

# SMOKING OUT LOCAL TRADITIONS? IDENTITY AND HERITAGE PRODUCTION IN SOUTHEAST ESTONIAN RURAL TOURISM ENTERPRISES

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**Abstract:** In this paper we explore the current process of the smoke sauna's transformation from a tradition into heritage in the context of rural tourism in Võru County, southeast Estonia. We examine the multiple meanings and values that the smoke carries from the tourism entrepreneur's perspective and the possible connections between the smoke sauna and personally interpreted cultural identity. Our theoretical approach handles heritage production as a selective process conducted by tourism entrepreneurs, in which personal memories, stories and material settings are displayed or performed in order to make them experienceable for the public. The results of the analysis of the fieldwork material indicate that three major directorial attitudes towards local tradition and heritage exist, expressed in the materiality of sauna settings, whereas entrepreneurs' interpretations of the intangible dimensions of the smoke sauna are more varied as they are based on emotional and personally significant meanings rather than shared cultural values.

**Keywords:** smoke sauna, heritage, identity, rural tourism, commodification

## INTRODUCTION

'Tradition' and 'heritage' are both concepts referring to something from the past that is considered valuable from the present perspective. Tradition refers more to the continuity and change of cultural knowledge or material objects in time, whereas heritage indicates certain knowledge or materiality as a cultural property often used in the process of identity politics (Lowenthal 1998; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998; Glassie 2003; Bronner 2011). The shift from tradition to heritage in cultural research is not merely rhetorical but also ideological, emerging from the global cultural politics and neoliberal consumption economy of our times. Heritage has increasingly become an economic and political resource in the global as well as local processes of "heritagization" (Bendix 2009) and "commodification of memories" (Ronström 2005). We agree that the concept of heritage carries an ideological burden; yet, as Eda Veeroja, one of

our informants, a tourism entrepreneur and teacher of tourism management, has stressed – one’s relationship to heritage is always personal, even though heritage serves as a basis for not only individual but also collective identity (Veeroja 2011: 22).

The smoke sauna as a traditional form of bathing still persists in southeast Estonia. The peripheral location of this cultural region supports the sustainability of cultural traditions characteristic of the Võru and Setu people who live there. However, during the last decades the cultural knowledge related to the smoke sauna (above all, traditional customs and beliefs) has diminished among locals. Therefore the smoke sauna in the imaginary historical Võrumaa, the core of which is today the current administrative district Võru County<sup>1</sup>, is claimed to be in need of safeguarding as an intangible heritage item of the region by a group of local ‘guardians of tradition’<sup>2</sup>. However, since the end of the 1990s, in addition to private use, making smoke sauna has also become a service provided by several tourism enterprises in Võru County. Regarding this broader background, our interest in the present study is focused on rural tourism entrepreneurs, who provide smoke sauna as a service in their enterprises, and their individual interpretations of this practice as a tradition and heritage.

Ethnologist Ullrich Kockel claims: “The heritage boom of recent decades may have camouflaged an erosion of European cultural traditions, hiding it behind the smokescreen of ‘culture as a resource’, a strategy that uses cultural fixation to commodify identity as heritage.” (Kockel 2007: 98) According to his view, the major problem for cultural traditions when transformed into heritage lies in their significant removal from “their historical purpose and appropriate context – such as to attract tourism” (ibid.: 96). In the official discourse the smoke sauna is acknowledged as an economic resource, which benefits from local heritage and may likewise function as a cultural identity marker of the region. The tourism development strategy of Võru County characterises the smoke sauna both as an example of local architectural heritage and as a “spiritually and physically purifying ritual”, which is related to historical traditions, authenticity and the multisensory experience of local culture.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, the commodification of traditions and heritage in tourism is not just a macro-level process directed towards the external promotion of regional cultural identity (cf. Ray 1998). Commodification might also help local people to preserve certain cultural traditions and “to maintain a meaningful local or ethnic identity, which they might have otherwise lost” (Cohen 1988: 382). We suggest that commodification may lead to the realisation of cultural creativity by tourism entrepreneurs through “the recombination and transformation of existing cultural practices or forms” (cf. Liep 2001: 2). This, in turn, may increase the entrepreneurs’ reflexivity in how they perform and display their

interpretations of local cultural traditions. Like other materialised and embodied forms of culture, the smoke sauna thereby becomes a marker of personally interpreted cultural identity, an expression of one's participation in culture, which combines traditions with creativity, often in the form of *bricolage* (cf. Leeds-Hurwitz 1993).

Holding the constructivist view, we see heritage as “a set of values and meanings”, including emotions, memory, knowledge and experiences, which may become manifestations of one's cultural identity (Smith 2006: 56). However, the symbolic dimension of heritage needs materiality through which certain meanings and values can be displayed, either in the form of architecture, artefacts or landscapes (Ashworth & Graham 2005; O'Keefe 2007; Cosgrove 2008), or embodied practices and performances (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 1998; Kapchan 2003; Woods 2011), in which one's cultural self is expressed and perceived by others.

We support the view that heritage and identity are produced and re-produced in the process of interpersonal communication, even though the ways of (re) production at collective and individual levels may differ (cf. Cohen 1993; Tunbridge & Ashworth 1996). As a set of meanings, heritage may become “marked out by identity”, and identity, in turn, is produced and exchanged through social interaction, various forms of media and likewise through consumption (Graham & Howard 2008: 2). However, even within a single cultural group, “heritages and identities should be considered as plurals” as they have multiple producers and “multiple objectives are involved in their creation, management and communication” (ibid.: 1–2).

With this in mind, we can see heritage and identity production analogous to theatre directing, because both involve a selection of elements from the cultural repertoire in order to create meaningful performances or displays for the public (cf. Taylor 2003). In the tourism sector the production is conducted by entrepreneurs, who may apply different strategies of stage management and direction in order to create environments and experiences different from everyday life (Pine & Gilmore 1999; Fischer-Lichte 2004; Edensor 2009). The production process may use personal memories, stories, and materialities, which are woven with collective narratives and symbols and displayed or performed in order to make individual interpretations experienceable for the public (Dicks 2004: 119–134). The experiential dimension is important also from the entrepreneur's perspective as the “experiential authenticity” (Di Domenico & Miller 2012: 286–288) of the service involves individual definitions and creative understandings of one's identity and belonging.

In our article we are interested in how the smoke sauna as a cultural tradition might, but also might *not*, become consciously heritagised by tourism

entrepreneurs as cultural agents and how different dialectics emerge from the tradition-heritage-identity interplay in individual interpretations. We aim to explore the diversity of individual interpretations of the smoke sauna service and how the awareness of the cultural identity value of this traditional practice is expressed in the architecture of their saunas, different modes of service mediation and self-identification. In the present study we do not provide an extended comparative analysis of how tourism entrepreneurs relate to and use other elements of the local cultural heritage as possible markers of their cultural identity in their businesses.

In the next section we give a condensed overview of how the smoke sauna practice in Estonia has transformed from a tradition to heritage and tourism attraction during the 20th-21st centuries by introducing the enterprises studied and the methodology used for this study, and also provide an analysis of the empirical material from Võru County. First we examine the entrepreneurs' relationship to the smoke sauna tradition and heritage expressed in the materiality of sauna buildings. In the second part of the analysis we explore how entrepreneurs mediate their service in different discourses and performances and how they perceive the cultural and personal values of the smoke sauna heritage in their lives and lifestyles. The article concludes with a discussion of the results in the light of theoretical ideas proposed in the introduction.

