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Who Owns “Folk Dances”? About the Intellectual Property Rights of Dances Formed in Historical Times. The Case of Borica¹

Subjective Introduction

When I started to work at a very young age with *Borica*, a danced ritual from Transylvania, I had been fascinated by its virtual testimony of an ancient past. My first article published on this issue contained a motto, a few lines from a poem written by Mihály Babits, which I had interpreted as a suggestion of a heritage of some “coded message”, left by the ancestors for future generations:

“Who understands my song, who understands?
And who knows, as I don’t know, why it stands?
And who believes I was deep down in the past?”²

At that time, I also formulated a naive question at some extent, linked to my pre-occupation towards the past of this danced ritual. The question was the following: “How can we possibly understand what message the people of the bygone past send us through the language of a custom, the meanings of which are not understood even by the preservers themselves?” (Könczei 1989: 145, 2007: 114)³ Later on, as I had the chance to lecture and study critical cultural studies and deconstructivist theories, I ended up tabooing my historical interest in *Borica*, classifying it as ‘romantic’ and ‘speculative’. Even more, I soon realized, that in the Eastern European context an ethnocentric attitude with heavy nationalist accents had been dominant in the 20th century – with respectable exceptions –, which overshadowed enquiries concerned with the history of dance, and in general all kind of history,

1 This study is a slightly modified and completed version of my presentation entitled *Legacy: Ritual as time-tunnel* at the World Conference of the International Council for Traditional Music (ICTM), in 2017 (13-19 July) in Limerick, Ireland. My participation at the conference was supported by Communitas Foundation.

2 Fragment from the poem Theosophical songs written by Mihály Babits. (In Hungarian: Theosophicus énekek, 1909). The English version was my own translation. (Könczei 2007: 125) Source of the poem: Mihály Babits *Levelek Irisz koszorújából* [Poems], Nyugat, Budapest, 1909.

3 I wrote my first studies on *Borica* in my twenties in the 1980s, then I returned to this research theme in the 1990s and 2000s to complete my doctoral dissertation in 2004, which was published in 2009 (Könczei 2009).

tossing them towards simplified variants of the so called origin issue, greatly influenced by the ambitions of the actual nationalist political forces. (cf. Bibó 1990. I dealt with this issue in the domain of dance research in Könczai 2015)

The Actual Context: The Case of the Inscription of the Lad Dance on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity

A recent controversy about the “ownership” of the lad dances from Kalotaszeg region (Romanian: Călata) signals that the institutional framework is still biased by nationalist visions, recalling a type of discourse which was common in the 19th century, culminating in the so called “Trial of the Wild Rose”, a hot-spirited debate between Romanian and Hungarian intellectuals about the intellectual property rights of an old ballad called “The Walled-Up Wife”, a building sacrifice song.⁴ The polemics over the “copyright” of the Transylvanian lad dances is symptomatic for the preservation of a nationalist discourse on “folklore” issues, which subordinates scientific research to the political project of nation building.⁵

The lad dance from Romania was nominated by Romania in 2009 for the inscription on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity and was inscribed on the 2015 meeting in Windhoek with a single critical remark, that is: [The Committee] “Reminds the State Party that the concept of authenticity is not in line with the spirit of the Convention.”⁶ The text of the decision does

