

ТМ	Г. XXXVI	Бр. 3	Стр. 985-994	Ниш	јул - септембар	2012.
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UDK 39 : 316.42

Прегледни рад

Примљено: 14.05.2012.

Ревидрана верзија: 15.07.2012.

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TRADITION IN THE ERA OF GLOBALISATION – A VIEW FROM THE CENTRAL BALKANS

Abstract

In the epoch of globalisation, the understanding of traditions is very changeable. In contemporary ethnology, denoting something as “tradition” becomes an act of interpretation, a way of selecting and labelling. The understanding of tradition as a given generation’s attitude towards its past and the culture of that past can enable us to analyse and argue the ways of managing cultural heritage in the contemporary world, as well as to analyse traditions as a basis of national identity.

The main questions that the author raises are: What are traditions – the real patterns of behaviour from the past, the markers of ethnic and national identity, or the “souvenirs” and tourist attractions? Where does tradition end and where does its contemporary interpretation begin? How is tradition “modernised” and “invented”? What will be the destiny of our Balkan peculiarities in the conditions of pan-European mobility – local curiosities for tourists and our guests from “Europe”, or “cultural heritage”, the basis of our identity?

“Constructing” traditions in the decades of socialism, as well as the attempts at “re-traditionalisation” in the years of post-socialist transition to modern democracy, show the unsuccessful attempts to manage culture. A “back to the future” cultural policy is nonsense. In the conditions of Internet reality and virtual social networks, tradition takes the form of separate symbols, while artefacts from the past become cultural heritage exhibited in museums and specialised websites. Perhaps, in the age of post-modernity, tradition – as a process of studying and interpreting the cultural past – is again returning to the family environment, which makes our responsibility even greater.

Key words: Tradition, Identity, Cultural Heritage, National Markers, Culture Management

ТРАДИЦИЈА У ЕРИ ГЛОБАЛИЗАЦИЈЕ – ПОГЛЕД ИЗ ЦЕНТРАЛНОГ БАЛКАНА

Апстракт

У ери глобализације, схватање традиције веома се брзо мења. У савременој етнологији, означити нешто као „традицију“ постаје ствар интерпретације, начин на који се ствари бирају и именују. Схватање традиције као става једне генерације према сопственој прошлости и култури омогућује нам да анализирамо и образложимо начин на који се у савременом свету односимо према културном наслеђу, као и да анализирамо традицију као основ националног идентитета.

Основна питања која аутор поставља у овом раду су следећа: Шта чини традицију – стварни обрасци понашања који су постојали у прошлости, маркери етничког и националног идентитета, или пак „сувенири“ и туристичке атракције? Каква ће бити судбина наших балканских специфичности у условима пан-европске мобилности – хоће ли оне бити занимљивости за туристе и наше госте из „Европе“, или „културно наслеђе“, основа нашег идентитета?

„Конструкција“ традиције у декадама социјализма, као и покушаји „ретрадиционализације“ у годинама пост-социјалистичке транзиције ка модерној демократији, показали су се као безуспешни покушаји да се дефинише култура. Културна политика заснована на приступу „повратак-у-будућност“ је бесмислица. У условима интернет-стварности и виртуалних друштвених мрежа, традиција поприма облик засебних симбола, а предмети из прошлости постају културно наслеђе изложено у музејима и на специјализованим интернет страницама. Можда се у доба пост-модернизма традиција – као процес проучавања и интерпретирања културне прошлости – поново враћа породичном окружењу, што нашу одговорност чини још већом..

Кључне речи: традиција, идентитет, културно наслеђе, национална обележја, менаџмент културе

INTRODUCTION

The thoughts that I present here were caused by one of the meanings of the Latin *trāditiō*, understood as ‘passing on’, ‘narration’, but also as ‘lesson’, ‘teachings’. After an entire decade of fieldwork in different regions of the Balkans, especially in Bulgaria, Macedonia and Serbia, I began to ask myself what constitutes “tradition” and, in particular, “traditional culture”, invariably presented in textbooks as one of the main research subjects in ethnology and anthropology. The aim of this article is posing questions about the destiny of traditions in the contemporary globalised world rather than giving answers and resolutions; the following lines present only one of all possible standpoints: that of the research worker in the central part of the Balkans.

