

**CULTURAL PATTERNS  
AND LIFE STORIES**

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# **CULTURAL PATTERNS AND LIFE STORIES**

Edited by  
Kirsti Jõesalu and Anu Kannike

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*This book is dedicated to the memory of  
Aili Aareleid-Tart (1947–2014)*



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## INTRODUCTION

# AILI AARELAID-TART: KEY MILESTONES IN HER LIFE AND RESEARCH

Kirsti Jõesalu, Anu Kannike,  
Maaris Raudsepp, Indrek Tart

I fondly remember a number of occasions, both in Krakow and internationally, when I had the pleasure of meeting and talking to Aili. She was an outstanding scholar, and a brave and good person.

Prof. Piotr Sztompka<sup>1</sup>

The articles collected in this book (except that by Gronow, Purhonen and Heikkilä) were initially presented at a conference dedicated to Aili Aareleid-Tart's memory on August 27, 2014, in Tallinn. All of the authors have collaborated with Aili Aareleid-Tart in her research at different times and on different themes: they shared her interest in biographical research (Kõresaar, Zdravomyslova, Temkina, Assmuth and Siim), in exiles and life stories (Bela, Bennich-Björkman, Kõll and Skultans), in research on cultural trauma (Rahi-Tamm, Roos and Skultans), and in questions of cultural patterns and values (Halas, Norkus, Gronow). This introduction gives an overview of Aili Aareleid-Tart's life and work, her theoretical thinking and use of the biographical method. There is also a brief overview of individual chapters.

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<sup>1</sup> Piotr Sztompka, e-mail to Indrek Tart on May 2, 2014.

### **Aili's life – the portrait of a genuinely curious scholar**

During the last decade of her life, Aili always stood out at the conferences she took part in: a grey-haired lady with a backpack and two Nordic walking poles to maintain her balance when walking. That image is probably how most people who knew her recall her now. She was always curious and took an interest in all that happened around her, both professionally and personally. Her attention was drawn not only to societal trends and cultural traumas but also to individual lives, including her own. In her studies, Aili maintained a balance of theoretical interpretations and concrete interviews with real people. The biographical methods she used are very much applicable in studying her own life. Cultural trauma was always intertwined with her personal disabilities and both of them required healing or coping. Her inner resources for facing and adapting to reality were vast and kept her going for many years.

The primary methodological goal in Aili's research was to keep theoretical musings and experimental results in harmony with the surrounding environment (nature, culture, society, family and personality). She sought out unique solutions that emerged from adversity. That is the reason why she went into such detail in describing the circumstances and social backgrounds of her research: it is difficult to communicate your findings if you do not succinctly describe the objects and limits of your investigation. This is a principle that she had already adopted in her days as an undergraduate.

Aili was born in Tallinn, Estonia on 2 May 1947, the only child of Martin (1905–1977) and Linda Aarelaid (1911–1959). She described growing up in a contentious milieu: “I was born into [a] family where class antagonism was programmed in. My father was from [a] poor family, [had tried to get a higher education] and [had a] left-wing world-view, while my mother, who had no interest in politics, [came] from [a] rich jeweller's family [that] had suffered [a lot]” (Arme 1999: 29). Conflicts between pre- and post-war attitudes flared up from time to time, to the point that her mother did not speak to her

for two weeks when she became a Young Pioneer. Aili was already on the path to adapting to and overcoming physical hardships, as she had contracted poliomyelitis (infantile paralysis) while very young and consequently had a limp all of her life. Actually, it was a miracle that she managed to survive: almost all the other children in her nursery school died. Knowing that had a lasting impact on her mind and soul: she grew up to be a fighter and survivor.

Aili received her secondary education from Tallinn Secondary Schools Nos. 46 and 7, both of which were renowned for their excellent teachers. The former gave her the opportunity to participate in a variety of activities, including folk dancing, singing and organisational work. She was one of the few to be sent to the Young Pioneer camp in Artek, Crimea. In the latter school, she studied journalism and mass media, in addition to the standard curriculum. This is when Aili developed a life-long interest in theatre, literature, philosophy and humanitarian thinking.

