

Sauna, more than sweating...

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Introduction to sauna

According to Leimu (2002), it was 1917, when Finland gained its independence and there was a need to find markers of Finnish identity. Three were the chosen aspects: Finnish language, the traditional narrative of Kalevala, and sauna. In time, Finnish sailors universalized the connection “sauna-Finland”, which is something Estonians and Russians see with some irritation, considering their strong tradition as sauna goers. All in all, as a Latin American, some years ago I could see sauna only as an activity that provided warmth to people in the long-lasting winter. However, as a task for my anthropological methods course in the master’s degree anthropology programme, I had to approach sauna as an object of study. This happened after having lived in Estonia for some years; hence, I had the opportunity to frequent a local “sauna-club” called *Väike-Maarja Saunaklub* (VMSK). This article aims to discuss and analyse sauna in two different scenarios: as a cultural artefact in Estonia and Finland; and as a leisure activity in relation to a socializing club.

The Context

My visits to the sauna with the locals had started out as a purely academic exercise. If anthropology is the study of culture, what were the meanings attached to sauna-going by these Estonian businessmen, builders, teachers, mechanics and information technologists? What motivates anyone to leave the warmth of home to drive to this small house in the middle of an Estonian forest to have sauna? I, as a foreigner in the

country, was attempting to understand sauna as a cultural artefact. “*Leili nautimine*” (“enjoying the steam”, in Estonian language), common background in the Soviet army, national allegiance, a shared need to ‘unplug’ from routine, and collaboration and comradeship seemed to be common markers on Wednesday evenings. According to one of my informants, meeting on Wednesdays was not a matter of chance, but rather a well-devised strategy to “split the week into two nice halves”. Now my Monday mornings are waiting for Wednesday afternoons when I go to the forest. I have gone ‘native’.

Getting there

After driving for around 30 minutes from the small town of Tapa, in central Estonia, we arrived to a small house in the middle of the forest next to a frozen river. It was the middle of February 2008. After a round of beers, food and jokes I could only understand partly – due to my at-the-time basic skills in Estonian, I was invited to sit on the “*lava*” (bench) – while others were preparing ‘something’ for later – and to enjoy some warm steam. Initially, it was warm and soothing, but then it became hot, very hot! The person next to the oven (“*leiliviskaja*”) threw more water over the stones and the steam was getting hotter and hotter, and wetter and wetter. After a while, someone explained how to use the birch leaves to promote blood circulation and infuse the sauna with its smell, and then I was invited to have a dip in the river. At first, I thought I hadn’t understood the question properly, but somebody translated and confirmed it to me. Yes, I was invited to swim when outdoor temperature was 15 Celsius below, and the water was only 3 degrees Celsius, very cold! The sensation cannot be explained properly with words: my heart beat started to be slower, my skin was hurting, and I needed to run quickly back to the sauna. Once sitting, blood circulation would tickle my legs and my mind was at peace. Borrowing Van Gennep’s

(1960) concept, sauna could be considered as a liminal moment: after abandoning the city life, sauna goers are immersed in an isolating moment, just to be re-assimilated to the rush of our contemporary world. In fact, whenever a sauna club member celebrates his birthday during a VMSK meeting, the club speaker would reproduce an old sauna saying:

This can be analysed in the light of Victor Turner's (1995) remarks that liminal people are considered as polluting, but inside the group social hierarchy is replaced by a feeling that all are equal. In this sauna context, "*communitas*" is restricted to *liminality*, excluding both *marginality* and *inferiority* from the transitional experience.

The same routine (bench, water, bench) would be repeated a couple of times, and then people would sit and chat about anything. One informant told me that besides their continuous obsession to get a good steam, sitting together to share some food and chat was a crucial ingredient for a successful VMSK experience. This clearly builds on the notion of sauna-going as a tool for socializing with others, particularly in the context of VMSK. Unknowingly, I was going to become the first VMSK foreign member.

Sauna basics

As reported by Leimu (2002), even though there are lots of texts in popular culture speaking about sauna, only a few are from an ethnological perspective, such as Estonian ethnologists Ilmar Talve (1960) and Tamara Habitch (1972), and Canadian anthropologist Lisa Marlene Edelsward (2001). This part of the article is an attempt to bring about an ethnographic approach to sauna in Estonia.

