

Karakat - Cars that Skate and Swim

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Karakat vehicles have huge smooth wheels, equipped with big bolts. Such tyres without any gripping pattern on the outside surface were certainly not made for the asphalt road. Sometimes the car is left standing near the house without any coverage. Other times, tyres are covered with black plastic bags. The carcass of the car is often cut into two halves; the authentic rear is then removed and replaced with a prolonged extension (imagine a limousine) that is made from all sorts of materials – the list of the items used for constructing such a car is limited only by the imagination. One can see these vehicles in eastern Estonia, in and around the town of Kallaste on the edges of Lake Peipsi. This is a fishermen's town of less than 1100 people, so the question arises, why create these cars? What is the purpose of these machines and who makes them?



Figure 1 Karakat parade (photo by A. Sirotina 2009)

I would like to take a closer look at the expansion of the do-it-yourself technological culture in Kallaste because it seems to be a unique phenomenon that remains important in the town. The surrounding towns that are situated on the shore of Lake Peipsi (like Mustvee), tend to use manufactured, modern technology such as motor sledges to drive on the frozen lake. One remarkable thing that points to this fact is the celebration of the karakat day. It gathers dwellers of the near-lying towns, and tourists to see the event. Several years ago, the number of karakats at the festival was about 20.

During the Karakat festival 2010, the amount of the karakats reached 35 registered nominees in

the contest. In addition to the car, local 'Henry Fords' assemble various other vehicles needed in the household. The total amount of self-assembled technology includes also two air pad boats, tractors and other self-made motoring machines in the private garages. Thus my main informant, Grigory, often says that the entire population of Kallaste can get into these vehicles and drive away. Moreover, there are karakats that were successfully sold to the neighbouring towns. This means that the inhabitants of the villages on the same coast also keep karakat cars in private garages, hence there is a room for additional research.

Kallaste first appeared on record at the end of the 18th century as a fishermen's village on Lake Peipsi. The residents – largely Old Believers – are widely known for their innovativeness. Their villages are spread along the shore of the Lake (Rus. Chudskoje ozero). Estonians, Russian Old Believers and Orthodox Setus have been traditionally residents of the domain (now the contemporary territory of the Estonian Republic).

The Lake Chudskoje is situated in the Eastern part of Estonia and shares the body of water with Russia. For the long period of time the lake was the crucial connection between the two banks. As fishermen say, the coastline of Russia is seen in the conditions of clear weather as Kallaste rests on the narrowest point of the lake. The political situation was an important part in creating the infrastructure and sustaining the micro-economy. Going back some 50 years in time, we find the Soviet Union in the country. With the Marxism-Leninism ideology and scarcity of private property it really made the difference in the sphere of commodities – these facts have influenced and shaped the car culture. In those days cars were rare things and owning one (especially privately, i.e. not one provided by work) meant a lot – it was a sign of respect and something extraordinary. The car became an integrated part in the environment. People had to wait for years in the notorious Soviet queuing system to get one.

The word karakatiza is something inexplicit and funny. One fisherman smiled and tried to gesticulate with the hands. It was an attempt to show something in motion. Grigory explained that the karakat is made from different parts of various technologies, so that from a distance you do not understand clearly what is in front of you. The dictionary (Ožegov, 1964:261) defines karakatiza as:

1. Sea mollusk that excretes a colorant – sepia.

2. [transferred meaning] About short-legged, awkward human (colloquial, funny)

This is what the name of the car shows – this funny and scruffy vehicle holds the meaning within itself. It is not a piece of art – the car is meant to be of advantage to fishermen. There was a need of a vezdehod in Kallaste, but when a car itself was a rare thing, it was not easy to start creating a new kind of technology out of a car. The men who assemble the car from heterogeneous parts and swerving from a direct course can indeed be called bricoleurs. A bricoleur from Levi-Strauss's definition is "someone who works with his hands and uses devious means compared to those of a craftsman" (Levi-Strauss 1966:16-17).