- 4 “János Kriza, a Unitarian bishop, started to collect folk ballads (and other genres) among the Székely Hungarians in Transylvania in the 1840s. Due to financial and other problems, he could publish the first volume only in 1863. Its title, *Vadrózsák* (Wild Roses), clearly reflects romantic German views about the beauty of peasant life. Pál Gyulai, a leading Hungarian literary critic, praised the unique beauty of the Székely ballads in enthusiastic essays, but Julian (sic!) Grozescu, a Romanian homme de lettres who was also interested in folklore research, wrote the following year short articles in Romanian and Hungarian journals in Hungary, arguing that two of Kriza’s best known folk ballads, »Molnár Anna« and »Kőműves Kelemenné« were translations from the Romanian narrative songs »Toma Alimoș« and »Mănăstirea Argeșului« (Monastery of Argeș), and near plagiarism. Several Hungarian literati refuted the accusation by demonstrating the existence of several Hungarian variants, and called for the collection of more Hungarian ballads. The polemics, which centered on the question »who stole« the ballads from other people’s tradition, was not without nationalistic overtones. The *Vadrózsá-per* (Trial of the Wild Rose) was later often mentioned in folklore research history both in Hungary and Romania (Alexics). In the rest of Europe nobody paid much attention to it. Adrian Fochi and Lajos Vargyas have demonstrated recently that both ballads are of international distribution, well known in different European folk traditions. Neither the Hungarian nor the Romanian texts are translations or stolen goods. “ (Voigt 2007: 323–324.)
- 5 An extreme form of the political subordination of the folklore is described by Hermann Bausinger in his study written in 1965 about the role of Folklore in the National-Socialist thought, characterized by „the absolute priority of political-ideological practice over any attempt at theoretical, neutral, or objective understanding”. (Bausinger 1994: 25)
- 6 Decision of the Intergovernmental Committee of UNESCO: 10. COM 10.B.25 (Online: <https://ich.unesco.org/en/decisions/10.COM/10.B.25>, last accessed: 02 February 2018.)



not cover issues linked to the representativeness and criteria of the selection of the performances, either to the lack of reference to an internationally known special literature on the lad dances from Transylvania, which has elaborated a sophisticated typology based on historical, structural and musical analysis (cf. e.g. Martin 1977, 1980a, 1980b, 1980c, 1981, 2004, or Bucşan 1971, Giurchescu–Bloland 1995) Nor did the committee notice the discrepancy between the statements of the official text, and the explanatory subtitles of the video produced by the project leader. According to the official text, which is annexed to the decision, the dancers of the lad dance “*may include Romanian, Hungarian and Roma dancers*. This aspect contributes to *intercultural dialogue* and provides a context for learning more about *cultural diversity*, by witnessing, for example, local performers dancing at regional events or by observing choreographic styles of different ethnic groups” (emphasis added). The subtitles of the supporting video in the same time are formulated in an exclusive manner, presenting the lad dance from Méra (Romanian: Mera),⁷ the single example performed by a Hungarian youngster, as belonging to the Romanians⁸: “*This is a Romanian dance, performed also by the Hungarians and Romas from Romania, but on Romanian melodies.*” (emphasis added) This was the sentence which touched the sensitive points of some ethnic Hungarians, who felt offended because their national pride was hurt, considering they themselves, that the lad dance from Transylvania is part of their own heritage, especially that from Méra. So they started a dispute in the media.⁹

I would like to clarify here, that I am not advocating for the investigation of pure ethnic origins of melodies or dances at all, for at least two reasons. First of all, if we apply the conceptual framework of post-Barthian social theory, we cannot comprehend ethnicity as an intrinsic essential characteristic of permanent groups of people, but as a process of categorization of social identity, which is moulded and changed along interactions in different historical contexts. Since Fredrik Barth we can hardly see contemporary ethnic groups as simple prolongations of primordial organic ancient tribal societies, which had been isolated when they developed singular and original cultural contents. The cultural content created by social groups is dependent as much of the creative capacity of the in-group as well as of the interaction with other groups. More than that, ethnicity and cultural content do not overlap: cultural diversity might be greater in the midst of the same ethnic group as in between ethnic groups (cf. Barth 1969, Eriksen 1993, Jenkins 1994).

György Martin drew attention to this characteristic of traditional dance cultures in 1980: “The dance cultures of larger European regions are similar – regardless the language and ethnicity – despite that since the spread of national consciousness

7 Méra (Romanian Mera) is a village inhabited by a Hungarian majority and a Roma minority in Cluj County.

8 Online: <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/lads-dances-in-romania-01092>. (Last accessed: 02 February 2018.)

9 See Gergely Szilvay: Botrány a kultúrdiplomáciában: lerománozzák a magyar néptánc zenéjét? [Scandal in Cultural Diplomacy: the Music of Hungarian Folk Dances is Declared Romanian?]. *Mandiner*, 6 July 2017. Online: http://mandiner.hu/cikk/20170704_kulturdiplo-macia_botrany_leromanozzak_a_magyar_nepzenet_. (Last accessed: 02 February 2018.)

certain people carefully record and emphasize their differentiating marks. For an observer having a bird eye perspective Balkan, respectively East European and Western-European dances are amalgamated. The outsider has little capacity to make a difference between Russian and Ukrainian, Slovakian from Hungarian or from Transylvanian Romanian, Oltenian Romanian from Serbian, Macedonian from Bulgarian. Separating German from Czech or Polish is as difficult as separating Swedish from Finnish.” (Martin 1980a: 10.) From the viewpoint of ethnic identity, what matters is not the cultural content in itself, but the identification of a person with a group, or his or her delimitation of another group. These are totally subjective processes, as they are based on the perception of similarity or difference. That is why ethnicity can be considered as being an emic and ascribed category (Barnard 1996) and not as an objective factual and substantial given.

