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Modernity embedded in “*rural*” | An anthropological study of identity representation of the “*peasant world*” among *young* Hungarian folk dancers living in Budapest

Abstract

The paper aims to interpret examples of identity representation of the “*rural*” in reflection to the Hungarian folk dancers living in Budapest. The examined Hungarian folk dancers identify themselves as those who reconstruct the “*peasant traditions*”. They reconstruct the attitudes of the “*old peasant world*”, redefine and represent them in their modern urban life. These attitudes are represented by the identifications of the body, which is evident in their interpretation of gender roles. By exploring the experiences of observations and interpretations of interviews - established from cultural anthropological research amongst the members of the Hungarian dance house movement – the papers’ goal is to present identity constructions in question.

Keywords: folk dance, identity, peasant traditions, urban life, symbols

Introduction

Stuart Hall in his study, *Questions of Cultural identity* (1992), claims that modern societies are keeping up a unique continuity with previous forms. By this, Hall means those traditions that are organized according to different principles and refilled with personal narratives (Hall, 1992, p.277–278). Taking influence from Hall’s statement, this text aims to interpret examples of identity representation of the “*rural*” in reflection of the *young*¹⁶ Hungarian folk dancers’ identity.

¹⁶ During the research, the *young* Hungarian folk dancers were examined. The term of *young* was defined as those men and women who have a regular paying job, either as a “*civilian*” or as a dancer. Besides this, one section of the group is undertaking college studies too. Moreover, they do not have a family life, which means none of them have children during the research. Therefore, the research only focused on the above mentioned age group among the Hungarian folk dancers living in Budapest.

The members of the researched “*folk dance community*”¹⁷ identify themselves as those who “*conserve*” the “*old peasant traditions*”. They reconstruct the attitudes of the “*old peasant world*”, redefine and represent them in their modern urban life. During the process of “*tradition conservation*” – which means adopting the “*traditional*” “*peasant*” attitudes – the “*peasant world’s*” customs, norms and gender roles become part of their identity. These attitudes are represented in the identifications of the body, such as their style, ideals of body image and other symbolic representations of their identity such as tattoos; furthermore, this is evident in their interpretation of gender roles.

Based on the previously mentioned, the following questions emerge: How do the members of the “*community*” define the past and the present? How do they define “*peasant*” attitudes? In which identity constructions are the “*peasant*” attitudes represented? The following study aims to present possible answers to these questions.

Methods of research

The represented empirical data is based on cultural anthropological fieldwork research, which has been conducted since 2014. The researched *young* Hungarian folk dancers are members of a more extended “*community*”, so-called the Hungarian dance house movement. By reason of qualitative anthropological research methodology, examining the more extended Hungarian dance house movement was not possible. The research focused on a select group of individuals within the “*community*” to be able to “study in the village” and not study “the village” (Geertz, 1983, p.22). The selected, previously explicated *young*¹⁸ individuals live in Budapest, and they define themselves as Hungarian folk dancers, moreover the members of the Hungarian dance house movement.

During the research, one of the key methods has been *observation and participation*. Observation in this research is understood “as a way of knowing about the world of others, it provides a particular and unique way of generating novel understandings of the participants in our research” (Musante, 2015, p.251). Moreover, the

¹⁷ Further on in this paper, quote marks and italics are used to visualize interviewees’ terms. According to Geertz, the experiences of the researched people should be analyzed in the reflection of their own conception (Geertz, 1983, p.59). Thomas H. Eriksen (2001) had similar views of this question, in connection with the “emic and etic” perspective. The terms are related to Kenneth Pike, linguistic who introduced the emic and etic dichotomy as the opposite pairs of “phonetics and phonemics”, writes Eriksen (Eriksen, 2001, p.36). On an emic level, the community members describe their lives themselves (Eriksen, 2001, p.36) and using this theoretical background the research material is analysed from “inside”, using the terms and words of the community members.

¹⁸ See: Footnote 1.

researcher who observes, “explicitly incorporates the collection and recording of information gained from participating in a social setting and observing what is happening in the setting explicitly into the analysis” (Musante, 2015, p.252). The studied Hungarian folk dancers can be observed periodically on a weekly basis at events, such as dance houses, which provide the folk dancers a recurring possibility for meetings. During these “collective” events, the researched individuals’ “interactions and practices” are led by a collectively owned pattern (Feischmidt & Szuhay, 2007, p.243). Therefore, the observation of such events is a chance for the researcher “to enter into the social and cultural field one researches” (Eriksen, 2001, p.26) and to “feel the point of view of the other” (Musante, 2015, p.260). Furthermore, I participated in other important events, such as festivals, competitions, and yearly meetings. Due to the casual environment, I had the opportunity to initiate informal conversations with members of the “community” and organise formal interviews with them.

