

“WE PRESERVED EVERYTHING OLD” FOLK TRADITION AND TRADITIONALISM IN CULTURE OF ETHNIC MINORITIES¹

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The paper discusses the conceptualization of two widely spread concepts of culture of ethnic minorities – one which implies that the minority culture is by definition a traditionalist one, and the other that implies it is based exclusively or predominantly on traditional folk culture. These concepts have an impact on the self-understanding of members of the minorities themselves, as well as on the policies toward them by the relevant circles of the majority society. The data used in the discussion is mostly obtained during the long-term field study of Serbs in Hungary.

Keywords: *tradition, traditionalism, folk culture, ethnic minorities, ethnic identity.*

V članku je obravnavana konceptualizacija dveh široko razširjenih konceptov kulture etnične manjšin: ena implicira, da je manjšinska kultura po definiciji tradicionalistična, druga pa, da je osnovana izključno ali pretežno na tradicijski ljudski kulturi. Koncepta vplivata na samorazumevanje pripadnikov manjšin kakor tudi na politike odločilnih krogov večinske družbe. Podatki za razpravo so bili večinoma pridobljeni pri dolgotrajnem terenskem raziskovanju Srbov na Madžarskem.

Ključne besede: *tradicija, tradicionalizem, ljudska kultura, etnične manjšine, etnična identiteta.*

When twenty years ago, as a young researcher, I just started the work on the research project on ethnic identity of Serbs in Hungary,² I got an advice from senior colleagues in the Institute of Ethnography SASA to pay attention to their traditionalism, conservatism, and even inclination towards petrification of certain patterns of their culture. In this view, it was self-implied that a small ethnic group, such are the Serbs in Lovra (Lórev, Hungary), in different ethnic environment and for several centuries at a physical distance from their native land, is an isolated enclave which, closed within itself, perpetuates its “centuries-lasting” cultural patterns. Reading the literature about Serbs in Hungary, I encountered, among else, similar understandings of this ethnic minority as a kind of reservoir of long-lasting traditions, which was also considered as a generally known characteristic of ethnic minorities’ culture in general, for example:

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² The project started in 1989 and has had two phases: the study of the ethnic identity of Serbs in the village of Lovra (Lorev) on the Csepel island, 40 miles south of Budapest, and its changes during the twentieth century (1989–1992), and the study of ethnic identity of Serbs in Budapest and its vicinity in the context of post-communist transition (1995–1998). The results of both phases of the study were published (Prelić 1995, 2008) as well as preliminary results (Prelić 1995, 2006) on the problem discussed in this paper.

In their everyday life, Serbian population of our homeland, as well as Serbs in Pomaz, give a rather prevailing role to old folk traditions which even today³ show very archaic features.

That conservation of traditional treasure, in our opinion, comes from two reasons. Among generally known reasons is the one that folk groups, folk islets and dispersed remnants, separated from its people-native land – exactly because of that isolation – maintain their genuine tradition more intensively (in case of Serbs from Pomaz, that isolation is nearly 300 years long). Another reason is their religion, which distinguishes them from other denominations in Hungary – the Orthodox Christianity, which church regulations are more orthodox and complex than those of the Roman-Catholic or Protestant ones. That religious contraposition, which in past was in the same time the pillar of their nationality, became the guardian of their world of customs. (Kiss 1975: 27; non italic M. P.)⁴

In certain studies of my colleagues – Serbian ethnologists of older generation – who have been giving me the advices, one of important reasons for research of culture of ethnic minorities is, among else, exactly the revelation of archaic, already forgotten aspects of culture, which help the reconstruction of older layers of culture of the majority peoples.⁵ Moreover, in some interpretations, ethnic minorities and mixed environments in general not only keep the archaic traces of their culture, but also of the cultures of surrounding groups. It is interesting to note that, in writing about this, these authors often consider the alleged traditionalism, conservatism and even the archaic character of cultural patterns of ethnic minorities as something unquestionable and generally known, and even obligatory in such cases (see non italic in the previous and the next quote). It follows from such discourse that for these researchers conservatism and traditionalism in ethnic minority culture was something intrinsic, that needs not to be explained:

National minorities or ethnically plural environments on the whole, necessarily more conservative in some segments of life than global society, regardless of their general level of civilisation, or integration into contemporary life trends, often safeguard certain archaic cultural elements or archaic ethnic traits of the national majority long after they have been discarded or forgotten by the latter. (Pantelić 1995: 162; non italic MP)⁶

³ In time of collection: year 1957–58.

⁴ Pomaz is a small town 15 km north from Budapest; of its more than 15000 today's inhabitants, around 200 are Serbs. The author of the text, Maria Kiss, PhD, is a Budapest ethnologist, a long-time researcher of customs of Serbian minority in Hungary.

⁵ To that respect, the most relevant is the research of Serbian village of Svinjica (Svinița), in the Romanian part of the Djerdap Gorge, carried out by a group of researchers from the Ethnographic Museum in Belgrade in summer 1969.