To claim that a peculiar dance or melody is part of the heritage or patrimony of one or another nation is what Michael Stewart calls ‘methodological nationalism’. According to this concept “Each nation is the bearer of a unique culture – or, to put it in the current jargon, carries a distinct heritage or patrimony of a unique character. [...] Nations are thus destined to realize their own unique potential. [...] There is a fundamental paradox here: a political idea that is predicated on the idea of unique, unrepeatable individual content (national character) rests on an entirely constant formal arrangement of that content. In this respect, all nations look alike – and look alike too in their denial of resemblance and their obsessive, frequently aggressive insistence on difference (Harrison 2006). This is, if you will, the psychopathology of modern world politics.” (Stewart 2012: 10, 12.)

So, how can we deal with such a heavily politically charged issue, which raise strong emotions? How can we escape the frame of national exclusiveness in interpreting cultural history? Is it possible to find adequate research methods for tracking back in history older conditions of present day traditional danced rituals? As I have never stopped contemplating about potential histories of the past of the *Borica* in spite of an unfavourable climate, I have struggled to find alternative models which transcend the categorization which implies concepts like ‘primary origin’ and ‘borrowing’, ‘purity’ or ‘contamination’, and I have tried to find a working strategy for constructing a plausible hypothesis which would help us to imagine a thinkable past of the *Borica*.

A Plausible Hypothesis for Imagining the Past of *Borica*-like Rituals

A ritual, linked to the ceremonial calendar of the winter solstice and to the practice of lad’s societies, the *Borica* has seemingly imbued a series of reminiscences, which we could even name survivals in the Tylorian understanding, as the performers



themselves do not feel the need to attest its status.¹⁰ Thus if we see it as an ongoing repetition of a basic ritual scenario, transmitted from generation to generation for a long period of time, the *Borica* might encompass the testimony of groups of people lived in historical times. The *Borica* is a ritual performed in three Hungarian communities from South Transylvania, in the so called Seven Villages (Hétfalu), and it is unique in the narrower region, called Țara Bârsei in Romanian, Barcaság in Hungarian and Burzenland in German. It is singular also in the context of the traditions of the broader dance culture of Hungarian speaking people.¹¹

According to the Hungarian dance research, the most typical male dances performed in the Carpathian Basin can be classified as individual and improvisational dances, traced back until the late Renaissance and early modern era, and are frequently exemplified by the lad dance from Méra. Following the same typology, the *Borica* belongs to the so called collective group dances, having a completely regulated structure, and performed in uniformity, thought to have emerged in the Middle Ages, a rarity in the traditional dance repertoire of Hungarian communities (cf. Martin 1979, 1980a, 1990). As a set of kinetic, spatial, visual, objectual features of the ritual, as well as the hierarchical structure of the roles of the participants and the commands of the dance leader signal military-like aspects, we can feel entitled to search for a possible warrior milieu of it, dating back to the medieval times.

As it is hard to believe that in the epoch when it had been shaped, the *Borica* was created as a singular and unique ritual, without any larger social and cultural background, a curious researcher would look for connections for better understanding. Of course, we know that the *Borica* has been related to the very broad contexts of *Männerbunde*, and *Morris*, which had been widespread all over Europe since the early Middle Ages, rooted probably in even more ancient times (cf. Domokos 1990), but what seems to me even more exciting than defining general typologies, is *the mapping of concrete historical contexts, where real people acted in the real chronological time in face-to-face situations.*

The toolkits of co-disciplines, as history, musicology and linguistics might help us to venture into this kind of investigation. So we can raise the question: What kind of demographic landscape would we find when going back to the appearance of the communities in the region possibly generating *Borica*-like performances? What kind of people inhabited the region in the first centuries, after the turn of the first millennium, when medieval Transylvania begun to become politically, religiously and military organized?