Here are some preliminary questions to think about:

– What are traditions – the real patterns of behaviour from the past, the markers of ethnic and national identity, or the “souvenirs” and tourist attractions?

– To what extent does our understanding of “tradition” cover the notion of the model of transmitting cultural values, as a generator of permanent development of ethnic cultural systems, and to what extent – its definition as a collection of artefacts, techniques and stereotypes, determined by the invariant, but not unchangeable?

– Where does tradition end and where does its contemporary interpretation begin? How is tradition “modernised” and “invented”? Once it became clear how traditions are “invented”, even in a strictly conservative country like England (Hobsbawm, 1983), isn’t it time to make the next step: making it clear to ourselves that by “tradition” modern ethnology actually denotes contemporary interpretations of the cultural past, which every subsequent generation accepts and “passes on” to the next?

TRADITION AS “LIVING ANTIQUITY”

In ethnology and anthropology, the understanding of “tradition” as a very important, historically formulated component of culture emerged as early as the second half of the 19th century. In America, Franz Boas viewed “tradition”, “folklore” and “culture” as overlapping and amalgamated (Feintuch, 2001, p. 470). In Europe, under the influence of the evolutionist paradigm, most importantly Edward Taylor’s, emerged the notion of “traditional” culture and folklore as “cultural heritage”, as “living antiquity”, passed on from ancestors to contemporaries. In many places in Europe, particularly in the Balkans, ethnology and folkloristics appeared during the 19th century in the context of national liberation movements and as part of the efforts for conceiving national ideologies. For researchers from the mid-19th and the early 20th century, “tradition” possesses a certain antiquity, while naming a given artefact as “traditional” means to relate it directly to another, hard to define concept: “authenticity” (Feintuch, 2001, p. 470). During this period of development of the scholarly disciplines, characterising something as “traditional” or “authentic” most often placed it against the process of modernisation. Here we can agree with contemporary sociologists that in the context of culture the idea of “tradition” is a product of modernity (Gidens, 2005, p. 65-66).

To ethnologists and folklorists of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century, proclaiming an artefact as “traditional”, as part of the people’s “cultural tradition”, meant giving it considerable social importance, turning it into a part of cultural heritage that had to be preserved, protected and passed on to younger generations. And the Balkan ethnologists, “the double insiders” according to Slobodan Naumovich’s famous

definition (Naumović, 1998, p. 101-120), are not only researchers but also – in the age of national liberation movements – “advocates” of their research subject: the national communities to which they belong. In addition: many of them took part with their research in building national ideologies and national myths. This national ideology, in which the value of the past is uncritically given to “folk tradition” as part of the “people’s cultural treasure” (Беновска-Събкова, 2004, p. 30), undoubtedly turns it into an ideological construct. Thus, the work of ethnographers and folklorists turns into a sort of “rescue” expedition that aims to document and preserve for subsequent generations the ancient layers of “folk culture”, of the “living antiquity” that is killed by advancing modernity and urban culture.

As early as the first half of the 19th century the “fathers” of Balkan ethnologic research turn to the past and give priority to old people’s narratives and recollections. Each generation of patriotic researchers mourns the disappearance of “tradition”, the loss of the “golden age” of folk culture and the abandonment of “pure” pastoral virtues, while at the present time folk culture is described as “remnants” of this past. Studying folk culture was accompanied by the understanding of “tradition” not as a process of passing on cultural values and stereotypes but as a stable, unchanging cultural knowledge that had to be sought again in the past (Беновска-Събкова, 2004, p. 30).

Apparently, such a view on traditional culture foretells the end of ethnology for every subsequent generation of researchers. Not to mention that the cultural “remnants” of a historically defined present become a “cultural heritage” and a “priceless cultural domain” for the next generation of ethnographers and folklorists. Bulgarian ethnography quotes the particularly representative example of American produce that found its way in Bulgarian agriculture during the years of Ottoman rule: during the 19th century beans suddenly became a Bulgarian “national food” (Генчев, 1984, p. 25).

Similarly to the changed view of ethnical identity as a process of construction, the view of “tradition” as an interpretation of the cultural past is gradually making its way in Balkan ethnology. As I already wrote in a previous research, the difficulties faced by comparative ethnological research in the Balkans, especially in the border regions, are caused by the non-critical understanding of ethnic identity as primordial, given once and for all (Hristov, 2009, p. 114-115).

