
TRADITION AS ILLUSION

THE ANALYSIS OF A VIDEO RESEARCH PROJECT¹

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In 1987 I went three times to the village of Ležaje, which lies in Bukovica, North Dalmatia, about 40 km from the Adriatic coast. My colleagues from Zagreb had invited me to join them in the production of an interesting video film about the last sheperds who practice transhumance in the region of Bukovica.² There is only one sheep-farmer left in Bukovica who still drives his flock to graze on the high pastures of Velebit for four months every year. Our video cameras followed his flock from its winter pastures on the coast all the way until its return from the highland pastures. However, it was my very first visit to Ležaje that is in fact responsible for this paper.

We first visited the village at the time of the Orthodox Christmas, that is, at the beginning of January 1987.

All the inhabitants are Orthodox. All the eleven families of the village bear the surname of Ležaja.

When we first came there, we wanted to document the winter pasturing of the flocks as well as Christmas customs, if it was possible.

Although our team was not big, four people altogether, it was clear that our presence disturbed the inhabitants and affected the spontaneity of their behaviour. How was this manifested?

I had known, from works on the subject, the framework of the celebration of the Orthodox Christmas, called "badnjak". Naturally, I expected to see a local, modified, form of the celebration; at worst, I was even prepared to believe that the custom was no longer practised. Verbal information about the subject surprised me. It namely turned out that the inhabitants of Ležaje are familiar with the rich form of traditional Christmas celebration, but our informants insisted that all that referred to the past and that nowadays no one believed in old customs any more. That is why I did not find it suspicious when the villagers in whose home we spent most of the time discreetly denied us their hospitality in the afternoon of the "badnji dan" (the day before Christmas).

We returned to Ležaje on the next day, which was Christmas. To my great astonishment, we discovered evidence of the celebration in several houses. The remains of the oak logs were smoldering on the hearths and the floor round the hearths were strewn with Christmas straw. Christmas candles and "žičak", a kind of eternal

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flame that is lit on Christmas Eve, were burning in the houses. We had obviously wrongly assessed the degree of the custom's preservation. I assumed we were faced with the following:

1. We had neither as a team nor as individuals acquired the confidence of the villagers necessary for us to be invited to join their family circles at Christmas.
2. This means that in their system of values the "badnjak" is still considered an important holiday that is not accessible to everyone, and therefore the moment of celebration requires proper intimacy.
3. In spite of our overt curiosity to find out how the celebration is carried out and what actually takes place, the informants themselves were not able to distinguish everyday events from ritual ones in order to call our attention to the latter. Whenever we asked them about a particular detail, they retorted it was nothing out of the ordinary and that all that was done, like the baking of bread, the slaughtering of sheep and goats, the making of fire on the hearths, was done in the same way as every other day. They ascribed all that might have indicated superstition to their ancestors, for they, so they said, did not practise it any longer.

In these events I could discern an authentic situation in which a traditional custom is steadfastly kept alive due to its ability to literally hide itself in the everyday way of life. To an outsider such a custom appears as sheer illusion.

I decided to study the phenomenon more thoroughly. On the one hand I was becoming interested in the factography of the Ležaje Christmas celebration, its anthropological truth and its comparison with the general model of the Orthodox Christmas, while on the other hand I wanted to find out if the video camera, too, would find the custom an illusion.

During 1987 I went to Bukovica three more times and built such a close relationship with the inhabitants that the family of Lazar. Ležaje invited me to join them in the celebration of Christmas in 1988. They also gave me permission to shoot a film of their family holiday.

Before I start describing my experience in shooting the film, let me briefly present the model of the Orthodox Christmas as it is described in Yugoslav ethnological studies.

The ancient (Serbian) religion was based on animism. With the advent of Christianity, the old notions and holidays merely got new names, while the magical and the demonic lived on in folk customs. The strongest of all the elements is the cult of ancestors, which manifests itself most prominently on the "Badnji dan" (the day before Christmas). In a broader perspective, this is a cult of nature with traces of totemism.