Recent historiography is warning us that it would be anachronistic to project back homogenous ethnic groups in the modern understanding, spontaneously

10 "When a custom, an art or an opinion is fairly started in the world, disturbing influences may long affect it so slightly that it may keep its course from generation to generation, as a stream once settled in its bed will flow on for ages [...] an idea, the meaning of which has perished [...] may continue to exist, simply because it has existed [...]" (Tylor 1871.)

11 On the results of my fieldwork on *Borica* and a review of previous bibliography see Könczei 2009. I have never stated that this ritual can be perceived as being totally identical with some ancient antecedents: in my thesis I also relate on the changes of the ritual which can be traced through historical documents.

settled in the Carpathian-Danubian region in the Middle Ages. With a low demographic density, the ethnic structure of this landscape has been described as totally mosaic-like, with islands of mainly Slavic, Wlach, Wlach-Slavic sedentary populations, intermixed with segmentary tribal communities of mostly Turkic origins, as the Pechenegs, Oghuz Turks, Cumans, arriving in different waves in different times from Asia. These groups of people later had been complemented with Occidental settlers, the overwhelming majority of whom were the so called Saxons, which is a generic denomination for groups of people coming from different parts of German speaking territories. The Hungarian tribal union entered the scene starting from the 9th century. (cf. Lendvai 2003.)

The picture would not be complete without acknowledging the major impact on the social structure of the broader region of the medieval state organizations, in our case the naissance of the Hungarian Kingdom, established in 1001 by Stephen I pushing the border of the Western European civilization based on Roman Christianity eastwards. The king did not even think about forming a linguistically or ethnically homogeneous population on the territories under his rule. On the contrary, he shuffled the social cards anew, generating a few centuries of extraordinary mobility before a next stage of relative territorial stability and social order, more favourable for the development of ethnically homogeneous social segments.¹²

Historian Ovidiu Pecican is explaining why the Occidental state-political thinking had serious difficulties in grasping the social reality of these regions, so different from the structure of an established and unambiguous administration: “It was a very diverse society, consisting of more or less different »islands« of languages and customs, at various stages of cultural-linguistic interferences, which had lived in more or less flexible organizational forms, with changing borders and representing quite fluid institutional traditions.” (Pecican 2007.) We can add to this colourful imagery the usage of some languages as “lingua franca” in the communication of different linguistic groups, like for instance the Slavic dialects, and the role of this type of language practice in the assimilation and absorption of some of the people in a few centuries of interferences, as well as the competition for influence of different religions: the Orthodox Christian, the Roman Catholic, the Pagan ones, and even the Muslim and the Jewish.

According to the authors of the local history, the initial population of the Seven Villages had been coagulated by members of Turkic groups, Hungarians from the administration of the early Hungarian state and Szekler colonizers (Hungarian: *székely*; Romanian: *secui*), having been settled in the Carpathian territories for border guard services, a function otherwise carried out by the Turkic people as well. What we know from historians and linguists is, that at least two of the Seven

12 The first Christian king from the Árpád dynasty, King Saint Stephen (Stephen I of Hungary), addressed to his son an exhortation, drawn up around 1030, probably by a German monk, saying that: “A country which has only one language and one kind of custom is weak and fragile. Therefore, my son, I instruct you to face [the settlers] and treat them decently, so that they will prefer to stay with you rather than elsewhere, because if you were to destroy all that I have built and squander what I have collected, then your empire would doubtless suffer considerable loss.” (Lendvai 2003: 2–3.)



Villages had been settled by Pechenegs or/and Oghuzs, the name of these, Zajzon (Romanian Zizin) and Tatrang (Romanian Tărlungeni) coming from the proto-turkic personal names of *Saysun*, probably meaning ‘stab him!’ and *Tatran*, probably meaning ‘he who offers’ (Árvay 1943, Rásonyi 1981, Vogel 1974). The presence of Turkic, and especially Pecheneg and Oghuz communities is widely accepted in the Intra-Carpathian Basin of Háromszék and Barcaság (Romanian: Trei Scaune and Țara Bârsei), as well as in the broader South Carpathian region, as it has been attested by a series of toponyms and written documents from the beginning of the 13th century.

