

TOWARDS CULTURAL ECHOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we introduce some of the first steps taken in a new research project called Sacred Sound and Ritual Soundscapes in Historical and Contemporary Fennoscandia: Acoustic Measurements, Ethnographic Research and Foundations for Cultural Echology. It proposes that sound waves projecting from environmental interfaces are far from being insignificant background elements, but active parts of the environment and our relationship with it. The new project will trace practices related to acoustics from the history of Fennoscandia, primarily from Finnish and indigenous Sámi traditions comparing the larger Finno-Ugric heritage also to the west of Fennoscandia, namely Norway. Practically, the study concentrates on acoustic measurements in echoing spaces in natural settings. We are interested in specific spaces, the use of them in collective rituals and events as well as more private encounters. Ethnographic participatory methods are used to be able to describe people's relationship with their historical, cultural and more-than-human elements and environments. This article gives examples of the testimonies of two persons interviewed. In the footsteps of acoustic ecology, listening and sensing are considered important skills and activities. The cultural echology approach, then also looks for possibilities that may activate more lively and conscious "echological transformations."

1. INTRODUCTION

Cultural echology is a neologism referring to sound, more precisely sound reflections. In the research plan of our ongoing project Sacred Sound and Ritual Soundscapes in Historical and Contemporary Fennoscandia: Acoustic Measurements, Ethnographic Research and Foundations for Cultural Echology we define this term as follows:

Cultural echology seeks to explore the agency of sound reflections in human cultures in the past and present. It proposes that sound waves projecting from environmental interfaces are far from being insignificant background elements, but active parts of the environment. The reflections replicate, shape and distort direct sounds and participate thus in the acoustic communication. They voice inanimate objects and make them living more-than-human beings with whom humans can communicate, negotiate and engage in dialogue or musical performance. Thus, the sound potential residing in rocks, buildings and

mountains is central in enabling and promoting a reciprocal contact and relationship with the environment. Cultural echology traces and explores this type of dynamic sound-mediated relations, interactions and their local interpretations in music history, cultural history, vernacular religion and today's world, bringing to the fore practices and traditions that have never been the focus of research before. In the project, we will trace practices related to acoustics from the history of Fennoscandia, primarily from Finnish, Norwegian and indigenous Sámi traditions. However, it is important to note that reciprocal contact and relationship with the environment are not relics of the past, something already or evidently disappearing. Steven Feld [4] has formulated the starting point of anthropology generally. Anthropologists tend toward the Kantian view that all knowledge begins in experience. We jump off that cliff to study how human experiential patterns and practices construct the habits, systems of belief, knowledge, and action we call culture. And we study it everywhere and anywhere we can. Our ultimate concern is with people, with adequately and evocatively representing their experiential worlds, their voices, their humanity.

In the same way, cultural echology gives space for respect to human experience and curiosity. As such, this new concept still represents an uncategorized branch of human culture and the study of it. Cultural echology takes into account different knowledges; it recognizes not only historical and existing meanings but the reconstructions of meaningfulness as living part of the environment, inspiration to act, ritualize, manifest and perform cultural activities that are part of human culture. These can be both individual and collective initiatives since connecting with natural places can also emerge also in various ways. Cultural echology can compare the universal, time- and site-specific and local at the same.

Our starting point is to understand how people at different times deal very differently with their notion of being dependent on nature and the surroundings as well as even adjust their lifestyle to live in closer contact with nature. In the ongoing project, Vikman (et al.) will analyze the cultural feel of nature as a personal construct and a product of the human mind. In addition to interviews and archival research, the project will employ quantitative and experimental methods, such as studying the acoustic properties of natural places or the psychoacoustic effects, impressions and illusions they create [5, 6].

2. VASKIKALLIO CASE STUDY

One of the study sites of our project is Vaskikallio ('Copper Cliff') situated in the sparsely populated wilderness of North Karelia in Eastern Finland. This exceptionally smooth cliff rises from the bottom of a ravine to a height of 30 meters, creating the impression of the wall of a huge building, church or castle. The ravine, which is a state-owned nature reserve, is home to old-growth taiga forest, several rare plant and bird species as well as wolverines and bears. In this place, nature and sound environment seem to have remained unchanged for ages.

Our archival research shows that a hundred to two hundred years ago Vaskikallio served as a ritual place for the villagers of Sokojärvi living nearby [7]. Another name for the cliff was Pirunkirkko ('Devil's Church'), that is, the place where the old gods or nature spirits resided. According to sources, a sage called Kakkara's old man worshipped devils at Vaskikallio, while a sage called Finne regarded Vaskikallio as his church staying there especially on Christmas nights. Interestingly, a total of 27 healing spells, meant to cure burns, snake bites, wounds, sudden pain and several diseases, were recorded in the late 19th century from sages Antti and Paavo Finne, who lived in the Sokojärvi village. Since Eastern Finnish sages typically healed by taking their patients to the spirits, it seems plausible that these healing spells of the Finnes – or at least some of them – were originally cast at Vaskikallio.

In the summer of 2021, we made two fieldtrips to Vaskikallio. The purpose of the first trip was to observe the place as a sound environment and to carry out an impulse response measurement of its acoustic characteristics. This measurement is performed by giving a standard excitation signal and recording, and later analyzing, the response it evokes in situ. The measurement results show that the Vaskikallio cliff and the surrounding old-growth forest generate countless reflections providing the excitation signal with a 1.75-second-long reverberant tail. A couple of distinct echoes project from the other side of the ravine, as our angle-of-arrival estimation shows [8, 9]. Moreover, our microphones recorded a sudden thunderstorm rolling into the ravine as well as a pair of curious ravens approaching and responding to our test sounds. So, it seemed that the environment actively participated in the research activities.