Events essential for the traditional celebration of Christmas take places on the following days: *the "Badnji dan"* (6th January, the day before Christmas), *Christmas* (7th January), *God's day* (8th January) and *the "Božić mali"*, or "Little Christmas" (New Year's day according to the Orthodox calendar, coming 8 days after Christmas). The most important of these are the Badnji dan and Christmas.

The central event of the festivities is the "badnje večer", or Christmas Eve. Each household makes special preparations for it. The basic components of this celebration are Christmas straw, the "pečenica" (a roast pig or sheep), Christmas straw and the "badnjak" (an oak log). These ritual objects are full of symbolism which, however, is subject to different interpretations in different regions. Ethnologists are unanimous in that the "pečenica" appears in the symbolic role of the corn demon, the straw in the role of the corn spirit, in this way symbolizing the field with crops, and the "badnjak" in the role of the forest spirit of vegetation. The killing of the animal (pig, cock or sheep) that will become the "pečenica" is a substitute for killing the corn demon, in other words, a remnant of the custom of immolating a totemic animal, which is Indo-European legacy. All the activities related to the oak log, or the "badnjak", are remains of a special kind of tree veneration. Great attention is paid to the way the oak is cut down and then handled on the hearth. It is felled by a boy, a shepherd or the master of the house just before sunrise on the "Badnji dan". The log is brought into the house on Christmas Eve ("badnje večer"), when the family are gathered round the hearth. They treat it as a human being. It is hewn into a slightly anthropomorphic shape. They offer it food and drink. The master of the house strews straw on the floor round the hearth and everybody lies down on it. The children behave like chickens on this straw. Although the "pečenica" is ready, the family fast, for the invitation to dinner is extended only to the spirits of ancestors.

This practice is clearly pagan. Although Christmas is essentially a Christian holiday, this is manifested only in the rite of lighting the "žičak", the eternal flame burning in oil, and in the lighting of candles on Christmas morning. In both cases those who light the candles and the flame cross themselves in the Orthodox manner.

Another ancient component of the Christmas celebration is waiting for the first visitor, called "polaženik", and his arrival on Christmas day. This is actually a part that has been agreed upon beforehand and which obliges its performer to stick to the traditional magical scheme. The "polaženik" may be a person (man, woman or herdsman) or an animal (hen, sheep or ox).

The archaic custom of treating the "polaženik" to a feast now takes the form of Christmas dinner which is a festive way of stopping Christmas fasting, still in use everywhere. At dinner it is obligatory to eat Christmas bread and the meat of the "pečenica".

As I have mentioned, I was invited to spend Christmas with Lazar Ležaja's family, which is one of the eleven families who make up the village community. Lazar's wife is called Ljuba and his sons, who attend primary school, are Davor and Damir. The extended family includes Lazar's mother Milica. Lazar is a member of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia. He used to work as a watchman in near argil factory, but for several years now he has been on compulsory leave because the factory closed down.

These details about Lazar are essential for understanding certain events that took place within the framework of the Christmas celebration and which were enacted by Lazar as master of the house.

As a communist and as a former watchman (the job considerably increased his reputation in the village), he felt obliged to properly present the local cultural curiosity, that is, the Christmas celebration, to our video team. To be honest, however — the custom acquired its status of curiosity only due to our persistent interest in it (which I have already mentioned).

My collaborator and I arrived at Ležaje on Tuesday, 5th Jan. 1988, that is, two days before Christmas. We were accommodated in the couple's bedroom, in the new concrete house. The family use three buildings to live in, and in all three of them, but mostly in the yard, preparations were under way for the Christmas celebration.

