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Culture in a Grain of Sand: Finnish Sauna Bathing

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Summary

Sauna has a long tradition in Finland and in this study, different aspects of sauna in Finland in the 21st century are explored. The text describes present day small- and large-scale saunas, some historical aspects, and how sauna bathing is part of the Finnish identity. In the process of commercializing the tradition of sauna to suit tourism, one must recognize what characteristics in the sauna tradition are of interest to today's tourists and what modifications must be made to suit the tastes of them. MacCannell claims that what tourists experience might not be authentic. He introduces the term staged authenticity, a space developed especially for tourists and, therefore, false, and inauthentic. Making use of terminology from Goffman's dramaturgical model of social interaction, MacCannell coined the concepts of "frontstage" and "backstage", denoting the areas developed especially for tourists, and the "true" local areas, where the local people live and to which tourists usually have no access.

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The Finnish sauna experience – scaring or daring?

Inez had come to Turku, Finland, on an Erasmus exchange. She was 21 and this was the first time away from her family for a longer stay. Inez had chosen Finland because she had heard positive stories about the country, its people and exotic culture from other Spanish students. While still in Spain, it had seemed natural that she would experience a Finnish sauna during her exchange. Once she arrived in Finland though, she felt more uncertain – all the fuzz seemed intimidating and the thought of being crammed in a hot room with other people did not seem very appealing. The Finnish tutor students had, however, decided to take the exchange students and some local students for a weekend to a cottage on an island in the Turku archipelago. They went by bus and with a connecting ferry there. It was in a beautiful spot on some rocks and there was a separate sauna building a stone's throw from the main cottage.

As the evening fell, Inez was sitting with a few other students around the campfire, chatting and drinking a beer. The sky was filled with stars that Inez had not seen in the city. This was the perfect experience for an exchange student. From the sauna she suddenly heard "Three...two... one!" followed by a moment of mumbling and shuffling and then, suddenly, what seemed to be cannon balls hitting the water, followed by shrieks of what Inez thought was pure terror. After that, laughter, and more laughter.

The next day, whenever any of the sauna bathers had a chance, they would, in a playful way, tease the ones who had not yet conquered the sauna. The tension was being built up throughout the day and eventually Inez felt that she was ready to test her limits and try a Finnish sauna. It was already dark when the sauna was ready. Inez put on her bathing suit and entered. The only light in the sauna came from the fire in the stove. It was dark and Inez had to find her way with her hands. Then, as expected, yet a bit shocking, a blast of hot air in her face! Seven students

Topics for discussion

- **What** prejudices does Inez have about the sauna and how may these prejudices affect her expectations and experience?
- **Before** sauna bathing, which aspects should be highlighted to an international visitor about the experience?
- **How** could the local Finnish students have supported the Erasmus exchange students better?
- **How** can a local sauna experience become part of touristic products in a meaningful way?

were crammed in the sauna. What if somebody passed out? What if they would not be able to open the door? What if...what if...

Someone was splashing cold water on Inez's face. That felt refreshing. She was told by the others to breathe through her hands, which was good. Everyone was splashed with cold water, and they encouraged each other to stand the heat. When water was tossed onto the rocks to give more steam, everybody screamed "sauna" and laughed. The water bucket was being passed around, more steam, more heat and as the minutes went by, Inez realized that she was safe and among friends. This was a unique experience shared with others.

"Three, two, one", they all screamed and ran out to the beach. The air was tingling the skin and her excitement increased as she stepped onto the edge of the jetty. Inez shrieked with terror and jumped into the darkness, just like she had heard the others do the night before.

Inez popped up from the water, laughing, with water up her nose and in her mouth. Everybody was cheering and laughing, celebrating the experience. Looking around at the bobbing heads in the water, Inez was convinced that this was fun, intentionally being in an enclosed hot space with these people, sharing this moment.

Introduction

*To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour*

*William Blake, Auguries of Innocence
(Blake, n.d)*

Culture can be said to be everywhere and nowhere. We do not always recognize the culture surrounding us and yet it is, as water does fish, surrounding us. It is possible to see culture in the smallest of artifacts and of course in other phenomena as well. When sauna will serve as our grain of sand, part of Finnish culture becomes unveiled. But why has sauna become such a central feature in the Finnish culture?

