PhD Dissertation Thesis

TRADITION – HERITAGE – INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE
AN ANALYSIS OF VILLAGE FESTIVITIES AND RECREATED CUSTOMS IN THE BIHAR REGION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

By Krisztián Simon (M.A.)

Supervisor Dr. Antal Lovas Kiss

University of Debrecen
Doctoral School of History and Ethnography

Debrecen, 2015.
I. The aims of the doctoral thesis, the outline of the topic

In my dissertation I examine the applicability of the concepts of the Hungarian ethnographic tradition and the Western-European legacy through festivities and recreated customs of certain settlements in the Northern-Bihar region in Hungary. It was an important aspect while selecting the appropriate region that in this area the twentieth-century historical and political changes created an unfavorable economic and social climate. Local societies explain their resulting peripheral positions primarily with the loss and fading of their identity. They aim to strengthen their identity and their bond to their settlement by creating festivities, for which locally documented spiritual and material ethnographic elements are often used. Where these cultural elements are missing, we encounter consciously designed settlement festivities. There is a serious impact of the globalization trends mediated by mass communication (Internet, media) from the twentieth century on the modes of festivity creation of the settlements. This cultural content defines today’s settlement festivities complemented with certain segments of the extinct but later revived local or national (from the Carpathian Basin) peasant culture. My hypothesis in connection with this is that the motivations for festivity creation and the examination of the selection of the required material and intangible cultural elements exceed the ethnographic conceptual framework of tradition and tradition making and such Western-European modes of application could be found among them that could be interpreted as a process of “patrimonialization”. Based on the combination of this double conceptual basis the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization provided the definition for intangible cultural heritage and the related convention. In my dissertation I present this definition and the possibilities of the application of the convention on the preservation of intangible cultural heritage created by UNESCO on the regional level.

I conducted my preliminary research based on the Bread Festival of Báránd in the Bihar-Sárrét region, the Village Day of Sárrétudvari located ten kilometers from Báránd and the May Polenta Festival of Létavértes, a town situated five kilometers from Hungarian-Romanian border. All the three festivities have been created for different motivations. In the case of Báránd a local product appears as the main focal point. Its creation is partly owing to the Village Days of Sárrétudvari, since the population of Báránd was watching the diversity of the village day with envy. Thus, with the examination of the cultural events of the two adjacent settlements I intended to uncover the methods of application of the local cultural elements, so I chose Sárrétudvari Village Days as the second ground for research.
The question of identity was an important factor in choosing the third village festivity. Létavértes was formed by merging two settlements with different status in 1970 and this caused some smaller and bigger conflicts. This situation could be observed to this day as in the background motivation for the town’s polenta festival we could detect an attempt to resolve this conflict.

The second part of my thesis is comprised of the analysis of dramatic folk customs connected to winter that were resurrected in the beginning of the twenty-first century, the nativity reenactments. The selection of nativity reenactment groups from Báránd, Hosszúpályi and Komádi was based on the fact that they participate in the International Convention of Nativity Reenactment Groups in Debrecen nearly every year. This event provides the possibility for nativity reenactment groups from the Carpathian Basin to demonstrate their skills. Thus the reedited customs are exposed to several influences, such as the possible adaptation of other nativity reenactment structures or a theatrical stage alien to the custom, where groups perform their own settlement’s (or another region's) play. My hypothesis connected to this was that since these reconstructed enactments do not appear in their original social environment and function, the nature of these customary practices is greatly determined by the social status and function of the people reenacting these nativity scenes. That is why I also analyze the ideas behind the revival of folk customs as well as the nature of the recent customary practices and their social conditions. I have extended my research with the analysis of the convention of nativity reenactment groups because of its impact on the dramatic performances and their performing groups. It could be noted as a recent development that the town council of Debrecen and the organizers of the convention aim to propagate the event to the register of good practices of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. Thus I examine the possible methods and obstacles of this registration.

It was the goal of my thesis to extend the tradition/heritage issue to the settlement festivities and nativity reenactments of the small regions of Bihar, at the same time providing adequate methods of analysis for the examination of twenty-first-century cultural phenomena. The UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage based on international cooperation and agreements attributed to this as it provides a broad frame of reference in the contemporary research on the small regions of Hungary.

The first part of my doctoral dissertation contains the introduction of the terminology I applied to examine my hypothesis. The second part revolves around the concept of heritage, in which I describe the memory, representation, ethnographic heritage as well as the logic of
actualization. This is followed by the comparison of the concepts of tradition and heritage, after that I describe the formulation of the concept of intangible cultural heritage and how it became a convention and also describe how it works on the international level and in Hungary. The chapter introducing the scientific terminology is concluded with the presentation of the conceptual apparatuses related to settlement festivities and folk customs and of the custom code analysis by Péter Niedermüller that I used as a research method.