## **THE SMOKE SAUNA IN SOUTHEAST ESTONIA: FROM LOCAL TRADITION TO TOURISM EXPERIENCE**

In every culture there is a certain range of symbolic practices, objects and sites which, from generation to generation, have served as markers of cultural identity and continuity (Leeds-Hurwitz 1993). Indeed, meanings and values of such markers are not independent of temporal changes and the political and economic situation in society. For instance, in Finland, the sauna practice has a long history as a symbol of Finnishness both in and outside of Finland<sup>4</sup> (Edelsward 1991; Leimu 2002), whereas in Estonia, in spite of symbolically rich cultural knowledge related to the sauna, it has not been explicitly connected to national or regional identities (Habicht 2008 [1972]).

Estonian ethnologist Tamara Habicht describes the sauna as a place for sweat bathing, which is common to most of the Baltic-Finnic peoples and Russians (Habicht 2008 [1972]: 9–13).<sup>5</sup> Even though Finnish and Estonian bathhouses are architecturally different (e.g. the sauna room in the former is much higher) (Talve 1960: 20–26; Vuolle-Apiala 1993), the basic sauna ritual is similar (see Leimu 2002: 72–73; Habicht 2008 [1972]: 179).<sup>6</sup>

The smoke sauna (*'suitsusaun'*) is an early type of bathhouse in which the fireplace has no chimney. Such saunas were common in the southern and western parts of Estonia and on the islands, with small regional differences in architecture and the additional functions. After World War II people started to convert smoke saunas into clean, i.e., chimneyed saunas. In addition, public saunas were built in the *kolkhozes* for rural labourers. People in towns could use public saunas; also, there were saunas in the countryside built for the employees of local enterprises. In the 1960s new trends were introduced – the so-called 'Finnish sauna'<sup>7</sup> and sauna as a place for social events and feasting rather than bathing became popular for private as well as public purposes. During the last decade the smoke sauna as a rare romantic bathhouse from the rural past has come to be appreciated again both by urban tourists and by the younger generation of rural dwellers who decide to renovate or build a smoke sauna.

In the following we provide a brief overview of the characteristics of the smoke sauna in Estonia, which distinguish it from other types of saunas. When the rocks in the vaporising stove (*'keris'*) are heated, the smoke from the burning wood circulates in the room before escaping through the door left ajar during heating, or through a small vent inside the wall close to the ceiling (Habicht 2008 [1972]: 178). The smoke blackens the room with soot, which is not dirt but a form of charcoal that has the effect of resisting bacteria (Hirvisalo 1949: 3–4, ref. in Habicht 2008 [1972]: 11). Therefore the smoke sauna was considered the most sanitary room in the household, where women gave birth, illnesses were healed and meat was smoked. The smoke sauna was also shared between the families of the village. In addition to several practical functions, the smoke sauna was also related to varied consecrating beliefs, ritual and magic customs (e.g. traditional greetings and whisking charms, whisking of newborn children, etc.) (Habicht 2008 [1972]: 179).

The process of heating the smoke sauna may last 4–6 hours or longer, depending on the size of the room and the outside temperature. After that the sauna needs to 'mature' for about 1 hour before it can be used for bathing. (In comparison, the process of heating the chimneyed sauna may take around 1.5–2 hours depending on the size, outside temperature and the expected heat.<sup>8</sup>) Unlike in the modern chimneyed sauna, no firewood is added once the stones are heated – they can retain the heat for hours. By the time that the sauna is ready for use, the smoke has disappeared from the room; yet, the unique aroma is still there. Before bathers enter the sauna, the embers are usually removed and the surfaces for sitting are cleaned. Bathers sit on an elevated platform (*'lava'*) specially constructed for that purpose – as the warm air rises and the upper part of the room is hotter – and throw some water on the heated stones to

produce hot steam-laden air (*leil*) in order to promote sweating. Smoke sauna users claim that the sweat in this type of sauna is much smoother, more humid and more enjoyable than in the chimneyed sauna, not to mention the sauna with electric heating. Bathers may use whisks made of birch twigs<sup>9</sup> in order to beat their bodies as a form of bathing that scrubs off the dead skin and, in addition, stimulates blood circulation under the skin.

As the sauna was mainly built from timber (logs, planks, shingle roof) and there was no chimney, the building was situated outside the main farmyard near a water body as a fire precaution (Talve 1960: 4; Habicht 2008 [1972]: 14). Using a pond, lake or river near the sauna for cooling is a relatively recent custom. According to Habicht, until the second half of the 19th century the smoke sauna used to be a one-room handcrafted round-log bathhouse, whereas during the 20th century a sauna with a separate small room for changing became common. The typical south Estonian smoke sauna was built on foundation stones and had shingle or board roofing. Beginning in the late 19th century, the dirt floor was covered with boards and a small window was installed. The oldest vaporising stoves were built from open pieces of rough granite. From the end of the 19th century stoves had a brick casing, the stove itself was usually in the corner of the sauna room next to the entrance, with the hearth facing the door. In the 20th century the hearth was moved into the changing room to make the heating more comfortable. The sauna stones (*kerisekivid*) were carefully chosen in order to produce the right steam (Habicht 2008 [1972]: 14–67).

In the 1960s most of the smoke saunas in Estonia were situated in the territory of historical Võrumaa (Habicht 2008 [1972]: 53–54). In the same decade, and also later on, many smoke saunas were converted into chimneyed saunas because the former were considered anachronisms in the process of the modernisation of rural life.<sup>10</sup> Even though people's living conditions have changed during the last four decades and the number of smoke saunas has diminished considerably<sup>11</sup>, the tradition is still alive among older inhabitants in southeast Estonia and has been re-discovered by the younger generation. However, today many people have a chimneyed sauna in addition to the smoke sauna, because heating the former takes less time. For those families who have maintained the tradition from generation to generation, the identity value of the smoke sauna is often tacitly approved. During the last decade several old smoke saunas have been renovated or new ones built. Establishing such a sauna today can be considered a conscious choice, creating “the idealized, even romanticized bathhouse of yesterday” (Lockwood 1977: 82). The owners of smoke saunas are often newly settled inhabitants, for whom it might be a conscious choice to manifest their cultural identity by relating to local cultural traditions.<sup>12</sup>



Thus, historically, taking the smoke sauna has been an important traditional bathing practice for Estonians, particularly in the southeastern regions. However, the smoke sauna as a valuable tradition and a possible marker of regional identity was recognised in public discourse only in the 2000s. In comparison, different developments in rural areas and the urbanisation process in Finland (see Leimu 2010) had already led to the revival of the smoke sauna by local enthusiasts in the 1970s-1980s.<sup>13</sup> Today both Finland and Estonia comply with the logic of global consumer capitalism and regional development policies, which have transformed the sauna as a symbol of national or regional identity into a commodity. This is especially true of tourism, which encourages locals to re-interpret regional traditions as resources for both self-identification and a means for place promotion (cf. Ray 1998).

In 2010, the website promoting tourism in Võru County<sup>14</sup> did not explicitly relate the smoke sauna service to local heritage but marketed it under the category of ‘experience tourism’. Nevertheless, it was claimed to be a traditional practice of the region. The introductory text on the website said that a significant number of smoke saunas had been preserved or were still in use. In addition, community values of the smoke sauna were stressed. For tourists used to modern bathing, the smell of the smoke and the ‘smooth’ steam were mentioned as important components of the smoke sauna experience and they were encouraged to pre-plan using this service well ahead and not to be afraid of getting dirty in the smoke sauna. Another online article introducing regional intangible heritage in Estonia admits that currently smoke saunas have acquired a new role as “providers of exotic experiences in heritage tourism” and, accordingly, tourism enterprises have an important role in promoting heritage through the introduction of sauna customs.<sup>15</sup>

To conclude, during the 20th and 21st centuries smoke sauna culture in southeast Estonia has changed considerably in relation to the socio-political and cultural transformations. In public discourses this traditional form of bathing that was once practiced purely for its own value has now acquired a heritage value and thereby also become a potential symbol of local cultural identity as well as a regional specificity in tourism.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

In our study we focus on an in-depth synchronic analysis of the smoke sauna as a rural tourism service in Võru County, using the comparative case study analysis as a general methodological approach. We selected the enterprises under study from the official tourism website of Võru County in the summer

of 2010, choosing nine out of twelve enterprises listed, according to what kind of information about the smoke sauna building and service was available online. Six enterprises are situated in historical Võrumaa and three in historical Setumaa (we included the latter derived from the contemporary administrative division, analogously with the tourism website).

