

Culture



Lisa-Marlene EDELSWARD, *Sauna as Symbol: Society and Culture in Finland*, New York: Peter Lang, 1991, 267 pages, US \$41.95 (hardcover)

Yngve G. Lithman

Volume 13, Number 2, 1993

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1083134ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1083134ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie

ISSN

0229-009X (print)

2563-710X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Lithman, Y. (1993). Review of [Lisa-Marlene EDELSWARD, *Sauna as Symbol: Society and Culture in Finland*, New York: Peter Lang, 1991, 267 pages, US \$41.95 (hardcover)]. *Culture*, 13(2), 101–102. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1083134ar>

Tous droits réservés © Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie, 1993

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

Érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

those between humans and animals, those between the members of a house, and those between the isolated Vaqueiros and the townspeople of the region — are shown to be central both to how people live and die and what the deaths of others mean to them.

The Vaqueiros cooperate in extended households in which one child is chosen as the heir to the house and accepts the responsibility to care for all the elderly (parents, uncles, servants) of the house. The value placed on the continuity of “the house” requires the marginalization of some members of the household. When the dying must be cared for, the division of labour in the household is affected, and the precarious balance between moral obligation and economic interdependency is brought to the fore. Likewise, the inevitable death of the household head raises the issue of inheritance, the conflict between the need of the aging to retain control of the property so as to not be left “unable to defend himself” and the need to ensure the smooth transition of ownership to the next generation. It is in this context that Vaqueiros speak of *gracia*, the pleasure of living, of activity, work, and cooperation in the house, and of *aburrimiento*, a state of mind that settles on one when *gracia* is prematurely lost, whether due to sickness or to deep conflicts and estrangement within a house that leave one vulnerable and marginalized. *Aburrimiento* — a state to which the Vaqueiros attribute the desire to kill oneself — is, according to Cátedra, a product of the stress and conflicts of the inheritance system. People who feel this way are, she says, “socially and cognitively dead.” What suicides do is to “properly hurry on their own death” (p. 203).

Cátedra builds her account from hundreds of hours of taped interviews. Holding that “a good way to get at what people have in their heads is to listen to what they have to say” (p. 26), she aims to value the Vaqueiros’ words by quoting extensively from these interviews. The result is a text that alternates between decontextualized, anonymous quotes from the Vaqueiros and Cátedra’s often repetitive glosses of what they said. Removed from the context of the telling, with virtually all narrative or dialogical content stripped away, and presented as representative examples of shared beliefs, the Vaqueiros’ words lose the very flavour and life Cátedra clearly wants to convey (a problem exacerbated, it appears, by the difficulty of conveying Vaqueiro dialect in translation). It is unfortunate that the ethnography, as a text, fails to do justice to the poignant and subtle vision that emerged from Cátedra’s conversations with Vaqueiros about the meaning of life and death.

Lisa-Marlene EDELSWARD, *Sauna as Symbol: Society and Culture in Finland*, New York: Peter Lang, 1991, 267 pages, US \$41.95 (hardcover).

By Yngve G. Lithman

Stockholm University, Sweden

Along with *sisu*, that willpower and stamina which characterized both Finnish military participation in WWII and its long-distance runners, the *sauna*, the hot steam-bath, is probably what most people associate with Finnishness. What Edelsward does in her book is to show that this is indeed what the Finns do themselves. Indeed, she claims, the *sauna* has become her guide to understanding Finnish culture.

Her book is based on some extended stays in Finland, as well as 220 responses to a questionnaire with many open-ended questions. These responses are used not only for some rightly cautious quantitative purposes, but more significantly and creatively for a section of quotations called Finnish voices as the end of each chapter. She also uses medical, psychoanalytic and other texts to show how the cultural discourse about *sauna* stresses the beneficial effects of this ‘national heritage.’

Analytically, this book places itself in a growing genre of cultural studies in western societies, where anthropological techniques and tools are used. Geertz’s notion of ‘the use of emotion for cognitive ends’ is used to help explain why the *sauna* is a key symbol. Turner’s discussion of passage rites is applied to having a *sauna* bath (but is there really a transformation of status which takes place when having a *sauna* bath?). The role of ‘invented traditions’ à la Hobsbawm is invoked to situate the *sauna* in the contemporary Finnish nationalistic idiom.