Allegedly, the word "Sauna" comes from *savuna*, literally "in smoke", and refers to rudimentary saunas, which looked more like "smoke saunas" than modern saunas. *Smoke*

saunas were the first saunas used by the Nordic people and had no chimney. In a big oven, wood is burned and the smoke fills the room. The room is heated during the whole day and when the stones are very hot the windows are left open so the smoke is ventilated out. During sauna, the steam is heating the room, not the fire. For some, such as VMSK members, this is the *real* sauna experience for it represents an ancestral tradition kept alive for centuries. In fact, sauna as a process of sweating in order to clean and heal people's bodies and minds has been present for approximately six or seven thousand years. It is evidenced in rock paintings showing people throwing water on stones (Mail Online, 2011). Both Greeks and Romans used hot baths to draw out bad temper and as a social way to gather and relax (Wagemakers & Moore, 1999), and the so-called "Father of Medicine", Hippocrates, recommended bath procedures to the majority of his patients. At the same time, not only is sauna useful in physical terms, but it is also embedded in the agricultural habits of Northerners in which, after a journey of hard work in the cold winter, a "communal warmth, beyond just physical heat" became the basis of social organisation and feeling of community. (Kaldera, 2005)

Symbolism and Sauna Culture

According to Joronen (2002), in rural areas the sauna door was shorter in order to have the sauna-goers stoop to come in as a way to show reverence for the ancestors, and, in case there is not a shower, the sauna visitor will have a dip into the closest river or lake or, in winter time, roll onto the snow. This aspect could easily be linked to Levi-Strauss' (Deliège, 2004) binary opposites, where heat and cold make essential part of the sauna experience. What is more, Kaldera adds curious details of an old sauna ritual in northern regions where sauna is used to solve conflicts in communities, always

appealing to the ancestors' guidance. In a way, several texts (Habitch, 1972; Kaldera, 2005; Joronen, 2008) explain sauna as a 'rebirth experience' at both individual and collective levels.

In addition to the sauna room and the oven, another important element of sauna is the steam, which is the source of heat at the heart of the sauna experience. According to the Finnish tradition, there are four different kinds of steam: *Maiden steam* that happens when water is thrown for the first time since it "surrounds you like a fiery lover; you can hardly bear her touch, but it is exciting and ecstatic" (Kaldera, 2005) The second time the water is thrown onto the stones is called the '*Lady steam*', for its caress is similar to that of a loving wife. The third time, known as the *Mother steam*, is so soft that it is 'like sitting in your mother's lap'. Finally, the fourth time, the *Grandmother steam*, "is said to be the sweetest of all ... it happens when you go out to the bathhouse after the sauna and toss a little water onto the still-warm coals for the sake of the *Saunatonnttu* and the Ancestors" (Kaldera, 2005).

Saunatonnttu is how Finnish saunas goers call the guardian spirit of sauna with the shape of a dwarf. Lopatin (1960) narrates how people used to warm up the sauna once in a while for the gnome to enjoy the steam, or to leave some food out of it for him. His function is basically to warn when there is a fire and punish those who have behaved in an improper way in the sauna. The Russian *Saunatonnttu* is called *Bannik*, and is considered "the spirit of the bathhouse" and bathers often used to make offering to him, such as some salt at the beginning of the sauna session, some soap, water and a little vodka.

Furthermore, a bunch of birch (*viht*) is usually used to slap on oneself to promote blood circulation and clean the skin by opening the pores. The birch is collected in

summer, and considered a "commodity" during the winter months. Nowadays, *viht* is mostly common in rural areas, it's used once and provides a fragrant aroma to the hot air. In the Slavic culture, the conquered peoples used to give them to the rulers as a way to pay tribute. Equally important was its role in the Northern lands, since it was used to predict the future: it was placed inside of the sauna in a row, if the birch twigs fell to the right a good harvest would be expected, to the left a bad harvest was ahead. Similarly, on *Jaani Päev* (Saint John's Day – Mid-summer's day), a piece of birch was placed on the corner of the sauna in order to get a good smell for future visits to sauna.

Finally, sauna going can also be considered a ritual, where emotional involvement and common participation is required, in order to reproduce and cement social ties that make us feel part of a community (Kertzer, 1988). In this perspective, a cleansing routine has become full of symbolic meaning, creating a backbone in the reaffirmation of our uniqueness and worthiness as individual human beings in a very chaotic world of which we have little control.

Sauna as Leisure

Sauna-going consists of more than sitting on the benches and sweating profusely in the heat. For some people it can be a complicated "ritual" that, done appropriately, provides a very enjoyable moment or longer, given that the bather will stay for long time inside.