⁶ Allegedly, according to this view, in case of contacts among diverse ethnic groups, they take over some cultural patterns one from another; however, these patterns, as not belonging to “their ethnos”,

If we look more closely the case most often referred to by the author quoted (research of Serbian village Svinjica in Romania – see results in Nedeljković 1971), upon which he founded his conclusions about traditionalism of minorities and archaism of elements of their culture – we come to interesting insights. In this case, the archaism, as a general characteristic of minority cultures, is the construct of ethnologists-researchers themselves, who among various villages populated by Serbs in Romania, in the region of Clisura and Banat, the majority of which do not at all show any obvious inclination towards the preservation of archaic elements in culture, consciously chose the one which is an exception to this rule – Svinjica, a geographically isolated, remote village in the Romanian part of Djerdap, which the Serbian inhabitants from other villages in broader vicinity consider “primitive” (cf. Draškić 1971: 8–9, 14; Pantelić 1971: 57), referring later to that exception to establish conservatism as a rule in the culture of such groups (e.g. Pantelić 2005: 296). In the summer of 1969 researchers from Belgrade worked in Svinjica, but in the village Ljubkova as well. Serbian population in Ljubkova, however, did not show too many “archaic” features. It is symptomatic that, unlike Svinjica, research results from Ljubkova were never published (Pantelić 2005: 292).⁷ Even more interesting is another case – the case of “Horvati” in Slovakia,⁸ whose everyday culture does not show any traditionalism at all (Pantelić 1977: 103–109). However, on the basis of only few traditional elements of wedding ritual, which point to their ancient Slavic origin, the same author continues to build his arguments on unavoidable minorities’ traditionalism claiming in one of his subsequent studies that the case of “Horvati” confirms the tendency of minorities to preserve archaic cultural elements (Pantelić 2005: 296). In the same paper the author speaks about the culture of Serbs in Hungary as archaic, not stating a single argument or source upon which such claim should be founded.

Already my first field visit and stay in the community of Serbs in Hungary (1988/89) convinced me that the situation was exactly the opposite from the one my senior colleagues had described. In the vicinity of Budapest, in Lovra village at the Csepel Island, I found a group of people whose culture I could understand, contrary to the advices I received, as a very dynamic one. Serbs in Hungary are migrants, who are mostly identified with the Great Migration of 1690, and therefore it is assumed that already in the first generation they had to experience a profound adaptation, reformulation of their traditions and changes of cultural patterns brought from the territories they previously lived in. During several centuries of living in new country, they had to adapt to different

remain only mechanically inserted into their cultural corpus and do not develop further, but remain as petrified traces of archaic layers of the culture they were taken from, but also the proofs of the inter-ethnic communication (Pantelić 2005: 296).

⁷ The exception in the mentioned volume is the paper of Petar Kostić, who compares the material from Svinjica to that from Ljubkova, pointing out that Svinjica, as “archaic oasis” represents an exception to the other Serbian villages in Banat (Kostić 1971: 84–85).

⁸ This is a group moved from Croatia to Slovakia in the 16th century. The researcher visited them in 1977, in a two villages near Bratislava – Devinska Nova Ves and Horvatski Grob (see Pantelić 1977)

changes of circumstances. I shall mention only the 20th century, which was in focus of my research of Serbs in Lovra: changes of ideologies, state borders, assimilation processes, and dramatic depopulation for various reasons – all that required their flexible and not “petrifying” relation towards cultural patterns. It is, however, interesting, that on a direct question about preservation of tradition in the village, my collocutors in Lovra replied: “We preserved everything old”, although it was obviously not the case.⁹ So, the inhabitants of Lovra strongly attempted, particularly in first contacts, to present themselves as “loyal guardians of tradition”.

In my previous research experience, which is mostly based on the study of ethnic minorities, the concept of minority culture as traditional and traditionalistic is widely spread.

I managed to locate it in the writings of my older colleges, but it unusually often appears in communication at various levels, as something that is a given. This concept affects the self-understanding of minority members themselves, as well as the policies toward them, or the policies they themselves design and implement. Hence I think it is useful to put it under the spotlight.

In order to define some attitude towards this problem of relation of tradition, traditionalism and culture of ethnic minorities, it is necessary first to define our attitude towards these very concepts. This, however, is not quite a simple task because – as some researchers notice – tradition is one of the concepts about which there is a tacit consensus of self-understanding – everybody feels to know what it is, but few are able to explain (Hobsbawm 1990: 6; Prošić Dvornić 1995: 302).

ON THE CONCEPTS OF TRADITION AND TRADITIONALISM

Vocabulary entries of the term tradition derive its origin from Latin *tradicio* (transfer), i.e. *tradere* (to transfer). In its essential meaning, the term is defined as (1) transfer of knowledge, customs, beliefs, legends etc. from generation to generation, orally or in writing, and as (2) routine customs inherited from previous periods (Klajn and Šipka 2006: 1252).¹⁰ However, the meaning of the term and its usage in social sciences are herewith not exhausted. The reason is, as noticed by Slobodan Naumović, that “it is a ‘concept-problem’, which has incomparably

⁹ It should nevertheless be said that even my collocutors themselves were aware of changes in manners of celebration of holidays and maintenance of certain cultural traditions, which often occurred before their eyes and very obviously. After initial statements “We preserved everything old (in a variance “We here preserved everything Serbian”) or “One is not free to abandon old customs”, in subsequent talks, when they did not anymore perceive me as a complete outsider, my collocutors usually relativized their statements, for example: “All is somewhat being extenuated and forgotten”, or “Old people knew the customs, we already don’t” (Prelić 1995: 182–183).