Saunas have multiple roles in Finnish culture:

- Saunas are visible in daily life as well as in prominent places and contexts in Finland.
- Saunas symbolize Finnishness, and the concept is used for branding Finland.

This case study will present both why sauna has become so important in Finland and how the sauna relates to values and other cultural peculiarities in the Finnish way of being and living. We will first present the Finnish way of expressing identity and culture through saunas and then proceed by showing how saunas are part of the country's tourist brand.

Saunas as part of the Finnish identity and culture

Sauna can be approached as a cultural entity that embodies many aspects of Finnish culture. Dramaturgy, as a sociological concept developed by Goffman (1956), is useful in describing a two-way relationship: people choose to

play the roles they are given, and our surrounding culture confirms to us who we are. When, for example, Finnish peacekeeping soldiers are posted for a longer time, a sauna will be built. The sauna can be seen as soldiers living up to what they believe is important and demonstrating the fact that they are Finns, and that sauna is an important part of their identity; apart from, of course, enhancing mental and physical wellbeing. Bringing this feature of their identity into daylight is then positively underpinned even at the highest level of the government:

“During the visit [to the UNIFIL peacekeeping operation in South Lebanon], Prime Minister Sipilä also inaugurated a Finnish sauna for the battalion.” (Government Communications Department, 2015)

The quotation above clearly demonstrates that the sauna is something different than taking care of your personal hygiene; the Prime Minister would not inaugurate 10 new showers in the bathroom. Goffman (1956) exemplifies the importance of a stage, the physical environment, for performing a social role with developments in the medical profession:

“[...] in the recent development of the medical profession where we find that it is increasingly important for a doctor to have access to the elaborate scientific stage provided by large hospitals, so that fewer and fewer doctors are able to feel that their setting is a place that they can lock up at night.” (Goffman, 1956)

It is difficult to imagine going to a doctor’s appointment in a place where the cultural artefacts would not mediate what we expect from a medical doctor’s office⁶: a sterile environment, a minimum of personal belongings visible, access to laboratory services (including nurses), and a colour scheme of white, light green/grey/brown. It is that environment where a medical doctor, in a long white coat, performs her profession. And just like a doctor needs a hospital to act her role as a doctor, one common way of expressing Finnishness is through sauna.

Thus, many a Finns use the sauna as a symbol for their Finnishness, their identity and it has become commonly accepted as an institutionalized cultural meaning of the Finnish nation (Tillotson, 2020). The sauna is of course also a central part of everyday life in Finland and in the Finnish lifestyle. Sauna has become important in Finland for several reasons, some of which reflect on the Finnish way of living. There is a sauna in the Parliament House, there are shared saunas in probably every apartment building built between the 1950’s and 2000, and during summers, Finns wash themselves in one of the numerous saunas built next to the summerhouse, where they spend their free time. The love of nature and spending summer at a cottage, going to the sauna and taking a swim in the lake unifies the Finns and this simple life has been thought of as an expression of equality (Periäinen, 2004).

What makes a sauna different from showers? Edelsvard (1991, p. 195) quotes an episode from maybe the most prominent Finnish painter artist, Akseli Gallén-Kallela’s autobiography, where the artist describes how he as a child broke the norms of sauna bathing. The young child in his innocence commented on a young woman’s naked body. This remark was not sexual but

⁶ Try doing a search on the web (“medical doctor’s office”), and you will understand what we mean.

still crossed the boundary for what was acceptable. Gallén-Kallela points out how he then came to understand “the holiness of the sauna.” Sauna bathing is, however, not holy in a religious way, but in a secular, sacral way. Bathing is a ritual, a kind of Rite of Passage, a rite that must be performed in a certain order. There are several ways in which sauna bathing functions as a gate to another state of mind or body. Sauna bathing works as a gateway from, for example,

- Dirt from arduous work to cleanliness
- Cold to warm
- Stress to relaxation
- The ordinary “toil” to a more relaxed and calm sense of being
- Duty to off-duty
- Workday to day of rest

Depending on the context, the symbolic meaning of the sauna varies. For the peacekeeping battalion, the sauna undoubtedly symbolizes coming from a dangerous context to a safe one – the soldiers would never go on duty after having bathed. That would be doing the Rite of passage in the wrong order.

