

FOLK TRADITIONS IN THE HOLD OF MEMORY

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For more than two centuries, folk tradition enthusiasts have talked of the fading of traditions, their falling out of memory, and increasingly with the passage of time, of the importance of their preservation. Sometimes they have spoken as realists; sometimes as romantics under the sway of a spirit that runs right through the history of the discipline. ‘*Let us preserve and revive*’, the collector and ethnographer František Kretz (1959–1929)¹ encourages his contemporaries at the turn of the twentieth century in an article on the music of Slovácko:

Preserve our sweet music! By doing so, you do more, much more. The excited twittering of birds will return to us and our national song and the old dances with their colourful rhythms accompanied once more by musicians of no pretence! (Kretz 1901: 57)

There were other similarly aimed challenges, complaints, and regrets expressed about changes in popular culture, all harbouring a fear expressed succinctly by the musicologist Otakar Hostinský: ‘*It’s high time!*’ (Zíbrt 1912: 163) High time, that is, to capture the folk expressions—in this case, primarily folkloristic ones—that were being engulfed by a rapidly changing world.

Forgetting as an aspect of memory characterises both the views of traditional rural culture in this phase of societal development and the motivation of the era’s researchers. Kretz gave expressive voice to the zeitgeist:

There, where earlier in Slovácko sounded the dulcet music of unsurpassed Old World musicians, today one is driven away by the brash tones of tin horns blasting to the point of deafness. [...] What was not ruined by the callous world of profit-seeking was

1. František Kretz, a native of Blansko, originally a teacher, later a journalist and collector, was active from 1891, primarily in the Uherské Hradiště region.

finished off by poverty and lack. The lively hum of life left the dwellings of the ordinary folk, leaving behind only a contagious everydayness. The songs flew away, the musicians fell silent, the once crisp steps of the dancers became wearied. [...] In some places, the folklore costume is still intact; but this, too, will fall prey. The worm of modernity is eating even into the costume and burying itself ever deeper in the fabric of our national treasures. Is there any antidote? (Kretz 1901: 54)

Despite the literary character of his writing, if we set aside personal aesthetics and taste then Kretz accurately captures some of the objective reasons this situation arose: economic conditions, labour migration, and changes in the traditional structure of the village. Although Kretz and a host of his contemporaries perceived the situation as an attack on the very existence of traditional folk culture, thirty years later that perception had changed. The literary historian and pioneer in the study of anonymous folk songs and bawdy market songs Bedřich Václavek (1897–1943) offered a realistic analysis of the situation regarding folk song:

Here is a complaint that has been often heard for fifty years: that the folk song is dying out. The song that grew out of the closed, static culture of the Czech village of the 18th and 19th centuries is dying out because the societal basis of this culture of song is being disrupted—under the influence of education, transportation, urban culture, and so on. Does this in fact mean the disappearance of the folk song? Not at all. All that has changed is what the term ‘folk song’ means. (Václavek 1963: 141)

The accent on **forgetting** as an aspect of memory by older folk culture enthusiasts gradually gave way to a new emphasis on the dimension of **remembering**. The culture of remembering is generally, as the German Egyptologist Jan Assmann has described it, perceived as ‘*the observance of social obligations. This culture relates to the group and turns on the question: What must we not forget?*’ (Assmann 2001: 31). The notion may be seen within ethnology and the study of folk culture to have two meanings: 1) What must society, as the bearer of specific cultural

elements, not forget? and 2) What must not be neglected by the researchers who study that culture?

The first folklore and folk culture enthusiasts usually sought out the memories of the oldest people to be able to capture expressions of folk traditions that had by that time become archaic. Examples may be found in ethnographic studies. One comes from the collector Lucie Bakešová (1853–1935) and the girls' dance called 'Little Queens', which she reconstructed for the 1888 Ořechov ethnography exhibition. Intense public interest then greeted its performance at the Czech-Slavonic Ethnographic Exhibition in Prague in 1895. Bakešová herself said about her early research:

...and then we found Grandma Parova ...it was just coincidence that it was she, at more than 70 years of age, who was the king (the queen had already died), and that she still could recall the songs. All the other old women were younger than her, but didn't know all the things she did [...] We talked to this grandma daily, and everyday she was able to recall something new. Finally the entire ceremony was noted down and rehearsed under her supervision, so that Little Queens could be performed at a small ethnographic exhibition in Ořechov u Brna in 1888.²