Such a view, used as an interpretative strategy by both historians and ethnologists in the Balkans (Naumović, 1998, p. 101-120), relies on “tradition” as a cultural “basis”, on the myth of the “golden age” of national Renaissance and on the firm national roots of folk culture, understood as pastoral-patriarchal and sought in villages (Наумовић, 1995, p. 114-128). This “folk tradition” has to be preserved, reproduced and (mandatorily) passed on to generations.

TRADITION AND ETHNIC IDENTITY

Attempts at changing the conceptions of ethnicity in the direction of overcoming the premised primordialism are not new for ethnology in the Balkans. These attempts have been made in Bulgarian scholarly disciplines during the second half of the 20th century to change the perspective by recognising in the *ethnos* the features of a social community that changes historically – for Stoyan Genchev the ethnic community is the “main form of existence of the ethnos” (Генчев, 1984, p. 87), for Todor Iv. Zhivkov the *ethnic* is a “form of inheriting, transforming and transmitting as a heritage the social-anthropological reality” (Живков, 1994, p. 112). Such attempts, made in the other Eastern European ethnologies during the 1970s and the 1980s remain, unfortunately, outside historians’ field of view (Tzaneva, 2000, p. 103-104). The same is valid for historical studies in other Balkan countries.

Our *ethnicity* is uncovered mainly as an attitude of identity and difference, i.e. of identity / non-identity (Gossiaux, 2002, p. 12-20). For the researcher it is of particular importance to analyse in every separate case and historical instance the aggregation of ways, means and strategies of behaviour, used to preserve and strengthen, or conversely, to remove ethnical boundaries. As every other boundary, *ethnicity* is fixed with boundary markers – cultural traits, artefacts, on the presence (or absence) of which depends to which group a particular individual will belong. And since these cultural traits are always relative in their ethnic affiliation (for Frederick Barth they are only tools), their inclusion in the ethno-(national-) markers is a question of their inclusion in the system of community symbols, i.e. in community culture according to Clifford Geertz (Gerc, 1998-I, p. 345) and their proclamation as “authentic folk tradition”. In this sense, in my opinion, *ethnicity* is a result of constructive dismemberment of cultural unities.

Thus, proclaiming particular cultural artefacts, most often common and shared throughout the Balkans, as part of the “authentic folk culture” of the *ethnos*, turns “tradition” into a part of the ideological construct of the “cultural heritage” that needs to be preserved for future generations at all costs. The researcher’s role is not to feed the “nature and content of nationalism as an “information source” of collective behaviour” (Gerc, 1998-I, p. 348), but through interpretation of bearers’ self-identity to reach the meaning that given symbols have “on the inside”, i.e. for the particular community that creates and possesses a given culture.

TRADITION AS ACT OF INTERPRETATION

In one of his early studies about the political usage of tradition, the Serbian ethnologist Slobodan Naumović pointed out that the affirmation of the set of identification markers of ethnic identity in the public dis-

course in Serbia resulted in the canonisation of “Serbian national tradition” after the First World War. This canon contained historical, Orthodox (with St. Sava’s heritage, including activity in the Peč patriarchate) and folk tradition, uniting a number of material aspects, folk institutions, customs and beliefs from Serbian traditional culture; the *slava* ritual has a special place among these (Naumović, 1996, p. 131).

The “traditional” understanding of “tradition” is carried over to the folk culture of a people – as research by Slobodan Naumović shows, tradition is a kind of “foundation” to national identity; its strengthening requires preserving, maintaining and inheriting folk culture, or at least what is publicly accepted as such. However, as a mental construct, tradition is not just a set of inherited ideas, knowledge, symbols, customs, beliefs, habits and skills. It contains a wide range of meanings that stem from the system of values of a given peoples, as well as a system of implications behind the visible acts, behaviour patterns and material artefacts produced over the historical development of the peoples (cf. Божиловић, 2011, p. 573). In this sense, the British scholar of Polish descent Bronislaw Malinowski – one of the fathers of modern anthropology – was right when saying that Jesus Christ was the first anthropologist in the world, having formulated the rule: You will know them by their deeds!

