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Баня– sauna– пывсян A Memory Play from Kozlovka Village

12 plywood pieces, 10x10 cm, laser engraving, birch branches.

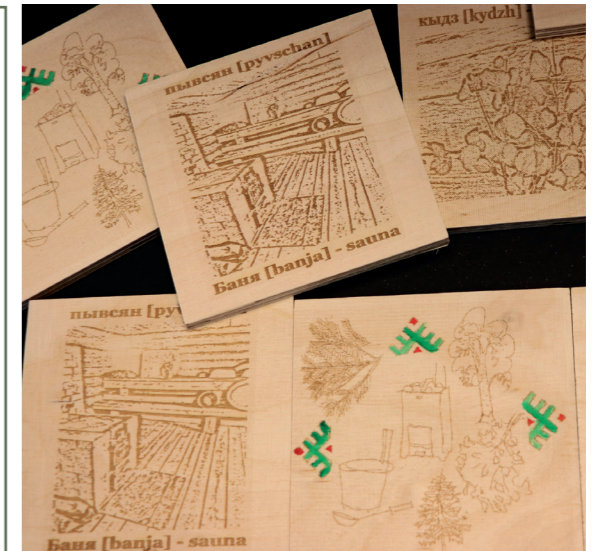
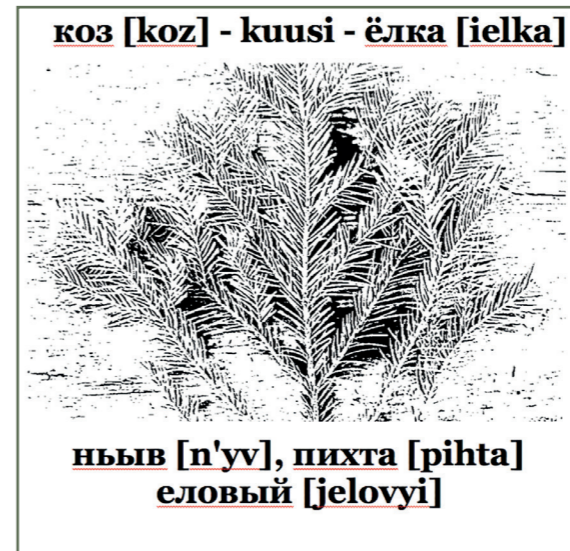
Ба́ня - мать втора́я - The banya is like a second mother

Feeding the body, healing the soul: the sauna is a sanctuary of peace and relaxation. There is not much difference between the Finnish sauna and the Russian banya [Баня], or, in Komi, ывсян [pyvschan]. In addition to bathing, the sauna is the place to have conversations about life and share ideas or beliefs with each other. People have treated the sick and given birth in the sauna, washed the dead, and taken care of many everyday chores. Both sauna and banya are also a way of living close to nature and maintaining balance with nature.

The Finnish people have always been linked with the forest. Around 72 per cent of Finland's total land area is covered in forest. Finland is most heavily forested country in Europe. Pine, fir and birch trees are significant features of the landscape. Besides wood production, birches are important to the biodiversity of northern coniferous forests. I can easily agree that light green birch stand at the lake-shore in the early summer is one of the most famous Finnish landscapes. Silver birch is the national tree species of Finland with a great importance to the Finnish culture and landscape. (Hynynen & Niemistö 2009/ 2017.)

The *vasta* (also called *vihta*) is the birch whisk used in a Finnish sauna. They are made in a traditional way where the ends of the branches are bound together with a rope made of a birch branch. Komi people normally use a whisk made out of birch (кыз [kydzh]), just like the Finns. But, the whisks that we saw in Kozlovka and used in the banya every evening were made of fir branches. It was an experience, a good one.

In Komi Republic the forested area covers about 300 000 km² making up 4.1% of the forested areas in Russia. According to Lopatin, Kolström & Spiecker (2006) the vegetation cover of Komi is dominated by middle and northern taiga forests, with the exception of mountainous parts of the Komi Republic where forest-tundra and tundra eco-systems have developed. Boreal vegetation is dominated by two pine species (primarily by *Pinus sylvestris* and rarely by *Pinus sibirica*), Siberian spruce (*Picea obovata*) and Siberian fir (*Abies sibirica*). Pubescent birch (*Betula pubescens*) forests are the first stages of post-



Images Mirja Hiltunen

fire succession. (Lopatin, Kolström &, Spiecker 2006.)

In Komi tradition the fir tree is a symbol of the surrounding nature. The pre-Christian worship of the Komi people consisted of various cults like the cult of trees, patron spirits and animals. Many forms of animism were common. Komi people living in the forest zone had rules for protecting nature with regard to respecting the forest, such as cutting the trees only in a case of necessity. In the past, Komi had original forest reservations, which were maintained by a public worship. It was also considered that trees could understand human speech and there are also legends of the forest spirit Versa and the water spirit Vasa among the others.

The Finnish god of the forest and ruler of the game therein is called *Tapio*. He was a personified form of various forest spirits important to hunters who were dependent on the forest for their livelihood. Tapio was sometimes depicted as being the size of a fir tree, fierce-looking, like a human being in the front, but like a gnarled old tree from behind. The various forest deities and spirits were generally capricious in nature and had to be constantly placated by those who were dependent on their favours. (Encyclopaedia Britannica.)

I discussed with Francis Joy, who works as a researcher in Sustainable Development Group in the Arctic Centre, Rovaniemi, Finland, about the trees. Francis is a Druid himself and he tells the fir tree is governed by the element of fire and the ruling planet is Mars. The resin - sap from the tree is the European equivalent of Frankincense, because of its qualities to help with healing respiratory problems and strong purifying powers when the resin is burned as an incense.

The ancient Celts recognized the fir's ability to outlive and outlast most other trees, and so gave it representations of resilience and longevity. The fir survives in torrid conditions, and is able to survive in challenging weather as well as substandard soils. The Celtic meaning for the fir is a symbol of honesty, truth and forthrightness. Their evergreen nature signifies hope, promise and renewal. (Celtic Meaning: Fir tree.)

The birch is known in the Druid tradition as 'The Lady of the Woods'. The leaves from the tree are very detoxing when dried and used in teas and are therefore, good for helping to clean the body of any impurities. Francis continues:

Birth is governed by the element of earth and ruling planet is the moon. In Britain, Witches bind the birch twigs to a handle made from Ash wood in order to make broom sticks for flying to the moon (out of body travel) and therefore, the tree is also associated with ecstasy. The Silver colour of the bark when seen in moonlight brings forth the trees purifying properties and also is said to be associated with shapeshifting. On May 1st (Beltain), which is a fertility festival, beds of birch brush would be made for the mayday love-making, because of the trees strong feminine power regarding its associations with women and the moon.

According to Celtic tradition birch is a powerful metaphor for our lives, while the birch is a brilliant symbol of renewal, it is also symbolic of stability and structure. The druids also held the birch as the keepers of long-honored traditions. (Celtic Meaning: Birch tree)

There are many proverbs and sayings about banya and sauna in both Russian and Finnish. We say "The sauna without a birch whisk is like food without salt". But after I dipped the whisk made of fir into cold water and then smacked it briskly against my entire body, I also agree with my Russian friend who said, "The birch whisk is for losers".

In any case, all of us women on the benches shared the view:

"В бане помылся — заново родился. "Washing in the banya is like being born again".



Warm thanks to you ladies with whom I had the pleasure of enjoying the banya together on Kozlovka village during our stay. Special thanks Nadezhda Bazhenova and Kirill Istomin for helping with the Komi and Russian words and to Francis Joy for having interesting discussions about trees.

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