The oldest building is a smoke house, called "kuča vatrelica", which is a one room stone-built and stone-covered house with an open fire-place and no electricity. It is here that they always bake bread and gather to celebrate Christmas. The whole family used to live here once. The second building, in which Lazar's mother Milica now lives, is a bit younger and has a kitchen that also serves as a living-room with a bed in it. Until the concrete house was built, the whole family had lived in this kitchen. Although they now have a "modern" house with two bedrooms, living-room, kitchen and cellar, they still spend most of the time at the grandmother's house, which is warmest, especially in winter, because the fire is constantly laid in the stove. When Lazar's children get ready for the school in the morning, they have breakfast in this old kitchen. The "modern" house is heated only on great holidays and its "modern" living-room serves only to entertain guests, watch television, briefly, for prestigious events.

The lively exchange of scenes of events was one of the more interesting aspects of our shooting. The three days were busy with activity from morning till night, with constant changes of scenes, but always within the radius of the three buildings and yard, without considering the village exteriors.

Before we started shooting, I let Lazar inform me in detail about what was going to happen in the three days to come. He quickly got used to letting me know in time what the next event would be and where it would take place in this way I managed to avoid any retakes and interruptions of action. If a certain event is not presented on the final tape, it is either because it is not essential or because I did not manage to shoot it owing to rapid and surprising course of events. In this way all of us, the protagonists as well as the video team, together contributed to the "direction" of the documentary.

While editing the video, I tried to present the events in a chronological order, because I find it to be critical to the understanding of the "Badnjak".

I have already mentioned that my colleague and I arrived at the scene of events two days before Christmas, which greatly surprised Lazar, who had thought we were interested only Christmas Eve (the "badnje večer"). So it was already on 5th Jan. that we could start shooting the preparation for the Christmas celebration, that is, the killing of the first goat and the fetching of brushwood. Technologically speaking, neither activity outwardly differs from everyday

activities of the villagers. I find this extremely important for understanding of further events. Whoever expected ritual events to differ in form from everyday ones would be mistaken. On the contrary, the whole structure of ritual consists of purely everyday activities that are charged with ritual meaning only because they are part of a traditional festive scheme.

It is customary to kill two animals for Christmas. One is cooked and the other roasted (that is why it is called "pečenica", a roast). It was surprising that Lazar had slaughtered one goat already two days before Christmas. It was supposed to be cooked on Christmas morning. In other households they usually kill both animals in the "Badnji dan". I soon found out why Lazar had been in such a hurry. He is highly appreciated as a slaughterer by the villagers. He killed more than ten goats and sheep at his neighbour's houses on the "Badnji dan". So it would have been difficult for him to find time to kill his own goat on the last day.

Fetching brushwood is a very important task in the village of Ležaje because they use a large number of hearths and stoves for baking bread and roasting meat. To carry brushwood, men borrow donkeys, while women carry brushwood on their backs. Before the "Badnjak", it is necessary to look for new supplies of fuel, which they will need to bake Christmas bread and roast meat and to make open fires on Christmas Eve.

The busiest activity takes place on the "Badnji dan" (the day before Christmas). The whole village is a little excited and busy with frantic preparations. The villagers help each other. They arrange for neighbourly assistance in the drive-off and tending of the flocks, the cleaning of entrails of slaughtered animals, the killing of animals, etc. Only towards noon, when the baking and roasting begin, does everyone turn to work at his own fire-place.

Early in the morning, Lazar killed the second goat and prepared it for spit-roasting. Only after he had finished slaughtering his neighbours' animals, he set off to fetch the "badnjak" from his lot near the village. Before shooting this event we had not discussed the details. I must have been rather naive for having secretly expected that Lazar would approach the cutting of the oak with a magic gesture, one of such as are mentioned in ethnological reference books. Nothing of the kind. The very departure did not fit the model. Instead of leaving before sunrise, we went to the wood around 11 a. m. Therefore I was all the more surprised, once back in the yard, when Lazar split the oak log into halves, shaped the so-called "beard" on the bigger "badnjak" and then poured the log with wine of which he had drunk a mouthful from a one-litre enamelled pot. Lazar knew I was surprised although I was standing behind the camera at that moment. He showed his awareness by directing a provocative look at the camera, which he would not otherwise do. Still today I do not know the meaning of both his gestures, the pouring of wine over the oak log and provocative look at the camera. Is the pouring of wine a tradition, something that Lazar saw his father do, or is it an instantaneous inspiration of his, an improvisation, creation of a new custom component? (Because of the camera perhaps?) Anyway, the scene just mentioned is one of the most powerful moments of truth in our video film.