The third chapter presents the socio-cultural situation of the settlements in the Bihar region, the results of previous studies concerning settlement festivities and folk customs, the conditions of the selection of the created festivities and recreated customs and the research mechanism employed in the doctoral dissertation.

My empirical data collections concerning the settlement festivities are included in the fourth chapter, in which the Bread Festival of Báránd, the Village Days of Sárrétudvari and the May Polenta Festival of Létavértes are analyzed in detail. This is followed by the chiefly social and intangible cultural heritage related examination of the nativity reenactment groups of Báránd, Hosszúpályi and Komádi in the fifth chapter and the alignment of the closely related International Convention of Nativity Reenactment Groups in Debrecen with the UNESCO convention and the mapping of the possibilities to propagate international registration.

The fifth chapter is followed by the summary of the thesis, explaining the results of the research about the three settlement festivities, the three nativity reenactment groups and the related international convention and emphasizes that today's created festivities, editorial motivations and revival nativity reenactment customs could also be investigated inside an international conceptual frame of reference other than based on the Hungarian concept of tradition. Furthermore, the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage is unlikely to be applied on the areas I intend to uncover, but owing to its extensive system of criteria and the international co-operations and agreements it serves as an important ground for research for the examinations of the local festivities and customs in the small regions of Hungary in the twenty-first century.

II. Outlining the applied research methods

I have constructed my dissertation based on the deductive method of the social sciences. In the first, theoretical, phase I presupposed the existence of patrimonialization in the structures of the examined festivities. In the second phase I performed the
interdisciplinary presentation of the concepts required for my hypothesis. The thorough assessment of the definitions of cultural heritage, tradition and intangible cultural heritage was made possible by the approaches and paradigms of Hungarian ethnography, the Anglo-Saxon cultural anthropology, the French ethnology and certain Far-Eastern (Japanese) schools.

The basis of the assessment of my presuppositions was my participatory observation, and the information gained through structured and semi-structured interview techniques. The online news reports, the publications of local and regional printed press and media as well as the photographs taken by me or originating from some private collections serve as secondary resources for my research.

In the course of my observations conducted from an etic perspective I managed to uncover intangible cultural elements and processes belonging to the conceptual framework of tradition and heritage. I could participate in the Bread Festival of Báránd, the Village Days of Sárrudvari and the May Polenta Festival of Létavértes in two consecutive years in 2013 and 2014. In contrast, I have been attending the international convention for nativity reenactment groups since 2008 with my fellow students led by associate professor Antal Lovas-Kiss PhD, during which time we made interviews with visitors and members of the performing groups.

In the course of my talks with organizers of the festivities, my questions were primarily targeted on the circumstances of the organization of the festivities, their underlying world of thought (ideology), other organizers, participants, principles of program compilation, and the use of intangible cultural heritage elements that might be found in their program pieces. During the research about the nativity reenactment groups I intended to map the reason of the revival, their stories if applicable, their investigation and the motivation for their participation in the international convention of nativity reenactment groups, the social role and status of the participating performers in their local society.

I analyzed and interpreted my collected data with the assistance of the method of the analysis of certain custom codes determined by Péter Niedermüller (1981). The people, acoustic, kinetic, material, corporal, textual and visual codes, the floral and animalistic symbols together with the investigation of the functions of time and space provided sufficient grounds for the assessment of the existence of intangible cultural heritage as well as for the scientific applicability of the created festivities and the revived nativity reenactment scenes by the definitions of heritage and tradition.

In my thesis I applied that principle of researching contemporary phenomena, which does not treat cultural elements as relics (interpreted in the framework of the role they play in folk culture that is considered to be a more or less closed system), in their distant and
detached reality as a contrast to other cultural elements, but this principle examines cultural elements in correlation to these others. In sum, it examines the cultural contexts of the contemporary age in their historicity, together with their past whenever it is possible.

III. Thesis-like listing of the new scientific discoveries of the dissertation

1. During the examination of the Bread Festival of Báránd my research methods on heritage and tradition analysis verified my working hypothesis. The event hides economic and political ambitions in its motivation for festivity creation, while the locally made bread of Báránd acts as a point of reference for an event disguised as having a role of sustaining tradition. The custom code analysis method of Péter Niedermüller shed light to the fact that the major part of the cultural manifestations applied during the event actually served the purpose of brand making. Among the codes listed here, no such skill- or knowledge system defined by intangible cultural heritage emerges that would concentrate on the processes of production and creations, but all the attention is focused on the ready-made product. Due to this, the application of the UNESCO convention concerning the festival is not possible. My research, however, has confirmed my hypothesis I had set up in the course of my fieldwork. In the event several attempts appear for gaining economic (tourism) and political (identity) benefits. In the structure of the event processes of patrimonialization are hidden, where certain material and intangible cultural elements emerge via deliberate selection.

