

# KARAKATS: THE *BRICOLAGE* OF HYBRID VEHICLES THAT SKATE AND SWIM

PATRICK LAVIOLETTE

Professor of Anthropology

Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology  
Estonian Institute of Humanities, Tallinn University

Room M-308, Uus-Sadama 5

10120 Tallinn, Estonia

e-mail: patrick@ehi.ee

ALLA SIROTINA

BA, Youth worker

Pirita Leisure Centre

Merivälja tee 3, 11911 Tallinn, Estonia

e-mail: alla.cyb@gmail.com

## ABSTRACT

This paper\* explores the material culture of 'karakat' (Russian *karakatitsa*) hybrid vehicles in the town of Kallaste, east Estonia. It focuses on the social factors that allow karakat culture to change. The region of study was part of the Soviet Union so the phenomenon of self-assembled vehicles implies socialist and communist considerations. Local people are still surrounded by the material legacy of that time. Technological assemblages from the past therefore continue to live in the present. It was popular in the USSR to maintain off-road vehicles, which were put together with the owner's own hands. Such a *bricolage* technique has been preserved since the middle of the 20th century and is something that is used as a marker of local identity. The distribution of spare parts was problematic in former Soviet times and this has influenced the way men now make karakats. Current owners spend a lot of time servicing their vehicles. The issue of masculinity is highly relevant here because dealing with technology is seen as a masculine activity. Moreover, because it is increasingly open to tourists, karakat culture is becoming a tradable commodity.

KEYWORDS: hybrid technology • car culture • east Estonia • masculinity

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## INTRODUCTION

[...] technology ceases to be a visible tool or technique, but becomes a world in which the boundaries and interfaces between humans and technological systems become blurred, refigured and difficult to disentangle (Featherstone 2004: 11).

When walking through the streets of Kallaste, in summer or winter, it is difficult not to notice a number of big strange vehicles parked-up near the cottages and houses.



Photo 1. Karakat in the garden. Photo by Patrick Lavolette, 2014.

These are karakats (Russian *karakatitsa*). Such self-assembled machines have huge smooth wheels, equipped with big bolts. Tyres of this type, without any gripping pattern on the outside surface, were certainly not made for asphalt roads. Sometimes such vehicles are left standing near the house under the open sky. At other times, only the tyres are covered with black plastic bags. The body is often cut into two halves, whereby the authentic rear is removed and replaced with a prolonged back-end (imagine a jacked-up, limousine-styled SUV), which is made from all sorts of materials. The list of items used for constructing a karakat is limited only by the imagination (see Photo 1).

Kallaste is a little Estonian town on the western edge of Lake Peipus, which forms a main part of the border with Russia. It first appeared in documents at the end of the 18th century as a fishermen's village.

The residents – mainly Old Believers – are widely known for their innovativeness. Their domain is spread along the shore of the Lake (known as *Chudskoye ozero* in Russian). Estonians, Russian Old Believers and the ethnic religious minority of Orthodox Setus have been the traditional residents of this part of the Republic of Estonia (Annist 2011). Recent statistical records vary but there are approximately 1,000 residents in Kallaste, with a majority of Russian speakers.<sup>1</sup>

Since effectively Kallaste is a fishermen's town, an obvious question emerges: why create such strange hybrid vehicles? What is the purpose of these machines? Who makes them? Many studies have been undertaken previously in Kallaste. The shores of Lake Peipus are being constantly monitored by researchers from various fields. For example, in a Master's research project, Yuka Kaneda (2005) has described the town as a whole and stressed an ethnic-economic-environmental approach. Ethnologists Gustav Ränk (1934), Aliise Moora (1964) and Elizaveta Richter (1976), as well as political scientist Leonid Mihhailov (2008) and historian Frederic Miller (Miller et al. 2010), have added some historical data to the common understanding of the past. The cultural organisation Pritchudye and the Russian Museum have also referred to some historical events that are

important for interpreting fieldwork data. The Centre for Transboundary Cooperation often carries out research in this territory. These writings have concentrated on different topics (for example, Old Believers, history, economy, fishing, the environment and so on). As these studies were primarily environmental and economics related, little has been said about how local people interact or the ways in which they lead their everyday lives (Kuusk, Käräinen 2013). The current situation in Estonia reveals important ethnographic gaps, especially when it comes to the divisions between urban dwellers and the country's rural citizens. This derives largely from a lack of understanding of the people who reside in poorer, non-agricultural settings (Roll et al. 2006).

It is the town's fishermen who use karakats to go fishing on the frozen lake. The tradition for making them appeared half a century ago but the car culture has since changed due to the political and economic modifications brought on by the end of the Cold War. It is important to remember that the assembling of karakats became popular during Soviet times. It was a form of politically and aesthetically charged material culture. Because Soviet cars were relatively easy to fix, a lot of people became skilled in repairing them with their own hands, so that many young men are now experienced in carrying out quite sophisticated repairs (Möser 2011).

Though they acknowledge karakats as important objects, local people have not kept in mind how the word *karakatitsa* first appeared. Most of the fishermen explained that the word *karakatitsa* is something inexplicit and funny. One smiled and tried to gesticulate with his hands. It was an attempt to show something in motion. Another explained that karakats are made from different parts of various technologies, so that from a distance you do not understand clearly what is in front of you. This is what the name of the vehicle shows – an odd and scruffy machine holding meaning within itself. It is not a piece of art but rather meant to be of advantage to fishermen. There was a need for a type of *vezdekhod* (cross-country vehicle) in Kallaste, but when a car itself was a rare thing, it was not easy to start creating a new technological form. The dictionary (Ozhegov 1964: 261) defines *karakatitsa* as:

1. Sea mollusc that excretes a colourant – sepia.
2. [transferred meaning] About short-legged, awkward human (colloquial, funny).

