

BOOK REVIEWS

EDWARD DUTTON. *The Finnuit: Finnish Culture and the Religion of Uniqueness*. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 2009. Pp. 288. ISBN: 978-963-05-8731-0.

Very few full-length anthropological monographs based on fieldwork by a foreign scholar have ever been written on Finland. Ray Abrahams (1991) did fieldwork in North Karelia in the early 1980s on the transmission of property on family farms and on rural development, and Tim Ingold (1976) studied the Skolt Sámi in the early 1970s as well as Finns living in Lapland a decade later. Edward Dutton's *The Finnuit* provides a recent contribution into this field, but from a somewhat different angle. Both Abrahams and Ingold focused on localities of a smaller scale, whereas Dutton sets out to deliver an analysis of 'Finland' and 'Finnish culture'.

Dutton has been living in Oulu in Northern Finland since 2005, and his fieldwork for *The Finnuit* was conducted over a three-year period in 2005–2008. In addition to working as an independent researcher and writing about Finland from an anthropological perspective, Dutton has established himself as a freelance journalist and attempted to acquire a visible position as a commentator on Finnish affairs. For example, he wrote an article on the possible causes of Finnish school shootings, which occurred in the town of Jokela in 2007 and in Kauhajoki in 2008 for *The Guardian*. The article sparked vivid debate in Finland about the accuracy of his analysis of Finnish society.

In the book, he says he has immersed himself in Finnish culture in various ways: through his Finnish spouse, by attending, for example, religious and political gatherings, and through interviews. His ethnographic analysis is based on participant observation, following the Finnish media and interviewing thirty informants. His informants came from different parts of Finland, mainly from the axis between Oulu and Helsinki—Dutton says he found the restaurant cars in long-distance trains very handy in finding people with whom to engage in conversation.

In his book Dutton sets out to study the 'belief' and 'myth' of uniqueness that Finns—according to him—are keen to profess. He also finds empirical evidence to support his claim in travel promotion materials and academic texts. The main argument of the book is that this claim or belief amounts to a 'functionalist religion', a kind of unquestioned nationalist religious dogma. Dutton's self-professed background in theology and the anthropology of religion (p. 247) may explain such a religion-oriented analytical perspective. Yet employing the term 'functionalist' seems unsatisfactory, as the concept is not really theorised.

However, according Dutton, this notion of uniqueness is not based on objective facts; when compared to—why not, for the sake of a novel argument?—Greenland, he identifies several similarities between the two countries such as rapid modernisation, high and self-destructive alcohol consumption, the popularity of revivalist religious movements and the existence of machismo and domestic violence despite high levels of education, employment and economic independence among Finnish women. The conclusion is that Finland is a kind of 'diluted Greenland' (p. 242). As a trope, it serves his argument well, but that's about as far as the comparison goes.

Criticism of emic utterances such as, 'We Finns are unique' (informant, p. 63), or that Finland 'developed its own unique culture' under Russian rule (historian Matti Klinge,

quoted on p. 64) is detailed and demonstrates how superfluous are such claims in various contexts. Yet throughout the book the reader is puzzled by why Dutton wants to prove that his informants are wrong when they say that Finns are 'unique'. Such an approach is problematic from an ethical point of view. Are not anthropologists out to study *why* Finnish, Greenlandic, Japanese or any other people claim that they are 'unique' instead of venturing out to prove that their claims are wrong? After all, do not all nationalities call themselves unique just to differentiate themselves from others?

Theoretically and methodologically, Dutton positions himself as defending the category of 'culture'—which comes across as rather static—and the comparative method. The concept of culture is dwelt on in the beginning (pages 27–39), but concepts such as race, tribe and tribal are deployed throughout without much problematisation. However, when trying to analyse Finnish culture as a unified entity, Dutton seems to have taken on too huge a task. The factual information—for example the importance of revivalist movements—might apply more to his area of residence than to 'Finnish culture' as a whole. Indeed, focusing more ethnographic attention on his primary locality, Oulu or Northern Ostrobothnia, might have produced a less sweeping and contentious cultural analysis.

Something that is definitely poor academic manners in the book is that the comments given by anonymous peer reviewers are quoted verbatim and argued against at length, sometimes using disrespectful language about the scholars concerned. Peer reviewers give comments in order to help in revision, and they are not to be singled out as 'incredulous' and quoted word for word. Including this kind of 'talking back' in the book seems an unusual stylistic choice both by the author and the editor.

The book is definitely a thought-provoking read, and it challenges conventional ways of thinking about Finns and Finland. Taking Finns out of their comfort zone is always good, whether in terms of the relationship Finland had with the Soviet Union, or how Western or European Finland really is. Dutton certainly manages to do this, but he takes his points to such lengths and, at times, his argumentation comes across as so aggressive that despite being a peer-reviewed monograph published by an academic publisher, the book verges on the extra-academic. At times, it seems to have been written in order to make a mark in mediatised public debate rather than to analyse Finnish culture from the empathetic perspective of an anthropological scholar.

REFERENCES

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