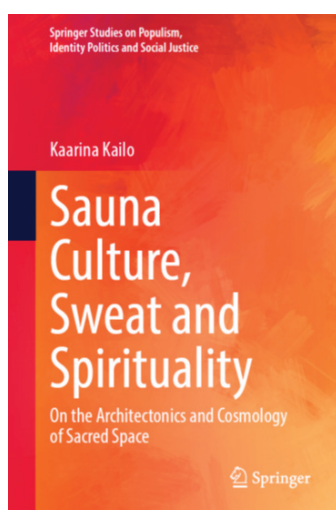


BOOK REVIEW

Sauna as Sanctuary: Ecofeminist Visions of Roots and Revival



Kaarina Kailo. *Sauna Culture, Sweat and Spirituality*. Cham: Springer, 2025. 410 pp.

This book by Kaarina Kailo, who has previously authored several books in Finnish dealing with similar topics, is a cross-cultural, comparative interpretation of the ritual practices and cultural-religious backgrounds related to various types of saunas and other sweating spaces. An average reader may be somewhat familiar with some of the sweating cultures Kailo describes, but as her book exemplifies, there are many more: besides sauna traditions in Baltic, Scandinavian and German regions, there are Irish, Iberian/Galician, Ojibway, Micmac, Cree, Lenape, Pueblo Indian, and Temascali sweat rituals under scrutiny. However, *hammam* traditions that are mainly spread in the Middle East and North Africa are mentioned rather in passing.

Kailo tries to look back into history as far as possible and while describing conflicting theories about the roots and starting points of saunas in the world, she assumes that ecological and climatic conditions have given rise to various types of saunas, not necessarily because of a diffusion of ideas and cultural

influences, but because the human mind comes up with similar responses in similar circumstances (p. 153). Nevertheless, the book speculates that the spiritual roots of the sauna may be in the Paleolithic era's bear religion and the woman-oriented first rituals of rebirth and regeneration, from Native menstruation huts to sweat lodges (p. ix). These ideas already lead the reader to Kailo's central arguments but also to her steadfast ecofeminist and spiritual feminist stance. Already in the beginning of the book one will encounter passionate future-directed insights, such as "We would do well to use the sauna as a means of decolonization [of] the misguided human norms of greed and competition, and as the space for rites of passage and initiation aimed at" (p. v–vi) or "It is timely to also study the ecological importance of sweat rituals for addressing today's planetary threats, climate change, mental dysfunction, militarism, and increasing multilevel violence" (p. ix). These hint that Kailo is not writing from a neutral bystander viewpoint but is at the same time a social activist with clear personal spiritual perspectives.

Indeed, discussions about the connections of sauna rituals to matrilineal or matristic civilizations with Great Mother and bear cults continue throughout the book, and as Kailo frames her sources herself, she refers much to "brand-new research on matristic cultures" whereas "'matristic' is the term Gimbutas uses to refer to goddess cultures" (p. 19). However, there is not much discussion about researchers from different eras who have presented counterarguments to such theories. For instance, Kailo highlights patriarchal notions of sacred and profane, grounding her understandings in the findings from authors like Marija Gimbutas and Riane Eisler, who have written about ancient goddess cultures of pre-patriarchal times. Here, the reader would have expected these theories to be placed within a broader scientific discussion. However, Kailo is aware of the somewhat alternative approach she takes, describing it as a "somewhat deviant research endeavor" (p. vi) and detailing her working methods as follows: "While I base my theories on scientific studies, I have also read fictional accounts of Old Europe and other historical sites, which, based as they are on serious scholarship, also allow us to speculate on past ritual life" (p. 10). She does not deny her own role as initiator or reviver of rituals that carry a certain holistic feminist agenda: "When seeking to reintroduce woman-friendly spiritual rituals, I have been myself busy integrating into them traditional ecological knowledge, wisdom traditions that honor all life forms, human/other-than-human animal relations, and consciousness-raising about ethical goals and a solidarity-based lifestyle" (p. 17).