Until 2019, and alongside the observations, twenty-five semi-structured in-depth interviews were made, to understand personal connotations of the *young* Hungarian folk dancers’ narratives. The interviewees were chosen by utilising the snowball sampling technique. The first interviewee was chosen based on their knowledge of the subject, and at the end of each interview they were asked to recommend another. From the listed folk dancers, a candidate was chosen, who had been recommended by all the previous interviewees. After each interview, the next interviewee was chosen by the help of the same method. As a consequence of this method, they outlined the members of their “community” themselves. During the in-depth interviews, the opportunity arose to get closer, not only to the examined phenomena, but also to gain a deeper understanding of personal connotations of the Hungarian folk dancers’ narratives. The research paper contains anthropological interpretations, which aim to “take us into the heart of which it is the interpretation” (Geertz, 1983, p.18). These interpretations are based on quotes from the interviews, the analysis of the informal conversations in which I took part, and the observations from the “collective” events.

In the further section of the paper, the narratives of the “community” are going to be firstly understood in relation to “cultural memory” (Assmann, 2011). Secondly, the members’ identity constructions will be examined as an example of the “peasant world” representation in their modern urban life. The analysis of identity contents will be discussed by the presentation of identity constructions, more precisely, from general

communal levels towards the individual, such as folk dancer clothing, folk tattoos and expected gender roles. In the following section, the paper presents segments of the folk dancer identity, which are connected to the narratives of past and present.

Narratives of the past and present

Jan Assmann, in *Collective Memory and Early Civilization* (2011), writes about the merging of “cultural memory” and identity. Assmann’s analysis exposes connection between “memory”, “identity”, and “cultural continuity” (Assmann, 2011, p.2). He writes, “every culture formulates something that might be called a connective structure” (Assmann, 2011, p.2). “Connective structure” of a culture continuously binds people together by the creation of “common knowledge and characteristics”, “common area of experience, expectation, and action whose connecting force provides them with trust and with orientation” through “laws and values”, and through “the memory of a shared past” (Assmann, 2011, p.2-3). Hereby “a basis of belonging, of identity”, the ‘we’ will be created and sustained, which is indispensable for cultural continuity (Assmann, 2011, p.3). The examined young Hungarian folk dancers define themselves as “*the followers of the old peasant culture*”, “*conservers of Hungarian traditions*” and “*speakers of one, common language*”. “*Conserving*” certain elements of the past and remembering them, have a crucial role in the life of the “*community*”. During the process of identifying with the “*traditional*”, “*country*”, “*peasant*”, and the related gender roles, these attitudes become part of their identity. The question arises, what is the exact process of “*tradition conservation*”?

The folk dancers “*traditions conservation*” can be interpreted as a memory related pursuit. With the help of remembering, they “*conserve*” the “*traditions*”, which create their identity. The memory works in a reconstructive way, and not as something that conserves the past. Only those parts remain in memory, which can be reconstructed within the reference frame of the group (Bartlett, 1995; Halbwachs, 1992). Memory reconstructs the past, and perception is an essential part of the reconstruction as the past is only created if the individual makes contacts with it. The contact is only made if there is “documentation” about the past that “denote some kind of characteristic difference” from the present (Assmann, 2011, p.17-18). In the case of folk dancers, “*archive films*”, “*field trips*” and “*folklore*” can serve, as “documentation”. The “*archive films*” are important elements of the process of dance learning. Those people who can be seen in the “*archive*

films” represent the “*informants*”¹⁹ attitudes and the “*traditional*”, “*rural*”, and “*peasant*” surroundings. Therefore, the different customs, decencies, and gender roles become part of their identity. During “*field trips*”, the dancers visit places where they have an opportunity to meet the above-mentioned “*informants*”. The members of the “*community*” have also talked about these meetings. One of the interviewees expressed the following: “*dance brings the other values, too, those things which we learn from the informants help us learn what is respect, and how to behave in human relationships*” (Amateur male folk dancer).²⁰ They can learn personally from the “*informants*” how to “*behave*”. The inherited knowledge is interpreted as a value in the folk dancers’ narratives. And, last but not least, knowing the “*folklore*”, namely, the customs, clothing, folk songs, and folk music are basic conditions of belonging to the community.