We drew on short-term ethnographic fieldwork trips (between June 2010 and July 2011), examining how the saunas and their settings were involved in creating the heritage experience, and conducting semi-structured interviews with entrepreneurs (in seven cases) and with employees<sup>16</sup> (in two cases) on the premises of the enterprises. Additionally, we used informal conversations and, in some cases, also participant observation and sensory ethnography (including taking a smoke sauna at four enterprises; in three of them repeatedly). We also took photographs on site and used sources available on the Internet. In agreement with the informants we use their and their enterprises' real names in our study. For the sake of confidentiality, we consulted the people involved with the final results of this paper.

The interview questions were divided into four major categories: (1) smoke sauna architecture; (2) the use of the smoke sauna in the entrepreneur's or employee's own family; (3) the main characteristics of the smoke sauna as a service for tourists; (4) connections between the smoke sauna and culture in Võru County (in three cases from Setumaa we specified the question, asking about connections to Setu culture). We did not use the notions of 'heritage' and 'identity' in interviews, except when mentioning local initiatives related to the safeguarding of UNESCO intangible heritage. For interview analysis we used the categorical analysis of themes (Gillham 2005), which evolved from the transcribed materials in light of our research questions and theoretical framework.

All our informants originate from Võru County, even though their relationship to the current place of residence and tourism business varies. Here we briefly introduce the enterprises and our informants in order to contextualise the cases in the following analysis. Suhka Farm in Haanja municipality has had a smoke sauna from the beginning of the 1900s. It belongs to the host Väle's (b. 1959) family and the sauna is shared with tourists. The hostess Merike (b. 1954) comes from the same municipality and returned here after having lived in Tallinn. The hosts of Mooska Farm, likewise in Haanja, bought the place and moved there at the beginning of the 1990s, yet they both come from Võru County. Their smoke sauna originates from the end of the 1800s; it was bought from Setumaa and renovated by the family in 2006–2007. The hostess Eda (b. 1962) considers mediating local heritage to small groups as the key element of their family's lifestyle business (they do not provide accommodation).



Two other enterprises in Rõuge municipality do not explicitly market heritage related services. Sepa (Blacksmith's) Farm belongs to a professional blacksmith Peeter (b. 1969), who was born in Võru County and bought this farmstead in 2000. Soon after that he rebuilt a smoke sauna from an old two-chambered storage house transferred from the neighbouring Põlva County (the territory of historical Võrumaa). He has been involved in tourism, which is his additional source of income, since the beginning of the 2000s. The host Erki (b. 1978) has inherited Nogo Farm and recently started establishing Saunamaa (Sauna Land) there. He is a sauna enthusiast who currently lives and works in Tallinn and runs the enterprise from a distance. He plans to create a theme park comprising approximately twenty saunas of different cultural origin (in 2011 the enterprise had seven saunas). His smoke sauna was bought from Põltsamaa municipality in Jõgeva County (approximately 130 km from Rõuge) and originates from the end of the 1900s (renovated in 2010); in addition, a replica of a traditional cave sauna was built in 2009.

Uhtjärve Ürgoru Nõiariik (the Sorcerer's Kingdom in the Primeval Valley of Lake Uhtjärv; hereafter Nõiariik) in Urvaste municipality is a rural theme park, which is based on local nature, folklore of local and foreign origin as well as literary fairy tales, and stories about sorcerers invented by the host.<sup>17</sup> A spacious new smoke sauna was built in 2004 and the tourism enterprise was established in 2006 by a couple who come from Võru County and bought this place after years of city life. We talked to an employee called Aare (born 1966, originating from the municipality). Tuhka Farm in the neighbourhood (Antsla municipality) belongs to a family who took possession of the place in 1985 (the farmstead originates from 1885). The owners have their roots in the villages nearby. We interviewed the hostess Ene O. (b. 1961). Since 1999 the farm has been part of the local network of tourism enterprises called Metsamoori Perepark (the Wood Crone's Family Park). Tourism is seasonal here and both hosts are engaged in paid labour.

The last three enterprises are situated in the territory of historical Setumaa. Jõeveere Farm (Vastseliina municipality) has a history dating back to 1866 and a smoke sauna from the beginning of the 1900s. The farm once belonged to the host's family. Our informant was the host's wife Ene D. (b. 1952). The owners have been engaged in tourism activities as a source of additional income since the end of the 1990s. Vetevana (Water Spirit) Farm in Misso municipality was bought as a summer cottage by the host Feliks (b. 1927) at the end of the 1960s. Later on he settled there and started with tourism services in the 1990s. The smoke sauna was built in 2007. Setomaa Turismitalo (Setomaa Tourist Farmstead<sup>18</sup>) in Meremäe municipality also has a spacious new smoke sauna established in 2006. The enterprise is marketed as a place offering a diverse

experience of Setu cultural heritage; one of the hostess's specialities is local dishes. The hostess was born and lives in Tallinn and conducts business with the help of several employees. We talked with one of them, Siret (b. 1985), who was born in Meremäe.

Using the production perspective as a general interpretive framework for our analysis, our focus is on the cultural repertoire and personal interpretations that entrepreneurs as cultural agents use to create experienceable environments and to mediate the service to tourists. In the first part of the analysis we examine three different types of relationship to traditions and heritage expressed in the sauna settings as regards their origins and the ways these saunas have been maintained, renovated or built (cf. Kannike 2009). In the second part we focus on the ways the smoke sauna is mediated to tourists, examining the experience value and the need to communicate practical knowledge, discourses and performances used in the mediation of smoke sauna culture, and the methods entrepreneurs use to connect their service to cultural heritage and individual identity.

## **SETTINGS CREATED FOR SMOKE SAUNA EXPERIENCES**

Each sauna with its architecture and surrounding environment can be considered as a specific setting for certain actions and experiences that express the owner's individuality as well as attitude towards cultural heritage. In the tourism enterprises we visited the smoke saunas were set away from the main house as they were in the past. However, today such a location has not only a practical purpose but can also be associated with affording privacy for tourists' sauna experience. All tourism enterprises, except for one, had a water body next to the sauna and the seasonal variety of the sauna experience could be enjoyed by clients both in summer and in winter (by cooling down in an ice hole). Whereas in the past the beauty of the landscape did not have any aesthetic importance, in the tourism enterprises well-maintained surroundings please the eye and express the owners' values of contemporary country living. We realised that the influence of nature and the countryside, though not the setting of the traditional agricultural farm, is a necessary pre-attunement and an important part of the smoke sauna experience (cf. Võsu & Rattus & Jääts 2013).

### **The smoke sauna as an inherited local tradition**

Under this category we focus on the entrepreneurs (Jõeveere, Tuhka and Suhka farms) who are the owners of inherited local heritage, thereby directly making use of the existing architectural repertoire with minor contemporary supplements. The three smoke saunas have been in family possession and use, except in the case of Tuhka Farm, as was described in the introduction. However, all three enterprises also accommodate a 'Finnish sauna', as it can be heated up in less time, and a bathroom with a shower in their dwellings.