The men who assemble karakats from heterogeneous parts generally swerve from traditional courses of employment. They can be referred to as archetypal jacks-of-all-trades, *bricoleurs* in other words, a term coined by Claude Lévi-Strauss. From his (1966 [1962]: 16–17) definition, such a person is “someone who works with his hands and uses devious means compared to those of a craftsman”. A *bricoleur* can be seen as a do-it-yourself, handyman, a person who uses haphazard techniques but who is not necessarily a ‘deviant’. This type of *bricolage* was quite a normal phenomenon in the Soviet Union and creating such vehicles was generally approved, or at least tolerated. We are thus dealing with what Bruno Latour (1993) would call a hybrid form of technological construction, for he argues that hybrids are conceived as contaminated mixtures of two pure forms put together.

## FIELDWORK

Kallaste hosts a yearly Karakat Festival on the last weekend of February. This calendric event attracts people from different parts of the Baltic states (Addo 2009: 218). On the eve of the festival in 2009, the winter was exceptionally snowy. Even from the window of the bus, one could see grey clouds that were ready to pour down. A key informant for this project was a janitress, Lyudmila, who cleaned the bus station. Upon meeting her there, she mentioned immediately that her husband Gennady has a karakat. Lyudmila's brother Aleksander also has one. What's more, he is amongst the pioneers in assembling karakats. He has made a brief introduction to the history of karakats and recounts stories of the yearly festival, when dozens of participants compete and where Gennady has been presented with several championship cups. Another key informant, a friend of Lyudmila, is Nina – a local historian who has outlined some of the town's significant historical events and the people who live there. She has a son, Gunnar, who bought a three-wheeled karakat (an old type based on the model of a motorcycle) after graduating from school.

Other than them, the first random informants were an old couple, residents in town for around 70 years. The woman replied that she was not interested in karakats but her husband had one: "the car has the wheels from a plane and it can swim". Surprised to hear this rather unusual description for a truck – it made us want to look for more information on karakats. Data was thus gleaned from participant observation as well as interviews that were mainly held in private garages while men were mending their trucks. Hansmann, an enthusiast and pioneer in karakat assembling, was the first to show his garage with schemes for making a small hovercraft-type boat (see Photo 2). It was the research participants themselves who suggested seeing their karakats, of which they are exceptionally proud.

The Karakat Festival has taken place every year since 2003. This day dedicated to karakat constructions has been supported by the local government. The concentration of the home made hybrids made the cultural director of Kallaste think that celebrating the vehicles could bring outside income to the town. Even though this man does not govern any more, the day of the karakat has survived. One remarkable thing is that the celebration of the vehicle during the festival gathers residents from neighbouring towns as well as tourists. Some karakats have been successfully sold to such visitors. This means that the towns and villages on the same coast also have karakats in private garages. Several years ago, the number of entries at the festival was about 20. During the 2010 Festival, there were 35 registered nominees in the contest. In addition to the karakats, local 'Henry Fords' assemble various other vehicles needed in the household. The total number of self-assemblages also includes other home-made machine-like tractors. Gennady therefore jokes that the entire population of Kallaste can get into these karakats and drive away.



Photo 2. Hansmann with his small home-made air-pad boat. Photo by Alla Siroтина, July 2010.

## EXCHANGING FISH AND FUNCTION

During the last decades of the 20th century it was popular to make greenhouses in Kallaste. A lot of men were involved in building greenhouses, which were later sold in Russia. All three main informants were involved in this and Gennady described the past with passion – he explained that making greenhouses was the way people earned their living. After the Soviet Union collapsed, people did not know what to do. The trade was interrupted by the border and there was no longer any income so new business was needed. It was in 1996, when there was a *putina* (a period when there was plenty of fish and a good catch on the lake), that a karakat boom took place. These circumstances motivated people to start assembling the vehicles in larger numbers, thus enabling them to enter into several systems of reciprocity.

In his research, Arjun Appadurai (1986) writes about economic exchange and the creation of value. For him, reciprocity is determined by the fulfilment of one's desire to obtain the other object. This can be observed among the Kallaste residents, but with a small shift in the theory of exchange. Value in this case can be easily defined. With the present shift in economic regimes it is possible to evaluate the good (the type or size of the fish and its market cost). Fish is of the greatest interest and value because it is something local, 'authentic', if you will.

Anthropologist Caroline Humphrey (2002) has reflected on barter and similar domestic modes of production: the organisation of economic production and consumption primarily in the household. She cites an earlier work with a colleague (Humphrey and Hugh-Jones 1992) when they give a rather strict definition of barter that draws on Appadurai:

(a) The focus is on demand for particular things which are different in kind; in other cases it may be for services exchanged for goods or other services. (b) The protagonists are essentially free and equal and either can pull out of the deal and at the end of it they are quits. (c) There is no criterion by which, from the outside, it can be judged that the oxen are equal in value to the carving. Some kind of bargaining is taking place, but not with reference to some abstract, nominal measure of value; each simply wants the object held by the other. (d) In the case above, the two parts of the transaction occur simultaneously; sometimes the two may be separated in time. (e) Finally the act is transformative; it moves objects between the 'regimes of value' (Appadurai 1986) sustained by the two actors. (Humphrey and Hugh-Jones 1992: 1)

On the eve of the Karakat Festival, fish is brought by some residents and often by a relative of a karakat owner. Is this somehow relevant to the relations that people have? At first glance it would seem that the exchange was the same: there are small presents like chocolate for a favour; people are often invited to the sauna or neighbours may come to ask to heat up the sauna. The existence of barter approximates the ordinary theoretical definitions. There is an addition to these basic definitions that is worth mentioning, however. This is connected to Caroline Humphrey and Stephen Hugh-Jones's (1992) third criteria for barter (c) when it is hard to comparatively evaluate the goods being exchanged. It is not easy to understand why people now give fish, nor how much fish can be given. This demonstrates that there are no universal rules for barter and thus the exchange system may and does vary cross-culturally.

