

TRADITION, REVITALIZATION AND INNOVATION IN CONTEMPORARY RITUALS IN SLOVAKIA

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This paper looks at the process of change in rituals in eight western Slovakian villages after 1989 and examines how these changes have been perceived by informants. The following topics are discussed: how have traditional elements survived to this day; how is socio-economic differentiation of the community reflected in rituals; what are the reasons for and functions of revitalization; and which are the new elements introduced after 1989, and how are they perceived by the community?

Key words: *rituals, tradition change, contemporary culture, Slovakia.*

Predstavljeni so novejši procesi v spreminjanju ritualov na primeru raziskave v osmih podeželskih krajih na zahodnem Slovaškem po letu 1989, s posebnim poudarkom na tem, kako jih doživljajo ljudje sami. Obravnavana so naslednja vprašanja: kako so fenomen tradicije preživeli v tem času, kako družbeno-ekonomska diferenciacija skupnosti odseva v ritualih, kateri so razlogi in funkcije revitalizacije, kakšne so inovacije po vsebini, zgledih in v doživljanju ljudi.

Ključne besede: *rituali, spreminjanje tradicije, sodobna kultura, Slovaška.*

Although rituals belong to the most stable cultural elements they do undergo changes. However, in comparison to other cultural phenomena, they change slowly. This can be substantiated by the famous Slovak proverb *Zvyk je železná košela* (Habit is second nature). Rituals have been considered the most traditional part of culture up to this day.

Changes in rituals had not been studied by Slovak ethnologists until the 1970s. The previous historic-comparative approach focused mostly on archaic elements, with emphasis on forms of rituals. A major shift came with the first studies of the contemporary situation and contemporary processes of change. In the initial phase of this process, extinct traditional rituals were inventoried. This was followed by the study of functional aspects of rituals and by content analysis. Analyses of factors causing these changes (dynamic and stabilizing) were undertaken. Even later, the main attention was focused on the study of rituals in the context of family and social relations [Jakubíková 1988, 1999].

We have to consider that due to the given political situation (the Communist regime) religious elements of rituals were neglected; on the other hand, the importance of the newly introduced, civic, and socialist rituals was glorified. Some of them were as follows: no longer being baptized in church, newborn babies were welcomed to the world in mayor's office; International Women's Day celebrations; and celebrating the 1st of May as Labor Day). The aim of this paper is to discuss recent processes of change in rituals that started to take place after the "Velvet Revolution" of 1989, and particularly how they have been reflected in the minds of informants. Discussed are the following topics: how have traditional elements survived to this day; how is socio-economic differentiation of the

community reflected in rituals; what are the reasons for and functions of revitalization; and which are the new elements introduced after 1989, and how are they perceived by the community? The data obtained by this study was compared to the situation in the 1970s. The most significant current development trends in rituals are outlined in the end.

Presented facts are the result of my fieldwork research during the period between 1998 and 2005 in eight villages in Slovakia. Three villages are situated in the northern part of Slovakia: Novot (Námestovo County), a village in the Slovak-Polish border region; Veľké Rovné (Žilina County), a former tinkers' locality; and Stráňany (Žilina County). Three are in the southern part of Slovakia: Hrušov (Veľký Krtíš County), farmers' village; Čajkov (Levice County), a rich vineyard village; and Komjatice (Nové Zámky County), a large village with some characteristics of an agrarian town. Two villages are situated in the Slovak-Czech borderland in the region called Záhorie: Moravský Sv. Ján and Sekule (Senica County).

The above mentioned villages represent different village types with different geographic, historic, and social backgrounds. Their common features are: population above 1000 inhabitants, Slovak ethnic identity, and Roman-Catholic religion. The aim of this study was to show the villagers' views on the topic mentioned above. As their opinions did not differ significantly despite their different localities it may be presumed that they are not the result of local characteristics, but rather reflect the overall changes after 1989 on the macro level.

The research method used in this study was a semi-structured interview. We intended to record reflections and interpretations of changes in rituals after 1989. The data presented in this paper therefore does not represent a description of reality but rather our informants' perceptions of this reality. In accordance with the opinions of Clifford Geertz it is *a narrative construct that is an inseparable component of anthropological texts* [Geertz 2000a: 167], and *each description is an individual interpretation of the informant* [Geertz 2000b: 26]. This level of data is then followed and supplemented by interpretations of the author of this study, i.e. the researcher. Our informants were predominantly women. In the hierarchy of the social-economic status they ranked in the middle.

HOW RITUAL TRADITIONS SURVIVED REVOLUTION

The hypothesis that each radical change, such as a revolution, brings "an earthquake" to the field of rituals has not been proved. Opinions on the present perception of traditions are ambivalent. There are several examples of actual preservation, and even of revival of rituals which had been already extinct. Ethnological studies already pointed out that in some cases *traditions are becoming trendy* [Danglová 1986: 206]. This statement has not only been confirmed, but even intensified. Preservation and revival of traditions were certainly reinforced by the formation of the independent Slovak Republic in 1993. It has been considered a manifestation of "Slovak identity".