The book has many of the strengths and weaknesses of the genre of which it is a part. It is an interesting and occasionally an enjoyable presentation of a custom, and it actually does manage to say significant things about Finns. The ‘shy Finn’ is elegantly discussed and revealed through his/her *sauna* compartment. In fact, Edelsward occasionally ends up pretty close to the nationalistic claims, as quoted in her book: “The *sauna* is a part of the Finn’s basic character.”

The anthropological study of our own societies has already produced a large number of insightful works. The majority of these, still, may be experienced as somewhat rhapsodic, and a bit loose-jointed. The theoretical propositions sometimes seem so general that they do not really excite the reader. Even if Edelsward has not given us new tools in this regard, her book is another testimonial to the growing trend of making us ourselves the "others".

Will C. VAN DEN HOONAARD, *Reluctant Pioneers: Constraints and Opportunities in an Icelandic Fishing Community*, New York: Peter Lang, 1992, 173 pages, U.S. \$36.95.

By Charles R. Menzies
City University of New York

In *Reluctant Pioneers*, van den Hoonard sets for himself the task of describing the rise of the shrimp fishery in the Westfjord region of Iceland and the subsequent development of a shrimp fishers' occupational identity in the village of 'Kaupeyri'. Shrimp fishers face a peculiar difficulty in establishing an autonomous occupational identity as they exist, says van den Hoonard, "on the occupational fringe of the fishing industry. [Thus], they cannot appeal to the traditional occupational imagery of the established fishermen" (p. 9). It is this contradictory occupational location — neither "pure fisherman [nor], of course landlubbers" (p. 9) — that informs van den Hoonard's description of the shrimp fishers' occupational culture.

Van den Hoonard dispenses with the historical background and contemporary ethnographic setting in two short chapters (pp. 17-25, 27-35). In the chapter on history, van den Hoonard describes how a succession of fisheries that utilized different types of gear (i.e. trawls, longlines, gillnets, etc.), levels of technology, and chased different species of fish developed and then faded away (pp. 18-23). His history moves with an apparent inevitability through eight separate stages without much evidence of conflict or contradiction. There is no sense of differing histories or the possibilities of such, but rather van den Hoonard melds the different threads together into one line that stretches (almost beyond belief) from the early period of Danish colonialism to van

den Hoonard's ethnographic present of the mid-1970s. I would have preferred that van den Hoonard spend more time explaining the period he calls the "herring adventure", 1955-1968 (pp. 22-23) as it seems pivotal to understanding latter points he raises with respect to the development of a shrimp fishers' occupational culture in opposition to so-called traditional fishing culture.

The chapter on the contemporary ethnographic setting provides the reader with several details and facts germane to van den Hoonard's argument. However, gender issues are deftly dealt out: "by reason of the author's gender, this world [of women] remained closed to him" (p. 34). Despite his exclusion from the world of women, van den Hoonard still tells us that shrimpers' wives "complain that their husbands 'think fish'" and that "there appear to be sharp cleavages between the everyday world of men and women" (p. 34). Had van den Hoonard at least attempted to explore further this sharp cleavage between women and men, his overall argument would have been better served.

In the central chapters of the book (four, five and six) van den Hoonard outlines the basic material and social aspects of the shrimpers' occupational culture and the ways in which shrimpers manifest their identity in the larger society. One of the strongest sections of the book, a discussion of crew recruitment and composition (pp. 52-61) is found in Chapter Four. The section on skills in Chapter Five is a clearly stated empirical description of the knowledge required to be a good fisher (pp. 71-76). In Chapter Six, van den Hoonard summarizes the development of the shrimp fishers' Association of Small-Boat Owners with an eye toward contextualizing their current role within the various fishers' organizations and within the wider arena of Icelandic politics.

Chapters Seven ("Going South") and Eight ("Turning the Table on Empiricism") are studies of the conflicts and contradictory situations into which the shrimp fishers of Kaupeyri are placed. Going South — both metaphorically and literally — refers to the nature of periphery/centre politics within Iceland and, in particular, with the experience of this group of northwestern Icelandic shrimp fishers with the development and implementation of a licensing and regulatory system. For the specialist, Chapter Eight contains a tantalizing glimpse into the development of the shrimp fishing quota system and the ensuing conflict between fisher and government bureaucrat (pp. 114-121).