Locals, especially fishermen, may pay a lower price for servicing or part of the payment may consist of fish. This exchange system can be explained by the socialist regime that influenced the region for many decades – money now has a different meaning in the post-Soviet bloc. But Humphrey and Hugh-Jones (1992) warn about assuming that the barter system can exist in its pure form as a single means of running an economy. It should be seen as a mode of exchange amongst others. Oleg and Gennady often do not demand money immediately. The karakat builders order fish when they want fishermen to return the debt. Everyone knows how much a kilogram of a certain fish costs in the market, so the 'payment' can be easily calculated. In Oleg's words:

You know, it is only if you make a deal. Of course the fish is worth money. If I need fish then there is no difference, but when a person pays with fish – with the same price or even lower and I need money, then why do I have to take fish? In the past times yes it was... but nowadays it costs money. Two kilos of perch is approximately 80 kroons [approximately 5 Euros]. You gave one, two, three fish to your friends. You are losing money.

Until recently it was possible to give a bottle of alcohol instead of any favour. But now "to hell with that bottle – why do the fishermen need it when one bottle is worth 150

kroons (9.5 Euros). A single fish is more expensive than that”, continues Oleg. It is hard to get fish – one must spend time, money and effort to get the catch but simultaneously fish is desirable and valuable. Nina has said that fish has the value of gold because there are no longer so many of them. Gennady follows the same pattern as Oleg – he asks different people so that it is not too much work for just one person. He has six or seven friends to whom he can turn during the winter and ask to bring fish. This economy sustains the relationships local people have and supports their social network.

## A FESTIVAL FOR DIY VEHICLES

Karakats are part of Kallaste’s lifeworld, a hybrid form of material culture that expresses a rapidly changing, hybrid identity. Karakats are being anthropomorphised in several ways. A vehicle that has its own festival and anthem indicates that such vehicles matter. The karakats in the festival are often decorated with fish and town flags, pointing to the ethnicity and authenticity of the vehicle’s origins. Gulnara Roll, Aija Kosk, Natalia Alexeeva and Peeter Unt (2006) have described Kallaste as a cultural centre of the Pridchudye dwellers,<sup>2</sup> with choirs, a *izba chital’nya* (library) and different hobby centres for handicraft. Today, with new political circumstances and the influence of contemporary trends, faraway places are becoming more reachable and open for visitors. Karakats were devised to be a helping hand in the fisherman’s job, but now they are becoming more of a vehicle for taking tourists and fishing fans to the lake, or as heritage tourism objects that show cultural value.

Today the Karakat Festival is growing bigger with a market running throughout the festival. Visitors from other towns come to see the performance. Karakats registered for the festival start a parade at 11 o’clock and drive to the town hall square. At the opening of the festival a song is sung – the karakat anthem – authored by Andrei. People competed to create an anthem for the karakat and Andrei, a local bard, won. When talking about the song he mentioned that the inspiration came when he saw karakats reaching the shore in twilight. The words of the song talk about the lifeworld of the fisherman. The fact that karakats have an anthem already places them in a sphere of special social significance.

A jury decides which karakat construction deserves prizes in ‘light’ (two, three or four-wheeled vehicles that can drive over ice 3 cm thick) and ‘heavy’ (with 6 wheels, mainly built to please tourists) machinery categories. In addition, they present a signboard saying Kallaste instead of the registration number plate. During the festival in 2009, there was also a lottery in addition to the first place prize. The winner of the lottery received a motor auger to make holes in the ice. This auger is now stored in Aleksander’s blacksmith shop. As Oleg mentioned, without the Karakat Festival he would not put that much effort into making his karakat look attractive or in keeping it in such good mechanical order.

The karakat is something quirky and unique that can be traded. In her writing, environmental anthropologist Amanda Stronza (2008) focuses on the conservation of traditions. For tourists, this means that cultural development stops, is preserved at a certain moment and thus becomes an exponent of stability. The invention of the festival and the current political situation have both effected the representation of pneumatic vehicles:

karakats are becoming increasingly promoted – visitors are attracted by the parade. The trucks are becoming neater, participants polish rusty coatings, attach some signs such as town or European Union flags. It is also becoming widely practiced to put a frozen fish on the front of the bonnet. Commenting on the festival, Gennady undermines its significance, saying “it is not important for the participants, it’s only for tourists”. The men are improving karakat cars because they want them to be faster, more comfortable. The result, however, is that individually or collectively they achieve the same purpose – developing the tourism infrastructure to improve the economy. The expansion of the do-it-yourself technology culture in Kallaste seems to be a unique phenomenon that remains important to the region. The surrounding towns situated on the shore of Lake Peipus (such as Mustvee) tend to use manufactured, modern technology such as motor sledges to drive on the frozen lake. On more rare occasions, however, a karakat may be found in some of the neighbouring towns.

Krisztina Fehérváry (2013) argues that producing citizens with high expectations for the modern material world was integral to the project of creating Soviet society. This should not be seen as equal to the capitalist project although socialist states often positioned Western modernity as the norm. The goal was not to create individual style, but to lift people up out of poverty. Scarcity of private property made a difference in the sphere of commodities and this has influenced and even shaped the region’s car culture. In the Soviet period cars were rare things and owning one, especially privately (not provided by work) meant a lot. Despite having to wait for years to get one, cars quickly became an ambivalent yet integrated part of the socialist environment (Siegelbaum 2009).

#### HYBRID MATERIALITY

Social activist Wolfgang Zuckermann (1991: 54) remarks: “Every concession a city makes to the automobile encourages movement at the expense of access and contact, and roads at the expense of residences and amenities”. Consequently, ‘roadscape’ and their associated paraphernalia are good cultural indicators (Lavolette 2015). They can show us many things: histories of travel and mobility as well as contemporary interpretations of them; what the local people consider important, what they put on display or what they try to conceal. So the architectural layout and arrangement of the town has certain sociological implications.

