cultural originality are maintained and preserved.

The landscape of Setumaa is currently connected to preserving a rural idyll with living folklore. There is, however, enormous pressure from outside to apply a set of rules or regulations—as described in environmental-management textbooks and using legislative, fiscal, and public information instruments—to this development. Existing policy measures support certain types of activities without considering how they fit into a specific situation, while legal measures forbid some and allow other activities, and planning and other procedures with the best of intentions sometimes only achieve another level of standardization. Many of these policies (except the legal ones) remain on paper because policy-makers are uncertain about how to make local people adapt and implement them. One reason for this inaction is that some researchers (Burton 2004) have discovered that adaptation requires a redefinition of symbolic meanings, which takes time. Moreover, we may also want to determine what may be lost if the local people, for example, farmers, started to redefine their basic values.

The Setu landscape appears as a small country within a larger country that has deliberately produced spatial differences within it and then reunified it. Ethnologists who have studied the Setus as a symbol of Estonia (e.g., Piho 2003) argue that, today, people believe the Setu culture is very similar to the Estonian culture, even introducing the Setus to foreigners, particularly Finns, as a symbol of Estonia. The Estonian tourist media presents this image in videotapes and in publications that use the image visually (Piho 2003, 124–27).

The Setu areas described in this article are a good example of Lefebvre’s (1996) concept of the illusion of social space, in which social space is treated as a vision and its practical importance and nature are lost or changed. This illusion is fantasized by abstracting the everyday environment, thus introducing only abstraction itself.
The question is: When reality is unable to bear the ideology of cultural reality, will cultural abstraction be considered a level of folklore, losing its identity and have nothing to do with reality (Lefebvre 1996, 53–93)?

Symbolic capital—ethnic identity—will work only if the community itself believes in it (Bourdieu 2003, 119, 131).

From an outsider’s point of view, many landscapes are of “no value” because they do not correspond to the images that outsiders have of a rural landscape and, in addition, may neither be accessible nor included in a landscape-management program. Nonetheless, they form a “lifeworld,” a place that is meaningful to local people. In a 2004 study of local inhabitants of rural landscapes, Setten concluded that they are interested in changes that are connected with good purposes and have value: the inhabitants stressed that if the old is preserved, it is good, but when it is of no use, it is wrong. In another study, Hughes (1995) noted the displeasure of locals regarding heritage production, pointing out their cynical attitude toward museums and the collection of national heritage material.

According to time borders, documented materials offer two different representations of Setumaa. One is connected with the everyday life of the local people, the other with presenting and performing its heritage. The latter is mostly carried out by young people with Setu roots, who search out and thereby preserve the old customs. These young people become involved in place-making by learning local history and taking part in the (re)introduction and living of customs by external agents. In reality, then, physical borders do not impede people from preserving and following their customs.

Institutional domination over the presentation of cultural environments can lead to many questions. For example, in which way and in which context could local practices initiate a dialogue or differentiate themselves within the produced ideologies? How would this dialogue influence the durability of the local environment and the cultural differences that emerge from the real environment? Instead of a cultural interpretation focused only on the economy, a culture’s purposeful, yet subjective, socio-cultural practices must also be valued. Representation of the environment should concentrate more on the place’s real needs and naturally valued practices, since this interprets and gives direct meaning to the real landscape and socio-cultural practices through the practices themselves. Local mentality seems to be maintained by older women acting as kinds of chroniclers, documenting through texts and songs local everyday life and events. Supporting local activities (and their motives) that are important to an area’s development is vital. The background of local communal identity lies in individual identity, which starts from practices in the home environment and interest in the surrounding environment.

In the process of place-making, the different views of outsiders and insiders meet, and the question of power becomes critical. Is it the place of the local people who are in a position to take care of their lived environment and living culture as it is expressed in their landscapes? Or, is it about outside control—policies and different economic and public-awareness campaigns through which outsiders seize control over the landscape traditionally controlled by insiders? The Setu case demonstrates that insiders are willing to develop their culture in their own way. Outsiders, however, are also increasingly willing to develop the rural culture according to their own values and desires, seeing versatile needs and the possibilities for conserving the rural idyll. Annist (2004) has underlined that cultural or historical identity may not always be the local identity; rather, it has often been constructed from outside, which might be detrimental to the local identity. If local people take the advice of the “authenticity watchdogs” too seriously, local life may be locked in the past. Essentially, locals are expected to pay too much attention to culture. When the past shadows the present and everyday local practices, it becomes difficult to define and maintain the local identity. The past should be a step toward the future, not the focus of life.
With respect to cultural variety in the time layers and how it is represented, it is important to ask how this representation by itself fits into the context of the local environment and relates to the needs of the local people.

Instead of trying to preserve daily practices, the Setu landscape has been treated as if it were a consumer good, which is very similar to global heritage patterns in which only original and special practices are valued. As our study shows, the sustainability of Setumaa’s idealized and abstracted pastoral landscape is a major concern. This concern links back to our discussion about places—specifically, that places are more personal than landscape and can be given meaning only through personal experience. Thus, in the transformation of time borders, it may be concluded that mental borders follow shifts that are connected with political formations and physical borders. At the same time, although local people follow formations, different groups among them understand landscape so differently that it is difficult for them to find common ground.

When power relations inherent to place-making are being considered, some characteristics of rural communities should be kept in mind. Although global processes are ever present, rural communities are also “located places” in which face-to-face contacts not only occur but are necessary. In addition, borderlines and rights concerning private and public spheres are part of tacit knowledge. Place-making requires that borderlines, both physical and social, be crossed and that new kinds of shared experiences of the life-world be created. What could these shared meanings be? And, are they shared virtually or in real life? Discussions in geography about whether landscape should be treated as scenery or practice are thus mirrored in real life.

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