A ’Unique Culture’? Migration, Nostalgia, Alcoholism, Suicide and Religious Revival in Finland

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Introduction

A great deal has been written on the way in which Finnish culture is ’unique’ or uniquely ’between east and west’ and thus distinct from that of its Scandinavian neighbours. The tourist book *Portraying Finland* (Otava 2005) summarises its discussion of Finland’s ’unique’ culture with the question, ’An Eastern or Western Identity?’ and proceeds to argue that Finland has aspects of both. Aini Rajanen (1984) has produced a book aiming to introduce Finnish culture to interested foreigners. She asks ’Why are (the Finns) so different, so individual, so fiercely independent? The answer lies in the country’s history’ (2006, 11). She then proceeds to explain that the history has involved being dominated by both East (Russia) and West (Sweden). I would like to suggest in this article that it is not entirely accurate to understand Finnish culture as ’unique’. Much of that which distinguishes Finland from its Scandinavian neighbours can be explained, at least in part, by the country’s relatively recent and sudden migration from the countryside to the towns. Indeed, I will argue that the marks of distinctiveness can be seen, in a much exaggerated form, in Greenland. This article will first look at the effects of migration observed historically. It will then examine certain issues that make modern Finland distinctive from its neighbours - such as a strong interest in the ’forest’, pietist religious movements and revivalism, alcoholism and suicide. It will argue that, amongst other factors, migration may be significant here and this can be seen in a more striking form in Greenland. This article has drawn upon fieldwork with a representative sample of Finns conducted for a broader discussion.

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Modernisation, Migration and the Effects

In order to understand the transcultural effects of a sudden movement from the villages to the towns, it might be useful to examine what occurred in Britain – the first country to industrialise – in the nineteenth century. In a few generations, the majority of the population moved from the countryside to the cities. Historians observed a number of seemingly related phenomena. Firstly, there is what Steve Bruce (2002) calls the ’Cultural Defence’ of an ’extreme’ form of religiosity which communities often turn to when they feel that their identity is threatened. The religion gives them identity and a sense of empowerment where they suddenly have no power. For example, Wales experienced a series of dramatic religious revivals throughout the period of the Industrial Revolution, when rapid social change took place. During these ’revivals’ – times of religious fervour when many ’convert’ to a usually conservative form of religiosity – many Welsh people become involved in conservative Protestant movements, especially Methodism. Bruce summarises up by saying, ’Modernisation can create a new role for religion as a socialising agent in times of rapid social change’ (36). Religious fervour is one reaction to modernisation.

A second reaction was nostalgia. Colley (1998) surveys this tendency. Victorian painting often focussed on English rural landscapes and scenes of country life, for example. Victorian intellectuals were fascinated by ’nature’ and, in general, the rise of the Romantic Movement in England is seen as no coincidence. Much of Victorian poetry

focussed on pastoral themes as can be noted in Alfred, Lord Tennyson to give just one eminent example. Wagner (2002) suggests that nostalgia was an integral part of many Victorian novels. She observes characters in Charles Dickens – in their often industrial landscapes – pining for the countryside. Anthony Trollope in *The Way We Live Now* refers to the Victorian era as 'a newer and worse sort of world' while romanticising the rural life that has been left behind.

A third phenomenon that was observed was a stark rise in alcoholism. Alcohol consumption reached a peak in Britain during the Industrial Revolution (Berridge 2005, Price 1968). Of course, there has always been alcohol consumption in the UK and even pre-industrial panics about the extent of alcoholism as reflected in the banning of gin the early eighteenth century. However, it is documented that rates of alcoholism and alcohol consumption rose considerably during the Industrial Revolution. Of course, there are all kinds of reasons for this other than a coping mechanism in relation to sudden social change, such as the poor conditions in industrial cities and perhaps even easier access to alcohol. But if industrialisation is psychologically difficult to cope with, it would make sense that alcohol would become a mechanism with which to do this and consumption would increase.