Kallaste is quite a remote place and it is not big – stretching only a few kilometres along the Lake Peipus coastline. The town can be crossed with a bicycle. It has a long history, however, thus harbouring a distinct older part alongside the newer. They differ in appearance: the older area consists of private houses mainly of wood and making up the larger part of the town. The block-houses are concentrated in the newer part of town and have lines of garages immediately in front of them. Two key informants, Oleg and Aleksander, live in a private house. The third, Gennady, lives in a Soviet-style block-house apartment. Gennady has a garage right in front of his door but he also rents a second garage to store his karakat. Aleksander and Oleg have recently built private garages next to their houses for their own karakats. This architectural layout influences social life because these garages serve as places where car culture has developed.

Cultural geographer Tauri Tuvikene (2010) has chronicled the Soviet legacy in Estonia through such functional buildings. Garages in Estonia inevitably point to the social change and the Soviet Union. In the beginning, garage areas were part of a resistance to the government that expressed the needs of residents rather than state ideology. As private enterprises were not allowed and the State provided insufficient car services, there was almost no place where one could repair a car. This resulted in the need for places to do it yourself – “a garage box” (Tuvikene 2010: 516). Hence the function of the garage has a long history of being both a place for vehicle storage and a place for mingling. As well as storing household goods such as old furniture, jam jars and musical instruments for band rehearsals, garages in Kallaste are places where vehicles and social relations are not just kept but are also maintained.

One intriguing thing in the Kallaste townscape is that, despite the high level of car related technology, there is no petrol station. Apart from a blacksmith who mends vehicles on one side of the town and a second blacksmith who accepts broken cars (in order to use the spare parts further) on the other, there are several places for technical servicing (where it is possible to change oil, fix parts and so forth). To get petrol, then, residents either go to the nearby town of Alatskivi, or store it in reservoir tanks.

Many visitors to the town therefore get the impression of emptiness. There are almost no people on the streets, not many young people loitering around and few communal activities. Even if most residents live there the whole year round, they seem invisible. One reason is that the majority are older people. They also constitute the biggest group of fishermen working at the Kallaste Kalur factory. It is next to impossible to find a permanent job in the town so some people look for work in Finland, mainly by working on farms or finding short-term employment in the fishing industry. People usually go to Finland in the summer when catching fish on the lake is restricted (Kaneda 2005: 5). They earn money on the farms or fish processing factories and come to Estonia to see their relatives. For several centuries local people’s lives have been largely related to fish production, so this has influenced the lifestyle and caused the evolution of various sub-cultures (Stoop 2007). Many of these subcultures change and disappear, like the influx of new religion or the boom in building greenhouses. But through karakats, a unique subcultural element related to fishing survives. Although the phenomenon of assembling hybrid car technologies has evolved relatively recently, it seems to be spreading around the coast of Lake Peipus. It offers a fascinating insight into the local society and its post-Soviet reality. At the same time, it reveals the sociocultural character of automobile technologies.

The first karakats were largely based on motorbikes (see Photo 3). One of the first people in Kallaste to assemble two-wheeled karakats (made from motorcycles) was Konstantin. He bought 4 *taz* (a kind of bowl) in a local shop and glued them together. In this way he constructed wheels for his karakat. People call these first karakats *kostotryas* – bone shakers. The major flaw that the old type of karakat has is that there is no suspension if they are based on motorbikes, so the seat is not comfortable and one can feel the vibration of every movement or bump on the frozen lake. In order to minimise the discomfort, people stand up when riding such karakats. The new variant of karakat, when it is based on a car or a larger vehicle, is quite comfortable (although vibration is still present) and there is enough room for tools and fish. One can add a two-wheeled trailer at the rear, so it is possible to carry more fish or tools, if needed.

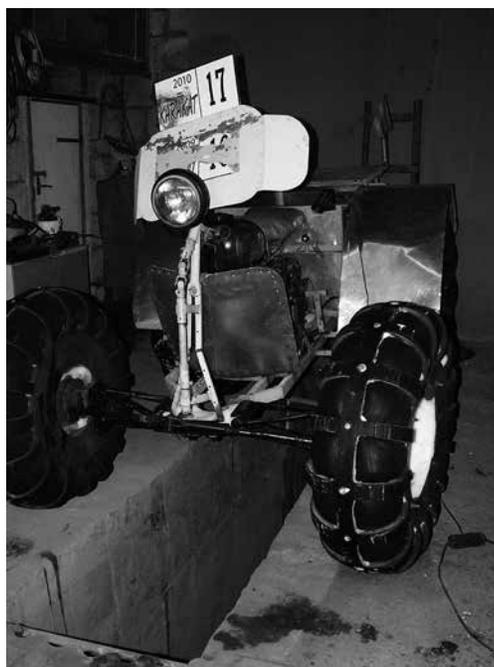


Photo 3. Oleg's motorbike karakat. Photo by Alla Siroтина, 2010.

Gennady mentioned that during the early days of karakat building at the beginning of the 1980s, there was considerable mockery regarding technical innovation. After a while, however, the designs of pneumatic assemblages proved themselves to be beneficial. Different magazines for car owners were published in the USSR in which amateur engineers shared their know-how. One enthusiast, Hansmann, has seen the pictures of these vehicles in one such magazine. Later Hansmann's brother thought of using the tyres that were stocked at Tartu airport.<sup>3</sup> The wheels were taken from fighter planes that were left by the Red Army Air Force. According to Gennady: "It was about 1981 then, [...] he was the first one who thought of getting tyres from the plane. His brother served in Tartu [airport], he knew where to get them. They were just dumped."

The ready-made tyre needs two layers: the original is left as is and a second is cut into strips and fixed by big bolts to create a pattern that can be durable on the ice. One tyre is wrapped in another, as Lyudmila explained, "like a sausage" and it is ready for use. Nadezda has cut these strips and screwed the bolts to help Gennady in the work. At present, however, there is no longer access to the spares of the Soviet period which used to form the basis for the karakats. This is not a problem though since the markets are full of analogous bits and pieces and spare parts. This reveals one significant aspect of *bricolage*: unlike an engineer, the *bricoleur* does not find it hard to cobble together what's necessary and "seeks the materials that are at hand" (Lévi-Strauss 1966 [1962]: 17). The biggest regret the men have is the shortage of the Soviet tyres. Gennady chastises himself for leaving the aeroplane tyres in the woods when he noticed them some 20 years ago. There were a lot of them and some were even packed. Now, these *bricoleurs* need to buy tyres. The new ones are made of real rubber and the brake discs of light metal, making the construction exceptionally durable and providing them with the ability to 'float' on the icy water.

