Listening to the Troubled Waters: Ethnographical Work as a Reciprocal Activity

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ABSTRACT

The history of Lyyrtti, an old pilot village in the south-western coast of Finland, is for many villagers a story of depopulation of a vital community during the last fifty years. In 2005 the villagers of Lyyrtti expressed their interest in collecting the oral history of their village. This material is gathered, edited and released in the context of research on the topic of 'narrated environment', which draws attention to the interdisciplinary methods and theories of the practices of place making

KEYWORDS

community, 'giving back', identity, place-making, water

Water is conceived as the centre, the fairway and the all-round essence in the Finnish village of Lyyrtti, located in the Turku archipelago. In 2005 the villagers of Lyyrtti expressed their interest in collecting the oral history of their village. It is an old fishing and piloting village by the seaside and on the islands along one main water route in that area. At the end of the 1960s, Finland's Board of Navigation decided to finish the piloting along it and closed the pilot station. Most of the 50 old houses in the village are nowadays summer residences of the relatives of those families which once lived in the village all year round. The villagers are like visitors in their ancestral homes.

I am currently working with villagers to create a 'village book' of collected stories and articles concerning the history of Lyyrtti and its environment. This is one role of the anthropologist: to participate in the tradition process. In a very concrete manner, in its written form and content, the village book represents the polyphony of ethnographic fieldwork, which is contrasted with the monophonic authorial voice of the conventional ethnographic monograph (see Gupta and Ferguson 1977: 2–3). Even though I am the one who

writes most of the text in that book, the many different ‘voices’ present in the actual discussions and dialogues through which ethnographic understandings are constructed make it into ‘a collection of narratives’, as Doreen Massey (2005) has defined a village. It is a product of a creative textualisation process of oral history.

The production of narrated data is as such an act of interaction and dialogue. I used the in-depth, unstructured and open-ended interview, starting with the question: ‘How did you end up to Lyyrtyti?’ This question let the interviewee herself determine where to start and how to continue. My emphasis was to get people to say as much as possible about the things that the villagers themselves wanted to share or perform, and include in the ‘village book’. What are those things in the past that are more meaningful to record than other memories? In a broader context I wanted to understand why forgetting is alarming. During the interviews I found it most important to *listen* sensitively to the emotional hotspots and those things that aroused great interest by the villagers.

While collecting the oral history and writing the ‘village book’, I am creating another literary product, which forms my dissertation, on the topic of *Narrated Environment: A Study of Producing Oral History in the Village of Lyyrtyti, Kustavi*. This combined approach has helped me, for example, to find step by step the structure, form and content of the ‘village book’. After all, memory is one of the basic concepts in history, and therefore the relationship between memory, history and village is complex, and can be examined from many different angles. So far, I have used interdisciplinary methods of oral history, micro-history and environmental history. This allows me to trace different paths using different methods and interpretations of place. My interpretation of emotions as signals, and of things that interested villagers most as clues in the search for the footprints or relics in history, served the purpose of the micro-historical method well.

The nostalgic telling could be seen as a reaction to, or even an effort at answering, ontological questions. By waking up the memory and particular reminiscences and letting them speak again, people bring them back to life. The remembered place is like an anchor although the environment has also changed as time has passed. The emotional, ‘thick’ narration includes mainly the concern or fear of losing the knowledge of local history, especially the memories of preceding local people. Mostly these stories are concerned with everyday life, tasks and cares in the village and people’s skills in their envi-

ronment. There are stories about surviving in different nature circumstances, for example how to row a boat or what the safe routes are on ice during the wintertime. These could be seen also as representations of 'spatial practice' (de Certeau 1984: 91–130). In Lypyrtti people have paths in the water, so to say (see Tilley 1994). How to row depends very much on the winds and the water stream. People have learned to honour the phenomena of nature. But because the summer residents of Lypyrtti no longer live in the village all year round, they are perhaps afraid of losing the track of the seasonal cycle and their knowledge of the former way of adaption to the environment. This led me to the history of the idea of place making in Lypyrtti. I examined how Lypyrtti was formed as a community out of the interconnected space that already existed.

The adaption process in Lypyrtti has ancient roots in an ever-changing environment. The landscape has always changed a lot on the coast. The land rises by half a meter in a century because of the post-glacial uplift. Even that has made great demands on adaptability of people living in that area. One of the oldest informants stressed the place or location of a good harbour along the navigation routes as the main reason of the origin of the village. She could also describe the past water routes accurately even though they have been overgrown for centuries. For her neither the knowledge of exact navigation routes nor a demarcated physical space as village was as important as the perspective of living along the water routes or at the waterside. There is a certain parallel with the Finnish historian Matti Klinge's bold 'sea' perspective on Finland's ancient history in his 1983 book *Ancient Powers of the Baltic Sea*. According to him, a millennium ago settlements in Finland were wholly concentrated by the seacoast and watercourses. These conceptions of the Baltic Sea as the centre of living also challenge the current nation-state oriented conceptions of written history.

The pollution of water is emotionally expressed as nostalgia for the lost clear waters. Water has become a moral witness of human actions, both global and local. The environment reminds people not to forget. The narratives are complementary or alternative expressions of history and values concerning peoples' own village. The textualisation of the oral history of Lypyrtti is a process of redefining many self-evident ideas and concepts. Tracing this openly through writing has led me to become ethically aware of my role as a scientist. As an oral history researcher, an ethnographer and an author of the Lypyrtti book I am also an intercessor by making the history of these people

visible to them and by showing its historical meaning (see Ukkonen 2006: 182). Making a ‘village book’, apart from being work towards an academic dissertation, is an act of ethical reciprocity, one way to give back to the village what belongs to it.

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