Bricoleur can be seen as a do-it-yourself person, but not necessary a deviant one. This bricolage was quite a normal phenomenon in the Soviet Union and creating such vehicles was approved. Even if a person got one car, from my informant Stanislav's viewpoint, it was a bizarre idea to cut the car into halves in order to make a karakat. That is why car owners turned to the technique that allowed prolonging the life of the used mechanism and enabled the spread of do-it-yourself craft. In

those days motorbikes on the contrary were something natural and usual. Those vehicles were like the mopeds nowadays – they were widespread. That is the reason why the first karakats created were based on the motorbike. One of the first people in Kallaste who assembled these two-wheeled motorcycle karakat was Konstantin. He bought 4 taz (kind of bowl) in a local shop and glued them together. This way he constructed wheels for his karakat. People called the first karakats *kostotrjas* – a bone shaker.

Old style karakat cars have a significant flaw. There is no suspension system since the karakat is based on the motorcycle. So the seat is not comfortable and one can feel the intense vibration every step of the way on the frozen lake. People stand up when they are riding two & three wheeled karakats so to minimize this unpleasant motion. The new variant of the karakat, when it is based on a motor car, is quite comfortable (vibration is still present though) and there is enough room for tools and fish. One can add a two wheeled cart at the rear, so it is possible to carry even more fish or tools, if needed.

Tim Dant (2009) has written about the work of repair culture, suggesting that cars are likely to be fixed, even though modern techniques of mass production often prevent enthusiasts from attempting to do so. He suggests that do-it-yourself repairs exist in most societies, varying because of the economic situation, gender-based norms, the desire to master the blacksmith's work, etc. There were several reasons for making car repairs on Soviet cars: first, it was relatively easy to undertake reparations with your own two hands as there was no complicated electronics or other devices under the bonnets of the Soviet cars which could prevent motorists from doing it. The second reason was that the state failed at providing the owners with the necessary spares like windshields, tyres, technical devices, and so forth.

In Kallaste the motivation to create the private vehicle was at the same time higher. One thing was the greater ownership of motor vehicles which created a desire for people to construct their own machines. Another reason was a putina – a good catch. Allan bought a karakat while still a schoolboy because there was plenty of fish in the lake. A lack of cross-country vehicles made the people who were going fishing obtain karakats otherwise they would have to wait until the ice on the lake was thick enough to go there on foot. Despite being so much heavier, because of their many diverse and eccentric ergonomic designs, the karakats have this ability to glide over slush and thin ice.



We can conclude that recreating and rebuilding are signs that point to certain historical events and anthropological manifestations. Here I place the emphasis on the self-assembled vehicles – aka karakats or pneumatic cars – that local men maintain in their private garages. Every culture is avowed by the material things that it creates. Materialised thoughts, cultivated thoughts (or things) during the course of time obtain some particular meaning. The car, as Miller (2001) argues, is personalised and ascribed with human characteristics. What does it mean to own a karakat? Is it just a tool for catching fish or might it be more important to sell it as a commodity?

Different cultures treat the car in various ways. For example, usage of the car in Africa has a different meaning than in the United States or Japan because people and circumstances are different. In any culture the car can become a form of resistance to the alienation of the dominant culture. And it can be an important thing in creating one's identity. Similarly, the car's relationship with the presence of the landscape is an important factor in the shaping of identity for certain indigenous people. Diana Young (2001:35) has written on the death of the cars that Australian Aboriginals treat as living humans. They are being abandoned by the owners in the outback when the car is no longer usable. She describes several cases which she calls the 'death' that points to an anthropomorphic relationship.

The story with the abandoned carcasses can be prolonged as there is a new form of life and hope in the act of salvaging bits 'n pieces for future reparation. This is sort of like the rag 'n bone men of old. Grigory said that it is worth giving a 'second chance' to the parts of decrepit vehicles – and this is what the Kallaste residents constantly do with their karakats: they prolong the life, not only of cars but of their own complex post-Soviet identities as well.

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