Merike and Väle from Suhka Farm said that for them the smoke sauna first served a practical function, as they lacked the washing facilities when they were constructing the main building of their tourism farm in the late 1990s. For Ene D. on Jõeveere Farm the quality of materials used to build the sauna, its facilities (e.g. stones for the vaporising stove) and the honesty of the hosts providing the service were of crucial importance. She stressed that an entrepreneur should heat and prepare the sauna for tourists as if it were made for themselves: "If you want to have a proper sauna, everything needs to be clean. You shouldn't think, 'Oh, he's a tourist. What can he get from it?'"

All three smoke saunas date back to the end of the 19th or the beginning of the 20th centuries. The basic log construction of the smoke saunas and the original traditional appearance has been kept to the extent that saunas have been renovated only in case of need, such as changing or mending the regionally traditional shingle roof, rebuilding the vaporising stove, renewing the sweating bench and wooden floor planks. Still, significant changes have been carried out for safety and amenity reasons: transforming the proportions of the sweat room and dressing room, rebuilding the base for the vaporising stove from firebricks and bringing the hearth of the stove to the dressing room in order to make the heating process more comfortable and safe. The entrepreneurs have installed electricity inside the sauna as it would be too dangerous to leave clients bathing with burning candles or oil lamps.

The smoke sauna space on Suhka Farm has been enlarged by extending the roof and building a small changing room. On Tuhka Farm the old sauna was rebuilt, because the original bathing room was too large in comparison to the dressing room; additionally, it took a long time to heat. Furthermore, after a small fire accident the sauna was inspected by the rescue service and the owners were asked to install non-flammable plates above the vaporising stove and a fire extinguisher is now set next to the main entrance. The hostess Ene O. considers it an unnecessary precaution, because heating the smoke sauna is under the owner's control, whereas the clients of the 'Finnish sauna' have a chance to add firewood throughout the bathing process, which makes it much more likely to overheat.



**Figure 1.** *The renovated smoke sauna on Tuhka Farm, Karula municipality.  
Photo by Helen Sooväli-Sepping 2010.*

Ene D. stresses that when they started with the tourism activity on Jõeveere Farm, nobody in the region offered this service and other tourism entrepreneurs (e.g. those organising hikes and canoeing) brought clients to their sauna. At that time, there were only a few tourists who dared to experience the smoke sauna. She believes that their sauna became a kind of model and inspiration for other entrepreneurs, who have now erected their own smoke saunas in their enterprises. A similar story was told by Merike – in the 1990s several local entrepreneurs were sceptical of how they dared to offer something so “old and outdated” as the smoke sauna to clients. Moreover, one of the obstacles was the official hygiene regulation for rural tourism enterprises, which declared that a smoke sauna should have conditions equivalent to a bathroom in a hotel. Therefore, they had to build a standard Finnish sauna with showers in their main building. However, in the 2000s Merike witnessed the increasing popularity of the smoke sauna among other entrepreneurs as well as customers: “Today completely new smoke saunas have been built because the old saunas were demolished some time ago. Now the smoke sauna is highly valued. Old saunas are bought at a very salty price.”

## **Adapting local traditions and creating individually experienced heritage**

The entrepreneurs belonging to this category share the same strategy of using the existing cultural repertoire - old buildings - through giving them a new function by employing their knowledge and taste. Because of the creative combination of old and new, they may be called bricoleurs in the strictest sense of the word. The owners of Mooska, Saunamaa and Sepa farms have bought old smoke saunas and storage houses from villages both nearby and afar, giving them either a fresher look or a new function. The buildings were transported to the farms and the owners renovated and rebuilt them either by themselves or asked for assistance from local builders. Eda from Mooska told us how they recalled family saunas from their own childhood, consulted with several experts, attended the old buildings renovation workshop, studied professional literature and visited other local smoke sauna owners to finally create their own understanding of how a smoke sauna should be built. Similarly, Peeter came up with the idea to rebuild an old storehouse, because it was the cheapest way to get an old-style sauna with two rooms (one for bathing and one for relaxing) meeting contemporary needs:

It is fairly easy to build a smoke sauna compared to the common one (Finnish sauna). You only need walls and a stove and a roof on the top. [...] I made a smoke sauna for myself because I thought it was an attractive thing in tourism as well. I use the smoke sauna because it is the only one I have.

In the same vein, the family of Mooska farm combined their sauna environment from an old storehouse and an old smoke sauna.

Erki from Saunamaa was determined to recreate an archaic sauna atmosphere following the idea that the more primitive, the more real it was (see Gaynor 1986, ref. in Edelsward 1991). For that very reason he has built a cave sauna representing a 'true to history' replica of Estonians' first saunas<sup>19</sup>. The other smoke sauna in the enterprise looks intentionally archaic because of the use of traditional natural materials – old logs are insulated with moss, the foundation is constructed from loose granite stones, a roof made of planks is customary for this region. Indoors the traditional style is combined with a contemporary rustic design by building a massive granite stone wall between the dressing room and the bathing room. Erki admits that he laid a proper wooden plank floor instead of the traditional earth floor because "you have to think about the tourists as well [...] not every client would come here". Still, there is no electricity, only candle light, and water from a cauldron or water





**Figure 2.** *The renovated and rebuilt smoke sauna (on the right) with accompanying house for changing and resting (on the left) on Mooska Farm, Haanja municipality. Photo by Ester Võsu 2010.*

butt in his smoke sauna, in order to offer clients “something genuine”. Erki admits that he enjoys both smoke saunas for their authenticity.

The stories of the entrepreneurs about how carefully the sauna buildings have been selected and renovated illuminate their understanding of the importance of historical authenticity in experiencing sauna. For example, the main logs of the three smoke saunas are original, except a few lowest ones, which needed to be replaced. Mooska hostess Eda explained that she had chosen to purchase this particular sauna mainly because of the logs, which had a “typical architecture”; she also said that the logs were “black way up to the smoke line”. The roof is of equal importance. The residents of Mooska have drawn ideas from Nordic, not Estonian vernacular architecture, and installed a turf roof on top of their smoke sauna. Eda explained the use of a turf roof was for practical reasons:

What kind of roof would you use today? You wouldn’t use asbestos cement plates, would you? A tin roof even less so. It is not a secret that split-board or shingle roofs are inflammable. So there is not much left.

In conclusion we can say that these sauna owners have rebuilt their saunas using the principles of bricolage so that the buildings would meet the contem-



porary needs of the family and tourists (widening the dressing room, changing the place of the heating stove, installing electricity, etc.). So, the principles of historical authenticity are not applied indoors.

### **Creating new saunas in an archaic style: heritage as a theme**

The third group of saunas includes recently built smoke saunas, which aim to create the impression of an archaic rustic style through the materials used (Vetevana, Setomaa Tourist Farmstead and Nõiarik). These saunas have been constructed of round logs and with dovetail notch quoins (an old architectural element in Estonia). Producing archaic elements of local cultural heritage seems to be a fundamental component with which the large sauna owners commodify their saunas. The owners' families do not commonly use these saunas and they are built considering tourists' needs. All the three farms, in addition, accommodate a Finnish sauna, Nõiarik even two of them. None of the owners originally comes from the farmstead where they run their businesses, and two of them do not live on the premises. Their relationship with local traditions and heritage is newly established according to personal imaginations and interpretations, and the saunas with their surroundings can be considered as themed heritage settings.