From the age of twelve onwards, Aili was essentially an orphan. Her mother died in 1959 and her father developed tuberculosis and spent long periods in hospitals and sanatoriums. In the Soviet era, this was not an insurmountable problem economically, but she had to manage on her own most of the time. Aili was forced to become independent at too early an age.

In 1967 she enrolled in Tartu State University, and at first studied history. Due to her childhood illnesses, including a bout of tuberculosis, she was at least a year older than the rest of her course-mates. Her memories of the learning atmosphere and her fellow students can be found in her article “Life metamorphoses of those born after the war. The story of a course” (Aarelaid-Tart 2012). She was the first in her family to graduate from university, like so many others of that generation, since the Soviet system made higher education available to those who could not have afforded it before. Aili prospered at the university, constantly attaining new goals and seeking out new information. She was fortunate enough to be offered a specialised curriculum where she studied theatre history and took

additional semiotics courses from legendary semiotics professor Yuri Lotman.

In 1980 Aili married Indrek Tart and officially took his surname, but continued to write as both Aili Aarelaid and Aili Aarelaid-Tart. Their son Lauri was born in 1982, followed by their daughter Liisi in 1985. Aili was able to successfully combine motherhood and scholarly work. In 1987–88 she wrote her acclaimed book *Rahva mälu-mustrid (Memory patterns of the people)* (Aarelaid 1990). Her son's asthma necessitated a move from central Tallinn to the outlying neighbourhood of Nõmme in 1989. However, during the nineties, property rights in Estonia were complicated and in 1997 the family was forced to move back to the city centre, with all the attendant problems. Today the children are both university graduates. Lauri, in fact, has carried on her professional legacy and earned a PhD, while Liisi has two children of her own, Mattias and Emilia.

In April 2001, Aili had a stroke, which was further complicated by post-polio syndrome, making her physically rather frail. Characteristically, Aili did not surrender and fought to recover. Despite balance problems and bouts of dizziness, she continued to participate in conferences. Her mental faculties remained as sharp as ever despite her physical suffering. As she wrote in her diary at that time, the doctors' conclusion was clear and tragic: her left leg would always be paralysed and she would always have asthenia from over-exertion. Her new disabilities shaped her personality and she coped with them primarily through mental rather than physical strength. Aili noted that she felt as though she was in a new state of spiritual maturity. As a practical outlet, she again took up singing and playing the piano. Music helped her overcome pain and stress. At the time, she described herself in her diary as a fairy whose mission was to illuminate a massive rock of misery with the radiance of a mental lighthouse.

Like her personal life, Aili's work as a researcher can be seen in terms of clear-cut turning points. There were distinct periods of varying subject matter, methodology and funding. Pivotal among

them was the dissolution of the USSR and the restoration of Estonian independence during the early nineties, which transformed the role of science (especially the humanities) in society. Independence divided her scientific career into two parts, since at the time she felt unable to continue doing research as a purely mental exercise. In her studies, she always associated historical perspectives with the social reality of the time. Aili considered herself a part of social renewal and contributed to the process by sharing her expertise via newspaper articles and speeches at meetings. But her analytical approach didn't lend itself to joining any of the political parties and becoming a politician, as many of her friends did at the time.