In the study by Stuart Hall, *Questions of Cultural identity* (1992), the author claims that modern societies are keeping up a unique continuity with previous forms. By this, Hall means those traditions, which are organized according to different principles (Hall, 1992, p.277–278), as previously mentioned²¹. In modernity, the traditional patterns are refilled with personal narratives. By conserving the “*old*” patterns, the folk dancers create their own identity. The members of the folk dance “*community*” “*conserve*” a past state that did not exist, reconstructing some elements of “*country life*” with the help of “*archive films*” and “*folklore*”, interpreting them in a unique way within their everyday urban life. The folk dancers are part of a circulation; they first meet the “*folklore*”, and the “*archive films*”, then they define their identity based on these materials, thenceforth they return to the starting point keeping the “*folklore*” alive continuously.

Identity built upon the body

The body is an integrated part of folk-dance culture and can be seen as a communication platform and complex interface that channels information between the ‘self’ and ‘others’, the individual and society. In the case of the body, two examples are presented which are

¹⁹ In the researched group, the members consider the word “*informant*” as a professional category which is connected to the profession of a folk dancer. According to them the “*informant*” is “*someone who knows the regional customs, traditions in a way that it was experienced in their authentic form*” (Amature female folk dancer).

²⁰ The study aims to indicate the gender and the nature of relation between folk dancer and folk dance of the interviewees for the purpose of highlighting the male and female, the amateur and professional narratives’ diversity or similarity.

²¹ See: Introduction.

related to the topic of identity built upon the body: the folk dancers clothing and the folk tattoos.

The clothing plays an integral role in the group by allowing the expression and formation of identity, as well as symbolizing togetherness and is often characterized by signs of “*masculinity*” and “*femininity*”. Their style identifies with “*traditional*” elements. The skirt often appears in everyday wear of the women in the “*community*”, according to them it is one of the symbols of “*femininity*”: “*for me femininity started with the skirts, and most of the female dancers wear them often*” (Amateur female folk dancer). Another preferred symbol of “*femininity*” is the flower pattern, because “*it attracts attention, but it’s not vulgar*” (Amateur female folk dancer). According to another interviewee: “*I like the Bulgarian style of clothing, and that’s why I like multiple flowers, and the big jewellery*” (Professional female folk dancer). As the above-mentioned quote refers, the different “*traditional costumes*” have an impact on the clothing of the folk dancers, and they try to imitate certain elements in their personal style. Whilst in the process of dance learning, the dancers are in connection with “*documentation*” (Assmann, 2011, p.18) of previous forms; they try to imitate the “*peasant*” attitudes, wearing their costumes, which initially were only necessary on the stage. But later, it became part of their identity as everyday wear. In men’s clothing, the hat is determinative, as they believe it expresses “*masculinity*”. During the interviews, the dancers often mentioned that “*in the old peasant world*”, the hat was typical wear for men. On the stage, during the performances, the male folk dancers often wear a hat, which becomes their habit, and over time their everyday wear. One of the interviewees remembered the following way in connection with the custom of wearing a hat: “*I couldn’t put my hat into the bag, firstly it was terrible, they looked at me like I was an alien, but then I didn’t care anymore, I was wearing it anyway*” (Professional male folk dancer). Initially, only intended for the purpose of performances, it subsequently represents the male “*peasant*” attitudes, becoming appropriated for everyday wear. The effect of “*traditional costumes*” can be observed in the informal wear of both genders. These elements are the symbols of the past and the symbols of “*femininity*” and “*masculinity*”. They choose specific items of “*traditional costumes*”, which can be easily adopted with their modern style such as jackets, hats, trousers and jewellery.

Recent clothing research²² examines its subject as a dynamic process upon its symbolic meaning. The approaches focus on the clothing's "agency" and "practice". Some studies view dress as a "set of competing discourses, linked to the operation of power, that construct the body and its presentation", furthermore it becomes a surface of "transnational, global, urban, and local forces" (Hansen, 2004, p.370-373). Hansen writes in her study, titled *The world in dress: Anthropological Perspectives on Clothing, Fashion, and Culture* (2004), because "dress has a dual quality" (Hansen, 2004, p.372), as it represents both individual and collective identities (Turner, 1993)²³, it may become "a flash point of conflicting values, [...] in interactions across class, between genders and generations, and in recent global cultural and economic exchanges" (Hansen, 2004, p.372).