The next task, related to karakat assembling, is to define the people who are involved in this business – are they fishermen or mechanics? Is it their job or hobby? This is not an especially easy thing to determine because most people say that any man can assemble the vehicle in his private garage. Indeed, most men in town have an *avtogen*, a gas cutter used for cutting through metal. There are some interesting relationships between technical expertise and the personalities involved in karakat making. Gennady is good at electronics for instance and is therefore needed for brainstorming if an assemblage is being considered. He used to work in different spheres and now he is a member of the local government with a high position in society. Gennady can repair many vari-

ants and collecting rarities has become a hobby for him. He has a model that was made during the Soviet period for disabled people. It was built in such a way that a person without legs could pilot it using his or her hands. He has rebuilt it now so it can be piloted using the legs as well.

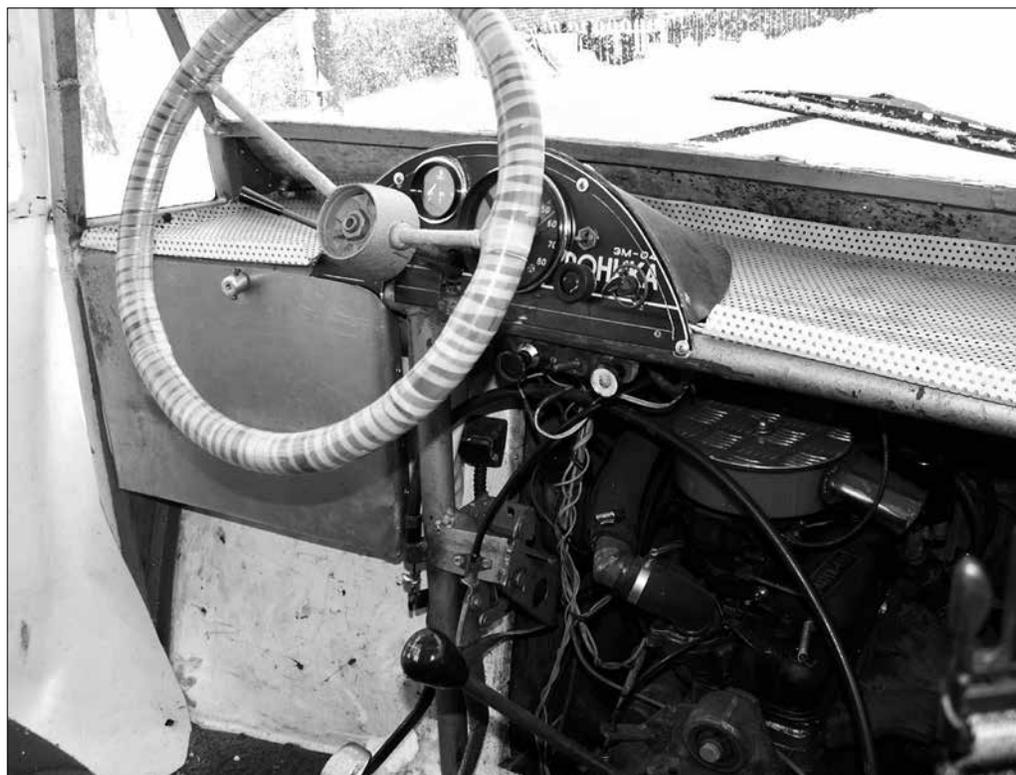


Photo 4. The inside of Gennady's karakat. Photo by Alla Sirotina, 2010.

Men spend a lot of time assembling karakats either by making them on request or simply to publicly demonstrate that they are working. The answer to the question of why do this kind of work cannot be given in just one sentence because there are important social and occasionally political factors that make the assemblage profitable. Take the following interview passage:

It all started when people saw pneumatic cars in a magazine called *Modelist-Konstruktor*. So the tradition comes from Russia. Because of the lack of cruisers or squad cars (*vezdekhody*) people started to assemble these *vezdekhody* for fishing. In earlier times fishermen used to go on foot or, when the ice was thick enough, rode horses. Later when the ice was smoother, they rode bicycles; some rode motorbikes or drove cars. With time, people saw what a relatively light technology karakats are. What is more, they do not sink. The pioneer [as Gennady remembers] was Andrei Hansmann. [...] It was a lot of trouble with spare parts. They were very expensive. Everyone tried to save money, so they assembled cars from “whatever one can get”.

In the Soviet Union, spare parts were certainly in deficit, deficit here being used in the economic sense in which demand exceeds supply. By the 1980s, it was clear that the socialist government had failed to lift people out of poverty or to provide them with high standard goods. Vehicle parts were hard to get as the government did not place their availability as a top priority for all strata of society. At that time the second-hand economy was flourishing. This is why plane tyres were adopted by the entire town as a substitute for car tyres; karakat parts have often been collected from rubbish material or reused things. To understand the way they are assembled and why they are being assembled in a *bricolage* way we need to go back to when karakats began to appear.

In order to give a more thorough explanation, let's turn to Victor Buchli (2000) and his description of Soviet design. This relates to the beginning of the second half of the 20th century when the Soviet Union was experiencing the period of reassessment – the 'thaw' –, a reinvigoration of Marxist understandings of the material world. Buchli (2000: 23) defines this era through the term *byt*: "Loosely translated, *byt* encompasses all the following English terms: 'daily life', 'domesticity', 'lifestyle', 'way of life'", in which design and multiple-use (i.e., 'transformable function') are problematised. This was not limited to the interior, such as sofas or bookshelves that could convert into a bed or cupboards with multiple drawers. Instead, new design was applied to the entire milieu. (Ibid.: 140) In the case of karakats, new designs were spread through the visual examples and instructions found in such magazine as *Modelist-Konstruktor*.

