

“YELLOW MUISTIHUONE” AND CONCEPTUALIZING THE RIVER AURA

INTRODUCTION

Imagine an aerial picture of Finland, large expanses of blue water surrounded by green forests. Some small blue strips connecting the interior with the coast. It is commonly known that Finland is famous for its thousands of lakes. A lot of Finnish people cannot even think of moving anywhere else than to the next lake, village or town. On the other hand some of us are totally tied up with the salty and windy seaside weather and landscape. Perhaps one extra category within “water people” is those urban dwellers who like to underline the connection of town, history, river and culture. This urban river tribe is of course known in other countries and can be found as well in London, Budapest, Prague or Szeged. Riverside apartments are usually more expensive and in many cases you can find the best restaurants and shops on the riverside. The main walking routes are along the river banks. In many towns dock areas are under renovation and new plans transform industrial areas and buildings into cultural centres.¹ The river is everywhere clearly an important part of the changing city image.

For a few of years, I have been working on the ethnological river topic, mostly with urban rivers, Kokemäenjoki in Pori, Aura in Turku (both in Finland), Tisza in Szeged (Hungary) and Danube in Novi Sad (Serbia). In all those cases it has been a question of *urban environmental ethnology*, but also of *developing ethnological fieldwork tools and methods*. The river has been the main actor, both subject and object. Quite similar research environments can be found in art history, sociology or human geography and humanistic landscape studies. In my cases however, the most important is oral history and recalling the past, including the relationship between man, river, space, place and memory. In modern urban ethnology discipline borders are not so tight (cf. urban anthropology or urban geography) and theoretical influences and methods are used together. In some discussions the deepness of the

¹ Cf. Industrial Heritage between Land and Sea – project (Turku) with several European partners.

city (and river) is closer to individual experiences, but as well our target can be seen as collective experiences. So, I have my own river, which is perhaps a part of another man's river, but not the same. In a Finnish motto of the project we wrote: "Kaikilla meillä on jokemme" (We all have our river).

In our project "Kerrottu ja koettu Turku" (Turku – Told and Experienced)² we tried to find those individual voices inside the common river discourse. Personal rivers become the river Aura. In the analysis this comparative process between individual and public generates more useful material. Though the project material is the starting point, it leads to new hidden memory places, local stories and names and to a "micro-geography" of the river. In this article I wish to describe especially some efforts to increase our field interactivity and accessibility in researching the river, but also to present some preliminary results about these ongoing projects.

In our work oral history, historical knowledge and archives are also combined with the idea: how the river happens. We have to be aware of the historical local facts (institutional information) such as the years when the bridge or the dam were built, but the most important question is about individual experience and later categorizing, conceptualizing and interpreting the data. However at first we should ask: How to make the field and how to work there?

In my paper I use our local river Aura as an example. It is about 70 km long, it flows to the sea after a short visit in the neighbouring communities of Oripää, Pöytyä, Aura, Lieto and Kaarina. There are certain parts which are clearly urban and some which are rural or nearly so. However the river Aura is more than urban or rural. Because of this in the following I try to find some concepts given by the river users, but first the background.

This article has at least three different backgrounds: At first the topic is combined with my river interests in the 2000s. Secondly I must note the international SemEthnoSz water seminar in Szeged. I took part in this seminar with two younger ethnology students from Turku and during the week we had a lot of good discussions about the river Aura, too. We tried to define typical urban river features and tried to find the borders between urban and rural river. Later during the 10th SemEthnoSz seminar we were able to use and further develop those ideas, this time in Szentes. I would like also to add my experiences in

² "Turku - Told and Experienced" was one of the Turku 2011 projects. See also : Arvio 2011.

Novi Sad, Serbia, because in this case I had an excellent opportunity to work with students of architecture and urban planning. The Danube is of course quite different from the river Aura, but a lot of questions are common.

FROM LOCAL CULTURAL PROCESS TO EUROPEAN CULTURAL CAPITAL

The river flows today, but it also has both its history and a future. Parts of the past are still visible. Stone Age settlement sites and Bronze Age graves guard the river valley. Koroinen ruins near the Halinen rapids and Turun Tuomiokirkko (Cathedral) tell about the official and governing nature of this river area. They also give a positive identity to the surroundings and local inhabitants. So, in our case the river Aura is not only historical process, but also a crucial part of modern positive areal brand building. The river Aura valley is the very first area for Finnish agriculture, industrialization and urban structures (Turku). The symbiotic relationship between sea, land and river is hundreds or even thousands of years old. Actually there have been two important routes between the sea and the interior: the Hämeen Härkätie (medieval road) from Turku to Hämeenlinna and the river Aura, which was navigable even for merchant vessels. As the land slowly rose (an Ice Age effect), the water route becomes useless for bigger vessels.