Historically the Szeklers are considered to be an affiliated tribe in the Hungarian tribal system since the conquest, Hungarian speakers from the earliest times. Originally settled on the western edges of the Hungarian state formation, they had been gradually moved towards East. Before inhabiting their present residential area, they had been directed towards South Transylvania, where they might have spent more than a hundred of years. There has been recently created a consensus in the historiography based on linguistic evidence concerning the settlement area of three of the Szekler tribes in the 11th and 12th century in South Transylvania, before occupying the Eastern Intra Carpathian region around the 12th and 13th centuries. Their initial settlements in South Transylvania would have been located around three localities, which carry the names of three administrative units in the present territories: Szászsebes, Szászorbó and Száskézsd (Romanian: Sebeș, Gârbova Săsească, Saschiz), the sources of the actual Sepsiszek, Orbai szék and Kézdi szék (Romanian: Scaunul Sfântu Gheorghe, Orbai and Chizd) situated in the Háromszék (Romanian: Trei Scaune) Basin. The three initial locations according to this theory would be the carriers of the denominations of the tribal organizations, around which the Szeklers had have possessed their transitional cantonments, and from where they had have been displaced because of the arriving of the new Saxon colonizers. (cf. Benkő 2016, Kristó 2002.)

The Szeklers were intermixed with Pechenegs in almost all the places their presence had been attested, in the same way as the Romanian communities had been combined with Turkic segments. It was in the area of the South Carpathians where Szekler groups could have interacted also with militarized Romanian communities more intensively, and both of them with Pechenegs, all of them having been issued for military services to consolidate the borders of the stately territory by the political administration of the Hungarian royalty.¹³ (cf. Kordé 2016, Madgearu 2005.) Due to the continuous extention and fortification of the border system, South Transylvania had been gradually populated by different militarized ethnic groups, and became a geographical area, where at least three civilizations, the western, the southern Byzantine and the north-eastern of the Steppe had intersected each other. (cf. Crîngaci Țiplic–Țiplic 2016.) As a real meeting point, it was favourable

13 The Pechenegs living in medieval Hungary had first of all military duties and participated in battles westwards, southwards and eastwards, often together with Szeklers. According to an early diploma, around 1210, they were intermixed with Szeklers and Romanians in the army lead by the war-lord of Sibiu against Bulgarians (Kordé 2016: 81).

for cultural transactions and for the construction of new identities by creating intra- and inter-ethnic cultural differences in between various groups on the one hand, and on the other hand for the assimilation of smaller scattered ethnic groups, like the Pechenegs and the Oghuzs into the Hungarian and Romanian population likewise. It is my supposition, that the *Borica*-like rituals, having antecedents in several directions, had been formed in this area in this period full of changes, probably between the 11th and 13th centuries as part of a medieval discourse of warrior ritual, which was shaped by diverse militarized ethnic groups serving as border guards. This would be a plausible hypothesis for the explanation of many similarities between ritual practices, and even correspondences of some melodies, dispersed throughout a larger region, probably all along with the displacement of the groups of people in later periods.¹⁴

Conclusions

Returning to my initial questions raised in connection with the possibilities of carrying out research on the past of dances and rituals formed in historical times, I would conclude, that the process of heritagisation, as far as it implies that cultural products enter into the patrimony of national states, appears as an obstacle, because it follows the logic of nation building, which sorts and rearranges cultural goods shaped in totally different social environments preceding the appearance of modern nations. The ownership of either the *Borica*-like rituals, or the Transylvanian lad dances in their various regional forms cannot be attributed to whole nations or national states, because they had not been left in our heritage by whole corporate ethnic groups imagined as being the direct predecessors of the modern nations.

The only legitimate successors of these dances can be those people to whom the skills have been passed on from generation to generation through face-to-face practicing, and who are still performing them. If we would like to aspire for a concept covering a more general inheritance, the property rights could be only credited to the whole humanity, hardly being possible to become partitioned between nations without falling into the trap of 'methodological nationalism'. Both conclusions would correspond to the strategy of UNESCO of building peace and to avoid interethnic conflict.

14 One melody of the *Borica* for instance appears in similar contexts in different locations at great distance, independently from each other among Szeklers and Romanians. More detailed results of the research on this issue I might present in further studies.



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