In the epoch of globalisation (or the increasingly popular interpretation “*glocalisation*” – cf. Roudometof, 2005), the understanding of traditions is very changeable. In my opinion, denoting something as “tradition” becomes an act of interpretation, a way of selecting and labelling. Similarly to the changed view of ethnical identity as a process of construction, the view of “tradition” as an interpretation of the cultural past is gradually making its way in Balkan ethnology. The understanding of “tradition” as a given generation’s attitude towards its past and the culture of that past can enable us to analyse and argue the ways of managing cultural heritage in the contemporary world, as well as to analyse traditions as a basis of national identity.

The difficulties in managing culture – and “tradition” as a part of it – arise from the popular dichotomy between the traditional culture of patterns and the modern culture of rules (Лютман, 1990, p. 273-284). Whereas in the former case new generations socialise via behaviour stereotypes – similarly to the mother’s tongue that we learn subconsciously by replicating patterns – in contemporary societies this happens via rules and norms, similarly to studying foreign languages. We thus construct our behaviour the way we construct our speech – according to the rules of grammar.

Here we can raise another questions: if, indeed, in post-modern society defining “cultural tradition” becomes a process of interpretation, then what rules are we to pass on to our children? Is it at all worth repeating to them inherited stereotypes as “patterns of tradition”, especially considering the fact that some of these patterns were actually “constructed” in the various social conditions of different ages in history?

I will use as an example one “invention” of Bulgarian tourist industry during the socialist era – the so-called “*Šopska* salad”. During the 1960s, planners in the State Tourism Company (“Balkanturist”) included three types of salads in the menus of Bulgarian restaurants: “*Trakijaska*”, “*Dobrudjaska*” and “*Šopska*” (“from *Thrace*”, “from *Dobrudja*” and “from *Šopluk*”) which included various products typical of the respective region. Of the three, only the last one became a “brand”; what’s more, it is recognised anywhere from Vienna to Istanbul: a salad of tomatoes, cucumbers, roasted peppers, onion and grated white cheese is referred to as “*Šopska*” even today. It most often goes along with “our” *rakija*. As a long-time researcher of this region in the Balkans, I can confirm that arguments as to whose traditional product “*Šopska*” salad is, are nonsense: there is no such tradition! However, we still continue to place labels and insist that this is “our folk tradition”.

Taken by themselves, though, the inherited religion, language, traditions and culture still do not constitute ethnic identity (Алтермат, 1998, p. 62). For a number of European ethnologists the process of ethnogenesis is mainly a developing sense of unity, regardless of what it is based on (Шнирельман, 1999). To “tradition” always belongs a system of cultural symbols, which can change in their shape and configuration, but possess the function of maintaining (by replication) internal group integration and distinction from others.

CONCLUSION: TRADITION IN THE ERA OF GLOBALISATION

The problem of “using” tradition was deepened in the post-socialist era – the decade of transition to modern democracy in Bulgaria – with the idea of restituting arable land in depopulated Bulgarian villages as a “return to century-long Bulgarian traditions”. Carrying out land restitution in Bulgarian post-socialist villages is one of the main arguments given when describing the Bulgarian transitional period as an attempt at “re-traditionalisation” (Добрева, 1997, p. 99) or “archaisation” of the agrarian sector, i.e. as an attempt to turn the tide of history and make it “reversible” (Джордано, Костова, 1997, p. 142). This attempt at going “back to the future” (according to Giordano’s description) was indeed politically intended to work “as if it were possible to ignore the epoch of socialism and return to an ideal point in history from where to start over at the present” (Волф, 2000, p. 7).

Social practice of the last two decades in Bulgaria showed that such attempts at “re-traditionalisation” are utopian and impossible. Today, according to official statistics, 87% of Bulgaria’s population lives in cities, and not in villages. The sad view of abandoned, untilled arable land and depopulated rural regions “kills” all hopes for going “back to the future” – to the strong folk roots of agrarian tradition and Bulgarian “folk

culture” as we know it from the ethnographic studies of the 19th and early 20th century. Today’s young generation is often unable to tell between a male and a female farm animal, but regularly takes care of virtual cows and sheep in Internet games.

Again, we face the questions: What will be the destiny of our Balkan peculiarities in the conditions of pan-European mobility – local curiosities for tourists and our guests from “Europe”, or “cultural heritage”, the basis of our “modern” identity? How to teach our children “our” traditions and is this necessary at all?