The researched Hungarian folk dancers choose clothing items, which fit to the modern urban youth style. However, they add those items of the "traditional" costumes, which are adoptable to their urban lifestyle, moreover this can represent their individual and collective identity. Hereby the "old", "peasant" and the present-day "urban" identity constructions are presented simultaneously. The dress becomes a surface of both "global and local interactions" (Hansen 2004: 370). While those clothing items, which are purchasable worldwide, interact with the "Carpathian Basin's" local "traditional" garments. By this means, the conflicted values of the urban sphere – which characterise as "global" by interviewees – and of the "old" "rural" "peasant" sphere interact on the surface of the body. One of the interviewees described the phenomenon in the following way: "Now there are these modern things. It is all more blurred; at the end everyone will look the same. This is not good. There are ideals, and there are fashion magazines, and people judge themselves based on what the West dictate. These do not represent anything, (these are) only trash of the West" – later, the interviewee's phone rings, which was muted for the interview, however on his iWatch the interviewee was able to see that someone calls him. He realised that I can see it too, so he continues – "yes, I also identify myself with this world. Obviously, I live in it, I can not avoid it" (Professional male folk dancer). During the interview the expression "trash of the West" appears, which without doubt, presents a negative connotation. The "trash of the West", which represents nothing – according to the

²² See: Joanne Eicher's summarising article about the last 125 years of clothing anthropological research (Eicher, 2000)

²³ See: Turner T. 1993 [1980]. The social skin. In Reading the Social Body. C. B. Burroughs & J. Ehrenreich (Ed.). Iowa City: Univ. Iowa Press. 15-39.

interviewee – stands against the “old” “peasant” sphere, which represents something. In this context the “trash of the West” expression can serve as the depiction of the urban sphere. The present-day urban world has a negative connotation in personal narratives, while the “old” “rural” is positive, and accordingly, it gains meaning in the personal narratives of members of the dance house movement. The conflicting values, such as “urban” and “rural”, or “global” and “local”, interact simultaneously and are represented in the clothing of members of the dance house movement.

To summarize, the tools of being a folk dancer are the clothing, and the related accessories, which were initially used only on stage and during rehearsals and performances. However, later they became integrated elements of the dancers’ identity and eventually part of their everyday style. The dancers transform “traditional” elements from the past and use them in their everyday life in a way that would not have been common in “peasant” culture. They refill these elements with their own narratives in combination with the form of fast fashion and represent it in urban life. The folk body becomes a surface of conflicting values, such as “urban” and “rural”, “global” and “local”, which are simultaneously represented in the clothing of members of the dance house movement.

During the process of analysing the relationship between the body and identity, I recognized that several of the interview partners had tattoos on their body. During the research the interviewees were invited for further discussion of these tattoos and their significance.

In the Hungarian study by Anna Kende, *Body identity and personal identity: The role of the different body concepts in the process of self-acceptance* (2002), we can read the following: “the body is not only the tool of expressing our identity, but also of creating it”²⁴ (Kende, 2002, p.72). Accordingly, every society has its own version for decorating the body, the way the body is presented, or perhaps hidden. These “immovable arts” transform the biological body into a “cultural body”, and tattoos are not only tools of expressing identity, but also creating it within the frame of the community (Bodrogi, 1987, p.112). The folk tattoos can also serve as examples for the previously mentioned.

First of all, the folk tattoos cannot be just anywhere on their body. The patterns should be placed where it can be hidden easily, because of the “old peasant attitude”,

²⁴ As the quoted study has not been translated into English yet, the presented sentence is the translation of this paper’s author.

which is the desired behaviour, does not include the existence of the tattoos. The tattoos are part of an urban lifestyle according to their interpretation because of the attendance and popularity of the tattoos nowadays. Moreover, the colour of the tattoos should represent the past state too, that is why they choose a colour, which can be defined as “*authentic*” in appearance.

Folk tattoos do not form a homogeneous group. Based on the observations, they can be divided into two groups. In the first group, there are those tattoos that symbolise the identity of the individual, and are therefore communicating with the outside world, and can also be understood by those who are not folk dancers. In the case of these tattoos, the motif has to be understood clearly, and therefore there is a need for collective interpretation. What sort of motifs appear in the folk tattoos then?

Folk tattoos are greatly inspired by folk art. The regional motifs often appear when they do not have to be understood collectively, so in the case of an inner message. When the folk dancers choose a tattoo to wear on their body for a lifetime, they prefer “*clean*” and “*authentic*” motifs. The “*clean*” motif can also be collectively understood, such as the motif from the *Hungarian Folk Tales* (1977) series, directed by Marcell Jankovics. This notion is also supported by one of the interviewees who claimed that she chose the above-mentioned motif because: “*it is well-known, so for example, If I had a regional folk tattoo, then lots of people wouldn't know what is that, but I would like it to be recognisable, because it's important to me*” (Amateur female folk dancer). During the research, a duality became apparent in terms of the “*old*” “*traditional*” and modern urban attitudes, which are represented in a reflection to their identity. The folk dancer’s goal is to “*conserve*” the “*traditional values*”. They consciously aim to represent a past state in every area of their life, or sometimes subconsciously they take on “*peasant-like*” behavioural patterns. Choosing the pattern of the tattoo, the motif of the *Hungarian Folk Tales* is “*more faithful to style*”, and able to represent the “*traditional state*”. According to their interpretation, the motif of the *Hungarian Folk Tales* is solid and looks authentic. Additionally, it can also communicate with the outside world, as it is “*well-known by everybody*”.