Hearths play an important role in the celebration of the "Badnjak" in Ležaje. The village still has a few ancient smoke houses ("kuća vatrelica"). Those that were demolished have been replaced by new, modern ones. I think that the Ležajas can not live without open fires, either technologically (baking and roasting) or emotionally (the celebrations of the "Badnjak" and of family holidays). Without fireplaces it would be impossible to carry on the tradition of Christmas Eve with the oak log and the straw.

Two key scenes take place on the hearth on the "Badnji dan". First come the baking of bread under a metal cover and the roasting of goat on the spit in the morning. Characteristic components are loaves of bread, ashes, live coals, smoke and the smell of roast meat. The husband and wife as well as the children are busy doing this. Identical scenes can be seen in the neighbourhood.

The second scene of course, is Christmas Eve, the so-called "badnje večer". From the cameraman's point of view, I had known the set from the morning shooting, but I did not know the details. I was only afraid that the presence of the camera would spoil the authenticity of the event, despite the closeness we had developed in the last two days. If I take a second look at this scene today, I find it hard to determine the line between a particular kind of pathos expressed by the protagonists, and a certain distance they showed that might have been due to the presence of the camera. Lazar, in his function of master of the house, directed the proceedings well. When he brought the oak log to the hearth, he surprised me again, this time with the only sentence of any length that he had uttered during the shooting: "Good evening! I bid you merry Christmas, God's Day and St. Stephen's day!" I have a feeling that he had studied this sentence long in advance and that, generally, he had spiritually prepared himself most carefully especially for this hearth scene.

All of a sudden there appeared numerous next door children who had probably been sent by their parents in order to "appear on television". However, their presence can also be explained by the nature of friendly relations cultivated among neighbours, for some are like brothers and sisters to each other.

While I was shooting Christmas Eve at the hearth I did not intervene, I asked no questions, I was only watching through the camera. Nobody felt any pressure directly from me for any special performance. I think they were downright astonished when I turned off the food they had eaten on Christmas Eve, the fast day (lean diet) by the hearth and being filmed.

The components of Christmas Eve as we are getting to know them through our film might be discussed at length. The emphasis would again be on the structure and timing of the activities. Since this is not reconstruction and because I saw evidence of the Christmas celebration last year, I can safely say that the activity taking place in Lazar's house on Christmas Eve, as shown on the film, is a typical Christmas activity in the village of Ležaje.

Its components are: the "žizak" (eternal flame burning in oil, which is lit in the afternoon of the "Badnji dan" and put out on Christmas morning), the spit-roasted goat in the corner, the bringing of oak

logs on to the hearth and, parallel to that, the utterance of the greeting mentioned before, the family's settling down around the hearth, the strewing of straw round the hearth and walking round the hearth in doing so, sitting on the straw, the circling of wine containers from mouth to mouth from which the children are not excluded, and the tasting of the roast goat's foot called "papučnjak". Lazar's family did not eat meat on Christmas Eve; they had eaten a humble supper before the hearth scene.

Lazar brought two oak logs to the hearth; the same happens in every house in the village. He put the big oak log ("Veliki badnjak") to the right of the fire and the small one, called "Priložak", to the left. It used to be a custom once to offer the big oak log some of the food they had eaten on Christmas Eve, the fast day (lean dishes: cod stew, potatoes, fritters called "fritule", all fried in oil).