“Constructing” tradition in the decades of socialism, as well as the failure of “re-traditionalisation” in the years of post-socialist transition to modern democracy, show the unsuccessful attempts to manage culture. In the conditions of Internet reality and virtual social networks, tradition takes the form of separate symbols, while artefacts from the past become cultural heritage exhibited in museums and specialised websites. And – as I showed in my previous research in Eastern Serbia and Western Macedonia (Hristov 2012, p. 287-294) – in the conditions of pan-European labour mobility, *ga-starbeiters* who return to their birthplaces restore those “places of memory” that relate to their family and local identity, without distinction of whether they are Orthodox Serbs or Macedonian Muslims (the so-called *torbeshi*). Perhaps, in the age of post-modernity, tradition – as a process of studying and interpreting the cultural past – is again returning to the family environment, which makes our responsibility even greater.

In the context of the questions I posed here, we can conclude that the view in Bulgarian ethnology, presented as early as the 1980s by Stoyan Genchev – understanding “tradition” as a given generation’s attitude towards the past as a whole and towards the culture of the past in particular, as this generation’s assessment of inherited culture (Генчев, 1984, p. 33) – can turn into an important research and pedagogical strategy. Teaching “folk tradition” to every new generation in the present, presenting the basics of joint interpretation of our Balkan cultural past, can become a basis for our shared future in a united Europe, Europe of “unity in diversity”. In this aspect, the role of both researchers and university professors is extremely important.

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TRADITION IN THE ERA OF GLOBALISATION – A VIEW FROM THE CENTRAL BALKANS

Summary

This research is based on the author's personal observations and fieldwork in different regions on the central part of the Balkans, especially in Bulgaria, Macedonia and Serbia. The focus is on the contemporary understanding of Balkan peoples' traditional culture, in particular, that of contemporary Bulgarians. The main questions that

the author raises are: where does “tradition” end and where does its contemporary interpretation begin? When and how is formed the set of cultural markers that became national culture and are cherished as national wealth and cultural heritage?

According to the author, certain inherited understandings in Balkan ethnology are due to be revised. The view of “tradition” as a very important historically formed component of culture arose in scholarly studies as early as the second half of the 19th century. Under the influence of the evolutionist paradigm (especially after Edward Taylor’s work) appeared the view of “traditional” culture and folklore as “cultural heritage”, as “living antiquity” inherited from the ancestors. In many places in Europe, particularly on the Balkans, ethnology and folklore studies appeared in the 19th century in the context of national identification movements, as part of the efforts to form national ideologies. During this period of development of the scholarly disciplines, referring to something as “traditional” or “authentic” usually opposed it to the process of ongoing modernisation. For ethnologists and folklorists from the first half of the 20th century, proclaiming a given artefact as “traditional” or as part of the peoples’ “cultural tradition” meant giving it important social significance and turning it into part of the cultural heritage that had to be preserved and passed on to younger generations. Efforts by several generations of ethnologists in separate Balkan countries, especially in Bulgaria and Serbia, were dedicated to studying the “authentic” folk culture of the pastoral village, threatened by the blows of modernization.

The second half of the 20th century was marked by important changes in the understanding of identity: similarly to the changed view of ethnic identity as a process of construction (after Frederick Barth’s revolutionary study); even if slowly, the view of “tradition” as contemporary interpretation of our own cultural past gradually made its way into Balkan ethnology. After Eric Hobsbawm’s research on how tradition is “invented”, even in a strictly conservative country such as England, ethnologists from the Balkans showed how folk culture is “updated” and modernized and how our cultural past is interpreted. Every subsequent generation adopted the common past, shared for centuries by all Balkan peoples, and “taught” it in its own model to the next generation, thus creating its own identity. The studies by a number of ethnologists in Bulgaria and Serbia over the last few decades contributed to changing the inherited view of “folk tradition” as a non-changing cultural heritage from the pre-modern age. According to the author, attempts at “re-traditionalisation” in the decade of transition at the end of the 20th century, showed the inadequacy of attempts to “restore” the past.

In the early 21st century, with the dynamic process of globalisation using the “global village” metaphor to describe the world, “tradition” as a heritage from the culture of pre-modern villages has become a subject to radical change and drastic transformations. In contemporary ethnology, denoting something as “tradition” becomes an act of interpretation, a way of selecting and labeling. The understanding of “tradition” as a given generation’s attitude towards its past and the culture of that past, as that generation’s evaluation of the inherited folk culture, can become an important research and pedagogical strategy.