There are usually no refinements like colourful upholstery or sophisticated adornments in karakat design. Most consist of heterogeneous parts that are close at hand (like plastic, cupboard doors, an engine from another car). Parts should not cost much, or anything at all. As Gennady explained: "If people want contrivance: some want a mighty engine, so they put one. Some want to order wheels from Russia."

The karakat blacksmiths are around 40 to 50 years old. They consist of different groups – mainly friends who are skilled enough to discuss the parts that are going to work. Some are skilled at electronics, some know more about engines. Others generate new ideas so that the completed vehicle is the product of the diverse talents of a whole team. Assembling these vehicles is a great way to create and preserve social relations as well as express oneself. Sociologist Tim Dant (2009: 4) even goes so far as to claim that the work of repair involves emotions unlike those generated whilst manufacturing.

Another motivation to maintain objects through the labour of one's own hands was that vehicles during the Soviet period were relatively interchangeable. Aleksander has been an untrained mechanic since he was at school. He has constantly made repairs and even got his nickname Shponka (a thin layer of wood trim from the interior of the car) because of his interest. The karakats are accepted by the residents, so the craft is not something that differs from the norm. A *bricoleur* is someone adept at performing his/her skills, as Gennady, Stanislav, Hansmann, Aleksander and many more are. Yet in contrast to scientific knowledge, they do not apply theory to their skills. They have learned on the job from their own experience. In Gennady's words: "If one is dealing with mechanics and has some experience, one already imagines whether this knot is going to work or not".

Gennady described the discussion during the assembly process and how other men brainstorm if a leaf spring or suspension is going to break or not:

I say: "Blin, it won't resist, it will bend. Yura, come on, where will it go?" – That is how we consult. I can say that this one will break. Then, true, it breaks. There is intuition. Sometimes a part that looks good and you even don't expect it might break, does break.

In describing repair work, Dant (2009) suggests that cars are likely to be fixed even though modern techniques of mass production often attempt to prevent enthusiasts from doing so. The ethos of do-it-yourself repairs exists in many societies but varies due to the economic situation, gender-based norms, the desire to master manual labour and so on. There were several reasons to repair Soviet cars: first, it was relatively easy to undertake this on your own as there were no smart electronics or other devices under the bonnets that could prevent motorists from meddling. The second reason was that the state failed to provide owners with the necessary spares, such as windshields, tyres and other technical devices. In Kallaste, the motivation to create private vehicles was even higher. One thing was the ownership of the motor vehicle, which helped create a desire for people to construct such vehicles. Another reason was a *putina* – a good catch. Gunnar bought a karakat whilst still a schoolboy because there were plenty of fish in the lake. A lack of cross-country vehicles meant those who went fishing needed a karakat, otherwise they would have to wait until the ice on the lake was stable enough to go there on foot.

Soviet society has been characterised as a shortage economy (Tuvikene 2010: 516). This phenomenon was widely known in the USSR and meant a lack of necessary things – not only food but also different products such as clothes and household commodities. People often queued to get certain basic things. The historian of Russia Lewis Siegelbaum has argued that owning a car was a dream for the masses but the shortage of spares (petrol, tyres) and the vehicles themselves, made it almost impossible to own one. Sometimes a person could barely afford a car; even when they contemplated the idea of making the effort, the levels of maintenance involved (especially due to the shortage of spares) would make them reconsider. In Siegelbaum's (2009: 2) words "while providing a greater number of cars, the state did not follow through with the myriad of accoutrements and services on which cars and their owners depended". By 1978, the number of technical service stations (STOs) reached 13 while the number of cars was 250,000 (a ratio per STO of 83,333:1). This insufficient proportion created an infrastructure that tied down car owners.

Such an interpretation has been disputed, however. According to the recent studies (Roth 2007) this is incorrect since the causes of the deficit economy were in the system of distribution controlled by higher authorities, not in the shortage of spares as such. Despite the discord, it is clear that people nonetheless got around the deficit by using various practices (an informal black market), creating unions (such as the All Union Voluntary Society of Auto Enthusiasts) and sharing knowledge of maintenance through magazines *Behind the Wheel*, *Modelist-Konstruktor* and so on. So for Gennady:

Right now there is no problem because there are so many abandoned cars. One can buy a car for 500 kroons [approximately 32 Euro]. If there were such advanced

sledges as Lux or Yamaha at that time, and they were affordable, maybe we wouldn't have started making these karakats, but it started as usual: The Russian people start to think because of poverty and despair *Gol' na vydumki hitra*.<sup>4</sup>

A further example of a man who started doing repairs during the deficit period is Aleksander. He was born in Kallaste and has good relations with the other repairers. He used to work with Gennady during the greenhouse boom, just before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Today Aleksander works as a blacksmith, mainly fixing tyres although he also does some welding. The high value attributed to karakats is demonstrated by him storing his vehicle in a private garage dedicated solely for this purpose. His karakats are based on the latest models. One of them, polished and shiny, has six manufactured tyres and can go on the lake when the ice is thick enough to take the weight. Aleksander has a crane to pull a karakat out of ice cracks and a forklift to lift them up. His do not float if the ice breaks and are considered heavy technology. These days he is geared up to take tourists to the lake so his karakat has space for ten people. He no longer works as a fisherman and thus does not need as much space for fish. He works at a car repair shop. To have the karakat repaired at his place means paying extra to his boss, who comes from Mustvee.

It is possible to get a complete karakat for 50,000 kroons (approximately 3,200 Euros). The price varies because, as Gennady explained, the craftsman composes a price list in which he shows how much money he will need for parts and how much will be added for labour. He gave an example, when someone caught fish and got 20,000 kroons (1,280 Euro) for them, that man then turned to order a karakat from Gennady. He told such a customer that he could sell him the karakat for 15,000 kroons (950 Euro) but it was another person who gave the money and took the karakat with him. There was no serial number and no documents. Gennady emphasised that the vehicle is always unique. He has never bought a karakat himself. He has made six or seven, three of which were small ones that he keeps photos of in an album. It is possible to sell a karakat for 30,000 to 150,000 kroons (2,000 to 10,000 Euros). People make 'nice', good-looking karakats, without any cables holding parts together, or without many welding marks, so that the whole vehicle is relatively polished and shiny. The buyers are either locals or from Latvia. The latter come to the lake for the winter period.