All these discourses in a way culminated when Turku (Finland) was elected as a European cultural capital with Tallinn (Estonia). During the open application process I submitted a proposal paper “UMK” (Urban Memory Machine). This concentrated on research on the town and especially memory places, including the river Aura. At the same time our department of history started to build up an application “Kerrottu ja koettu Turku” (Turku – Told and Experienced). They contacted us to combine our efforts and after some negotiations I transferred my river topic to this larger application. Later this project was constructed as a two-part programme: the first part concentrated on the river Aura and the other part on the women’s town.

TRADITIONAL CULTURE RIVER

Turku and the river Aura have always been like sisters or brothers, at the same time both also like servant and landlord. In Kassila's documentary film "Kolmen kaupungin kasvot" (Faces of three towns) made in 1963³ this river is in the very centre when speaking about Turku. According to the film the Aura is democratic and Turku aristocratic. It is true that the Aura is not on the same size scale as the great European rivers, but its meaning for locals is just as important. It is the heart of agriculture, an ancient cultural route, the urban edge and a vital background for industry. This presence has also created the situation of bad water quality. For a very long time it was a common habit to discharge all the waste waters into the river. In recent years the situation has improved. The colour of the water has however always been grey because of the clayish soil. This is not important for those living along the river, but someone coming from outside connects this colour immediately with serious pollution (as did my students in Novi Sad, too).

We have to remember that everyday life river culture nowadays means different things than it did some hundred years ago (e.g. from agriculture to creative industries). Iceboxes no longer need real ice sawn from the river. Hunting or fishing are no longer as important as they were. People used to get together, dance on the bridges, skate on the frozen river and keep cows and horses on the river banks. In our case industrial places, like water mills and small factories created an upper river village environment. The urban stretch included also bigger factories, and the dockyard has been perhaps most important. In recent years the river itself has become increasingly important. Traditional river fish markets have new competitors, such as music festivals, concerts and plays. The river is no longer only a route or edge. This has been noted also by the city, new lighting and wall stones bring new possibilities. We let the river happen.

TURKU 2011 CULTURAL CAPITAL WITH SOME PROBLEMS

The small boat route and huge areal cloak became more active, clean and visible already in the late 1900s. Quite suddenly there were a

³ Kassila 1963.

couple of restaurant boats, environmental art, new lighting and plants, which create a totally different atmosphere and townscape than before. The river is almost like a part of the street system, some kind of a market place, certainly a public place.

This was clearly seen in the 2011 programme, especially in opening ceremonies, but also in many smaller chosen programmes. Huge waterbird sculptures in the river and seal sculptures on the banks showed something extraordinary for locals and tourists alike. Not only the official “cultural sector”, but also everyday life is nowadays closer to the river. In summer people can get together in the riverside grassy fields. The river Aura is a popular canoeing route and a lot of family boats are moored along the city centre. Those light blue small boat anchoring poles are back in the summer and the whole “river discourse” is much more positive than some years ago.

People are more interested in the condition and future of the river. One good example is the question of bridges. There has “always” been a couple of bridges joining this part and the other part. Turku was a little bit unlucky during the 2011 culture capital year. One of the great central bridges (Myllysilta) partly collapsed and was later demolished because of serious damage. It was not only the local bridge accident which was discussed, but also the whole Turku brand. The new bridge appeared quite soon and it has a lot of artistic value, too. However there was another bridge to come in the very centre of the town. For some hundred years the old Market place had been connected with the other side of the town by a light bridge. In the early 2010s there were new ideas for the similar light traffic bridge which was to be built about two hundred metres downstream. The so-called “Pennisilta” or later “Kirjastosilta” has been moved to the river bend. The idea was perhaps good, but the new place aroused a lot of protests. This part of the river was ranked as perhaps the foremost riverscape in Finnish river iconography. This panorama to the Cathedral is (was) a national treasure and some of the citizens were strongly against the process⁴. We even took part in the discussion with the master dissertation of ethnologist Maria Herrala. She wrote her MA on the influence of the bridges on the townscape of Turku. The juridical process took an unfortunate turn for the town, which started to build a new bridge in late 2012.

⁴ At first there was a public address and later a new demand signed by a number of persons (two architects, professor of geography and even the writer of this article).

It was not only the bridge process which showed us the increasing need for interactive discourse with the townspeople. Our small projects had such results that finally we decided to develop something new in the area of urban ethnological field methods. It was obvious, that we needed more interactivity and publicity. In the very beginning it was only the idea of mobility, but after some months we were ready for the mobile and interactive “Muistihuone”, a real movable building.