**Figure 3.** *The newly built smoke sauna in Nõiarik (Sorcerer's Kingdom in the Primeval Valley of Lake Uhtjärvi), Urvaste municipality. Photo by Helen Sooväli-Sepping 2010.*

All these saunas were erected in the second half of the 2000s as a reaction to the developing tourism market and are spacious in order to accommodate larger tourist groups, at the same time maintaining the traditional atmosphere (for more on building modern smoke saunas see Tammekivi 2009). According to Siret, an employee of the Setomaa Tourist Farmstead, the new sauna is bigger than the former one, because “people said it could be bigger”. Employee Aare justifies the big smoke sauna in Nõiariik by saying that renting a smoke sauna is a pricey service nowadays. A bigger sauna with more space satisfies the needs of a large group of different clients.

The Setomaa Tourist Farmstead and Nõiariik may be characterised as heritage theme parks which, in the first case, commodify local Setu cultural heritage and, in the second case, have invented a story of witches and witch houses. Aare told us that a new smoke sauna was built in Nõiariik because it has to look “decent and new. When it (the smoke sauna) is sunk half way into the ground, then no client wants to pay us for using it.” Current saunas on Vetevana Farm and the Setomaa Tourist Farmstead were built by construction companies (the former by the host’s son’s company), as the previous ones burned down.

Concerning innovation, all the saunas have installed both water and electricity. The clients need electricity, as Aare explained to us, “because it is dark in winter. It is dangerous to use candles”. The new smoke saunas consist of three rooms – an entrance hall in the middle for dressing, a large room for bathing accommodating up to twenty people at a time, and a spacious relaxing room with a table and benches. A fireplace is commonly not found in smoke saunas as there is no chimney in these buildings. A living fire in the dressing or rest room became a somewhat necessary element in Estonian saunas that were built at summer cottages since the 1960s and 1970s, when sauna became more a place for partying with drinks and snacks.

The Setomaa Tourist Farmstead advertises its smoke sauna to foreigners as “an authentic smoke sauna”. In this example, the physical location and the smoke sauna itself are to create a historic atmosphere. Another component of rusticity to create the feeling essential for sauna experience is soot, which was stressed by Aare from Nõiariik:

Aare: This sauna doesn’t have this vent; therefore the windows and doors are left open. Now it has turned sooty enough. [...]

EV: But why do you want it to be sooty?

Aare: In the beginning (straight after completion), how can you tell that we have a smoke sauna, when there is no soot.

However, the walls of the smoke sauna of the enterprise are cleaned regularly to get the redundant soot off, so that the clients would not get dirty. Also, in

Nõiariik (compare with Mooska Farm) the turf roof is considered an important element in creating an archaic style. The inspiration to use turf roofing for the Nõiariik smoke sauna comes from Nordic architecture. “The idea to have a turf roof stems from the Viking Age. It is used to attract people. It would have been even easier to use a shingle roof,” Aare explained.

## **EXPERIENCE VALUE AND THE NEED TO MEDIATE PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE**

In the following, we aim to focus on entrepreneurs’ interpretations of cultural and individual meanings of the smoke sauna, the degree of personal mediation used and the identity construction expressed in the smoke sauna service.

Despite a few informants who consciously marketed the smoke sauna service to tourists as a special experience of traditional bathing (Erki) and as a local tradition realised in the hosts’ lifestyle (Eda, Merike), most of our informants considered providing the smoke sauna service as something natural and self-evident in their enterprise:

Siret: There is a demand for the smoke sauna.

Aare: This smoke sauna, it (the idea) came unintentionally, so that if you have a Finnish sauna, you must have a smoke sauna, too.

Only a few connected commodifying the smoke sauna with using and mediating the local cultural heritage as part of their service. However, even those who did not explicitly stress the importance of the cultural heritage value of the smoke sauna, indicated to its experience value for tourists. For instance, Ene O. said:

We thought who would come here at all. Who would come to the smoke sauna – they think they would get dirty ... But initially quite many people came. [...] If we hadn’t had a smoke sauna, we would not have done it the same way ... We would have had a Finnish sauna. Then we would not have had tourism. The smoke sauna has attracted tourists.

Experiences and emotions were believed to be something that should have made the clients distinguish between different rural tourism enterprises, as there are quite many who provide bed and breakfast in Võru County. Peeter compared the smoke sauna as a local specialty to eating frogs’ legs in France or insects in Thai and stressed that “the emotion a person gets from it is of key importance, no matter if s/he comes here for the first, second or third time”. What makes clients feel emotionally aroused in the smoke sauna? It seems to be hard to describe in words both for the entrepreneurs’ themselves and for customers.

Peeter himself replies to this question wordlessly, pointing with his palm to his chest. An entry from 2008 in the visitors' log of Suhka Farm says: "The smoke sauna was indescribable. We are speechless with emotion. Everything was fantastic!" Probably one of the triggers for clients might be the specific intense smell of smoke absorbed in the room, which creates a "real sauna atmosphere" (cf. Edelsward 1991: 70) and may evoke romantic connections with our primeval past. According to our informants, the smoke odour was mentioned by most of the clients, who kept smelling their hair or skin after taking the smoke sauna.

Several entrepreneurs acknowledged that even though their clients were from diverse age groups and social backgrounds, for different generations of Estonians the smoke sauna might have varied values for distinct reasons. For the elder generation, who still have some childhood memories of bathing in the smoke sauna, it might be a nostalgic experience. In comparison, younger people, among whom the smoke sauna has become increasingly popular, might perceive it as an 'exotic' experience. Merike from Suhka Farm relates the latter to the chance to identify oneself with one's ancestors' life-world and Estonians' native religion because one can "charge oneself there" and "wash off everything that is bad with water into the earth". However, the smell of the smoke and the dark walls of the smoke sauna might also be perceived as dirty and repellent according to contemporary bathroom hygiene standards. Several entrepreneurs related such unfamiliarity or discomfort to the increasing number of people in Estonia who are used to the urban lifestyle and habits. We heard several stories of how entrepreneurs had to convince their clients to come inside the smoke sauna and check together with them if its surfaces were making them dirty or not. Some clients were said to have had strong prejudices and little knowledge about how to behave in the smoke sauna:

Merike: They just don't know how to behave. [...] And then (after the smoke sauna) they quickly come to take a shower to wash themselves. In fact, it (smoke sauna) is until now primarily a place to wash, to get clean and of course to heal oneself.

Nevertheless, rules for bathing and washing one's body varied in different saunas. The majority of entrepreneurs found that the smoke sauna was not meant for using modern hygiene products such as shower gel and shampoo. They suggested that their clients should take advantage of the sweat bathing and whisking and finalise their bath by washing themselves with clean water. Traditional birch whisks are provided in most of the enterprises as part of the service, even though the popularity of whisking among clients was said to have decreased. Mooska Farm has created its own product facilitating the multisensory experience – sauna honey, which is mixed by the hostess herself, adding

aromatic oils and sea salt. The effect in modern terms is scrubbing, nutritious and relaxing at the same time.

Even though our informants claimed that there were quite many (returning) customers who were familiar with the specificity of the smoke sauna, they also stressed that it was important to give all groups of clients basic practical instructions related to the sauna of the enterprise – where to change, how to make steam, where to find cold or hot water for washing, and where and how to cool down outdoors. Such mediation refers to the multiple skills and knowledge that an entrepreneur or employee should have. For example, heating the smoke sauna is a task usually accomplished by either a male family member (often the host) or an employee who has specialised in doing this job. Even if clients were informed beforehand about the heating rules of the smoke sauna, almost every entrepreneur or employee had had an experience with some ‘expert’ client, who decided to add some firewood during the process of taking the sauna. As a result, all sauna goers were literally ‘smoked out’ of the steam room. Several entrepreneurs brought up the fact that clients who were used to the chimneyed sauna did not know how to get the steam in the smoke sauna, and tended to throw too much water on the vaporizing stones, even though they were suggested just to sprinkle. Thereby the steam became too hot and the sauna cooled down relatively quickly.