The same goes for bathing in the *korsu* saunas that were built and used during WWII during the “Trench-war” period, i.e., during a kind of stand-still in war operations (Tunturisusi, n.d.):

“The first thing soldiers on the front did, when retreating from the actual line of fire to their rest shift, was to have a sauna” [Kun tulilinjalta siirryttiin taaemmaksi lepovuoroon, mentiin aina ensimmäiseksi saunaan]

A *korsu* is a wooden bunker built in connection with trenches (see figure 1 for a *korsu* sauna).

Figure 1. JR 27:n *korsu* sauna in Valkeasaari, 1943”. Source: Vapriikin kuva-arkisto, licensed under CC BY 2.0 (Staf)



The duty to off-duty transition is also an explanation for why saunas must be built on Finnish merchant vessels. (Government Decree on the Living Environment for Seafarers on Board Ships, 2012) Yet another example would be that when the work week was six days, the Saturday night sauna was a tradition in many families. The sauna-at-the-end-of-the-work-week-tradition

changed to Friday night with the five-day work week, but the symbolism remained the same: the work week was over and there was a time to rest. There is of course also a transition from dirty to clean and from work to rest, so the sauna bathing is a combination of a practical and symbolic meaning.

Traditionally, the sauna has been considered a sacred place, 'a church of nature' (Sauna Culture in Finland, 2019). The connection between sauna and nature is strong and combines the four elements of water, fire, earth, and air that are believed to be essential to life in western cultures. The sauna used to be the cleanest place, and as late as in the 19th century, this was where babies were born and dead bodies were cleaned and clothed (Kalevala viideskymmenes runo, n.d.).

Today, sauna is also a place to gather and get close to each other. Physically, but even more important, mentally, or even spiritually. In the sauna families, groups of workers, soldiers or even strangers in public saunas gather, calm down, and follow the norms of bathing. One norm is that sauna-bathing in Finland is void of sexuality. Being lightly dressed, or sometimes even nude, does not allow for sexual innuendos, not to mention acts (Edelsward, 1991). Respecting the unwritten rule is so strong that for example, in a Finnish comedy series produced in the mid-1990s, the then prominent politician Tarja Halonen (later President of Finland) could have a sauna together with two male reporters for an interview, fully convinced that the episode is decent and will not be used against her. (Lenso, 1996) They were, of course, wearing bathing suits, and the president to be, had further wrapped herself with a towel. The episode highlights many Finnish cultural features; a relaxed approach to nudity, gender equality (female bodies can be seen without sexualizing them), and the fact that saunas are places for more open and relaxed communication.

There are also examples where the Finnish political elite used the sauna to foster friendships for policy and commercial decision-making with foreign politicians, in what is commonly referred to as "sauna diplomacy". Sauna was used as a form of social communication. Decisions and negotiations take less time in the heat, cools down overexcitement and diminishes political differences. (Finnish Sauna Society recognizes the sauna diplomacy of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2011)

When entering the sauna people, along with their clothes, take off their public roles (cf. Goffmann). In saunas people are alike, i.e., the fool and the king are equal. The idea of equality also reflects on Finnish cultural values (Lindman, 1999 (19)). The core of what Finnish people experience as Finnishness is the silence, the immersion of oneself in nature, isolation, and eagerness to withdraw from an urban to a rural environment.

A rite of interaction

Sauna bathing has above been described as a rite, and rites follow common accepted ways of behaving. We can recognize for example weddings as rites. Randall Collins (Collins, 2014) in *Interaction Ritual Chains*, describes what could be called a common manuscript for weddings and sauna bathing alike. Rituals have their own idiosyncrasies, but on a meta-level they appear the same. First, a group assembles and establishes a barrier to outsiders. In a sauna context this could mean collecting towels and clean clothes to wear after bathing, and refreshments, and then gathering in a changing room to undress or to change into bathing suits. The group of people has a mutual focus of attention and might perform some stereotyped formalities during the process. Such formalities can be drinking something (nowadays often

beer, cider, or soft drinks), putting a birch sauna whisk in water, or simply expressing positive expectations: “this will be great, it has been a while since I’ve had a sauna”. These formalities and preparations build up a shared mood, or, as Collins (*ibid.*) puts it, collective effervescence.