WHAT, WHERE, WHY AND WHEN IS THE YELLOW MEMORY ROOM?

The writer of this article was responsible for the sub-project “River Aura as cultural environment”. From the very beginning of the project the river was connected with all three tasks of the university: research, teaching and so-called third task, working with the society. It was also very important that our geographical area covered the river Aura from its first metres in Oripää to the Turku harbour.

The idea of the interactive research method was discussed earlier, but real planning and construction work were done during my course on “Kulttuurin tuotteistaminen” (creative industries) with a small group of B-level students. The course was a success because everybody was eager to develop our ideas. This was the case also in very practical needs. When we had to get a carpet or curtains, somebody brought those from her/his home. We tried to collect especially place memories, but to reach our informants we had to create good places for our “MUISTIHUONE mobile office and exhibition room”. Those places were based on city nodes where we could reach enough interested people. We of course also visited several planned places. Only one place was a disappointment, namely Manilla (old factory, which is nowadays a cultural centre). The problem was that the entrance between buildings was too narrow and we had to leave Muistihuone outside and also in a peculiar position.

That meant mostly places with a good number of people passing through and potential interviewees. It was not only to get interviews, but also to present our former results (panels and photos inside and outside of the cottage, books), build new networks and to find a place for discussions. This concept was as much a methodological experiment as a practical way to collect data and have an exhibition at the same time. With this mobile cottage we also had an opportunity for marketing

the whole Turku 2011 project. From our point of view this project was like an umbrella with its lectures, studia generalia, teaching, areal workshops and workshops with other projects (like Koroinen). Instead of the light plastic rain cover we very early turned to the idea of a real mobile cottage. There were good models on the neighbouring construction sites where we also visited. I was in contact with two major construction companies (NCC and YIT) to find out the possibilities. We needed the cottage itself, but also all the logistics. I was happy to find that both companies gave us a green light with the whole package, including logistics. Surprisingly the problem was with the 2011 foundation, which informed us that those companies could not be our collaborators. The reason was that they (2011 foundation) had already chosen another company, namely NN. According to all our discussions and e-mails this was not true and our project spent some very busy weeks to clarify the situation. However after those weeks we were able to reach an agreement with YIT. We got the brand-new yellow cottage (we added some blue and red ball stickers) and what was just as important, the company moved it from one place to another with a lorry following our time schedule. Our tour started from Kyrö and continued both in the countryside communities and in chosen Turku places along the river Aura. We had a couple of students who kept our “Muistihuone” open. Actually there was also the field work course, which contained some practising parts during the process. We collected about 2000 visitors over the summer. I will describe this work and the data collected in more detail in another forthcoming article, but here I wish to briefly point out more generally something about the river concept itself, the things which were important to our visitors.

GOALS AND CONCEPTUALIZING

When analyzing this whole project, I shall attempt to summarize our work in three main topics: 1. method and research work in environmental ethnology, 2. Habits, customs and new possibilities in teaching and 3. interactivity with the (local) society, more widely the so-called third task of the university.

One of the most interesting topics is how we conceptualize the river itself. How this waterway is understood as a cultural and social infrastructure. In a way we continue the discourse between rural and urban ethnology, too. In our case we operate in both milieus and also try

to combine our knowledge from both research traditions. So, riverside saunas and urban restaurant boats are equally valuable actors. In our everyday life orientation we like to underline the meaning of (hidden, forgotten) memory places, both individual and collective. However there are also several other questions, like discussing the coalition of concepts: accessibility, dialogue, interactivity, memory place, (cultural) landscape, environment, habitat, aesthetics, topophobia and -filia. We can also speak about different kinds of resources, like economic resource, social resource or nature resource. With all of these we can find data which relates us to both built and unbuilt infrastructure. One of the final goals is that we could also use these data and results, not only at the university, but in the work with schools, foundations and different kinds of other organizations, too.

During the project we had several different kinds of working models or forums. First of all we arranged seminars for our co-workers and students, but also *studia generalia* for all those citizens interested in our topic. More specifically we collected material in smaller workshops. At the university we linked our project to the courses of ethnology. This means also that students wrote their papers for the project⁵ (e.g. Herrala 2011). There were very useful web pages for the blog writings, photos, exhibition and collection tools. We devised e-questionnaires, and also offered shorter and easier versions for informants. Students and researchers also wrote blogs for those pages. Perhaps most important was however the “space”, our mobile experiment “Muistihuone” itself, because there we could make better contact with the people. Some of them had already visited seminars or written their stories and some visited more than once.