¹⁰ The quoted dictionary states two meanings more – theological and legal; these meanings are of less interest for us, although they also point to the essential meaning of the word – establishment of continuity and transfer, duration of certain cultural content, pattern of behaviour, belief, human relation etc.

more often been used than precisely defined, and which intrinsically joints numerous and not quite compatible meanings" (Naumović 1996: 112). In order to systematize the term, the same author classifies its meanings into four levels that can be cross-linked with two substantial definitions of tradition: 1. substantive type – "genuine" traditions, actual continuity, folklore contents, and 2. formal type – every phenomenon which has actual or fictive continuity (ibid: 112–115). Other authors point to the complexity of the concept as well. Hobsbawm makes his well known differentiation of "genuine" and "invented" traditions (1983: 1–14). Edward Shils (1981: 195) points out "two pasts", "real" and "perceived" one. What "really" happened does not necessarily coincide with the perception, remembering and interpretation of the past events. Raymond Williams reminds that the meaning of tradition has been increasingly shifting from the initial meaning of transfer of knowledge from generation to generation towards ceremonial, outdated, obligatory. This meaning also implies a certain system of values, an authority standing behind the tradition, further implying the obligation of respect of duty (Williams 1985: 319–320). Tradition in this sense is what has been selected as good and positive, what the group considers to be the pledge of its survival. In the light thereof, culture, tradition and identity can be perceived as concepts which partly overlap and rely one upon another (cf. Naumović 1996: 114), but "in difference from integral cultural heritage, tradition assumes certain relation towards that heritage, i.e. expression of awareness of its meaning, which is transferred to successors as a stake of common cultural identity" (Jovanović 1994: 137). Already by this, the concept of tradition is obviously presented as an ideological construct and an efficient means for imposing a desirable social order and system of values. Tradition in this sense does not represent only a factual continuity, but also a value attitude towards it: the manner in which the present interprets the past, with a view to the future (Feintuch 1997: 470). Having this in mind, researchers more and more focus not only on the processes of construction, but of the conscious instrumentalisation, the use of tradition as well (cf. Naumović 2010).

Naumović adds another very important dimension of understanding of functions of tradition, particularly its instrumentalisation, by noticing a dynamic attitude / feedback between apparently completely different phenomena – transition process and various types of traditionalism. The author realizes that genuine or constructed tradition and insisting on its values are often used when the transition process has taken root in a society, in order to achieve the illusion of continuity and alleviate "the shock of modernization" and often drastic processes of changes it entails (Naumović 1997: 128). In that sense, the practice of use of tradition can be called a paradoxical phenomenon (ibid: 140). In addition, as the concepts of thought developed in Enlightenment and Romanticism persist till today, symbolic status and valuation of tradition is ambivalent – it can be considered as an unquestionable source of authority and authenticity, as well as a stronghold of anti-modern spirit and backwardness (ibid: 114–115).

TRADITION AND CULTURE OF ETHNIC MINORITIES: POSSIBLE UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE RELATION

If we do not understand the concept of tradition as something objective, static and unchangeable but as a sort of interpretation, value selection of certain sets of patterns and symbols, actually or assumingly enrooted in the past, which relies on the power of authority, the concept of tradition becomes closely linked to the process of construction of identity. It has already been mentioned that tradition, culture and identity can be perceived as close, inter-depending concepts, so that it is understandable that ethnic minorities (same as majorities) have certain aspiration to legitimise their culture and identity with the help of the authority of tradition. If we understand the construct of tradition as a means of self-representation, and particularly as a way for overcoming often traumatic experience of change, we can better understand how it is possible that inhabitants of Lovra which, in times of my research were passing through a phase of dynamic change, consider and present themselves as traditionalists, in spite of not “really” being such (cf. Prelić 1995). However, this strategy is very often used by majority groups as well. Can something specific nevertheless be noticed in the relation of culture of ethnic minorities, tradition and eventually traditionalism? There probably cannot be a universal reply to this question, having in mind the diversity of socio-historical situations of various minorities; however, there may be one salient characteristic, especially in the region of Eastern Europe – associating culture of ethnic minorities with folklore, folk tradition and culture.

Folklore and folk cultures are among the basic foundations on which the 19th century national (majority) cultures have been built; those cultures however are not considered to be based on folklore only, while the concept of minority cultures is often understood as merely folklore, as the culture of “local colours” exclusively.¹¹ In the region of Eastern Europe, this reflects the influence of Romanticism, but cultural policies of socialism in second half of 20th century as well (Ober 2007: 98–103); but some authors emphasise the specific situation of minorities, which are double peripheral – in relation to the “own” national culture in mother country, and in relation to the majority culture of the surrounding society (cf. Banjai 2007).

That the culture of ethnic minorities can be considered as marginal or peripheral derives from the very definition of minority as a group with relatively less social power than majority. Marginal or peripheral position of ethnic minority cultures, however, does not mean that that these cultures are static, isolated, by definition traditionalist or “archaic”. While they might be latecomers compared to the centres and metropolitan cultures, they have their own dynamics, and – in multiethnic surroundings – are often characterized by very intensive communication with Others.