Aili graduated from Tartu State University in the summer of 1972 and in December began her postgraduate studies in the university's philosophy department. Her interest in the sociology of theatre manifested in several newspaper articles (Aareleid 1972ab) and participation in a survey of theatre audiences led by the theatre historian Karin Kask. But she soon turned to more philosophical studies and ultimately defended her dissertation, "О социальном и биологическом в детерминации отражения человеком времени" ["On the social and biological in determining the reflection of human time"] at Leningrad State University on November 3, 1977. It was a difficult time for Aili because she had lost her father a month before and there were ideological differences with her supervisor, academician Jaan Rebane. But she defended her dissertation successfully and her degree was confirmed by Moscow six months later. Meanwhile, she had been employed as a junior researcher at the Institute of History in Tallinn since 1975. That position lasted for ten years and saw a number of tense moments due to limited career prospects and contrasting visions of studying culture. But over the years the head of the institute's Department of the History of Culture, well-known historian Ea Jansen (1921–2005), became a mentor and close friend of Aili. In her diary, the entry for April 24, 2005 (the day Ea Jansen was buried) reads: "I have been very lucky to have had Entu [Ea's nickname] as a good road companion for almost thirty

years, half of my life. For us, a common will-o'-the-wisp – the perfect Estonian cultural history – glimmered far away.”

Indeed, the ultimate goal of Aili's studies was to write a synthesized history of Estonian culture. Under the Soviet regime, that was impossible (her one serious attempt in 1979 was rejected as unsuitable by the Estonian Academy of Sciences). So until the Singing Revolution of 1987–1991 she devoted herself to specific issues of cultural theory. This was not easy for Aili, and in her notes from 1980–81 she argued in favour of her beloved “time stuff”. In 1984 she even published an article about the problem of human time (Aarelaid 1984).

In the late eighties she wrote a number of popular essays about nature, home, generations, nationality, mass culture and musical culture. At the same time, she restated her goal of pursuing cultural research (Aarelaid 1987). She was quite active in the general plenary sessions of the boards of the Estonian Creative Unions on April 1–2, 1988, which she attended as an expert on cultural development. In the same year Aili wrote the article “Kakskultuurne Eestimaa” (“Bicultural Estonia”) (Aarelaid 1988). The next year she promoted the idea of Estonian cultural autonomy and helped write Estonian history books for secondary schools. She received awards in both cases: from a daily newspaper for the best article of the year and an annual prize of the Estonian Writers' Union for authors of a textbook. In 1992 she received the Väino Tanner Foundation scholarship for research on voluntary association as a part of civil society in Estonia in 1940–1991.

In 1991–99 Aili was a member of the council of the Estonian National Commission for UNESCO. In 2002 she was awarded the Order of the White Star, Medal Class, for her activities in the field of cultural research.

The institutional reform that began with the dissolution of the USSR continued throughout the last twenty years of Aili's life. Her home institution was renamed the Institute of Philosophy, Sociology and Law in 1989, reorganized as the Institute of International and Social Studies (IISS) in 1994 and incorporated into the



*Aili and Indrek Tart with their children Liisi and Lauri in spring 1987*

soon-to-be-renamed Tallinn Pedagogical University (TPU) in 1997. In 1995 she established the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, which was a part of the Faculty of Social Sciences of Tallinn University, and joined the Estonian Institute of Humanities in 2008.

At the beginning of the 2000s she felt that she needed a “real Western” PhD and started work on a new dissertation called “Cultural Trauma and Life Stories”, based on her latest publications. The effort ended with a successful defence of the degree in 2006 at Helsinki University with her supervisor J.P. Roos, the Finnish academician and professor of social politics. The dissertation was named the best monograph of Tallinn University in 2007.

Institutional change in Estonian science involving cooperation with and then merging into universities changed researchers from specialists with permanent positions into competitors holding temporary grants. In the 1990s the number of research staff was cut by more than half compared with the Soviet time. Low salaries and small grants, along with fierce competition, led many to change

professions. Aili was motivated and successful, and stayed in science because that suited her ambitions.

In 2008 she was one of the founders and leaders of the Centre of Excellence in Cultural Theory (CECT), a transdisciplinary network of Estonian humanities scholars involved in the development of general theoretical models in Estonian culture by juxtaposing and comparing data, theories and analytical methods. With the creation of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Aili worked for the integration of scholarly efforts in the field, co-ordinating the work of sociologists, literary scholars, psychologists, ethnologists etc. She was able to contribute significantly to CECT due to her previous experience as an administrator and analyst.