2. The May Polenta Festival in Létavértes is the realization of personal (subjective) construction of a peasant meeting originating from individual memory. It is not nearly a time for entertainment, but it is a composed customary event, the essence of which is provided by common work (baking, cooking) and the reference to tradition. Its purpose is to present the cultural elements of the traditional agrarian society – on the small group or community level – in a way that the documented (collected) intangible and material products are not necessarily made to appear in their original form and esthetic quality, but the knowledge and skills required for the creation thereof could be acquired and applied, in other words past knowledge could receive self-justification in the present. It is very important to refer to the peasant way of life in order to attain this goal, which creates a celebration of a collective memory in the framework of a
festival, based on the individual memory of the creator of the event. The common celebration (celebratory nature) at the same time also attempts to resolve the putative or real social conflicts originating from the merger of the two settlements in 1970. This way applicability of patrimonialization for gaining political (symbolic) benefits emerge, since the employed material and intangible cultural elements focus on the attempts at creating local uniformity and strengthening the sensation of belonging together. At the same time the polenta festival is a defined set of cultural segments of symbolic nature (polenta and acts of tradition preservation) selected and created through subjective points of view, striving to engrave norms of behavior (a person from Nagyléta or Vértes ought to be considered a citizen of Létavértes). This political goal recalls the Hobsbawn process of tradition making in the course of the investigation of the motivation for festivity creation.

3. The third examination of the dissertation concerning village days was targeted to the Village Days of Sárrétudvari. The peculiarity of the event was that from among trends emphasized and mediated by the media and the local material or intangible cultural elements the global components prevailed. Actually it is very hard to find a program in the village day that could be related to Sárrét or, in a narrower context, to the settlement of Sárrétudvari. Not even the declared image concentrated on the history of the settlement reflects this weighing of the programs. The reason for this could be found in that the organizers (the local government and civilian societies) do not focus on the traditionality and the authenticity of the performances, but to satisfy the needs of the local citizens based on their system of values. The observation of custom codes, at the same time, calls the attention to important points of view concerning intangible cultural heritage. While the concept of heritage could not be measured in the continuous mediation, since it revolves around the recycling of a vanished element for the purpose to define scientific, economic and political benefits. However, the village day was not created based on previously died-out custom, but it is designed to resolve the lack of community events in the village. Thus, it gains meaning as such a social festivity, which is built on the trends, fashions and cultural manifestations of the present, so this feature could be aligned with the concept of intangible cultural heritage unlike the centrally controlled nature of the event, which is not only legitimized, but it is also manipulated by the population, but it does not dedicate sufficient attention to its past traditions and customs (raising awareness), so twenty-
first century trends prevail in the custom codes. The intangible cultural heritage elements that are present to a lesser degree emerge in the framework of a local public educational and entertaining series of programs, without the role of identity creation or maintenance. Their functions could also not be aligned with the definitions of neither tradition nor intangible cultural heritage, however, the series of events in its structure pursues the goal of emphasizing locality with the creation of an event of celebratory nature.