Finally, there is some evidence that the suicide rate in Britain increased during this process of dramatic change. However, it is perhaps difficult to compare this with Finland or Greenland because attitudes towards suicide were so different in Britain two hundred years ago. Suicide was illegal and attempted suicide carried the death penalty. Also, it was so shameful to have a suicide in the family – they could not even be buried on consecrated ground – that coroners would not infrequently record 'misadventure' or 'open verdict' in order to spare the family humiliation. However, suicide will be examined in both countries as possible consequence of sudden social change. Certainly, historian John Nuf (1943) observes that, even accounting for factors such as suicide's illegality, 'suicide shot up' in Britain during the Industrial Revolution according to coroners' statistics from the time. However, in asserting this it must be remembered that suicide was extremely taboo in pre-industrial Britain and, as such, the statistics may not be entirely reliable a point made by historian Olive Anderson (Anderson 1980). Indeed, they may be understated.

Migration in Greenland: Nostalgia, Alcohol and Suicide

Both Finland and Greenland have experienced relatively recent and sudden internal migration due to modernisation and similar effects can be seen. Let us look at Greenland first.

Modernisation was a sudden jolt for the traditional Inuit way of life. In a matter of a few decades from the 1960s, the Inuit changed from the subsistence hunting lifestyle they had pursued for thousands of years, to industry-based jobs in towns and, for many, dependence on government welfare when the economy experienced a down-turn. Many Greenlandic were put in a situation where there was little choice to move to the small towns – especially the capital Nuuk (current population 12000) – as the Danish government did not consider their settlements economically viable in terms of development. Mark Elliott contends that this has led to 'an indefinable sense of loss' because the Greenlandic have been unable to adjust to 'city life.' It has led to a 'void' that is filled with 'alcoholism', 'sex' (in a culture where sexual promiscuity was traditionally the norm), and 'occasionally religious piety' (O'Carroll and Elliott 2005). Others have noted the importance of maintaining the hunting lifestyle and many Greenlandic still engage in regular hunting activities, sometimes in order to entertain tourists and supplement their income. In terms of nostalgia, Nuttall points out that male child hunting its first seal remains an important celebration and that the demand for seal products amongst urbanised Inuit remains very high (1992, 26). Moreover, numerous Inuit traditions have been avidly maintained such as Inuit drum singing and even urban Inuit 'thanking' the seal as they cut it up for dinner, part of the traditional Inuit religious worldview. Traditional shamans also remain in use on some social occasions.

Also, Nuttall observes the very high alcoholism rate (amongst the highest in the world). In 1950, the average Inuit drank seven litres of alcohol a year and by 1987 it was twenty-two litres and consumption has increased markedly since then. Lynge (1985) has connected this

consumption to the sudden change of modernisation arguing that it is particularly pronounced in Greenlandic towns. Certainly, she notes that alcohol consumption has increased dramatically in Greenland from 1960s onwards. There is also an extremely high suicide rate in Greenland – 100 suicides per 100,000 people per year, the highest suicide rate in the world. This is far higher than countries such as Iceland (10.1) and Norway (12.6) which have comparable climactic conditions (Bjorksten *et al* 2005). Equally, it has been argued that there is a strong desire for 'space' in Greenland, as this is what people were used to, and 'lack of motivation' and 'social problems' have resulted from the 'Danish living conditions' in Nuuk (Petersen 1986, 278).

Migration in Finland: Nostalgia, Alcohol and Suicide

Even until as recently as the 1950s, Finland was a mainly agrarian society and most Finnish-speaking Finns were small-scale farmers living close to nature, especially the forests. Various Finnish historians such as Jutikkala and Pirinen (1996) and Klinge (1982) have noted that 'the urban population was small and only really began to grow in the 1940s' (Klinge 1982, 93). Moreover, Klinge argues that this modernisation was accelerated as a consequence of World War II:

As a consequence of the war, Finland went through a fast and at the beginning difficult social and economic change' (140) . . . 'The modernization of this large and sparsely populated country was achieved in a remarkably short time . . .' (152).