She was a member of the European Sociological Association (ESA) from 1995 onwards and a member of the board of the Research Network of Biographical Perspectives on European Societies from 1999.

Despite all the challenges, there were no interruptions in Aili's research. Her studies were tightly bound to Estonian culture, its challenges and survival adaptations during the second half of the twentieth century.

### **“Every moment requires its own action” (Aili Aarelaid). Three periods of theoretical research**

A full life is an integrated whole, a period of time filled with action. The ancient Greek conception of time included the concepts of *acme* – the supreme moment, a period of culmination and flourishing – and *kairos* – the right or opportune moment, a time when the essential destiny of a human being is realized. In her article (Aarelaid 1977), Aili Aarelaid wrote about the “wisdom of time” (*ajatarkus*): the ability to recognize good times and to realize one's destiny, spending one's time wisely.

Aili Aarelaid's scholarly life had several peak periods, and she defended two doctoral theses, in 1977 and in 2006. Both of them

focus on the problems of human time. Her first dissertation analyses time on the macro-level of social and historical determinants (Aarelaid 1977a). The second was a micro-level dissertation on the life stories of individual actors who have experienced social trauma within turbulent socio-political contexts (Aarelaid 2006).

Her intellectual journey can be divided into three parts. Aili Aarelaid began her career in the 1970s within the framework of Marxist philosophy, focusing on a philosophical analysis of time. During the next period, in the 1980s and 1990s, she focused on the theory of culture and concrete developments in Estonian culture and society. The last period of her career, in the 2000s, involved a synthesis of her theoretical interest in social time with specific socio-historical phenomena: she pursued a biographical approach in order to reveal historical developments and the perception of time through the lens of the social memories of generational cohorts.

Thus, starting from general and abstract conceptions of time, she gradually shifted her interest towards the concrete and the particular, especially focusing on the cultural context of Estonia and different viewpoints within that context.

In her first dissertation on anthropological problems of collective memory and human time, Aili Aarelaid (1977a) revealed different temporal levels of human reality and analysed objective (biological and social) determinants of the human conception of time. She applied Marxist dialectical methodology, which enabled her to treat, in an integrated manner, astro-physical, biological and social determinants in explaining social time, which she defined as the temporal organization of social practice and social memory. Aarelaid stressed the necessity of using a complex interdisciplinary approach, and in her work she synthesized knowledge from biological, psychological and socio-anthropological studies to explain a variety of particular historical forms of human time perception (Aarelaid 1977b, 1997c). In her article on the conceptions of time in ancient Greece (Aarelaid 1975), she attempted to find materialist explanations for

the development of ideas on time by referring to progress in technology, forms of production and the political organization of society.

Her main research topic in the 2000s comprised particular ways of reflecting historical time in the social memory of different social groups and generations. She elaborated dialectical relations between the continuity and discontinuity of time in the concrete historical context of post-socialism.

Her theoretical model of culture is presented in the book *Rahva mälumustrid. Kultuuriteoreetilisi etüüde (Memory patterns of the people. Essays on cultural theory, Aarelaid 1990)*. Here she provided an integrated concept of culture, including its structural aspects (elements, and the structure of the cultural field as a totality) and its dynamic functioning. There is a detailed analysis of cultural boundaries and dialogue between cultures. Aili Aarelaid's approach was based on dialectics and materialism, but also on system theory, information theory, Lotman's semiotics and Bakhtin's dialogical theory. The book provides a comprehensive interdisciplinary theoretical model of culture and has been used as a university textbook in Estonia.

The Marxist materialist orientation is visible in the terminology she used, e.g. the consequential demarcation of material and ideal aspects of reality. Culture belongs to the ideal realm, but has its roots in the material realm: in social and biological processes. Throughout the book, Aili Aarelaid applies dialectical methodology: she treats culture as a historical phenomenon, the inherent contradictions of which are triggers for development. She moves from abstractions to concrete analysis, analysing both the structure and functioning of culture, and describes its development in different forms.