For comparative purposes we may refer to a research of a different type of community – community of university students. In the framework of a research of calendar holidays the following observation has been recorded. There is a widespread opinion among the students that one of the major reasons why we should preserve traditional rituals is that they are to balance the recent consumer-society-like character of holidays [Magulová 2001/2002]. To put it simply: the more we preserve our traditional rituals, the less of a consumer society we become.

Rural communities are also keenly aware of the current intense spreading and transplanting rituals from other cultures (e. g. Valentine's Day, Halloween, and others). They consider the existence and future preservation of our original traditions endangered. Foreign rituals are often negatively perceived (especially by the older generation). This is where the ideas on decline, endangerment, and even extinction of our traditions originate. The above mentioned ambivalence of opinions on vitality of traditions is in principle valid. However, there are differences among localities with respect to the active application of ritual traditions.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC DIFFERENTIATION AND ITS REFLECTION IN RITUALS

The hypothesis stated that the growing property differentiation would reflect also in the field of rituals. Especially in comparison with the socialist equality and uniformity it should be significantly reexamined. This hypothesis has not yet been proved. Consciousness of people does not contain what has been called “status symbolism” as yet. A reason of this undeveloped status symbolism may be the shortness of time available for its formation and perception. Another reason must be the egalitarian lifestyle among the inhabitants of Slovakia. This has been confirmed even by sociological researches from the 1990s [Krivý 2005: 262–263]. Local economic elites do not need to manifest their status in rituals. Particularly, they do not want to distinguish themselves on these occasions from the others. If they plan something more extravagant (e. g. a wedding) they go somewhere else. This may be part of the “out of sight, out of mind” strategy; it may also be a more pragmatic way of attaining a higher quality of services. It may be stated that in Slovakia, the rich try hard, and are also fairly successful at it, to signalize that they are not so rich after all.

REVITALIZATION OF RITUALS

Instances of revitalization after 1989 mostly refer to religious rituals (e.g. pilgrimages, Christmas carols singing, performing of Bethlehem plays). This is a reaction to the previous era when rituals were oppressed and even directly forbidden. It was all a part of try-

ing to convert the society to atheism. Revitalization of other rituals is motivated by the contemporary need to make the ritual situation more peculiar. It refers predominantly to those situations where traditional rituals are missing. We may refer here to contemporary urban weddings that have transformed to regular receptions and parties. On the other hand, there are fresh attempts to enrich and further emphasize this important event. Traditional rituals are often revived and revitalized (e. g. the bonneting of the bride).

Another reason for revitalization is an attempt to emphasize local/regional identity and its uniqueness. This is why traditional forms are revitalized and performed mostly when there is a chance to present “ourselves” in front of “others” (e. g. in case of interlocal or interregional weddings). Revitalizations are very often introduced and practiced by institutions such as school, church, folklore groups (e.g. a wedding organizer orders a folklore group to demonstrate the bonneting of the bride). Reconstructed rituals are performed also on request of tourists.

INNOVATIONS EXAMINED

Innovations have infiltrated mostly material components of rituals (food, clothes, symbolic objects, room decoration). Sources of innovations include rituals from cities, from other localities and regions, but also from other cultures (mostly western). Innovation source remains often unknown. But it is often referred to as an out-of-the-community thing (people say: *It has come from the outside*). Innovations spread through both personal contacts and mass media. Local authorities (such as mayor or a priest) play an important role in the process, but weddings are altered also by people like disc jockeys, cameramen making video records, and in some regions also professional wedding planners called the *starejši*. Contemporary rural communities are more open to accept innovations than those in the past. That is why innovations get accepted rather quickly: *Once someone has started, the others follow*. This concerns mostly innovations with which people can demonstrate their high living standard or copy prestigious elements from western cultures and from the elite.

Summarizing the findings about contemporary changes of rituals and comparing them with the changes in previous decades (in the 1970s and the 1980s) we can define several development trends. I am going to mention those which appear dominant.

The normative character of rituals have been reduced due to democratization, liberalization, and individualization of contemporary life. This means that preservation of a ritual is a matter of individual or family choice and agreement. This applies even to the principal wedding ritual, the bonneting of the bride. A newlywed couple is asked in the course of the wedding whether they are in favor or against the bonneting. In the past, such an option was not possible. Individualization has been promoted also by the possibility to select from various models including foreign ones. The option became at the same time a source of anxiety about the correct choice. It resulted in stress experienced at the wedding

or during other ceremony preparations; examples of this have been often mentioned by the informants. Apparently, this may be the reason why people tend to use professional services (especially for weddings and funerals). Major participants of the ceremony thus become customers that order a ceremony as one orders goods. They select from a professional choice list and pay for its realization. (for example, a professional wedding planner shows the wedding couple videotapes with various types of weddings and they select a model that they like - including the wording of wedding vows, songs, and type of the wedding party).