Christmas day started early in the morning with the cooking of goat in the kettle above the hearth. This was the grandmother's task. Lazar then used the cooked meat to prepare goat soup in the "modern" kitchen, where the last act of the Christmas celebration began. I was particularly interested in the lighting of Christmas candles. A big glass jar (usually one where pickled gherkins are preserved) is filled with maize cobs and two candles are put in it. One is a Christmas candle and the other is dedicated to the dead. In some houses a red wollen thread is wound round the Christmas candle.

I have gathered a lot of information about these Christmas candles from ethnological documents as well as from informants. According to tradition, Christmas candles used to be lit on Christmas morning by means of the brand of the oak log that had been burning on the hearth throughout the night.

The Christmas candle usually burns till evening; in the past, it was put out by drops of wine dripping from a piece of bread soaked in it. The other candle is left to burn out. Traditionally, the lighter of candles used to cross himself in the Orthodox way. I wondered what Lazar would do.

He did not cross himself. He lit the candles with a match.

Evidently there is the absence of religious (Christian) elements in the celebration of the "Badnjak". I wonder if this is the reason that season customs have so long survived in Orthodox parts of Yugoslavia, in spite of their persecution by the communist regime, which was especially common immediately after the war. The regime was much harder on customs based on the Catholic religion. These were particularly forbidden to communists. At present, the establishment is more tolerant of expressions of religious confession, but communists are still not allowed to participate publicly in religious ceremonies. Did Lazar as a member of the League of Communists show some of the naive political sensibility by eliminating the very last religious element from his Christmas performance?

Lazar, his wife Ljuba and his mother Milica seat down to Christmas dinner. The main course was goat soup and cooked goat meat. In the middle of the meal, the first Christmas guests, Lazar's elder brothers from the town, entered the room. Other families in the village get similar visits that day. Visiting of relatives has a strong

tradition and we may presume that it replaces (or continues) the former rounds of the "polaženiki". This statement can be based on the fact that it was only after the arrival of his relatives that Lazar served also cold roast goat meat, the "pečenica", which used to be offered to the "polaženiki" once.

Up to this moment the film has shown 16 shots, or events that took place in three days. What is the result of this video observation? We have encountered several strata of information about the "Badnjak" celebrations in Ležaje.

The first stratum is verbal information about earlier celebrations that are no longer practiced though still remembered. This information can be used for making a historical reconstruction of the "Badnjak" model, but it is not appropriate for the method of visual documentation.

The second stratum is contemporary practice that is carried on and can be seen. This is what we have been able to shoot.

Third comes contemporary practice about which the informants are ready to talk, but is for several reasons inaccessible to outsiders. It cannot be filmed without breaking ethic norms.

The fourth stratum of information is the practice that informants will neither mention nor would be willing to show to outsiders. This is the most secret part of the custom, which borders on religion. We chanced upon an instance of this, in Ležaje, in connection with traditional fortune-telling from the shoulder-blade of immolated animal. The pater familias of a stock-raising family who still practice transhumance with their sheep flocks secretly collected the necessary bones and took them to his wife who was in the meantime watching their flocks of sheep on the winter pasture. (Fortune-telling from animal bones is a woman's task!) Of course, he refused to admit it when we asked what he would need the bones for.

Our experiences and the documentary clearly show the tripartite structure of the "Badnjak" celebration:

1. *the preparation*
2. *the event*
3. *the outcome*

The preparation includes manual work (slaughtering of animals, baking of bread, oak cutting) as well as spiritual preparation which is manifested in renouncing from food, that is, in fasting at the very moment when food is abundantly available on Christmas Eve. The event culminates in the only formally cult event, that is, in the bringing in of oak logs and the strewing of christmas straw around the hearth, perhaps also in the passing around of the pot of wine. The outcome is the arrival of guests (the "polaženiki") who inaugurate the merry feasting and relaxation with food and drink.