The manner of perception of minority culture and its relation towards tradition has to do with the symbolic status of these groups in societies they live in, as well as with cultural

¹¹ An interesting reflection on the theme of uncritical identification minority culture and traditions with local, “local color”, “our”, familiar, can be found in Banjai 2007.

policies carried out for them. In the light of what has so far been said, the association of minority culture with traditionalism and exclusively with folklore and folklore traditions must be reflected as a problem. Here I shall do this on examples from my own research, primarily a long-lasting research of ethnic identity of Serbs in Hungary which was carried out in the last decade of the past century, as well as a research of concepts and meaning of tradition in the culture of Bunjevci from Bačka region, started in 2006, still and unfortunately unfinished.

CULTURE OF ETHNIC MINORITIES AND (FOLK) TRADITION: SOME EXAMPLES

For my collocutors, during the research in Lovra and later in settlements in Budapest and its vicinity, the link of culture, national tradition and identity is very strong, whereas two most important aspects of folk tradition are, in their opinion, customs (calendar and those linked to personal life) and folklore (folk songs, dances and music), in their words – “our dances”, “our songs”, “our old customs”. This reflects a romantic concept of customs, i.e. “genuine” folk culture, unspoilt by industrialisation which, besides the language, are considered to be the foundation of ethnic and national identity.

Some authors – cultural workers who themselves belonged to this community, explicitly expressed the attitude of the necessity for the folk customs, which in their genuine form have been considered as strong symbols of identity, to be collected and written down in order not to be “spoilt” or forgotten and thus jeopardize the very identity and survival of the group. Lazar Terzin (1880–1965), teacher and later superintendent of Serbian Orthodox religious schools in Hungary, who in the 1920s and 1930s recorded material on Serbian customs in Hungary, in the introduction to his manuscript (completed in 1934) writes as follows:

Here we collected some folk customs, through local Serbian-Orthodox priesthood and teaching staff. It was done with an intention of their preservation, since many customs have already been falling into oblivion. They have been collected for the reason to present, in this manner, at one place, the customs from all our localities. Exactly here, all this is highly necessary, as in numbers we are weakened a lot. There are not even 7000 of us. Therefore we should and must maintain our folk customs better, stronger, firmer, hotter and more desperately. This is the most reliable force for further maintenance of our – still awake – national consciousness. It is a solid rock which makes the waves of every foreign attack hopelessly bounce off. This is that everlasting living memento, which does not allow us to forget: who and what we are? (Terzin 1987: 347–348)

However, in spite of all attempts for “our folk customs”, “our songs and dances” to be recorded and in that manner fixed in collective memory and in practice, they are unavoidably changing. Visible changes in this aspect occurred during the 20th century. It is well known

that the processes of modernization and urbanization contributed to a large extent to the process of changes of traditional culture. And although neither the patterns of traditional culture have ever been static and unchangeable, their accelerated changing and disappearance “before our eyes” in this region have been found out around the end of the 19th century, to become even more obvious during the 20th century.¹² As an illustration of these processes I shall present two examples, the first of which is from the domain of ethnomusicology.

A devoted researcher of musical folk creativity among the South Slavic population in Hungary, Tihomir Vujičić, commenting in mid-1970s the material of his collection of musical tradition of South Slavs in Hungary, found out that in the field, among else, he was still able to find a relatively old ritual material in parallel with the composed, more or less folklorised music and songs of different types (old city music, *kafana* music, popular music) as well as that the repertoire was under an extreme influence of radio programme (Vujičić 1978: 7–11). The field research carried out in August 2012 among Serbs in Battonya, on the three borders region of Hungary, Serbia and Romania, shows that the memory and interpretation of older cultural patterns (“genuine”, particularly ritual), songs and music have already been lost, so that the ethnomusicologists can with a higher reliability reconstruct only the repertoire of the second half of the 20th century, which was under an extreme influence of contemporary media (radio and television).¹³

Another example deals with the annual customs cycle. Working in the village of Pomaz in late 1950s, ethnologist Maria Kiss managed to see, or on the basis of still fresh memories of collocutors describe in details, a relatively rich repertoire of Christmas customs, although already at that time it was obvious that many of these customs were in the process of disappearance or degradation (cf. Kiss 1975). In late 20th century, during my research in Lovra, elderly women knew the majority of these customs, but they already to a larger extent loss their mandatory character and even the sense for their performers. Out of numerous customs recorded in literature referring to the celebration of Christmas in Budapest in mid-1990s, according to my research, a family I interviewed (which moved to Budapest from its vicinity in early 1970s) and otherwise very much keeping its religious and ethnic identity, celebrated the holiday in a very reduced manner: on Christmas Eve they together had a lean dinner, while for the Christmas they had a luncheon, followed by breaking the *česnica* bread. They also used to go to church for Christmas, but only if their working duties allowed them to do so.¹⁴

¹² In the perception of my collocutors in Lovra, a specific factor of these processes of loss of traditional culture in case of Serbs in Hungary (Lovra) was the land collectivization, carried out in Hungary in early 1960s, in the period of socialism, which disturbed the overall social life of the village, and therefore its traditions; in their words: “The land was mixed and hence everything was mixed” (cf. Prelić 1995: 127).

¹³ Acknowledgment for this information goes to Jelena Jovanović, PhD, from the Institute of Musicology SASA.