The stages are obviously not the same for everybody; for instance, my informants agreed that an indispensable ingredient in the sauna for it to be perfect were friends and drinks. In the sauna experience, an important part of the club meetings is the conversation where people share the same cultural capital, and discuss various topics, from building to politics, passing through

travels and future plans for the club. Cultural capital here refers to the choices of activities the club members engage in – what Bourdieu called “taste” (Harris, 2005), as well as the particular skills needed for such activities. In many cases, these skills are closely related to their identity as “*maainimesed*” or country people, as commented by one of the informants during my fieldwork.

Authenticity, on the other hand, is a topic that has been widely researched in Leisure studies. In the sauna case, the searches for authenticity are of different nature: some would like to get a smoke sauna experience close to that of their ancestors, while others would not trust the steam raised by an electric sauna (Leimu, 77). In any case, one of the dynamics that VMSK has adopted is to organize ‘field trips’ during the year, where the members are looking for contacts with the ‘authentic’ Estonian life in museums, manor houses, historical sites, etc. One of my informants once told me that the main goal was to get a taste of what Estonia ‘really’ is. In fact, Geertz (1972) suggested that symbolic forms are not only a reflexive interpretation of social life, but also a means through which people discover and learn their culture. Sauna allows for the opportunity to explore such symbolism.

Furthermore, when I first encountered these men getting together to sauna in the middle of the week, my first impression was that they were escaping from routine and reality. In fact, according to Joronen (2002), “sauna going is a form of escapism as well. We escape everything our modern environment does to us with the knowledge that we are undoing certain effects in the sanctity of the sauna room.” One possible explanation as to why people look for an escape comes from Marxist approaches in which people witness changes in terms of “*increased alienation, as individuals lose control over their lives to powerful corporation and government agencies*” (Harris, 2005, 79). However, in the

case of Väike-Maarja Saunaklub, it seems to deal with a way to escape from a strongly structured working routine in which people have fixed schedules and miss time on their own. On the other hand, the tough weather is one of the reasons why the inhabitants of the northern regions go so often to sauna, but it is also a place of social tradition, and lately has become a centre of social activity: it is common to hold business meetings in sauna in some places in Scandinavia, not to mention the sauna clubs already spread in different countries in Europe.

In addition to the way how sauna habits have been closely influenced by cultural, environmental and contextual aspects (i.e. weather, health, strengthening the bonds with the others, with nature, and with ourselves), sauna culture has also been governed by political and social changes. In a way, sauna could be considered here as a liminal place for it provides people with a space to make a transition from work to rest, or from every day to the sacred – in relation to its connection with ancestors (Leimu, 78). According to Tamara Habicht (1972), sauna served several purposes (food smoking, deliveries, clean room for the ill, and even sheep-holding during the cold months), but its main function was that of cleansing. In fact, before 1939, people in Estonia used to go to sauna on Saturdays, in order to clean themselves and to look their best for the Lutheran Mass on Sundays. In contrast, during the Soviet occupation of Estonia, sauna practices changed: religious practices were banned by the central power, therefore sauna day changed to Friday (to relax after weekly work) or Sunday (to go to work clean on Monday). In Finland, conversely, people would go to sauna every other day in the countryside, or on Saturdays.

Currently, sauna is still a very important activity for people in Estonia and Finland. When they offer sauna to out-of-town guests, they are formalizing a traditional way of

extending hospitality, and failure to do so could be taken as an insult. In relation to VMSK, when someone takes a guest along, this person is treated with major cordiality and asked to write down his impressions on the guests' book.

Sauna... sweating and something else

The term sauna has multiple meanings. In the Western world, sauna is a place for party, sexual encounters, and dark atmosphere. In Nordic countries, sauna is considered to be a place where people enter a threshold ideal for reflection, meditation and renovation of both soul and body. This later approach has transcended continents, which appeals to Kirmayer's idea (2004) that cultural systems of healing that were particular to certain cultures have been globalized and made accessible in the global market.

When sauna becomes an activity to 'escape' from routine, it implies an attempt to influence positively one's perception of life. Hence, in the context studied, and in the light to the informants' answers, sauna aims "to restore balance in people's lives, and bodies become the field where this work is carried out, where pathways are cleared, disturbances healed, and losses retrieved" (Persson, 2007: 45)

In the words of Pirkko Valtakari, the former executive secretary of the Finnish Sauna Society, "Sauna bathing does not only clean the body but also purifies the mind. The bather's frame of mind after a leisurely relaxed sauna ritual could be best described as euphoric. It is like a rebirth; all unpleasant feelings fall away and you feel at peace with the whole world" (Valtakari, 2006). Sauna for VMSK members is more than cleansing; it involves the construction – strengthening - of social capital in a widely impersonal society, barter and service exchange in a commoditized social structure, and a break

from the weekly routine and the harsh weather.

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