Seeking out witnesses and their memories allowed new possibilities to be uncovered by folk tradition enthusiasts who had no opportunity to observe the phenomenon first-hand. The collectors recorded testimonies, it is true, but they also noted down dances and songs, often with astonishment and seeing themselves in the role of explorers who had happened upon something already lost from everyday life. They also revived the generational memory, which would otherwise have died with its bearers. As Jan Assmann (2001: 48) has written: '*Once the bearers who embody the tradition die, the memory of it is replaced by other, newer memories*'.

2. Institute of Ethnology, Czech Academy of Sciences, v. v. i., branch Brno, document collections and archives, Sign. R/Bakešová, Inv. No. 3140a; Bakešová, Lucie: *Jak jsme našli Královničky* [How We Found Little Queens]. Manuscript (1922).

In the attempt to record ‘antique’ expressions of folk culture, though, the researchers frequently left the cultural life of their own era out of the account.³ Even in the case of participatory observation, to use the current term, their greatest interest lay in ceremonies and celebrations that were still connected to archaic (or hypothesised archaic) culture, which could be showcased for the general public, including the educated and urban public. The overall image of folk traditions was thus formed from an external viewpoint and subject to diverse types of motivation. These motivations grew out of the aesthetics or ethics of the era and were often connected to the use of folk culture in religious contexts as well as contexts that were cultural and political or purely political (which in the history of our nation and others has been constant). Such use was made even in regions considered iconic for folk culture, like Horňácko. Although the participation of dancers, musicians, and singers from Horňácko at the Czech-Slavonic Ethnographic Exhibition in Prague (1895) is perceived as an effort to maintain folk culture (but even here the motivation was coloured by the exhibition’s role as a display of Czechness within the Austro-Hungarian monarchy), the presentation of folk elements in front of the leaders of the Communist regime fifty years later generates mostly negative feelings.⁴

It must however be added that even in earlier eras, researchers did not focus exclusively on the overall transformation of folk culture. Aside from cultural memory, they were also interested, as we indicated above, in **individual memory**. Through its bearers, individual memory was a source of the most diverse variants of

3. What is more, they often labeled them in a negative fashion, as may be seen in the second quote cited above from František Kretz.
4. In the Velká nad Veličkou municipal chronical it is written: “February 12, 1955, in the local Kordárna company cafeteria, the Company Club organized a ‘Slavic Carnival Eve’, where the ‘Slovácko Group’ performed along with a cymbalom band led by Jožka Kubík, and Václav Mlýnek, a folk story teller from Kuželov. Dr. Josef Plojhar, the Minister of Health, was invited and attended the event with his entourage.” (Quoted from Černíčková 2012: 65)

songs, dances, and lyrics, which part of both the local and regional repertoire. That there were differences between individual bearers was clear, and this expressed itself in the hierarchical structure of local society. As far back as the 1830s, Josef Jaroslav Langer (1806–1846), a poet, journalist, and collector active in the National Revival, noted, in an article entitled *Wedding Customs and Songs*:

Villagers call anyone who knows lots of songs and can sing along with the musicians in the pub a singer. Almost all the lads can do that, but a singer is someone who can improvise new lyrics to suit himself, his dancing partner, the guests, or an impertinent barman. A singer is someone who can improvise funny lyrics. (Langer 1861: 115)

The ethnomusicologist Dušan Holý, for example, in his eulogy for the Horňácko storyteller Vašek Mlýnek (1926–1976), said:

He got the storytelling gene from both his mother's side and his father's side. His maternal grandfather, Tomeš 'Horňák' of Hrubá Vrbka, a musician, is still remembered today as a funny man, even though he was killed back in the First World War. (Holý 1978: 304)

Gradually, modern folkloristics began to devote itself to the issue of individual memory with great intensity. A leading Czech folklorist of the latter half of the 20th century was Oldřich Sirovátka (1925–1992). He and his colleagues were part of an international trend that saw greater attention paid to interpreters—to those who bear folklore culture—and to ecological methods that emphasised both the role of context in studying the life of folklore and the role played by the personalities who interpreted them. This emphasis on the bearers of the tradition, whose memories are responsible not only for preserving folklore compositions but also for their transformation and dissemination, led to studies of active and latent personal repertoire, intentional and unintentional improvisation, and the classification of interpreter types. Over time, the attention shifted away from a focus on outstanding bearers to include those of more ordinary calibre. Work was done on storytellers and singers who were not considered leading interpreters, but

who allowed a picture to be obtained of the average level of the personal and local repertoire of that segment of society.