4. In the course of the research conducted about nativity reenactment performances in the Bihar region of Hungary the previously disappeared, but later revived folk traditions were brought to the focal point. It has emerged as a hypothesis that the social role, status, occupation and ideas of tradition of people responsible to put revival customs back into practice again greatly influence the nature of the customary practices. The leader of the nativity reenactment groups of Báránd, Hosszúpályi and Komádi are school or nursery school teachers without exception, who encountered this long-forgotten dramatic folk custom during their job. The members of all the three groups are little children who have met nativity reenactments as a result of the teaching method of their educators. The social acceptance of the three groups’ performances is different. The nativity reenactment group of Báránd, however, did not break up after leaving elementary school. The people, who are adults now, still practice this tradition by visiting individual people or families. In contrast, the other two groups perform only at certain social and cultural institutions. Based on the dramaturgy of the all the three nativity reenactment groups it may be noted that they perform the nativity reenactment scenes of their respective town or village, taken from previous ethnographic collections. The group leaders, however, implement changes in the structure of the scenes on their own volition and by setting up priorities for applying the scenes to the stage. The nativity reenactment groups of Báránd, Hosszúpályi and Komádi perfrom at the International Convention of Nativity Scene Reenactment Groups in Debrecen nearly every year, which could be considered to be the largest forum of dramatic customs in the Carpathian Basin. Besides generating undisputable results in reviving nativity reenactment, the practice of the custom results in the appearance of several alien functions. It is a recent development that the organizers and leadership of the town wish to register the event on the UNESCO list of the best practices.
5. While examining the International Convention of Nativity Reenactment Groups in Debrecen I came to the conclusion that the registration attempt of the organizers only partly satisfies the requirements of the UNESCO convention. I emphasize that the event itself is a typical example of folklorism, during which nativity reenactment groups organized from below no longer conform into the traditional (from the 1940s, 1950s) social context, so their existence serves to fill up a socio-cultural vacuum. The event is the result of an initiative coming from above, the purpose of which is the revival, emphasis and raising awareness to the custom of nativity reenactment scenes in an international framework, but behind the attempts at registration to the UNESCO list is the will of the organizers rather than that of the performers of the custom. It poses a difficulty in registration to the list that certain groups do not perform their own nativity reenactment scenes (such as the performance of a nativity reenactment scene from Halm by secondary school students from Bonyhád in 2012). However, with clarification of these disputed perspectives (the request for registration should be supported by not only the organizers or people and institutions representing the town, but also by the performing groups) the International Convention of Nativity Reenactment Groups in Debrecen has a fair chance of being registered to the UNESCO list of the best safeguarding practices. Its efficiency owing to raising awareness to the practice of the custom is undisputable. Besides the role the convention played in the revival of several nativity reenactment groups, a multitude of customs cohabit in the event, which brings the holders of intangible cultural heritage closer, aims at presenting their customs, while their interaction and exchange of ideas result in supporting the keeping alive of the custom, raising awareness to them and drawing adequate conclusions. This way, it includes the possibility of an international exchange of experiences, making possible regional and subregional co-operation.

6. I could draw the following conclusion from my examinations: in the presentation of the already extinct peasant culture only background motifs and ideas of tradition are expressed, which serve the goal to create and fill the festivities with content. It has become apparent in my doctoral dissertation that the applicability of the UNESCO principles and categories is limited concerning settlement festivities. These still appear inevitable for my analyses, since such intangible cultural elements are placed in the center of the examined settlement festivities that are aligned with basis and safeguarding attempts of the convention. In could be maintained that with the
assistance of custom code interpretation method of Péter Niedermüller, the processes of patrimonialization and tradition making could be observed in the festivity constructions of the Bihar small region of Hungary in the twenty-first century. I emphasize that the although the concepts of the Western European “heritage” and the Hungarian “tradition” that are interpreted as crucial variables reflect diverse scientific approaches to the application and use of cultural heritage, yet they complement each other to formulate a complex research methodology and approach to the examination of the created festivities and recreated customs on the small regional level in the twenty-first century.

VI. The scholarly works published on the subject of the dissertation

5. Szellemi kulturális örökségi elemek felhasználása a Létavértési Májusi Málé Fesztiválon. DOSZ Online kiadás (megjelenés alatt, várható: 2015. szeptember)

V. Conference lectures on the subject of the dissertation

   Szervező: Intercisa Múzeum, Dunaújváros
Elhangzott: Doktoranduszok Országos Szövetsége, Tavaszi Szél 2015. konferenciája.

3. Hagyományteremtés, revival mozgalmak az Észak-bihari konvergencia régiókban.
Szervező: Debreceni Egyetem Történelmi és Néprajzi Doktori Iskola.


VI. Further publications of the author


**VII. Further conference lectures of the author**


List of publications related to the dissertation

Hungarian book chapter(s) (1)

1. **Simon K.**: Struktúra a bihari betlehemes játékokban - különös tekintettel a hosszúpályi betlehemesre.
   

Hungarian scientific article(s) in Hungarian journal(s) (2)

2. **Simon K.**: Falunap és lokális szellemi kulturális örökség Sárrétudvariban.
   
   *Bocskai István Múz. Évkv.* 1, 126-142, 2014. ISSN: 2415-8933.

3. **Simon K.**: Szokásrekonstrukció, revival, motivációk:Bihari betlehemes játékok újrafelfedezése.
   

Non scientific journal article(s) (1)

   
List of other publications

Hungarian book chapter(s) (3)


Hungarian scientific article(s) in Hungarian journal(s) (2)


Informational/educational article(s) (1)


The Candidate’s publication data submitted to the iDEa Tudóstér have been validated by DEENK on the basis of Web of Science, Scopus and Journal Citation Report (Impact Factor) databases.

30 June, 2015