Visual aspects of ceremonies, aesthetics, and decorativeness have also become very fashionable and dominant. Although this has always had its role and adequate meaning in a ritual situation (Danglová 1998), nowadays it is becoming the priority of the ceremony organizers. In the 1970s, a successful wedding depended mostly upon its guests' satisfaction with catering and entertainment; the primary goal today is the motto: *Let it all look nice*. This extreme importance of the visual aspect is reflected in wedding clothes, hair styles, overall outfit, decorations of the house, church, wedding party room, table settings (matching napkins, ribbons, candles, flowers, and balloons). Even the broom and the dustpan, which are used in the ritual of the plate splinters' sweeping, are decorated with a matching ribbon. Simply, everything that can be decorated gets decorated. This emphasis on the visual aspect can be perceived in the popularity of video recording as well. Since the 1980s, video recording has become widespread especially at weddings; less so on other ceremonial occasions. The quality of the recorded material plays an important role in wedding preparations, and the wedding date very often depends on availability of a skilled cameraman). After the wedding, copies of the wedding videotape circulate among a large circle of people. They are used as a souvenir of the wedding but also as a welcome replacement for a poor TV program.

The visual side plays an important role also at funerals. Caskets, flower decorations, and especially tombstones should all follow the contemporary aesthetic criteria. Attempts to be "in" sometimes result in absurd activities. For instance, a tombstone that had been built in advance gets replaced with a new one if the fashion has changed and if the owners of the tombstone are still alive. This priority of visual, aesthetic aspects of rituals *has been to a great deal promoted by pictures presented in television* [Augé 1999: 88].

As I have already mentioned, these trends vary in different regions of Slovakia. Rituals change due to various factors. Globalization, spreading through many channels, plays a great role. However, there are also ambitions to preserve or even revitalize traditional rituals. It is the everlasting human need to emphasize and highlight important moments in the life of an individual, the community, and nature as well. This is complemented by an aspiration to define identity – local, regional, and national. Due to a high number of various factors influencing the development of rituals, it is very difficult to formulate a prognosis of their future development.

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TRADICIJA, OŽIVLJANJE IN INOVACIJE V SODOBNIH RITUALIH NA SLOVAŠKEM

Prispevek obravnava spremembe v ritualih na Slovaškem po letu 1989. Temelji na terenskem delu v osmih krajih na podeželju zahodne Slovaške v letih 1998–2005. Pri tem se izbrani kraji ločijo po različnem geografskem, zgodovinskem in socialnem kontekstu. Spoznanj so povzeta iz interpretacij pripovedi posameznikov, ki odsevajo njihovo doživetje resničnosti. V ospredju je pokazati na podobnosti njihovih mnenj o sodobnih spremembah ritualov. Ugotovljene podobnosti niso posledica podobnosti na lokalni ravni, temveč bolj izražajo dogajanje po »žametni revoluciji« leta 1989 na makro ravni. Poudariti je treba, da v raziskanem primeru ne gre za analizo ritualne kulture, temveč bolj za premisleke ljudi oz. tega, kar razkrijejo raziskovalcu. Ta raven je dopolnjena z raziskovalkinimi interpretacijami naslednjih vprašanj: kako so fenomeni tradicije preživeli v obravnavanem času, kako družbeno-ekonomska diferenciacija v lokalnih skupnostih odseva v ritualih, kateri so razlogi in funkcije oživljanja ritualov in kakšne so pri tem inovacije (po vsebini, vzorih, v doživljanju ljudi).

V prvem delu je predstavljeno preživetje izročilnih ritualov po letu 1989. Mnenja ljudi o tem so ambivalentna. Revitalizacije se nanašajo pretežno na verske prakse, drugi motivi pa so izražanje lokalne/regionalne identitete in uporaba v turistične namene.

Inovacije so prežele predvsem materialno sestavino ritualov. Vzori prihajajo iz mest, iz drugih pokrajin, pa tudi drugih kultur (pretežno zahodnih). Razširjajo se z množičnimi občili, tudi prek posameznikov (npr. lokalne oblasti in poklicni udeleženci). Sprejetje novosti simbolizira ugled.

V primerjavi s 70., 80. leti 20. stoletja lahko prepoznamo nekaj prevladujočih teženj: normativni in sankcijski značaj ritualov se je zmanjšal s povečano demokratizacijo, liberalizacijo in individualizacijo sodobnega življenja. V ospredju in modne so vizualne, estetske in krasilne razsežnosti ritualov, kar velja za različne slovaške pokrajine in na različnih ravneh.

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