The outcome of the sauna bathing ritual is then a kind of group solidarity and emotional energy in the individual participants (*ibid.*). The emotional energy derives from the common experience of having been close together and having relaxed – or enjoyed – something together. If the sauna bathing was a first experience (compare to *The Finnish Sauna Experience – Scaring or Daring*), the group might have formed a bond, and that bond may be demonstrated also after the bathing, as a symbol of social relationship. This kind of symbols can be for example as simple as lingering in a towel for a while instead of immediately dressing. Another such symbol would be sharing a meal or at least light refreshments.

Applying Collins’s Interaction Ritual Chains theory to sauna bathing also brings forth why it can be difficult to fully adapt this cultural heritage into a tourism experience. Already the first steps when beginning the ritual, group assembly and creating a barrier towards outsiders, imply that access to this kind of sauna bathing can be limited – you need to have a group, and you need to isolate yourselves from others. Thus, some modifications to the concept must be made. The tourism experience needs to be easily accessible, fun, and even extreme at times, however, taking into consideration, the original idea of intimacy and privacy. The private, everyday sauna experience in limited company will next be explored in a tourism setting. How is this cultural heritage being offered to tourists?

Sauna as part of cultural heritage consumption

Sauna is today part of the Finnish tourist brand and what used to be a private practice, solely within the family and among a close circle of friends, has been opened to international visitors as part of different travel packages. In December 2020, the sauna culture in Finland was inscribed on the UNESCO’s representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (Finnish sauna added to UNESCO’s Cultural Heritage List, 2020) Adding sauna to UNESCOS’s list is likely to create further interest in, and awareness of, the Finnish sauna culture.

In the process of commercializing the tradition of sauna to suit tourism, one must recognize what characteristics in the sauna tradition are of interest to today’s tourists. Some tourists may find the idea of undressing among other people awkward or the thought of washing off their make-up and destroying their hairdo simply terrifying. Renting a cottage in the outback and heating a sauna might also be too demanding for an outsider and this is one reason why there are sauna experiences created to cater to the tourism market. The connection between nature and sauna is, traditionally strong and connects well to the idea of sustainable travel and respect for nature when travelling.

There are saunas that cater to a young and modern audience and that attract both locals and tourists. Löyly (Steam) (see figure 2) and Allas Sea Pool are two ultra-modern public saunas at the seafront of Helsinki, where there are DJ: s entertaining and exercise and relaxation classes like Wine&Stretch in combination with good food. In the City of Tampere and in the City of Kuopio there are so-called sauna restaurants, where sauna and restaurant services can be enjoyed by both tourists and locals. Since these spas are public and people may come and go as they wish, the atmosphere is different, and you



Figure 2. Löyly Helsinki Sauna | Vadelmavene, CC BY-SA 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>, via Wikimedia Commons

should for example be prepared to chat with strangers. This contrasts with a private sauna, where you can enjoy the silence and lounge on the benches.

For the more adventurous Finns or visitors, there are also unusual places for saunas. There are floating summer saunas in the shape of a wooden raft, where people can enjoy a sauna in combination with a swim in the lake or the sea. In Ylläs, Lapland, there is a sauna gondola ride/cabin, ideal for people who love heights and scenic views. Combined with the 20-minute ride is the possibility to explore the resort's other saunas, fireplaces, and outdoor hot tubs. A tourist can also purchase a sauna tent that is compact and portable and ideal for mobile adventures. In some models the stove can also be used to cook a hot meal on. As can be seen in the above, sauna for the visitor can come in all shapes and sizes.

Figure 3. Sauna bathing guide in different languages Source: Sutinen, 2017

The association Sauna from Finland has created a booklet on how to have a Finnish sauna. This booklet can be found in receptions of hotels and spas around in Finland (see figure 3). Is the booklet, however, enough to guide the visitor to an authentic experience that appeals to all senses, and provides natural relaxation?

Authenticity in cultural heritage consumption is a difficult concept to clearly define (Reisinger, 2006). If a Finn were to judge whether the tourist experiences above come from a Finnish sauna, that person may agree or disagree; there are surely different views on what an authentic Finnish sauna experience must or must not involve, being authentic.

Elderly Finns, who grew up in the decades following the Second World War, have certain expectations of saunas. These expectations do not always match with the more accessible and touristic spas, or the ski-gondola sauna for example, can be very far from what they would call authentic sauna. They would probably not even think about the experience as 'Finnish sauna' at all.