Of course we tried to use all earlier experiences and find new questions. The first traces of my river ethnology appear in the very beginning of the 2000s. At that time we had some collaboration with River Aura foundation and our first publication “Muistojen myllyt” came out in 2004 (Salenius – Virtanen – Komulainen 2004). Some years later we launched wider fieldwork concerning everyday life in the river valley. Both projects also produced mobile exhibitions for museums, libraries and some other public places. In addition to these, collected data was used as source material for the research “Aurajoen Muisti – kertomuksia jokiarjesta”, which is to be published in 2014 (Virtanen 2014 in print). All the material collected with “Turku – Told

⁵ Nyyslä 2009; Kostet 2009; Herrala 2011; Simola 2011.

and Experienced” has been archived to TYKL-archive (University of Turku).

We tried to grow our “river people network” from the very beginning. The first seminar was arranged in Turku Water Works in Halinen. Those seminars and workshops continued later at Lieto, Rusko and Turku libraries. In some cases we had both exhibition and lectures, but at the same time tried to collect new data with mental maps, questionnaires and interviews. I have to note that one of these workshops was open for immigrant women only! That is also the moment when the Tigris is first mentioned in our materials. For marketing those events we published a couple of flyers and different kinds of cards like information papers.

FROM ANCIENT NATURE ELEMENT TO FUTURE CULTURE ARENA?

This river is like a self-cleaning part of the environment to most of the Turku people: dirty greyish and flowing slowly. Like our grey everyday life, our river is however deeper and more meaningful. The image of the river is mostly historical and cultural. Turku has always been a river town and it was obvious that our cultural capital 2011 includes this river, too. When reading those applications, you can find river topics from many connections. Mostly those were not research proposals, but performances, children’s culture, environment art and so on. In those cases the river was more like a suitable arena or “public main street” for all kinds of events. It was also seen more like an object, not a subject. Local river discourse tells about urban technical infrastructure (a part of the street system), bridges and more widely of the urban built environment. It is also clear that before our project, the rest of the river (the rural part) was not so much discussed. Our work and analysis reaches from the harbour to the first springs of the river. The small stream grows as it flows towards Turku. Some main rapids give more power and at the city centre it becomes quite calm and ready to meet the sea.

From the temporal point of view, the river is both a long cultural project and a floating moment at the same time. You can see prehistoric sites even today, but at the same time you can be a part of the decision-making process for the river’s future. This is one of the most interesting questions: how is it with the river’s future? This should be one of the main tasks in our research: How is it with the river in 2030?

RESOURCE FOR EVERYDAY LIFE

We can think that the river is the reason for the (pre)historic sites around it as well as for the modern cultivated fields. It is an everyday life route for moving from one place to another, but it is also a source for food and other resources like leisure-time activities, hay loads, small animal furs, water and ice blocks. Different kinds of niches open one after the other every year. The relationship between local people and the river nature however changes because of the changing technical infrastructure, but also e.g. because of the changing quality (or volume) of the water. We do not speak here about flood effects on the same scale as the flooding caused by many bigger rivers. It is a little bit surprising that the most common resources mentioned in Turku discourse about the river Aura are those connected with the rural milieu: all those salmon rapids, almost 40 different fish species, swimming places, watermill ruins and agricultural landscapes create balancing factors for the urban industrial river. On the upper stretches of the river the water itself has been an important resource. It has been used for fields, as drinking water for cows, as ice blocks for the preservation of milk (sawn in the winter, but used until late summer to keep milk cool). In the urban milieu the river used to be like a long small boat harbour. There were also certain places for the archipelago boat traffic. This continues even nowadays with numerous tourist boats.

Nowadays there are very popular places for sport fishing (Halinen, Nautelankoski), but some decades ago most of the riverside families tried to catch fish (pike, bream, perch, salmon) for their table, too. It was the same with waterbirds and crabs. We cannot forget all the mills which were built to use water power. In some cases we can also find some industrial traits like upper river dairies, the Manilla urban rope factory and distillery, the Barker cotton mill or leather fabric in the Aura centre. In the very centre of Turku we can find specialized parts like the dock area and harbour for the giant car ferries. In the town centre the riversides are constructed with stone walls and good electric lighting which create a totally different atmosphere than on the upper river. There are also more than ten restaurant boats (at least three are open in the winter) in the centre.

One of the rapids is more or less connected with the city centre and situated at the suburb of Halinen. This place is famous for its industrial history, but is also known as a modern fishing place where even salmon can be caught. That is why the town also constructed

concrete steps for the fish swimming up the river. The building of the river Aura Foundation (our important collaborator) is also situated on the bank of the Halinen rapid.