Klinge notes that architects attempted to account for this difficulty of moving to the Finnish town in the design of the new towns, which are almost all very modern in appearance. Many of the towns have forest areas within them, '. . . but the traditional link with the forest was preserved almost everywhere' (151). Thus, there is certainly a case for claiming that both the Finns and the Inuit have undergone a similar trauma of being urbanised too quickly, a situation for which they were not prepared. Many Finns I spoke to also intensely disliked the idea of living in Helsinki. A female engineer in her thirties from near Oulu was equally unimpressed by the capital city:

There are too many people. It's crowded. The people are cold and unfriendly. They don't want to get to know you and they won't let you get close to them. It would be really difficult to get to know people in Helsinki and, anyway, people in Helsinki are rude and arrogant and proud. I wasn't very thrilled by it when I lived there for five years.

An Oulu priestess went to university in Helsinki but 'did not want to at all.' However, she wanted to study Theology and 'there was no other place in Finland to study Theology at that time.' In relation to Greenland, Per Langgaard (1986) argues that small villages are generally seen as more 'Greenlandic' and therefore 'satisfactory' than Nuuk, which is frequently perceived as something alien to Inuit cultural life.

Back to the Forests

Certainly, there are many ways in which contemporary urban Finns appear to retreat to their former forest based lifestyle. This is most conspicuous in the ubiquitous presence of little patches of forest within the boundaries of entirely modern Finnish towns. Also, many urban Finns engage in rural activities to a far greater extent than in other countries and, without wishing to over-generalise, going to the forest and its lakes is a national activity. Many Finns have 'summer cottages' in the forests (many of which do not have electricity) to which they retreat during the summer months and especially during the Midsummer celebrations when the towns appear to empty (Talve 1997, 212). Going into the forest and renting out a cabin is a not uncommon activity. Hiking, especially in the wilderness of Lapland, is another popular Finnish activity as is going into the forest to pick mushrooms and berries (Symington 2006, 32).

Interestingly, the Finns that I interviewed that had lived in large cities for many generations did not express any great interest in the countryside. The two Helsinki natives interviewed above both claimed that they 'almost never' went to the forests as children and, as the male entrepreneur put it, 'maybe I go to the forest about once a year, if that.' However, most Finns outside Helsinki that I interviewed very much enjoyed going to the forests. 'We Finns love the nature' summed up one Lapland

postman. The summer cottage itself is also very popular. The female priest from Oulu mentioned above also commented that:

Of course, Finns love their summer cottages. Then they can be back in the forest where they feel they belong. They can go berry-picking or swim in the lake after a sauna or just, you know, just 'be'. That's why they are so popular. Every Finn from a town wants to have a summer cottage where they can have space and just relax in the nature.

The popularity of these nature-based activities is further evidenced in their commercialisation. Thus, it is possible to purchase special contraptions – like robot claws – to make berry picking easier and many Finnish forests have skiing and walking paths constructed through them, sign-posts so that one does not get lost and designated car-parks. Hence, in a sense the forest experience is hyper-real and sanitised but retreat to the forest by urban dwellers is still extremely popular in Finland.

As an aside, I wonder if the popularity of the sauna in Finland might also be seen as a way of 'returning to the forest.' It has been noted that saunas were traditionally communal in Finnish villages and now the private sauna is extremely popular (Helamaa 2000). Most Finns have saunas and most modern flats are built with saunas. Even those flats that are not built with a sauna usually have a communal sauna which you can book for a private session. It is even possible to buy liquid that smells of pine or smoke called *Terva*, put it in the water, throw the water on the sauna and thus allow the sauna to smell of the Finnish forest. Perhaps the sauna is a little piece of the forest in every urban Finnish home.