Often it is hard for urban people to understand why it takes so long to heat the smoke sauna and why, therefore, the price for this service is higher than for the Finnish type of sauna, or why the smoke sauna for the same evening cannot be ordered in the afternoon. Erki mentioned an extreme example of a middle-aged urban client from Estonia, who could not understand why he heated the smoke sauna so long and suggested that he should use the electric stove, like he himself did, in order to speed up the process. The host of Saunamaa proposed that one way to re-familiarise such people with the forgotten tradition could be to engage them in the whole process of heating the sauna, including assistance with adding the firewood, in order for them to learn from hands-on experience.

All in all, the importance of the integrated experience of local heritage was stressed by Merike, who argued that the smoke sauna should not be a single or isolated service but coherent with other services and products provided by the tourism enterprise. For instance, she claimed that the local entertainment and food provided during the events organised in Suhka Farm should be in tune with the history of the region and with the setting of the farmstead: *it must constitute a whole.*



## **PERSONALISED MEDIATION OF THE SERVICE THROUGH DISCOURSE AND PERFORMANCE**

There are multiple ways to inform tourists about cultural traditions or heritage related to the smoke sauna and ways in which an entrepreneur can personally participate in the process of mediation. In the following we will briefly touch upon three different ways of mediating smoke sauna heritage in verbal and visual discourses and embodied performances, thereby also communicating personal identity and values to tourists.

Often visitors to heritage sites or objects are informed about the historical meaning and contemporary importance of the place by information boards that may contain both verbal and visual explanations and can be used with or without the assistance of a guide. Our research demonstrated that an introduction to smoke sauna culture is provided on the website of the enterprise, orally via phone calls (when the sauna is booked) and on-site, before taking the sauna. Furthermore, some entrepreneurs use immediate performance in order to give their clients more personalised knowledge about the smoke sauna.

Saunamaa markets the smoke sauna from the host's perspective, relying on Estonian folk beliefs in the sauna spirits. To attract the attention of younger (male) clients, Erki has used a Playboy model of local origin to personify an imaginary sauna fairy that his clients could meet in the sauna. With the help of a professional photographer, a nude photo series, though carefully 'photo-shopped' according to the host's vision, has been composed and uploaded on the enterprise's website as well as in the Facebook account. This sauna fairy exposes the closeness to nature and symbolises the purifying effect, at the same time giving a contemporary erotic touch to the whole sauna experience.

On Tuhka Farm an instruction sheet with detailed information in standard Estonian is attached next to the entrance of the smoke sauna. However, when taking a closer look, one discovers that the knowledge and suggestions gathered in this paper are not specific to the smoke sauna, but a compilation from different Internet sources explaining how to behave in the sauna. The hostess Ene O. argued that such instructions were needed because during the first years they had many clients and neither she nor other family members had time and energy "to explain it to everyone".

With the help of a local artist, the hostess of Mooska farm has decorated the facade of her sauna and a detached house next to it (the dressing room) with two pictograms. These are wooden plates covered with archaic style drawings, which display the important functions and symbolic meanings that the smoke sauna has had in the life-world of local people. Eda uses these drawings to illustrate her verbally performed story about the life and seasonal cycles related



to the smoke sauna. She believes that these simple pictures animated with her stories often give a better and quicker overview of the local smoke sauna tradition than a detailed text would, especially to foreign customers for whom English is often not their native language.

The varied landscape in Võru County provides opportunities for diverse forms of active recreation during all seasons. Two of our informants in Haanja municipality take advantage of both the natural environment and cultural heritage of the place, organising hikes in the neighbourhood of the farm. These are often package hikes focused on heritage experience, so that the group of tourists can enjoy a guided walk in a natural environment and a smoke sauna afterwards. This way the hike works as a way of attuning a person for the smoke sauna and enforces the multisensory experience, the interconnectedness of the (smoke) sauna and nature.

Väle from Suhka farm organises guided hiking trips in the neighbourhood of his farm, in the primeval valley of the Piusa River and its surroundings, which are his childhood landscape and related to multiple personal memories (see more in Võsu and Kaaristo 2009: 85–86). He is a discreet guide who does not talk about what he is doing while mediating the local natural or cultural heritage, even though during the walk he is able to give explanations about both. Eda and her husband Urmas, from Mooska farm, love sports activities and they offer diverse guided explorations in the neighbourhood, relying on their personal experiences, skills and wisdom as well as knowledge acquired from other sources (e.g. breathing exercises, Nordic walking, recreational snowshoeing). While introducing their hikes, the Mooska hosts emphasise keywords such as experience, heritage and family mediation. The hikes in both enterprises can be finished by taking a relaxing smoke sauna. However, Eda admits that not all urban tourists are able to fully appreciate the smoke sauna after making a physical effort in the forest – they are simply too exhausted.

Thus, hiking before taking a smoke sauna may be viewed as a modern way for urban people to empathise with our ancestors, who had to do hard physical work throughout the week before getting to the sauna, although now the physical activity serves a purely recreational purpose. Entrepreneurs in this process become mediators who perform personal interpretations of the local heritage; however, these interpretations may vary according to the personality and intentions of the host (cf. Rattus 2007).

Probably the most immediate and intimate mediation of the smoke sauna heritage is offered by those entrepreneurs who agree to join the tourists in the sauna and provide a guided sauna experience throughout the process. For example, the old host of Vetevana Farm said that he preferred to whisk female clients: “I lash them [women] sometimes. There is space for three women

lengthways.” A more elaborate guided smoke sauna service is offered by Eda, who perceives that personal mediation is something that distinguishes her business from other farm tourism enterprises:

Eda: We don't sell the smoke sauna service so that we give the keys and let people into the sauna; we go there together with the clients. [...] I've been to practically everywhere in Europe and also to other places, and I've been looking for precisely that genuine cultural heritage experience ... and you don't get it without mediation. You cannot interpret these things for yourself. [...] It remains incomprehensible when the culture is different. And people in Tallinn have a different culture and people in Võru [town – E.V.], too, and also urban people, these people who lack the connection to the smoke sauna.

Thus, she wants to commodify for her clients what she values herself when in the role of tourist. According to our experience, a sauna visit guided by Eda is an advisedly directed performance, which leaves space for improvisations and customers' own interpretations, as sauna is also something personally perceived.

In contrast, Erki, the host of Saunamaa, is sceptical towards this kind of guided sauna experience, claiming that clients should have their privacy, even though they need practical instructions beforehand. The privacy of the sauna experience needed for both guests and hosts was also brought up by most of the other entrepreneurs who claimed that, even though customers had invited them to join the sauna, they had refused.

## **CONNECTIONS WITH CULTURAL HERITAGE AND EXPRESSIONS OF INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY**

In the last part of our analysis we aim to examine how entrepreneurs perceive the smoke sauna as something culturally significant to Võru County and what kind of identity values can be expressed through it.

When we questioned our informants about how the smoke sauna could be characteristic of Võru County and if it was something that distinguished Võru culture from that in the rest of Estonia, the responses we got were quite varied. Peeter, Erki, Siret, Väle and Ene O. considered the smoke sauna typical of Võru County, pointing to the relatively large number of preserved smoke saunas; however, they did not explain the reasons behind such a situation. Merike, Eda and Aare were more specific, explaining that the smoke sauna both as a building and as a cultural practice has been well preserved in Võru County because of its geographical location in the Estonian territory and scattered settlement

pattern that has enforced cultural isolation. Therefore people here have a more conservative attitude towards cultural change and chimneyed saunas, while the Soviet culture of ‘sauna parties’ was not welcomed here as quickly as in other parts of Estonia. Väle found that the smoke sauna had been rather significant in this region in the past; yet, today most of the old saunas had been rebuilt or abandoned. In addition, Erki and Ene D. had an alternative view claiming that the smoke sauna in Võru County was just one variant among many as there was also smoke sauna culture in, for instance, Russia or Finland. To summarise, the cultural heritage value of the smoke sauna still seems to be tacitly understood by most of the entrepreneurs; or, it is hard to articulate when being asked to reflect on that issue explicitly.