Gennady, Oleg and Aleksander learned to fix such machines through practice. Oleg does not hesitate to ask friends and acquaintances or look for answers on forums (log files) if something breaks down. They not only build karakats. They can fix other vehicles: trucks, light cars, motorbikes and so on. It is possible that there might be two or three teams, or coalitions, if you will, working on the improvement of the vehicles. These three men are apparently the 'centres of know-how' because they are felt to be authorities, likely to provide help with technology that is often referred to as "reliable". This is one of the main things to define karakat culture – hands-on experience.

#### GENDERED AGENCY

The role of masculinity in Kallaste is demonstrated and sustained by two things: fishing and technological truck assemblages. From discussion with local people, and from seeing fishermen at work in the morning, one can conclude that today only men are

involved in fishing on the lake. Women are left out of this labour. The men work with great amounts of fish that can be caught with nets. Women work at the Peipus Fish Factory, which processes frozen fish. There is also another small enterprise in town called Kallaste Kalur. This enterprise has permission to catch a certain amount of fish within the factory's limit. Karakats have proven themselves to be beneficial and reliable – the fishermen at Kallaste Kalur factory work using their private vehicles.

By talking to men who maintain the karakats it becomes clear that this technological realm is not the sphere of women either, who hardly ever take part in assembling the vehicles. Karakats are spoken of by women as something their husbands have but which they were not interested in and could give no information on other than lists of owners. The Karakat Festival showed the same – local women either stayed at home or returned home shortly after the opening. When asking informants' female friends about who won the cup this time, they did not know and started pondering. Ulf Mellström (2004) argues that technology, as a rule, expresses masculinity. For him, the relationship between masculinity and technology is so pervasive that it formulates a durable equation. Suggesting that technology is related to masculine issues in most cultures, he states that “women's technical skills are rarely defined as technical because technology is pervasively a masculine cultural expression” (Mellström 2004: 369).

A similar logic can perhaps be applied to the expansion of karakat technology and understanding of its importance. Indeed in Kallaste, all those who use and maintain them are male. It is an appropriate thing for a man to be interested in owning and maintaining cars and men's interest in technology is obvious. Informants stress that one has to be an experienced mechanic to build a karakat that will not break down. Men interact and ask for advice from other men who are experienced in this sphere.

Siegelbaum (2009: 12) identifies male bonding within Soviet car culture as a significant thing in strengthening social exchange. This phenomenon parallels the flourishing of do-it-yourself repairs as a function of pervasive deficit in the last decades of the USSR. When the Soviet government failed to supply spares and services, car enthusiasts created their own system of car support. The tradition of do-it-yourself repairs influenced the performance of masculinity as men applied their skills to the household. In addition to assemblage consultations, men keep in touch once they witness an accident. Frozen lakes are dangerous places so drivers usually count on friends as backup. As Oleg mentioned, he is quite sure that once he helps someone, he won't be left helpless in a similar situation. Maintaining the vehicle and helping others – these factors keep the men united and sustain a system of reciprocity amongst them.

To take the humanity of the car seriously one must examine it as a vehicle for class oppression, racism or other forms of violence. A vehicle's humanity, if you will, exists not simply in what someone is able to achieve through it “but in the degree to which it has become an integral part of the cultural environment within which we see ourselves as human” (Miller 2001: 2). One aspect of humanity is that karakat expresses masculinity. Secondly, it is a vehicle that is helpful in sustaining domesticity. As Buchli (2000) shows, the ‘thaw’ year, 1960, brought in a new addition to the meaning of masculinity that included the presence of men in the domestic realm. The role of masculinity was reshaped by “social engineers of socialism” (Hann 2002: xii) and the previous aspects of rural manliness. Men were to apply “traditional masculine skills” (Buchli 2000: 152) to domesticity. Men in Kallaste predominantly do this by keeping a karakat in the house-

hold. In addition to the help it brings in fishing, it can also be used as a tractor to plough fields. Lyudmila said that a plough can be placed at the rear of the karakat if the tyres are replaced with the summer variant i.e., ordinary tyres. It is then ready to turn over the soil. Gennady, on the contrary, argued that it is better to use a tractor since these are conditioned by the power of the engine and special wheels.

Considering the construction of gender differences through the fabrication of karakat trucks, many argue you cannot give this kind of work to a woman or a child. It is hard for a woman to cut all the rubber strips that are needed for the tyres or do the welding, but there are also some masculine expectations that are being applied. Women and children, as both Gennady and Oleg mentioned, are neither that apt at assembly nor physically fit enough to drive karakats and therefore are not entrusted to this kind of work. Gennady asked his boys Vladik and Andrey for help in cutting rubber for the karakat, but then joked that they did it incorrectly, so it was better to cut the rubber himself.<sup>5</sup> Lyudmila also tried to cut the rubber but when Gennady did not mention that fact, Lyudmila did not interrupt. This situation points, once again, to the gendered construction of car culture in Kallaste as a masculine phenomenon. We can surmise by saying that rebuilding hybrid vehicles is a sign of certain historical events and anthropological manifestations. As materialised thoughts, cultivated self-assemblages of this type locate men in private garages or on frozen ice.

## CONCLUSION

Anthropologist Daniel Miller (2001) and gender specialist Ulf Melström (2004) describe the car phenomena in different cultures. Starting from Africa and ending with Japan, Miller's ideas concerning the car's humanity and agency resonate with the attitudes towards motorised vehicles in Kallaste. As Miller (2001) argues, cars become ever more personalised and ascribed with human characteristics. In his words:

The car today is associated with the aggregate of vast systems of transport and roadways that make the car's environment our environment, and yet at the same time there are the highly personal and intimate relationships which individuals have found through their possession and use of cars (Miller 2001: 2).