The concept of culture is examined in semantic relation to other categories linked to non-material or ideal aspects of society: mental production, social memory and societal consciousness. Culture is defined from multiple points of view: for example, as informational-significational structure of meaning (Aarelaid 1990: 10), as the unity of social ideals and social reality in concrete historical circumstances

(op cit: 21), as the ideal multiplicity of a society in its integrity and directionality (op cit: 22), and as the collective memory of a cultural community, allowing for collective self-reflexivity (op cit: 22–23).

Aili Aarelaid's model deals with both the structural and dynamic aspects of culture: she describes the elementary components of culture and their interrelations, and deals with the dynamic processes within culture that lead to changes and development.

Presenting a structural model of culture (the architectonics of culture), she proposes two poles of culture: ideal content and a material mechanism for distribution. The **ideal** aspect of culture consists of elementary content components (sensory etalons and *idemes* as cultural invariants). Aili Aarelaid's original concept of the *ideme* (a construction mirroring the term "phoneme") designates a core element, a cultural etalon that is expressed in verbal or figurative codes and forms the basis for cognition and behaviour in a cultural community. *Idemes* are knowledge, values, norms, beliefs, habits, skills etc. They have concrete historical backgrounds, and they regulate and unify people's activities in the framework of a particular ethnoculture. The uniqueness of a culture is based on specific combinations of its *idemes*, which form the characteristic pattern of the culture.

In Aarelaid's model, the structure of cultural content can be described on different levels. On the level of social consciousness, it can be described as interrelations of ideological core elements, surrounded by specialized content areas and a common-sense periphery. The structure of cultural content may also be described through the hierarchy of its categories and principles, by using the concept of style as an organizing and integrating principle, by differentiating cultural consciousnesses of different social groups, or by contrasting one's own *idemes* with others.

The **material** aspect of culture consists of different mechanisms for the transmission of culture: living people and successive generations, the material environment, social relations and semiotic systems.

Aarelaid conceptualized the dynamics of culture on two levels: 1) the formation and creative realization of structural and content invariants of culture through the processes of interpretation and recording, and 2) dialogical processes within culture and between different cultures. The boundaries of culture are conceptualized through the processes of cultural memory. Aarelaid provided an original model of collective memory, which consists of three hierarchical levels: a) the meta-ethnic level: universal and species-specific memory, b) the inter-ethnic level: ecological and area memory, and c) the ethnic level: ethno-cultural memory.

Aarelaid created a theoretical model of dialogical processes in culture. She highlighted the necessary conditions for intercultural dialogue: equality, respect for the other's integrity and uniqueness, motivation for contact and understanding. She also suggested a typology of intercultural dialogues: the quarrel of "the deaf", the alien message, content-rich dialogue, new rules and lost identity. Cultural diversity is a pre-requisite for dialogue. Intra-cultural self-dialogue occurs through contact with one's past (former generations). Aili Aarelaid stressed the role of generations and inter-generational cultural transmission in securing cultural continuity. This topic became central during the last period of her scholarly activity. Besides dialogue with others, dialogue with the past, relying on historical memory, was also crucial in this respect (op cit: 54)

In summary, Aili Aarelaid's theory of culture is comprehensive and systemic, dialectically treating both the structural and dynamic, as well as spatial and temporal aspects of culture, and revealing the internal mechanisms of cultural development and transmission. Aarelaid's general orientation was enlightening and historically optimistic (she envisaged progressive development towards "a more humane and culture-friendly world"), humanistic (striving for revitalization of humaneness) and ethical (she promoted respect for the cultural other, and peaceful co-existence between different cultural traditions). It would be interesting to relate Aarelaid's cultural theory to more recent Western theoretical approaches that were