RIVER AURA AS TECHNICAL AND ART ELEMENT

The river is usually both the route and the edge. As well it is a collection of technical solutions. Bridges must be built, but those must allow the traffic, too. There are some other main "problems" in the history of the technical river discourse. The river Aura, as well as many other rivers, has been an areal cloak and the quality of the water is still one of the most important themes in everyday life discussions⁶. There are a number of new solutions to avoid pollution, like field shelter areas (EU directives) in the riverside, river bottom dam constructions and of course modern equipment for water cleaning.

Streets cross the river with different kinds of bridges. In recent years these bridge discussions have been very visible (see above). One of the most interesting new results in our fieldwork is that the river is the tool and also an arena for political struggle and ways of using political power. This discussion also gave more role and meaning to our fieldwork and research texts.⁷

The Turku 2011 program turned to the river from the very beginning and it figured prominently in the big opening ceremony with fireworks and a circus-like program. It was not so much a question of the historical river value, but the idea of a suitable arena. The everyday life of the river was suddenly changed by the festivities. Both the river Aura and Turku have their own image. When branding Turku as a culture town, the river was needed, too. On the other hand, when the river is used as a local arena, it is not just any river, it is the river Aura in the old capital town of Turku. Music festivals like DBTL⁸ or some fish markets also give a certain richness to the urban river culture. Already before the Turku 2011 cultural capital year we have had a lot of

⁶ Cf. The situation and programs concerning the Danube: we have to understand the complicated situation between many countries, but the river policy is becoming more and more demanding even with small communities.

⁷ E.g. Maria Herralala's (2011) final-year thesis about river bridges was used in the highest court during the "Kirjastosilta" case.

⁸ DBTL, Down by the Laituri is an urban music festival in Turku. It happens along the riverside.

environmental art⁹ along the riverside (and even in the river, such as “Harmonia”). There have also been many plans which have not been fulfilled, like the 2011 river pavilion. This competition was meant to produce some kind of a floating building. The winner “Orko” included also an experimental idea to clean river water with a working alga system. You know now the idea of pavilion and even the place. It has not existed, but the memory is available.

INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY PLACES

The theoretical space and place discourse varies a lot depending on the discipline. In ethnology we usually spoke about environment, but nowadays more and more also about the meaning of the space and place in the sense of human geography or critical geography. Childhood swimming and fishing places can still be with us in visual memories, the taste of the water or soundscapes of the crowd or silence. Though the relationship between public spaces and individual places needs several different scientific notes, there are my places, your places and some we know together. Those secret crab places, swimming sands or stones with names are all available, but it is even more interesting if you can access the linking story behind these.

It is obvious that many river landmarks can be understood in different ways. One excellent example is a single concrete pile on the riverbank near Halinen rapids. Covered by modern graffiti, this element does not tell so much about itself. If you happen to know that there was a bridge over the river at that spot, you can get more. Even more, if you know that it is the last remaining part of the railway bridge of the vanished ceramic factory “Kupittaaan Savi” nearby. Actually there are no other signs of the factory or the railway between the factory that has disappeared and the river bank (which was the source for the raw material).

Most of the memory places at the river are however not special landmarks, but empty places where somebody used to have picnics with friends, feed waterbirds or saw an unfamiliar butterfly. Combining all these we can create individual small-scale or micro-geographical maps of the river environment¹⁰.

⁹ E.g. Fibonacci sequence 1-55 (Mario Merz 1994) red light numbers in the smoke stack of Turku Energia or Achim Kühn’s “Harmonia” (1996) also known as the “tail of the whale”.

¹⁰ Cf. Virtanen about urban mental maps.

THERAPEUTIC RIVER

*”When our children were small and our baby fell asleep after lunch, my husband stayed as a babysitter and I went alone to the river Aura and I swam along the river and it was a great feeling of freedom and my own time, when I swam kilometres in both directions. And now, as a pensioner granny, I would still like to go to the river, if I could. I think that I almost used the river in a similar way to paddlers with their canoes, I swam many kilometres. Those times gave me great pleasure. All those visual elements were also very important to me, I enjoyed the landscape and everything I saw. It was huge... and especially relaxing, feeling and finding the balance, safety around me and certain... that nature meant everything good.”*¹¹ I can imagine that some fishermen at the Halinen or Nautelankoski rapids could tell quite similar stories. The river is important for all of us now, before and in the future. The next research project should be about the future of the river!

¹¹ TYKL/KK/2581

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