¹⁴ Since Serbian Orthodox Church uses the Julian calendar, Christmas is on January 7, so that employees, depending on their jobs, cannot always be sure that they will be able to take a day off.

Besides disappearance and crumbling, there is another obvious line of change in the corpus of "our customs" – the processes of folklorisation and invention of tradition.¹⁵ If we take a look at the manner of celebrating Christmas, one example for these processes is celebration of this holiday in a school and another – in the Ethnographic Museum in Budapest. In the Serbian school in Budapest¹⁶ it became a custom to hold a joint class before the Christmas holidays, in which pupils, in advance assigned to this task, present Christmas customs of Serbs from a certain region, to be followed by setting a large *badnjak* log on fire in the yard.¹⁷ The idea of such concept of celebration is to jointly mark one, otherwise family holiday, and that children see and learn the aspects of the holiday which have not been practiced in their families and/or have never been practiced among Serbs in Hungary, as – depending on the preceding agreement – the presented customs can be specific to any region populated by Serbs, whereas the performance relies on models described in literature.¹⁸

In addition, in time of Christmas holidays in 1996, the Ethnographic Museum in Budapest organized for various national minorities a two-day presentation of stage performance of their Christmas customs in front of the audience. Serbian customs were presented by citizens of Lovra, in organization of their local and central self-governance. They presented the customs pertaining to the Christmas Eve, in this case – in the manner they have still been remembered, and in some homes still performed, in this village.¹⁹

¹⁵ On the concepts of folklorism and folklorisation, see, for example, Stanonik 1990. The concept of "invention of tradition" pertains to Hobsbawm's differentiation between genuine and invented traditions (Hobsbawm and Ranger 2003).

¹⁶ Serbian primary and high school *Nikola Tesla*.

¹⁷ On the custom of setting the *badnjak* log on fire at public places, most often in church yards, which was established during the 1990s in all regions populated by Serbs and which is related to the process of redefinition of Serbian national identity, see Vučinić 2008, although the author does not take a definite attitude toward this phenomenon as an invention of tradition. With a certain delay, this custom has since several years ago been established in Budapest as well, in the yard of St. Djordje church. Setting the *badnjak* log on fireplaces at family celebrations of Christmas has largely disappeared during the 20th century, primarily in relation to changes in house interior, i.e. disappearance of open fireplaces and even kitchen stoves to which the log could be set on fire.

¹⁸ According to my knowledge, learning and performance of Christmas customs in educational institutions in informal talks caused doubts as well, as some members of Serbian community thought that celebration of certain traditional holidays (which implies belonging to certain denomination) is a private matter of an individual and family. However, almost all my collocutors whom I directly asked during an interview what is their opinion about that children learn in school how to celebrate church holidays replied that it was good, exactly because "already today not every child sees that at home". In the school I got reply that the class of presentation of Christmas customs is not compulsory and that teachers do not make records of presence, thus avoiding eventual "coercion" against atheists or followers of other confessions.

¹⁹ It is interesting that ethnologists present on this occasion developed a debate whether the Ethnographic Museum should organize an obviously folkloristic, "non-authentic" manifestation – while one lady colleague was against, the others thought that the concept of authenticity is itself disputable and that in this kind of presentation of customs there is nothing problematic exactly because it does not cover its "non-authenticity".

This performance has in the same time been video-recorded and one lady from younger generation of activist of Serbian community noticed that this recorded material would be very helpful in Serbian school in future, as these customs would probably soon disappear, whereas the pupils attending lectures in their mother tongue would have an opportunity to nevertheless get familiar with these customs and learn them even when they would not exist in practice anymore. Therefore the circle is closed through the process of customs folklorisation – the customs which have already been nearly lost are reconstructed from memory, taken out of context, presented to the audience in the Ethnographic Museum as a stage performance and in the same time video-recorded; in that manner they are fixed and preserved (although already in the form of surrogate), opening – at least theoretically or as intended by the community members-cultural activists – also the possibility of their revitalization in future generations.

Another obvious example of the folklorisation process pertains to folk dances. It deals with learning and performance of folk dances within folk groups which have been created and active since 1950s and which are very popular. Among older generation, however, there is an awareness of interruption of tradition – they know that the choreographies danced by their grandchildren, who learned them from professional and semi-professional choreographers, are not what they had danced in their youth. However, participation in cultural-artistic associations is very popular among younger members of the community.²⁰

Examples of folklorisation, however, do not always provoke positive reactions among Serbs from Hungary. An external observer can notice a tendency that folklorisation is used and positively evaluated as an identity strategy primarily within the community, in situations where both participants and audience belong to the minority. Raising the issue of its implementation beyond the community provokes resistance that might be labelled as *fear of musealisation*. That fear was being expressed on several occasions in talks and comments during the course of this research. At the meeting of the cultural board of Serbian Self-Governance in Hungary which I attended in December 1997, activists – board members discussed very thoroughly about the dangers of reducing the national minority culture only to folklore aspects, seeing it as a devaluation of national aspect of minority culture and, in some sense, depolitization of their problems. Not only folklorisation in a more narrow sense, but also the presentation of Serbian culture in general beyond the borders of the group itself can under certain circumstances provoke suspicions of its members. For example, when in April 1993 at that time still informal theatre troupe of Milan Rus²¹ performed in

²⁰ *Dancing the same dance* itself has a large potential for becoming a symbol of ethnic identity. On importance of mostly amateur cultural-artistic associations which nurture folk dances for symbolisation of ethnic identity of Serbs out of Serbia, see Blagojević 2010.