On the second trip, the purpose was to record Antti and Paavo Finne's spells in their original acoustic and environmental context at the foot of the Vaskikallio cliff. As the performer, we invited rune singer Eero Peltonen, who chanted and recited four spells in the traditional Eastern Finnish way (Figure 1) [10]. This experiment clearly showed that acoustics had an effect on the rituals. The reflections from the cliff, forest and ravine accompanied every word and syllable with a humming or rumbling sound, which suggested that the sage was not alone, but surrounded and supported by invisible energies or some kind of acousmatic beings. With the help of reflections,

the sage could interview or interrogate these beings, or argue or fight with them, so that these ritual participants – conceivably spirits – felt embodied and psychologically real. This must have had a great impact on the patient and their healing experiences and processes too.

3. TESTIMONIES FROM VASKIKALLIO

Here we offer two testimonies of two persons who both had experiences from Vaskikallio. These persons had different individual backgrounds as to how they became connected to this place. Our interviews focused on the following themes:

- How do the participants experience these natural places?
- What are their first impressions of the acoustics when they make sound?
- What happens if these experiences are put in dialogue with artistic expression?
- How do the participants get inspired by the sensorial environment and the stories of the past and why do these attract?

Interviewees Eero and Mari answered what kind of aspects and inspiration the visit(s) to Vaskikallio brought into daylight and have had in their personal life, experiences, and worldviews. Rune singer Eero Peltonen was interviewed during our second visit to Vaskikallio in August 2021, right after the performance and recording of Finnes' incantations (Figure 2). Peltonen could be described as a do-it-yourself difficult-to-define tradition worker and artist, singer and actor with a lot of knowledge about folklore, tradition and different sound phenomena. In addition, he is an educator, mediator and extremely curious and well-read bon vivant. He had a lot of experience from several atmospherically and archaeologically meaningful places over the last 30 years.



Figure 1. Singer Eero Peltonen at the foot of Vaskikallio. Photo by authors.

In the conversation on September 28, 2022 local resident Mari Lackman told that her grandmother's surname was Finne and that she is a direct descendent of the Finnes who performed magic at Vaskikallio. The Finnes had a tenant farm near Verkkolampi in Sokojärvi in the 19th century. Lackman had heard these family stories from her grandmother and other relatives who are now deceased. Now that the last oral histories of that generation can no longer be heard or recorded, they can be interpreted in relation with the environment and the time context. From now on, it is possible to live true the history of the sites in situ – co-sounding, listening silently or provoking the spirit of the place with active experiments. The motivations and fascination of the interviewees are best encapsulated in these quotes [11]:

Eero

It took me very long to try to combine mythology, psychology and art. Maybe here in Northern countries these have already differentiated into separate areas of everyday life, but not so much in the Baltic area or in Karelian culture. This is why I'm here now (in Karelia). To be able to sense the connection between different issues. If you take one part off, the tradition starts to die, self-confidence disintegrates like rock, the tradition becomes just repetition, you feel no spirit anymore. I need them all. Otherwise there is not really anything.

Mari

I don't know if the healing skills are directly related to that place or to those people who are related to me. It is known that there were people in my grandmother's family who were able to stop the bleeding. My grandmother's father was like that and her cousin was also skilled. Among my cousins there are those who can see. Personally, I'm not the kind of person who sees, but I get feelings. I've been to Vaskikallio from time to time to drum, but I don't need an audience there. It is personal empowerment and grounding, or whatever word you want to describe it with.

These manifestations are supposedly based on the preliminary joy or feel of belonging to a wider than human realm. They are good examples of how the interest in connecting to Finnish cultural heritage and reinterpreting history has grown recently.

4. ECHOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATION?

In our project on cultural echology, we recognize the ongoing new wave of ecological transformation. Cultural echology is hearkening to the slow and silent motions of nature. People all over the globe are actively identifying themselves with special localities and places. Supposedly both majorities and minorities have the same need to develop their feel of nature as well as to reconstruct their sense of nature.



Figure 2. Interview in the forest in front of Vaskikallio. Photo by authors.

Some people seek knowledge, interpretations, and proof of old or ancient/archaic lifestyles. Rites and ceremonies ritualized collectively encourage and invite us to form more permanent communities or modern tribes. The aims and results of cultural echology may include a lot of speculation, expressions of creative reconstructions of past life based on different historical and archaeological facts and options which has an inevitable connection to beliefs. The study of the contemporary manifestations will be sensitive and conscious of/about the definitions and fine line between sensitive concepts like “heritage”, “tradition,” “belief,” “religion” and “spirituality.”

5. CONCLUSIONS

Indigenous cultures still identify with their more recent past. Both among the Finns, the majority, and the Sámi, the minority inhabiting northernmost Finland and Fennoscandia, there is a strong will to maintain or revitalize the connection with nature. Later on in this project, the interest in connecting to the larger Finno-Ugric heritage is also compared to the west of Fennoscandia, namely Norway. Our study will ask and clarify the meanings given to more-than-human interactive connections. It does not limit the interest or suggest importance to any certain cultural tradition or its “age”. The aim is to pass over some restricting and confusing categories and categorizations when analyzing the relationships with the environ-

ment in the contemporary culture. Could this kind of cultural echological attitude offer an alternative to the irrelevant but popular discussion about whose respective relation with the environment and the past is more relevant or evident? Could it help to allow and encourage anybody to update and (re)create a respective, relaxed and active relationship to the environment and the past?

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