However, there was one cultural practice – smoking meat in the smoke sauna – that was recognised as something typical of Võru County by almost all our informants from different generations. For example, when asked about the connection between the smoke sauna and life in this region, Feliks, the elderly host of Vetevana Farm recalls:

There is a lot of meat smoking in this region. I don’t know about north Estonia, but here all saunas were smoke saunas. The meat that had been kept in a cask was smoked every spring. Some two-three days ... Smoked meat has a good taste.

Yet, even though entrepreneurs have vivid memories of such meat, they do not make it in their saunas rented for tourists, claiming that it would be too hard to clean the sauna room after the meat cooking procedure. Nor are they offering meat smoked in some other sauna in the neighbourhood as a local specialty snack for their sauna customers. Eda from Mooska Farm is the only exception in this matter, as she wants to provide multifarious and multisensory experiences related to smoke sauna heritage and she has (re)established this tradition in her enterprise. Erki from Saunamaa is considering serving ‘sauna ham’ to his clients in the future, because “such an old thing is just to the point”. In conclusion, meat smoked in the sauna was something meaningful and valued because most of the informants had some personal memories or experiences related to it. Nevertheless, this is no longer a living practice in the tourism business. For its revival in this context it needs to be given a new meaning and value (e.g. as a local specialty product).

Eda, Aare and Ene O. explicitly stressed that the biggest threat to the future continuation of the smoke sauna culture was the disappearance of the practical need for such bathing and the fact that heating the smoke sauna was a time-consuming activity. When we asked our informants to compare the smoke sauna with other types of sauna at the enterprise, most of them answered that

the smoke sauna gave the best sauna experience because of its unique smooth steam and atmosphere. The Finnish type of sauna was contrasted with the smoke sauna and its intense dry heat was criticised. However, entrepreneurs admitted that they used the former type of sauna more often because of the faster heating process. Therefore the declared value of the smoke sauna in the entrepreneurs' own practice might be bigger than its importance in everyday practice.

For future survival, the meaning and values of smoke sauna culture need to be reconsidered by present generations. For instance, Eda, who is the most aware among our informants about heritage and the identity value of the smoke sauna, clearly distinguishes between its functions and meanings in the past and today:

The thing we do here is so-called spa tourism, this is for pleasure. We wash in the bathroom, you know. We have it [smoke sauna] here as a way of life, but it is a question of choice, conscious choice. We go there because we enjoy it.

Eda claims that she and her husband like to take things slowly in their everyday life and they could not afford such breaks just for themselves if they were not involved in tourism, which gives them an additional income. However, marketing the smoke sauna as a lifestyle business requires conscious planning as concerns both 'backstage' (negotiating with family members about how and to what extent to share the sauna with tourists) and 'frontstage' (selecting how and what to mediate to the tourists from the family customs and cultural heritage).

Eda believes that the smoke sauna as a re-established tradition can become part of people's lifestyles, their emotional and spiritual values, and a living standard for the young generation, who can make a conscious choice not to consume mass culture but to create a personal connection with local culture through taking the smoke sauna. In a broader context, such a lifestyle choice might be linked to the values promoted by the slow living movement. Erki, who belongs to the younger generation, confirms this viewpoint, arguing that appreciating the smoke sauna is most of all dependent on personal preferences, not so much on the time and energy spent on heating and taking the sauna.

Even though Peeter does not admit that he established the smoke sauna because of its value as a local cultural tradition, there are more than just practical reasons behind his choice of having only this type of sauna in his household:

[--] the emotion that you get from this sauna ... when I come out of the sauna and take a plunge into the pond and go back, depending on the weather, either to the dressing room or sit on a terrace in front of the

sauna, then I always say to myself: 'This is the Estonia that I wanted' [smiles].

Thus, for Peeter, the smoke sauna has a highly emotional and likewise a life-style value, it is something that enables the creation of a feeling of belonging to a place and a feeling of citizenship through personal interpretation (cf. Lester & Poweller 2008).

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Our findings suggest that the way the smoke sauna service is mediated to tourists in Võru County depends on what kind of role the smoke sauna tradition plays in the entrepreneur's personally interpreted cultural identity. The analysis demonstrated that a considerable diversity exists in the meanings and values that the entrepreneurs relate to the smoke sauna and in the ways that they express these meanings and values in sauna buildings and in the service provided.

We distinguished three major attitudes towards the smoke sauna as a local tradition and heritage regarding the sauna settings in the enterprises studied. Those entrepreneurs who had possessed the smoke sauna as a family inheritance were the most direct representatives of the cultural continuity of the tradition, even though they had transformed it into a tourism service and considered it important to share the same sauna environment used by their own family for generations. The second group of entrepreneurs were creative cultural bricoleurs selecting from and combining different cultural repertoires – old (sauna) buildings were transported from elsewhere and renovated in their holdings according to their personal interpretations of coherence and authenticity, considering both family and touristic needs. The entrepreneurs who had established novel sauna buildings in archaic style were the most intentional heritage producers, interpreting heritage as an old-looking historical theme and expressing it in the use of vernacular building materials, which were merged with historical architectural elements from other cultures. In themed heritage settings the disconnection with the tradition was most explicit because large sauna spaces were built for tourists, not for family use.

Drawing a parallel with staging a theatre production, we claim that the role that most of the entrepreneurs take in producing the smoke sauna service is that of a stage manager, who is concerned with the materiality of the setting. Almost all of our informants had a broad knowledge related to the practicalities of maintaining and taking the smoke sauna, which had been acquired through

personal experience of renovating and using their own smoke saunas. They were likewise eager to communicate the knowledge to the tourists who are today mainly used to the Finnish type of sauna.

Continuing with the theatre analogy, only a few entrepreneurs took the role of artistic director, responsible for a more complex interpretation of the cultural tradition mediated within a service that integrates material as well as immaterial elements into a coherent production. What seems to be less elaborated or reflected upon by entrepreneurs is how the overall context of the enterprise, what other settings, activities or products would contribute to the smoke sauna experience. In case there are a few other services related to local cultural traditions, the smoke sauna in itself may not give you the experience of encountering local cultural heritage. However, there is always a risk in overly managed themed settings within tourism that they leave less space for improvisations and unexpected experiences (cf. Edensor 2009).

The results of our analysis indicated the importance of personal memories as a significant basis for heritage and cultural identity production and mediation. For instance, multiple individual memories of smoking meat in the smoke sauna were connected to the regional tradition, whereas there were a few remembrances of the rituals and vernacular beliefs related to the smoke sauna as these have almost vanished today. This might be the reason why the majority of entrepreneurs do not communicate such symbolic elements of tradition to the tourists.

Usually the immediate interaction with the entrepreneur and his or her family and the intimacy of host-guest encounters are considered key characteristics distinguishing small-scale rural businesses from the large-scale tourism industry. Furthermore, in small tourism enterprises the entrepreneur often enacts multiple roles (cf. Vösu & Rattus & Jääts 2013). Therefore, in addition to organisational and storytelling skills, an entrepreneur should also have good performative artistry in order to engage the customer and make the experience of the service memorable (cf. Pine & Gilmore 1999: 145–146). Although one has to ask: to what extent can a traditional smoke sauna experience be commodified and communicated to clients using performative means of expression?