Indeed, different cultures treat the car in different ways. For example, usage of cars in Africa has different meanings to the United States or Japan, because people and circumstances are different. Cars can become a form of resistance to social alienation. Diana Young (2001: 35) equally provides a fascinating case study regarding the death of cars which aboriginal Australians treat as pseudo-living beings. They are abandoned by owners in Australia when the car is no longer usable. She describes several cases which she identifies as social 'death', pointing to an anthropomorphic humanism.

The analogy with abandoned bodies can be extended to Kallaste, for as Gennady recounts, it is worth giving the parts a second chance. This is what residents constantly do – they prolong the lives of these vehicles. In her accounts of post-Soviet societies, concentrating on how the Soviet structures have survived despite social changes, Caroline Humphrey (2002) reflects upon the current trend within the eastern European heritage industry of seeking to highlight certain elements that we could label 'Soviet chic'.

When going out on the lake, one does not only catch fish. There are lots of different forms of social interaction: cooperation, cooking, celebrating birthdays and so on. Even though pneumatic karakats have proven themselves to be a trustworthy form of technology that can bring income to the household, this does not mean that all the town's residents make them. Those enthusiasts involved in assembling such vehicles are blacksmiths. Fishermen just use them. Blacksmiths do not make karakats in advance – they understand that for the small town the present quantity is too great (there are currently more than 20 four-wheeled karakat cars in Kallaste, not to mention the three-wheeled ones and small hovercraft).

Karakat smiths pick up the parts for their assemblages from spares in their garages and from scrap metal yards. Some elements, such as engines or parts which need to be in working order, are bought from a shop. There are many ways to get spare parts starting with those found lying around in private garages and ending with local repair shops. Because such pieces are not of the best quality, karakats often break down. This frequently occurs outside in the uneasy circumstances of the frozen lake. When drivers need help they call anyone who can bring the appropriate tool or spare, giving GPS coordinates so that help can reach them without delay because conditions can be extreme.

Today karakat construction is not a private task and is becoming more centralised. There are several blacksmiths to whom people are likely to turn. People come to Aleksander because he is a known blacksmith. There is an unofficial queue when there are no registered clients during which time locals can come. Locals pay a little, or if they have no money they can give fish (although this is rare). Aleksander is an employee and his boss is the owner of the car repair shop so he cannot make too many rules himself. People turn to Oleg because he has a reputation for not being a profit-making person. Nor is he restricted by commercial activity. So it is easier to make a deal with him. He is neither an Old Believer, nor a fisherman. He used to work as a fisherman but later moved into the sphere of tourism. Now his main work is technical inspection of karakats.

Originally karakats were made for fishermen, so it was not possible to use them on the road. Like a yacht, one had to put it on a trailer and take it to the lake. Since then, Kallaste dwellers have obtained the town's permission to drive them within the town borders and on the frozen lake, but not on the main roads. Gennady mentioned that it is a tricky thing if you start promoting this product because at the moment it is free for use, no one pays taxes. The karakats owners might be ordered to acquire a license, other documents, or go through technical inspection and so on. Nevertheless, karakats are currently being promoted.

Hence, karakat culture has today become more tourist oriented (see Photo 5). They are still vehicles to help fishermen in their work. Yet this technical assemblage is far from functional – the factors that lead to the construction of these vehicles are also political and symbolic (Fehérváry 2013: 8). Karakat car culture is becoming more accepting of contemporary tourism and today it is an attraction for visitors. It creates local identity and masculinity, notions performed during the Karakat Festival. With the coming of new cultural values displaying the karakat car culture of Kallaste represents a setting in which the objects of the past are reused and transformed. Moreover, this hybrid vehicle is a trademark of the town, becoming an exhibit that can be traded as a local good.

The social life that surrounds this car culture is showing a situation in which karakats are assembled in a *bricolage* way indicative of the intertwining of penury (Hatton 1989). Hence, the proliferating use of spares is dictated by past circumstances of shortage regarding the parts needed for car maintenance in the former Soviet Union.

The things crucial for understanding karakat culture are: people, fish, vehicles, spare parts and the political circumstances. Choosing the materials for an assemblage from items at hand is the main goal for the karakat *bricoleur*, who does not look at the availability of the spares but instead at the picture of the final product and acts from that perspective. Relations between residents circulate through a system of exchange between blacksmiths and fishermen. The different spares used for the assemblage, stocked in garages, are generally the legacy of a past era. The phenomenon of the karakat involves a unity of men, relations which are created by Kallaste's particular car culture. The men of Kallaste thus construct their reality with their own hands. The cultural infrastructure involves a nexus of blacksmith shops, garages and odd hybrid vehicles that help with fishing because they can skate on ice.



Photo 5. Image of karakats in the local café. Photo by Patrick Laviolette, 2014.

## NOTES

1 See Kallaste arvudes 2015; for example, this site indicates 963 people living there in 2013.

2 This is a term to describe the inhabitants of the region near the three main 'chain' lakes that make up the border with Russia: Lake Peipus, Lake Lämmijärv (*Tëpłoye ozero*) and Lake Pihkva (*Pskovskoye ozero*).

3 As of May 2015, some tyres were still there but were being cleared due to the recent construction work for the Estonian National Museum's new building.

4 A common phrase that means that poor people are prone to invent things.

5 The tyre that is based on aeroplane wheels consists of two parts: i) a frame, ii) a second wheel that covers the frame so that it creates a pattern that prevents the tyre from slipping on icy surfaces. The two parts are fixed together using big bolts. The second part is called *pauk* – 'spider' (see Photo 5).

## SOURCES

The initial fieldwork for this project was undertaken by A. Sirotina in 2009 and lasted for three months. Subsequently it was followed up sporadically by both authors from 2010 to 2015. The main informants have given consent to use their genuine first names. Many dialogues and interviews were recorded and remain at Sirotina's disposal.

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