²¹ In 1995 this troupe developed first an amateur and later professional Serbian Theatre in Hungary (cf. Prelić 1998: 170). On the play *Sentandrejsko jevandjelje* see Srpske narodne novine 16, April 22, 1993: 1 and Srpske narodne novine 17, April 29, 1993: 7.

Budapest the play *Sentandrejsko jevandjelje* (The Gospel of Szentendre), the then president of Hungary, Arpad Goncz, who attended the event, allegedly, in words of my collocutors, said in an interview that this play could be performed within the cultural programme of the Szentendre Summer festival (*Sentandrejsko leto*). In the community, reactions to this probably absolutely benevolent proposal were negative – some of my collocutors told me that “Serbs in Hungary are not a folklore group for tourist shows.”

Mid-1990s, when this research was carried out among Serbs in Hungary, saw very vivid discussions and dilemmas within the community about what was or what should be the national minority culture, in which frameworks it should be defined, in what manner and to whom it should be presented. It was the period in which the transition process, which certainly significantly changed the position of ethnic minorities in Hungarian society, overlapped with the process of establishment of separate Serbian institutions and creation of their cultural policy.²² These processes also opened the issues of redefinition of cultural identity and its symbolization in case of Serbs in Hungary.

The dilemmas which are in our primary focus here can be divided into two directions: the first dilemma can be formulated as the question – Should minority culture, including Serbian culture in Hungary, be primarily based on folk traditions (whatever their definition is), or it must develop also, for example, theatre, visual art, modern music...?, and the second as the question – To what extent should the formulation of identity strategies rely only on tradition, and to what extent and in what way it should initiate changes and introduce new, more modern contents? Dilemmas on cultural contents are present also among the community leaders. In words of one of them:

New, authentic and legitimate leaders of minorities on the other hand turned to nurturing of higher forms of culture – instead of folk one, which is otherwise increasingly disappearing, i.e. losing its previous function, and within which frames the minorities in Hungary were kept in also by artificial, state means (coercion). Preference of folklorism at the expense of other branches of culture in which the key role is played by mother tongue, as well as preference of ethnography at the expense of other scientific research, together with prevention of establishment of own cultural institutions, strengthened traditionalism and impoverishment of minority culture, and ultimately accelerated its assimilation. Now, however, other activities are becoming more visible in cultural activity of Serbian organization and Serb citizens – drafting the institutional frameworks for nurturing of culture, launching the “Srpske narodne novine” weekly, TV broadcast – “Srpski ekran”, intensive publishing activity which exceeds the limits of local literature, starting of theatre and nurturing of such forms of culture which character is not primarily minority, but much broader cultural and

²² The context of these processes was certainly under impact of in that time dramatic processes of redefinition of national borders and national identities in the native state.

human, such is opening of private painting gallery Rockov in Budapest owned by Serbs, who gather Serbian artists and intellectuals, as well as the 50th anniversary of death of famous inventor and scientist Nikola Tesla, a person who is an important element of general Serbian culture and whose activity was in youth narrowly connected with Hungary ad Serbs in this country. (Lastić 1993: 4)

In opinion of some intellectuals, exclusive orientation to traditionalism, disregard or inaccessibility of higher forms of culture might mean closing in a ghetto which in long run unavoidably leads to disappearance of community. One of my collocutors, an older generation intellectual from Budapest, emphasizes that cultural life and cultural needs must follow contemporary changes in the following way:

Not everything can be based on folklore, folklorism and transfer of rural elements into urban environment... Folklore is in the foreground now, money is given for it, children twist their legs there, that is very nice and I sometimes like to watch it, but it is not essential. Urbanization, all these accompanying changes, shall lead to further crumbling of the community. If different needs, a more serious cultural life, are not developed, this does not lead to survival.

It is important to notice that members of national minority, even if they resolve the first dilemma within the group and turn toward nurturing the culture understood complexly and broadly, frequently face with stereotypes and prejudices of the surrounding society, and often also of competent institutions, i.e. their staff in charge for minority cultural issues, about what a national minority culture is. Dealing with relationship of politics and minority culture in contemporary Hungary, Richard Papp speaks about the already mentioned celebration of Nikola Tesla's anniversary: at the call of the relevant public body for financing cultural manifestations of minorities, representatives of Serbian minority whose idea was to organize an exhibition devoted to Nikola Tesla in Budapest were rejected, for the state bureaucracy was not of the opinion that an exhibition devoted to a scientist-physicist would fit into the concept of national minority cultures, according to their understanding thereof (Papp 1996: 37).