This tripartite segmentation is strongly reminiscent of the structure of the liturgical spiritual drama, which entered European culture in the 10th century through a simple dramatization of a Christmas scheme (*Officium* or *Ordo pastorum*). The elements of this scheme are *pathos*, *actio* and *theophania*.

62 The reality of the celebration of the "Badnjak" in the village of Ležaje greatly differs both from the general model of the Orthodox

christmas and from the oral legacy about ancient "badnjak" celebrations in the village. The custom today is somehow void and impoverished, but its structure remains solid and distinct. We can speak of a modified, but living, custom that proves its strength by virtue of its ability to adapt itself to the times. It may be surprising how the whole celebration is embedded in everyday life where the custom has found its natural habitat. Where there is nothing of cult and ritual left, EVERYTHING is cult and ritual.

NOTES

¹ The Orthodox Christmas "Badnjak" (Naško Križnar, 3/4 PAL, 31 min.)

² Video film was realized in the year 1988 and presented on the Symposium Visual Research Strategies (XII ICAES, Zagreb, July 24-31 1988). Its title is THE LEZAJA FAMILY 1987 (Nada Duić-Kowalsky, Tomo Vinšćak, Naško Križnar, 3/4 PAL 26 min.)

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TRADICIJA KOT ILUZIJA

Analiza vizualne raziskave

V referatu so opisane izkušnje, pridobljene pri snemanju in analizi video filma **Pravoslavni Božič Badnjak**, iz proizvodnje Avdiovizualnega laboratorija ZRC SAZU (1988, 3/4 PAL, 31 min.).

V vasi Ležaje (Bukovica, severna Dalmacija), med prebivalci ortodoksne vere, je praznovanje Badnjaka še živo ohranjeno. Na pomembnost tega praznika je bila ekipa posredno opozorjena na ta način, da so ji domačini pri prvem poskusu (leta 1987) diskretno odpovedali gostoljubje, češ, da se na ta dan pri njih nič posebnega ne dogaja. Sele po navezavi tesnejših prijateljskih stikov smo bili povabljeni, da lahko posnamemo vse dogajanje okoli Badnjaka, to je v dneh od 6. do 8. januarja 1988.

V video filmu je prikazano božično praznovanje v družinskem krogu Lazarja Ležaje, v 16 sekvencah. Vsaka od njih je značilen sestavni del sodobnega praznovanja badnjaka, ki ga lahko razdelimo na priprave, na sam dogodek na predbožični večer in na razrešitev praznovanja s prihodom polaženikov. Iz strukture filma je tako jasno razvidna kronologija celotnega običaja in stopnja njegove ohranjenosti v primerjavi s splošnim modelom praznovanja pravoslavne Božiča.

Pri raziskovanju s pomočjo video kamere smo se srečali s številnimi nivoji informacij. Prvi nivo je besedna informacija o starem načinu praznovanja, ki se danes ne prakticira več. Drugi nivo je sodobna praksa, ki je veljavna danes in ki jo je edino mogoče posneti. Tretji nivo je sodobna praksa praznovanja, o kateri so informatorji pripravljene govoriti, ne dovolijo jo pa snemati. Te prakse ni mogoče posneti, ne da bi prekršili etične norme. Četrti nivo informacij je praksa o kateri nočejo informatorji niti govoriti, niti jo pokazati nepoklicanim.

Pri snemanju je bila uporabljena metoda opazujoče kamere, podoba konteksta šega pa je bila ustvarjena s klasičnim anketiranjem. Namen uporabe video kamere je bil fiksirati ključne dogodke šega, kot se odvija danes v vsej svoji banalnosti. V prizorih klanja kože, sekanja hrasta, polaganja »badnjaka« na ogenj, božičnega kosila, itd. ni mogoče videti nobene ritualnosti. To je tudi razlog, da se je šega lahko ohranila pri življenju. Dobesedno se je skrila v vsakdanje dogajanje. Kjer ni ostalo nič kulturnega in ritualnega, je VSE kultno in ritualno.