The Importance of Space

It might be argued that another reaction to modernity in Finland – or evidence that it has been rapid – is the apparent importance of 'space' for Finnish people. We already discussed the way that many Finnish houses and relatively large with relatively large gardens compared to what might be experienced in England for example. Terraced or even semi-detached housing in Finland is also very rare. Many Finns in cities appear to live in flats but even these betoken an emphasis on at least the illusion of 'space'. Where a similar flat in England might have a separate 'front room' and 'dining room', I have never seen this in Finnish flats. Indeed, I have never seen it in a Finnish house. In my experience, Finns appear to dine in either the kitchen or the living room. As one student in his twenties from Joensuu put it:

We like to have space. It's awful to be all cramped. My parents especially were brought up in villages and were used to space. Maybe that's where it comes from. That we Finns are from the forests maybe.

Although most Finns that I spoke to admitted that, for example, 'I don't know. I've never really thought about this. I just thought it was normal everywhere.' For many Finnish people, the concept of distance reflected this need for space and, perhaps, historical isolated living arrangements. Thus, people in Oulu would refer to Kokkola – a two hour drive away – as 'close' or 'near'. By contrast, I am certain that English people would regard a town that was two hours away as 'far'. Interestingly, Finns tend to ask questions such as 'How many square metres is your flat?'- an interest in space – whereas the English might ask, 'How many rooms are there?'.

Alcoholism

Again, it is speculative whether it is really possible to prove that Finnish alcoholism and piety are directly connected with the jolt of urbanization but the fact there is evidence of it in the relatively similar circumstances of Greenland and Finland might at least make the sceptic less than dismissive. It is, I would submit, uncontroversial to claim that Finland has an alcohol problem. Though there are alcohol problems in other Scandinavian countries – and in northern countries (such as Scotland) in general – the situation is considerably worse in Finland. Finland is the second worst country in Europe in terms of binge drinking (BBC 1st June 2006) with 27 percent of Finns binge drinking at least once a week. Finns are exceeded by the Irish (34 percent) and the British are third with twenty-four percent. The average Finn consumes 10.5 litres of pure alcohol a year. The increase in alcohol consumption since 1960 has also been dramatic. In that year, the average Finn drank 2.7 litres of alcohol. Though the level of consumption is lower in Finland than in France, for example, the method of consumption

is more likely to be through binges. Equally, Finland is the only country in Western Europe where alcohol is the leading cause of death (BBC 1st November 2006). More than 2000 Finns died of alcohol poisoning or related illnesses in 2005 and another 1000 died in accidents while drunk. Moreover, the popularity of Finnish religious movements that abstain would be likely to mean that these statistics mask the extent of individual alcohol consumption (Winter *et al,* 2002).

Finland-expert and linguist Richard Lewis argues out that Finns are statistically the most voracious consumers of alcohol in the world and alcoholism is a serious issue (R. Lewis 2005, 105). The extent of the alcoholism in both countries is reflected in government attempts to restrict the sale of alcohol. O'Carroll and Elliott claim that in Greenland 'alcoholism is a serious and very obvious problem. This becomes all too obvious in bigger towns on weekends.' To deal with this, alcohol is sold by a state monopoly and may be purchased from 'noon to 6pm on weekdays and 11am to 1pm on Saturdays' (95). It is not possible to buy it on Sundays. Alcohol is also taxed heavily, keeping the price extremely high. Some towns in Greenland have even introduced prohibition.

Alcohol purchase is heavily restricted. Beer and cider may be bought from supermarkets from 9am until 9pm. For most of the year, supermarkets are closed on Sundays. All other alcoholic drinks can only be purchased from the state monopoly *Alko* and all alcohol is heavily taxed. This monopoly is open from 9am to 8pm week days and until 6pm on Saturdays. It is shut on Sundays and shuts early the day prior to national holidays when a lot of drinking tends to occur. Thus, while it is not possible to conclusively prove that the migration to modernity and alcoholism are connected, there is at least a case as the problem is not so great in other northern countries, which have far lower levels of binge drinking and alcohol consumption – in Norway it is 6.2 litres, in Sweden 6.5 and in Iceland 6.7. (BBC 1st June 2006, Hughes 29th October 2005) or deaths caused by drink. Of course, other factors may explain the similarity as well – such as national character. But certainly, drinking could be a way of dealing with an 'indefinable a sense of loss'. Many Finns I spoke to claimed to have friends or family with alcohol problems. One informant identified the 'change' in Finland as possibly being at least partly responsible for the alcohol problem.