As for the dilemma *traditional/modern*, to an explicitly posed question my collocutors replied in such a manner that, generally speaking, almost all obtained replies can be reduced to two – tradition is more necessary, or – both are necessary.²³

In the light of that choice of “middle road” one can observe tendencies of organizers of cultural life of Serbs in Hungary to combine modern and traditional contents, i.e. to use modern means in order to promote “by tradition consecrated” cultural patterns. Modern and traditional are mixed in certain ratio in the example of rock-opera *Pastir*

²³ In research, when I asked questions to collocutors, the concepts of modern and traditional were not defined, but explained on examples – traditional, for example folklore and customs, modern, for example rock-concert, modern music.

vukova (Wolves Shepherd), "the first Serbian rock-opera" inspired by the life of St. Sava and performed by Serbian theatre "Joakim Vujić" from Pomaz, then, in case of presentation of cultural heritage by computer means (for example, CD-ROM *Kulturna istorija Srba u Mađarskoj – Cultural History of Serbs in Hungary*), opening of websites of the Eparchy of Buda and Serbian institutions on the Internet, digitalization of the inventory of the Church Art Collection in Szentendre and the like. Maybe as the only example of use of top modern contents in the function of symbolization of Serbs in Hungary we could mention the rock-concert of the group "Avala Ekspres" which existed for a while within the Serbian theatre from Pomaz.²⁴

Summarizing the stated examples, we can conclude that the processes of shaping identity in case of Serbs in Hungary to a high extent rest upon the construct of the idea of tradition, i.e. the strategies of its appropriation. In the process of symbolization of identity, notable are the needs for continuity, as well as for the construct of "genuineness" and "authenticity" of cultural patterns functioning as the identity symbols. That need should not be necessarily understood as a factual traditionalism (absence of cultural change, resistance to modernization), but as a *strategy of traditionalisation* – a conscious symbolic use of certain segments of traditional culture aimed at preservation of the group identity. It can also mean the possession and use of certain symbolic or actual resources, which through the activities such as for example ethno-tourism or some other forms of branding "authenticity" can ultimately help the group to obtain a better economic position, and therefore a better status in the society. However, folk, traditional culture, as a reservoir of either "genuine" or "invented" traditions, – as denominated by Hobsbawm, bears certain problems. First, these symbols must bridge a visible gap existing in actual, living, everyday culture of ordinary people, in which "genuine traditions" are subject to drastic changes and crumbling, particularly since the middle of the last century, whereas their function is exactly the symbolization of continuity; another problem is that such constructed "folk tradition" often (although not necessarily) estranges the group, particularly if it is a national minority, from other forms of actual, contemporary culture and different forms of artistic creativity which must not necessarily fit into the mould and stereotype of "our", local, recognizable, as well as from the sphere of social and political power – and raises among the members of minorities the "fear of musealisation", i.e. ghettoisation and marginalization. It feeds the stereotype of ethnic minorities as obsolete reservations of "tradition" (which in fact does

²⁴ In the cultural institution Attila Jozsef on May 2nd 1996, for the first time under the title *Avala Ekspres*, there was a concert of songs of rock musician Tamas Cheh translated to Serbian language by Budapest writer and Slavic scholar Petar Milošević, PhD. In new arrangements and translation, the songs which once were the symbol of rock culture of youth in Hungary in 1960s now spoke about the destiny of "new Čarnojevićs", refugees and immigrants from former Yugoslavia who during the 1990s came to Budapest. In that time, *Avala ekspres* was the name of the train on relation Belgrade-Vienna, via Budapest. The concert was later repeated on several occasions and became very popular, and a tape with this music was also published, but the entire project of *Avala Ekspres* (both concert and rock group which took the same name) was relatively short. Translations to Serbian can be found at: <http://milosevits.web.elte.hu/ARTavala.htm>.

not exist anymore). Hence the issue of use of “folk tradition” within the culture of national minorities and symbolization of its identity can be observed as a process for which meanings and open issues there is no definite and unambiguous response.

It is interesting to notice that elites among Serbs in Hungary are to a certain extent aware that the “identity” and the “tradition” it relies upon are – social constructs. Thus one of them when after a break in late 1990s I returned to the field in Hungary told me – “while you were not here, we *invented* one holiday more.” In another case I researched – the case of Bunjevci in the region of Bačka, the problems of relations of identity, culture, tradition and actual or assumed traditionalism, as well as the awareness of actors about the strategic uses of tradition can be posed in a slightly different manner.²⁵ One of the problems of my research was exactly the use of tradition in construction of identity. In difference from Serbs in Hungary, whose elites are at least to a certain measure aware of processes of construction of identity and tradition, this group and its elites are, on the contrary, absolutely assured in *authenticity* of what they consider their traditional culture, although this elite is itself to a large extent involved in its *invention*. A lot of attention is paid to reconstruction and promotion of “folk tradition” – costumes, traditional food, language (standardization of language/promotion of *ikavski* dialect), traditional dances, manner of singing, etc. In contacts with me, cultural activists put a lot of efforts to bring me over as an “expert”, to participate in the processes of revitalization of the selected, representative elements of traditional culture.²⁶ They are sure and they explicitly expressed it in several occasions – that there is an “objective truth” about who Bunjevci really are, and that this truth is based on their origin and objective cultural diversity from others, whereas it is only necessary for this to be revealed and scientifically confirmed through ethnological and historical research. They expected from me to get involved into their work, whereas my idea was opposite – to deconstruct their identity constructs.

Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that Bunjevci, although enjoying the recognized status of national minority in today’s Serbia, have during the history, and it could be said even today, experienced certain pressure: their particular ethnic identity is openly negated by another national minority – Croats, who consider them as “sub-ethnos” of Croat people as well as, maybe less openly, from certain circles of majority Serbian people, who consider them Catholics. The history of Bunjevci is to a large extent the history of attempts of surrounding peoples who since the 19th century worked on their nation states building (Hungarians, Croats, Serbs) to include Bunjevci into their corpuses, negating their particularity. Among

²⁵ I started this research several years ago (I visited the community for the first time in September 2006). However, I unfortunately did not complete it for financial reasons. Therefore I present here only some preliminary data and observations.

²⁶ Another interesting example is that some of them, at most important manifestations of the Bunjevci culture, wear traditional Bunjevci costume, reconstructed according to a representative model from the late 19th century.

else, this group built its particular identity in resistance to these tendencies. Since it did not have its own state, nor its political elite could developed like the elites of nation states, neither the Bunjevci culture enjoyed the status and political support within the national state as did the "national culture." Under pressures, members of the group feel certain insecurity and attempt to develop their own culture and confirm their own identity according to patterns dating from late 19th century, and according to nation model found at surrounding majority nations. Often these majorities that surround them, i.e. their political, cultural and scientific elites, give models and directions of thinking according to which they should search for their "genuine" identity and confirm it through their "genuine" origin and "authentic" culture. This might seem outdated, but it has its historical causes.²⁷

In cases like this, we see that among members of ethnic minorities there are also examples of unreflected relation towards the strategy of use of tradition, i.e. use of tradition without critical distance or a naive belief that there is no difference between genuine and invented traditions, as we saw in the beginning, on the example of the Svinjica village, that members of ethnic minority in some cases preserve certain cultural patterns actually longer, which can be labelled as the phenomenon of traditionalism. However, such phenomena cannot be considered as intrinsic characteristics of these groups – in order to understand such cases, they must be observed in historical context, like, generally, the processes of preservation of genuine or invented traditions or uses of tradition in any other culture. Or, as Erich Wolf would put it

To say that a society is 'traditional', or that its population is bound by tradition, does not explain why tradition persists, nor why people cleave to it. Persistence, like change, is not a cause – it is an effect. (Wolf 1966: viii)²⁸

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²⁷ Certainly, it should be noticed that here I speak about prevailing but not only and exclusive way of thinking about identity within this community. The members of this community themselves are in the process of mastering skills of their own promotion and representation, whereas besides the already mentioned, which are for now most obvious, there are other identity strategies appearing within the group.

²⁸ Cf. Naumović 1994: 95.

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»OHRANILI SMO VSE STARO.«
LJUDSKO IZROČILO IN TRADICIONALIZEM V KULTURI ETNIČNIH
MANJŠIN

V prispevku sta problematizirana utrjena načina interpretacije kulture etničnih manjšin: prvi trdi, da je kultura manjšin po definiciji tradicionalistična, konservativna, celo arhaična, drugi pa, da temelji izključno ali prevladujoče na tradicijski (folklorni) ljudski kulturi. Ti koncepti so del znanstvenega diskurza, vendar so razširjeni precej širše in vplivajo na samorazumevanje samih pripadnikov manjšin in na politike, ki se zanje oblikujejo na ustreznih ravneh večinske družbe. Za problematizacijo so tu uporabljeni podatki, zbrani v dolgotrajnih terenskih raziskavah Srbov na Madžarskem, nekaj je tudi primerov z območja srednje in jugovzhodne Evrope. Avtorica postavlja podmeno, da je v zvezi s kulturo manjšin mogoče reči, da je obrobna, periferna, vendar

pa ima svojo posebno dinamiko. Če zamuja za središči, še ne pomeni, da je arhaična, zamrznjena in sama po sebi konservativna in tradicionalistična. Poleg tega pa: če je kultura etničnih manjšin zvedena samo na folklorne vidike (na predmoderne, večinoma ruralne kulturne elemente), kar korenini v romantiškem konceptu avtentičnega ljudskega duha in kulture, v primeru sodobnih manjšin in kulturnih politik, ki se nanašajo nanje, potem je to mogoče razumeti kot namero, da se kulture manjšin getoizirajo, pa tudi izključijo iz razmerij z močjo in politiko.

Zgledi s terena kažejo, da sami etnologi, ki verjamejo v tradicionalnost kultur manjšin, pogosto interpretirajo preučevane primere skladno s svojim prepričanjem. Pripadniki manjšine pa, kakor tudi pripadniki večine, pogosto uporabljajo ali (re)konstruirajo tradicijo v funkciji lastnih identitetnih strategij. Prav tako so primeri, ko je tradicija uporabljena za premoščanje »šoka spremembe« in za simulacijo kontinuitete kulturnih vzorcev, ki jih v resnici sploh ni več. V nekaterih primerih je res mogoče identificirati ohranjanje določenih kulturnih oblik (zglede iz Svinjice) ali nepremišljeno in naivno rabo tradicije (zglede Bunjevcev), vendar je treba te primere obravnavati v kontekstu – ti pa ne pritrjujejo neogibnemu tradicionalizmu kulture etničnih skupin, temveč zahtevajo pojasnitev okoliščin in razlogov zanje, navsezadnje tako kakor pri vseh primerih, s katerimi se ukvarjajo etnologi ter socialni in kulturni antropologi.

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