While describing her methods, Kailo expresses opposition to the patriarchal approach and support for engaging various senses, by stating: "My method, then, is also visual in reversal of the abstract and detached, almost clinical tendency of patriarchal scholarship with its left-brain idealization. I illustrate the book with images of little or unknown goddesses or emos from my culture, to give them a face and voice" (p. 20). A special subchapter is devoted to the

notion of the masculinized sacred for further clarification of her viewpoints (p. 33 ff), and then she moves on to explaining feminist spirituality (p. 39 ff) and its perceived proximity to indigenous views on the spiritual, while describing, for instance, the principles of the gift economies of which, in her opinion, singing can be one (p. 81 ff).

Kailo emphasizes her intention to look for the “affinities” among the many described sweat cultures, rather than focusing on their differences. However, some of her conclusions seem overly simplistic and idealistic, such as arguments that “dominator societies... replaced the joy- and life-centered spiritual worldview of Paleolithic and Neolithic societies following Bronze Age conquests of Old Europe by a violence-oriented lifestyle” (p. 9). She stresses that she identified the importance of the bear – or the Great Bear Mother – in most of the viewed cultures but it seems too absolutistic to claim that all indigenous worldviews encompassed the same harmonious more-than-human dimensions of perception of the sacredness of the land, animals, plants, rocks and spirit beings. Thus, the role of the practitioner or the alternative historian often seems to dominate over the researcher’s role. On the other hand, this combined role is also unique and has allowed Kailo to participate in and gain insights into spiritual practices, which, if she were only in the role of an observant researcher, would perhaps not have been approachable in such a direct experiential way.

Among other things, Kailo explains the symbols she finds most important in association with the sauna culture, e.g. by looking at the affinities between the shape of a sweat lodge and the shape of a mound or beehive, both with a small, low entrance, requiring the participant to enter with humility, and with a center pole connecting the heaven and earth. Additionally, the symbolism of the womb and the sauna ritual as a form of rebirth are highlighted, leading to the next level – symbolism related to the bears whose cyclical pattern of winter hibernation and emergence from caves in the spring with cubs is, in turn, viewed as a symbol of fertility, rebirth and regeneration. It is not far from here to reach the cults related to bear gods. However, at times, I as a reader would have liked a more precise distinction between when it comes to Kailo’s own conclusions and when it comes to the views of other researchers or the ones of her interlocutors.

According to Kailo’s conclusions, the sauna deserves to be viewed as the center of the world and the solution to all evil: “The sauna, after all, is the first religion, the first temple of healing and well-being and the matrix where peaceful, trusting relationships have been celebrated since the beginning of time” (p. 388). Being contrasted “to post-Enlightenment mechanistic views of Nature as a mere dead machine” (p. 337), sauna rituals have the potential to lead us back to the worldviews of “unity, oneness and Earth Democracy” (p. 338). This sounds somewhat like an esoteric self-help book – especially when being aware of the sauna as a space where rituals with a wide range of

intentions (including black magic) have been performed according to Baltic-Scandinavian folklore sources, and considering the fact that Kailo herself points out, namely that for many people today the sauna has simply become a place to drink beer, party and relax. But it would be, of course, great if such an ideal world really worked and revived sauna rituals could function as a tool of empowering and bringing about a world of balance, equality, peace and sustainability (cf. p. 386). In any case, this book is likely to be successful in reinforcing identity narratives, so the book has its place and readership in our pluralistic post-secular contemporary society. But there are even more possible ways of reading it. Since the book contains technical descriptions of preparing and using various sauna whisks and oils (e.g. “You can use the supple birch easily also for binding the *vihta* and its odor is considered superior”, p. 349), it can also be read as a practical manual that can offer sauna lovers new possibilities for experimentation. Additionally, for myself, the appendix that described Abigail Harkey’s visit to Kailo’s sauna in a detailed and multisensory way was quite exciting and intriguing reading, shifting the boundaries between the researcher and the research subject even more. In her description, Harkey comes up with a keyword that seems to be well suited to sum up Kailo’s approach, namely “intuitive knowing”, that seems to supersede other, less experiential sources and theories.

From a more technical aspect, it would have been recommended not to include long web links in the book text; from the linguistic viewpoint, having a native speaker review the text would have been useful to correct grammar mistakes and make the book easier to read.

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