There has been a lot of change in Finland in the last fifty years only. They have had to move from the villages to the towns because there is no work in the villages so the young people had to leave. Maybe they would rather stay where they were. So they feel lonely. They don't feel themselves to be of the city. And drinking makes them feel better.

It should be noted that many Finns whom I interviewed from all around the country confided that they had many friends who were alcoholics and often family members as well. As a forty-three year old, female beautician from Helsinki put it:

My father drinks always a lot and I have suffered when I was a child because of this. He has not self-confidence and it is the same with me. I drank a lot ten years ago as well.

However, some Finns gave alternatively explanations for the issue, which I do not disagree with such as 'national low self-esteem'.

Suicide

The suicide rate in both Finland and Greenland is very high. In Finland in 2003 it was 31.9 deaths per 100,000 (men) and 9.8 (women) (WHO, 2003). This is an average of around 20, far higher than its neighbours, as seen. Nevertheless the suicide rate – generally amongst young men – cannot simply be blamed on the weather because of the suicide rate is considerably lower in the Nordic countries as has been shown. However, both countries have in a common a geographic position which leads to very long days in the summer which has been connected with high suicide rates (Oulu University 2000). Bjerregaard (1988) observes that half of deaths in those under forty-five in Greenland are violent, usually suicide and he connects this to rapid cultural change in Greenland as well as to alcohol consumption (2002). I would suggest that there is at least a case to invoke the notion of jolt of migration in this regard and this case has been argued by various sociologists in relation to Finland. For example, Stack (1993) has observed that the Finnish suicide increased

dramatically during industrialisation and now appears to be gradually stabilising at its relatively high rate. It is this jolt that Greenland and Finland have in common, in marked contrast to the other Nordic countries. It has been argued elsewhere that loss of identity and status – which would be precipitated by a dramatic change in lifestyle – can lead to a despondent outlook on life. For example, psychologist Shirley Fisher (1994) shows that there are high levels of depression amongst British students because many British universities suddenly separate students from their home environment and expose them to people from diverse social backgrounds who may, even inadvertently, challenge the whole way that they see the world.

The national suicide rate was another area where Finns had various explanations and I would accept that there are various explanations and migration is just one. But some Finns echoed this explanation claiming that alcoholism was connected to sudden change, in some cases, and that suicide just meant, 'even that didn't work'. One man from Oulu commented that, 'I think when Finns commit suicide they first drink. And the drinking makes them depressed'. This would imply that suicide is indirectly connected. The Oulu female priest interviewed above exclaimed that, 'It is only half way through July and I have already buried three suicides this month. All young men'.

Many Finns to whom I spoke had some kind of experience of suicide – in general they knew somebody who had killed themselves. A forty-three year-old beautician from Helsinki recalled that:

In 1994 my boyfriend committed suicide. He was 49. He was a lot older than me. He just felt that he couldn't live in the moment. They feel that they can't get any satisfaction. They can't enjoy life and they want more so they kill themselves.

Two Finns whom I interviewed admitted that they had tried to take their own lives. A sixty-five year-old retired chemist from Helsinki took an overdose of sleeping pills when he was a student but was found just in time by his mother and the beautician mentioned above attempted to kill herself when she was forty, three years before I spoke to her.