Certain folk-art motifs, besides being decorative elements, functioned as symbols, and these symbols were well known by everyone according to Mihály Hoppál.²⁵ The tulip is a fertility symbol in folk art, and it also represents the gender relations as it portrays

²⁵ Mihály Hoppál is a Hungarian ethnographer, who examined folk art motifs as erotic references and symbols.

the open legs of a woman, and therefore “it is the symbol of fertility” (Hoppál, 2002, p.295). One of the interviewees has a *Kalotaszeg* pattern, which ends in a series of tulips situated under the belly and around her ovary. About the placement and the choice of motif, she said that: *“it is the symbol of fertility, that’s why it’s there, because I have a polycystic ovary syndrome, which makes much more difficult to get pregnant”* (Amateur female folk dancer). To summarize, the interview partner had a fertility symbol as a tattoo in order to provide the fertility. The surface of the body becomes the subject of the most intimate topic, female fertility. The visual messages of flower patterns are known by the community members, as knowledge of the *“folklore”* is one of the conditions of belonging to the group. Besides this, it is part of their identity, and they use them as symbols.

The tattoos cannot be linked to *“old peasant”* attitudes, but they still have tattoos on their skin and use them as communication platforms. The folk tattoos are representations of the *“old”* and *“traditional”*, but in modern forms at the same time.

Gender roles

“It should work like this in the real life as well”

The folk dancers’ narratives do not only affect the different representations of their identity. During the following, the folk dancers’ gender roles will be discussed.

The dancers, during the folk dance, learn gender roles that are defined in the *“old peasant culture”* by the words *“masculine”* and *“feminine”*, and they also call them *“traditional.”* According to their interpretation, the folk dancers’ identity is characterized by *“male dominance”* and *“female subordination”*, and these gender roles appear during the dance. They learn the gender roles, and by the act of dance they start *“wearing”* them. These gender roles only appear initially during dancing, as time goes by it becomes an integrated part of their identity construction and narratives. One of the female interviewees explained the following about gender roles: *“you learn and you play those movements from the old times, the man is determined, knows what he wants, takes care of the woman, and takes her into account, however, the man is the one who is dominant and the woman accepts that, today’s modern women have to hold themselves back, they cannot say when to stop, when to turn, and so on”* (Professional female folk dancer). Based on this quote, we can examine that the gender roles appearing during the dance have a situated character. The phrase *“today’s modern women”* refers to themselves as one who lives in a *“traditional”* way in the age of modernity. One of the male interviewees mentioned the

following: “*the woman serves the man, the man represents a leading role, but cannot achieve anything without the woman. The man is the head, the woman is the neck, the Hungarian language recognizes the marriage as the unity of one half which is expressed in the word of ‘wife’²⁶, and two parties are one whole. The man is only a man if there is a woman by his side, and the folk dance is an excellent indicator of this. I am trying to represent this point of view in my own relationship as well*” (Professional male folk dancer). The mentioned quote signifies that, although the majority of the groups’ members do not have any personal experience in connection with the “*peasant life*”, they are aiming to live according to these “*peasant values*”. This notion is well symbolized by those words which describe the ideal gender roles according to them: “*the man is the dominant one, but the woman can evolve next to him, it should work like this in the real life as well, this is the healthy approach, the absolute good, it should be like this*” (Professional female folk dancer). The gender roles, which are initially only “*played*” and learned during the dance with the help of mimicry, successively become an integral part of the individual, affecting the dancers’ narratives and forming communal values.

Conclusion

In this study, examples have been presented that demonstrate representations of the “*rural*” in urban life through the topics of style, tattoos and gender roles. As a conclusion, it can be stated that the identity of the folk dancers can be defined both as “*old rural*” and “*modern and urban*”. Folk dance itself is a present representation of a past state. This past state is defined as “*traditional*”, and their goal is to “*conserve*” these “*traditional*” values. They consciously aim to represent this past state in every area of their life. Although not discussed in this study, it is also evident in ideal body image, during the process of choosing a partner, in their interpretation of sexuality.

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²⁶ In the Hungarian language, wife is called “*feleség*”, which can be translated as “*half of something*”.

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