MacCannell claims that what tourists receive might not be authentic. He introduces the term staged authenticity (MacCannell, 1973), a space developed especially for tourists and, therefore, false, and inauthentic. Borrowing the terms from Goffman's dramaturgic sociology, he coined the concepts of "frontstage" and "backstage", denoting, respectively, the areas, developed especially for tourists, and the "true" local areas, where the local people live and to which tourist usually have no access. It is the backstage where authenticity resides; frontstage areas are considered totally inauthentic by MacCannell. There are critical voices to this concept of authenticity, for what is authentic? Isn't authenticity in the eyes of the viewer? Very often, and even if the physical environment is important, the social roles are in the centre, and tourists are seen as the audience (MacCannell, 1973). Most tourists are content with what the frontstage offers (partly because of the safety they feel there), yet the backstage has its important role for tourism, too. First, it provides the mystery, the sense of intimacy, which creates the feeling of the "real". Recognizing this importance, providers of tourism services often construct false backstage areas to imitate authenticity. Thus, a continuum between the two extremes is created, described by MacCannell in the following way:

- Stage 1: coincides with Goffman's front region; tourists, however, often try to go beyond it.
- Stage 2: front region that has been manipulated to resemble a back region; changes are mostly "cosmetic", only some of the elements of the back region are imbedded to create "authentic atmosphere".
- Stage 3: front region that has been changed in such a way that it totally looks like a back region.
- Stage 4: back region which is opened for tourists.
- Stage 5: back region, slightly altered and occasionally visited by tourists.
- Stage 6: the ultimate backstage. Almost never reached by tourists.

Stages three and four indicate the transitional zone between the two extremes and they can be difficult to separate. Which of the stages tourists will reach, depends a lot on their own motivation and the extent to which they are ready to give up their "environmental bubble". Contacts with local people can be very useful and even necessary in reaching stage five. It can be argued that Inez, the main character in our story, reached stage four and

even five, thanks to the fact that she was introduced to a sauna experience in the company of local people.

The above stages can help us re-think the tourism experience. For tourism providers at a destination this includes matching the visitor with the 'product', by balancing the familiar with the unfamiliar, aiding the tourist to gain a deeper understanding and, hopefully, an experience that emotionally involves them. There is a growing interest and curiosity among visitors to experience the 'real' life of local people; what they do and how they live. For the tourism providers it is a matter of considering the local culture and not being afraid of sharing the "backstage" to the visitors.

Conclusion

In this study different aspects of sauna in Finland in the 21st century have been explored. The text describes present day small- and large-scale saunas, some historical aspects, and there are some attempts to analyze how sauna bathing is part of the Finnish identity.

The exchange student Inez in our story gets to experience the power of sauna in a group of like-minded young people. The group comprises both local Finnish students and exchange students, which enables guidance into the 'mysteries' of sauna culture. An authentic sauna experience like Inez's, can only be achieved when it is possible for the sauna bathers to form a sense of togetherness, a sense of group formation and a sense of belonging to that group. In addition, the group should be limited size wise and timewise: people cannot come and go (like in a spa) because then a group will not form.

Important aspects of the sauna also include the pre- and post-sauna rituals. The sauna is not a place for anyone in a hurry. When the bathing is over, it is customary to sit together and talk, enjoying refreshments and maybe a light meal. The sense of warm skin and no make-up strengthens the ideas presented in the case study about relaxation together without a public role. Inez herself might not care whether the sauna experience was authentic or not. In the end she had a nice experience and whether it was authentic or not, is not very important for her. It is worth considering whether it is even possible to determine if a place or atmosphere or experience is authentic; who is to say what an authentic experience must be like?

Löyly and other spa-like facilities may be authentic in some sense but perhaps not in all? After all, they are saunas in Finland, created by Finns, for Finns and tourists alike – why would they not be authentic? If tourists are taken to a spa sauna – is it cheating? Does the touristic sauna experience function as a lens to magnify the Finnish culture? It exemplifies a nicely packaged and accessible experience but bearing in mind the historical connotations that saunas have in Finland, the experience feels superficial and thin. In the end it is up to the individual to evaluate and decide for herself whether an experience was enjoyable or not.

Learning objectives

- **To analyse** preconceptions in your own culture
- **To discern** and describe possible preconceptions related to the Finnish sauna
- **To understand** what the sauna experience is all about and why it is important to the Finns
- **To increase** awareness of how to create tourism products from a cultural heritage perspective

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