Religious Piety

Finland has a number of 'pietist movements' within the Lutheran Church that tend to be, in various respects, religiously and socially conservative, with many rejecting alcohol consumption. The largest group is the Laestadians, who have 100,000 members in Finland of which three quarters are Conservative Laestadians, who reject not only alcohol but television and contraception, leading to large families. Though the movement started in Sweden, the overwhelming majority of Laestadians are in Finland (Kouva 2005). These movements seem to have a more significant influence in Finland than in the case of its neighbours (Stoddard 1974), with a higher membership. There could at least be a case for arguing that the significant presence of these revival movements in Finland is connected to migration. They were already popular in villages and in the towns they are an important way of dealing with change. They are, therefore, especially popular in Finland where relatively recent migration has occurred. This can be noted, as a process, in the Kokkola Awakening of the 1970s, a few years after mass village to town migration had taken place. This conservative and Charismatic revival (involving prophecy, healing and so forth) occurred a few years after there had been mass migration into Kokkola – a medium-sized town on the West Coast with a large Swedish-speaking minority - from surrounding villages (Koutonen 1991). Many of those involved – according to former priest and others I interviewed - were originally from these villages so the revival could be interpreted as a play for status and assertion of identity on the part newcomers having to negotiate dramatic cultural change and challenge to their identity. As there were permanent pietist groups in many villages (Jutikkala and Pirinen 1996, 307), this indicates a further assertion of identity in the towns. This would imply a relationship between Finnish revivalism and the jolt of modernisation and migration. A number of Finns also felt that groups such as the Laestadians are popular because they stop people from drinking, which may indirectly relate to sudden migration.

Revival in Greenland

Langgaard argues that there is clear social division in even the most equal Greenlandic village between alcohols and those who do not drink at all and actively support the Temperance Movement

(1986, 307). These movements tend to be connected to the Lutheran churches. Langgaard argues that Greenlandic communities are divided, roughly half and half, between those who abuse alcohol and those involved in these movements. This would imply, even if it is not so clear cut in areas such as Nuuk, a substantial influence in Greenland from pietist, Lutheran groups, a point Elliott moots in his travel guide. I would suggest that, to some extent, the same divide can be seen in Finland. However, it should be emphasised that Nuttall (1992, 31) points out that while 'church' is still important in many Inuit settlements, there do not appear to be organised competing groups within the church, as is the case in Finland. Otherwise, there is, I would suggest, at least circumstantial evidence in Greenland for arguing that 'religious piety' is an issue. In January 2003, the BBC reported that the Greenlandic government coalition was 'under strain' because of 'a row over a top civil servant who used an Inuit healer to chase away evil spirits in government offices . . .' According to the BBC, the incident caused such 'indignation' that staff walked out of government offices. Of course, as Greenland was only fully Christianised in 1922, the religious might be less obvious than in Finland, or even expressed through Pagan religiosity as has been noted.

Conclusion

There is much discussion on the 'uniqueness' of the Finnish way life and how it is distinctive from its neighbours. However, the evidence would seem to indicate that some of the central points of distinction – such as the high rate of alcoholism and suicide, the high interest in nature and religious piety – can, at least in part, be explained by Finland's relatively recent mass migration from the villages to the towns.

Very similar cultural phenomena could be observed when Britain underwent the same migration in the nineteenth century and these factors can be observed in an exaggerated form in Greenland where the movement was, perhaps, even more sudden and extreme, apart from in the religious case where circumstances are very different. But even here, high religiosity can be observed. Of course, there are other reasons for these factors – and, indeed, Finland and Greenland may share these. Many of my correspondents talked about 'national low self esteem' which might be caused by the 'National Low Self Esteem' of having been colony. Others talked about how Finns 'can't express themselves' and Greenland has been observed to have similar communication patterns to Finland (Lewis 2005). It has even been argued that both groups have an eastern gene (with no alcohol adaptation) which leads to alcoholism and suicide (Marusic 2005). However, the evidence would seem to indicate that many aspects of Finnish distinctiveness can be seen in Greenland in exaggerated form and that this may relate to sudden migration, which was even more exaggerated in Greenland. Hence, in some respects, maybe the Finnish way of life is not as 'unique' as tourist literature would have us believe.

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