One noteworthy example to do with the issue of individual bearers comes from research of the ethnomusicologist Marta Toncrová published in the study *Zpěvačka Františka Petrů a její repertoár* (1981). The Brno singer noted in the title had accumulated a list of the opening lyrics of almost 3000 songs, and Toncrová went through the list and its broad range of genres over a five-year period. The interesting passages relate precisely to the theme of memory:

Research into a portion of the songs from her manuscript collection shows that Františka Petrů knows only some the songs fully. For instance, she may recall only the initial verse. On the other hand, she is capable of remembering extensive epic songs, including 'Vnislav a Běla' and 'Na hranici města německého', which were part of folk culture, or the folk ballad 'Juliana, krásná panna'. She shows great agility when her memory fails, filling out the missing lyrics with her own additions. She was able to provide exact data on the social function of many songs, as well as on their interpreters and the occasions at which they were performed. [...] Her interpretations are characterised by excessive repetition, which is a consequence of the fact that the singer many times calls the lyrics back to mind while she is in the process of singing; the repetitions help her remember how the lyrics go. (Toncrová 1981: 209)

Toncrová also considered how the repertoire changed over the course of a human life, how the songs were tied to human emotions, and concluded that folklorists cannot fully penetrate into the thinking of the bearers:

[...] Similar questions can only be raised by folklorists in a general way or may arise in working with interpreters, but only a psychologist can answer them. For folklorists, then, there is no way to gain clear insight into the mechanism of memory, which is the motor that drives folkloric self-expression and secures its development and continuity. (Toncrová 1981: 212)

This study incidentally brings to mind one important aspect of traditional folk culture and memory. Most often, a connection is cited with the oral way that compositions are handed down from generation to generation. But written records, too, play a role—records created by the bearers of the culture that testify directly to the life of the village, not those made from the point of view of collectors or outside enthusiasts. Because of the level of literacy in rural areas, particularly in earlier eras, these sources are infrequent. They concerned chroniclers and rural scribes who recorded everything they thought was important, whether it be something they had learned personally or that perhaps reflected their surrounding environment.⁵ Alžběta Kulíšková, editor of the manuscripts, published in book form, of the farmer Josef Dlask (1752–1853) of Dolánky u Turnova, thinking of the importance of his efforts, wrote:

Sometimes it doesn't take that much to become immortal. You don't have to be a politician, a famous artist, or an inventor. Sometimes it's enough just to sit down at the kitchen table after a day of work and write by the light of a candle whatever comes to mind. Perhaps to exercise your own memory, perhaps to capture important events and preserve knowledge for your descendants, perhaps just to read to your neighbours... (Kulíšková 2015: 7)

This kind of writing, too, is a significant source of cultural memory.

With the transformation of traditional folk culture, the rural cultural memory began to evolve within a broader context, incorporating novel input related to preserving vanishing traditions. And it is here that we come to our final thoughts. Although folklorism is often seen as a subsequent phase following on the gradual disappearance of traditional folk culture—its 'second life'—it is still possible to tease out distinct directions

5. Cf. eg. Pavlicová, Martina. 2009. Život je smích skrze slzy [Life is Laughter through Tears]. In *Smích a pláč* [Laughter and Crying], edited by Irena Příbylová and Lucie Uhlíková. Náměšť nad Oslavou: Městské kulturní středisko, 2009. 7–14.

in the phenomenon that went on to evolve in their own separate ways. Contemporary empirical studies show a remarkable correlation between the preservation of traditional folk culture and the subsequent flowering of folklorism in locations where conditions were favourable for the development of village life, including demographic characteristics. The ethnologist Roman Doušek notes:

On the basis of historical data, we must take into account that industrialisation and the urbanisation associated with it in the latter half of the 19th century brought about a depopulation of the countryside. [...] From a demographic standpoint, rural areas in Moravia cannot be seen as homogeneous, nor was the folklorism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries present in equal intensity everywhere in the Moravian countryside. Social crisis need not provoke an immediate reaction. Instead, several phases may be involved, with depopulation only one. It may also come, however, in that phase of the crisis in which society momentarily lacks the strength to respond [...] and this may lead to the collapse of the community and its eventual extinction. (Doušek 2016: 206)

We may proceed analogously in relating this example to the development of culture and cultural memory. Assmann, as noted above, ties culture to memory and asserts society's reliance upon it and that the history of individual memories is crucial for cultural memory (Assmann 2001: 50). He also emphasises that to relate to the cultural memory, one must first be aware of it (ibid: 33).

The extent to which contemporary folklorism relates to the past is, however, an open question. The folk cultural phenomena that attend the cycle of life in rural areas are more intensely felt than they are within the groups that form the urban folk movement. Research carried out ten years ago with urban folk groups showed that relating to folk culture was only a marginal motivation for participants (Pavlicová – Uhlíková 2008: 30). But even with local activities, there are examples where, on one hand, it is an effort to maintain the intense experience of the local tradition, but on the other, various novel elements are introduced. In commenting on

photographs of folk costumes from a Slovácko locality in recent research, one respondent expressed her thoughts on the way the jacket is worn with the men's costume (*lajbl*). Traditionally, it was worn only during winter; today, it is worn in all seasons. The respondent ascribed this novel trend to the fact that, particularly in South Moravia, male singing groups have taken to making this clothing variant part of their presentation.

The respondent's husband (both are active in the folklore movement) pointed in another part of the research to the local feast tradition (*hody*) and to the current participation of children, something he says did not begin until the late 1960s in that locale. This he explained by the fact that the feasts were now organised by local folklore groups and the people associated with them, so that they were no longer organised by young village bachelors as had previously been the case.

These examples show that most of today's bearers of the folk tradition do also have strong ties to folklorism, that is with the 'second life' of folklore and folk culture. Here, too, we encounter the same processes of cultural memory that earlier generations reacted to: forgetting, remembering, and the attempt to preserve the generational memory. The cultural memory is reinforced by tradition but contemporary influences both personal and collective do penetrate into it. It is certainly a question why today, in this era of mass culture, the relationship between folklore and folklorism in local areas continues to evolve. One potential answer has been given by Doušek: that folklorism is connected to the historical memory, and its potential is such that it may lead to the articulation of the positives of rural life and the countryside as a cultural space for living (Doušek 2016: 214).

In conclusion, folk traditions and the perception of them have always been based upon memory. In addition to the traditions of particular cultures, a research tradition has grown up and formed its own relationship to the cultural memory and to individual singers, dancers, and other personalities—the bearers of the cultural memory. With a certain amount of licence, then, it may

be said that folk traditions have been and continue to be encased in the memories of their bearers and those individuals who have researched and interpreted them. It is therefore always essential to carefully study all the applicable background, all the mutual influences, and the entire context. Not an easy task, but for a true understanding of historical memory and cultural identity, in which traditional folk culture and its legacy play an important role, one that is indispensable.

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Sources:

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Summary

The fading of traditions of folk culture, their falling out of memory, and their preservation have been talked about for more than two centuries. From the first pioneers and people interested in folk culture, this thread leads up to the present, where it is connected not only to ethnologists and other scholars, but to artistic spheres and the general public. The paper deals with diverse aspects, which can be observed in connection with folk traditions and memory. The author follows statements, comments, and narrations of observers and bearers of folk culture in order to show the evolution of approaches to memory in the field of folk traditions. These include both a tie between memory and its bearers, and a reflection of folk traditions in general cultural memory. The development of research memory, which studies and interprets manifestations of folk culture, can be observed as well. Last but not least, the paper considers the preservation of folk traditions, which provides new enrichment and activation of culture memory.

Key words: Traditional folk culture; folk traditions; folklorism; memory; forgetting; recollecting; individual memory; cultural memory; preservation/ safeguarding of folk traditions.