

“Thinking like a river: An anthropology of water and its uses along the Kemi River, Northern Finland”

Abstract

Do people who live with a river also think like a river? Does everyday and professional engagement with a flowing stream resonate with ways of understanding social and ecological relationships in terms of flows? This thesis explores in what ways Kemi River dwellers, in the Finnish province of Lapland, use and have used the waters of their home river, and how their skills and experiences are reflected in their conceptualisation of the riverine world.

Based on a year of ethnographic fieldwork, I portray river dwellers' relations with the Kemi, focusing on practices and narratives and how the flow of water and other matter figures in them. Having undergone radical transformation over the course of people's lives, the river is tightly interwoven with personal biographies. An environmental history reveals how people and stream have mutually shaped each other for a long time and continue to do so today. Even orientation and topology in the area reflect the layout and flow of the river.

I focus on three activities, fishing, transport and hydroelectricity generation, that have been and are of central significance for the relations of river dwellers and the Kemi River. Fishing, formerly the major political-economic river use but economically marginal today, continues to provide a significant way of engaging with and coming to know the river. Boating has radically changed with damming, mechanisation and the displacement of travel and transport to the roads, and presently constitutes a way of performing one's belonging to the Kemi, in terms of both “understanding” its waters and claiming them politically. Similarly, timber transport has recently shifted from the river to the roads, though the memories of large-scale floating operations are still prominent in river dwellers' stories and the riverine landscape. The roads, in turn, provide transport arteries quite different from the river, but do share some characteristics with it, such as a dependence on weather conditions. Finally, hydroelectricity infrastructure widely transformed the river dwellers' world and introduced a powerful technology negotiating water flows, electricity markets and inhabitants' sensibilities.

Scrutinising these practices and narratives reveals profoundly rhythmic patterns in the river dwellers' activities, the river's dynamics and the world around. The annual course of the seasons and weekly and daily rhythms of discharge, temperature, work and other patterns, make the river dwellers' world an ever-transforming phenomenon. Life on the river emerges as the ongoing articulation of these manifold rhythms, shaping and being shaped by their interaction. The flows of life and the frictions of everyday encounter continually make and remake the river and its inhabitants, negotiating national strategies, economic power, river dweller ingenuity, and the currents of the Kemi River.