Different enterprises use distinct means to give additional information about the smoke sauna, mainly in images and texts instead of live interpretation of the sauna experience by the host, hostess or employee. Such immediate guided interpretation of the smoke sauna tradition during the course of a sauna seems to be the most challenging way of mediation as it demands self-reflexivity and skilfully controlled ‘self-commodification’ by an entrepreneur acting as a guide (cf. Bunten 2008). With two exceptions only, sharing the sauna with customers was not acceptable to the entrepreneurs and employees because of how they



interpreted their own and their clients' privacy within the sauna experience. This touches on another major change related to commodification – traditionally the sauna was shared among family members meaning that the comfortable atmosphere of shared bodily experience emerged naturally. Such an atmosphere is hard to achieve with larger tourist groups in spacious sauna settings.

Even though the entrepreneurs' personal memories and stories of the smoke sauna were related, our informants did not consider the smoke sauna as a collectively shared manifestation of cultural identity but rather as an expression of individual identity and lifestyle. As most of our informants originate from Võru County, they might not consider the smoke sauna to have a symbolic value as a cultural identity marker, either because the practice is still common in the region or simply because this tradition does not serve an identity purpose for them (cf. Noyes 2011). Our analysis allows the suggestion that the “emotional authenticity” (Smith 2006) and “experiential authenticity” (Di Domenico & Miller 2012) of the smoke sauna involving personally meaningful material as well as immaterial elements, and most of all a unique bodily experience, were more significant to most of the entrepreneurs than the possibility to associate their service with historically authentic representations of the regional cultural heritage. However, in spite of the emotional value of the smoke sauna, entrepreneurs admitted that they use the Finnish sauna more often in their everyday lives because the heating process is less time- and wood-consuming.

In the current study the question remains open as to whether the experiential, emotional and lifestyle values attributed to the smoke sauna by rural entrepreneurs indicate the discontinuity of the old tradition or if these values relate to new meanings that the tradition has acquired in the present socio-cultural situation. The period of commodification of the smoke sauna tradition in Võru County has been relatively short – a bit more than a decade. It is still developing as a tourism service and might not have been heritagised yet as multiple understandings exist among entrepreneurs as to how the smoke sauna may or may not have heritage and cultural identity value. Some entrepreneurs expressed scepticism towards local heritage policy, pointing to the problems of distinguishing between ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ heritage (re)presentations or the danger of musealising a fixed tradition. Furthermore, even those entrepreneurs who used the concept of ‘heritage’ explicitly in marketing and mediating their business did it in different ways and with a varied degree of personalised mediation. Additional comparative studies are needed in order to examine how meanings and values of the smoke sauna as part of local heritage and identity are constructed and communicated by different groups living in Võru County, and how global ideologies of heritage production (such as UNESCO's) might change the existing tourism service, its interpretations, marketing and mediation.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> According to contemporary administrative division, Võru County is a southeastern region of Estonia, which is subdivided into one urban and twelve rural municipalities. It borders on Põlva County to the north, Valga County to the west, the Republic of Latvia to the south and the Russian Federation to the east. According to the administrative division before 1944, the territory of Võru County was divided into Võrumaa (included eight municipalities) and Setumaa (between 1920–1944 the official name was Petseri (Pechory) County, and it included eleven municipalities, four of which are currently associated with Setumaa while others are part of the Russian Federation). Today these municipalities are centred (due to redistricting) in Võru and Põlva Counties with parts extending into Valga and Tartu Counties. Today the most distinctive markers of the cultural identity of the Võru and Setu peoples are their languages, folklore, and, in case of the Setu, the Russian Orthodox faith (see Leete 2010; Ehala 2007; Runnel 2002; Koreinik & Rahman 2000; Jääts 1998).
- <sup>2</sup> These 'guardians' are both representatives of local cultural institutions initiating the revival of local cultural traditions (the Võro Institute, the Võro Society VKKF) and individuals concerned about the continuation of the tradition. The smoke sauna in the territory of historical Võrumaa has been included in the Intangible Cultural Heritage List of Estonia and the further aim is to apply for entry into the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding in 2013. The 'guardians' have initiated a number of projects to raise local as well as wider Estonian awareness of the intangible heritage value of the smoke sauna tradition. From 2010 we have followed these initiatives and conducted fieldwork trips to interview people and observe sauna customs in Võru and Urvaste municipalities in Võru County. Thereby we admit that as scholars we also became engaged in the process of local heritage maintenance. However, these topics need further study and reach beyond the boundaries of this article.
- <sup>3</sup> Võrumaa tourism development strategy for 2015 and action plan for 2007-2010. <http://southeastonia.ee/uploads/dokumendid/V%C3%95Rumaa%20turismiarendustrateegia.pdf>, last accessed on 5 January 2012.
- <sup>4</sup> The Finnish Sauna Society as a cultural association for fostering the heritage of the national bath was founded in 1937.

- <sup>5</sup> The word *saun* in Estonian denotes both the bath-house and the practice; it has archaic origins and is very similar to the Finnish word *sauna*.
- <sup>6</sup> However, historically the sauna was not common in all Estonia, and in certain regions of northern as well as central Estonia people did not have a separate house for bathing.
- <sup>7</sup> 'Finnish sauna' is a colloquial term used in Estonia to signify a type of sauna in which the stove is made of iron and the sauna itself is often built separately or joined to the summer cottage. Such ideas were borrowed from Finns. Characteristic of this type of sauna is dry and very hot air (up to 120° C) (Habicht 2008 [1972]: 158).
- <sup>8</sup> As heating the sauna using firewood is a time-consuming process, some people prefer to have an electric sauna stove that heats up faster and needs no labour.
- <sup>9</sup> Sometimes whisks are also made from the twigs of the oak or lime tree, more rarely from juniper or nettles.
- <sup>10</sup> Although in the 1960s–1970s living conditions on many old farmsteads in southeast Estonia as well as in the neighbouring regions were still rather archaic.
- <sup>11</sup> We argue this relying on the fieldwork conducted in Võru County in 2010–2011.
- <sup>12</sup> See previous comment.
- <sup>13</sup> In 1990 the International Smoke Sauna Club was established to raise awareness of the value of this type of sauna.
- <sup>14</sup> The website is accessible at: [www.visitvoru.ee](http://www.visitvoru.ee). In November 2011 the website was redesigned and the content reorganised. Smoke sauna can now be found under the category of 'active holiday, without the general introduction of local traditions.
- <sup>15</sup> Taal, Kati and Eichenbaum, Külli. *Suitsusaun vanal Võrumaal*. – Eesti vaimse kultuuripärandi nimistu. [Smoke Sauna in Old Võrumaa. – List of Estonian Intangible Cultural Heritage.] <http://www.rahvakultuur.ee/vkpnimistu/>, last accessed on 5 January 2012.
- <sup>16</sup> Conversations with employees took place in agreement with the owners of the enterprise, who could not meet us at the site.
- <sup>17</sup> Nature has inspired the hosts to build small „witch cabins“ using tree roots exposed by windfalls (the theme is taken from Russian fairy tales of the witch Baba Yaga and her log cabin set on chicken legs). The legend of Lake Uhtjärvi and the Estonian traditional folk customs (the making of 'tuhkapoiss' (ash boy) as part of 'tuhkapäev' (Ash Wednesday) ritual) are combined with the story 'The Little Witch' (*Die Kleine Hexe*, 1957) by a German writer Ottfried Pleußler.
- <sup>18</sup> This is the official name of the enterprise in English (see: [www.setotalu.ee](http://www.setotalu.ee), last accessed on 5 January 2012).
- <sup>19</sup> The first smoke saunas were called 'ground saunas' or 'cave saunas' (*koobassaun*). They were built in a pit dug into a natural slope, with a heap of heated stones set in one corner.

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