

**AT THE INTERFACE OF THE GERMANIC,  
ROMANCE AND SLAVIC WORLDS  
FOLK CULTURE AS AN IDIOM OF COLLECTIVE  
SELF-IMAGES IN SOUTHEASTERN ALPS**

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*The interface alluded to in the title of this paper is the historic zone of language contact designated by the intersection of the contemporary state frontiers of Austria, Italy and Yugoslavia. This paper is based upon prolonged field research in marginal agrarian communities, located on either slope of the Carnian Alps in Austria and Italy, where Slovene vernacular has been spoken by the majority of residents since approximately 600 A. D. The national models for collective self-identification introduced into this region over the past century - that is, the inclusive social categories represented by the terms German, Italian and Slovene - are for the most part rejected by this indigenous Slovene speaking population. This draws our attention to collective self-identification as a manifestation of social process in local society and introduces the question addressed by this paper: In what ways is it possible to conceive of 'folk culture' as an idiom of collective self-images, that is, as a manifestation of social discourse as it unfolds in local society?*

**ON THE FRINGE OF SLAVIC CIVILIZATION?**

This paper is based upon field research conducted among speakers of the same Slovene dialect who reside in neighbouring villages located in Val Canale (Kanalska dolina; hereafter: Canal valley), Italy and Gailtal (Ziljska dolina; hereafter: Gail valley), Austria.\* These valleys comprise part of what is locally known as the 'three country region' where

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the contemporary state frontiers of Austria, Italy and Yugoslavia intersect in the south-eastern corner of the Alps (see: attached map). Here vernaculars<sup>1</sup> representing Europe's three major language families - Germanic, Romance and Slavic - have been spoken since the Middle Ages. And from among these, Slavic, which dates from the 6th century (Barker 1984: 26-28, Grafenauer 1975 (9146): 113), represents the longest historical continuity.<sup>2</sup> This historical zone of language contact designates not only the western frontier of Slavic speaking Europe; it has also influenced the modern political integration of the region.

German speaking aristocrats consolidated their hegemony over the entire region around the year 1000 (Frass-Ehrfeld 1984: 124). And the domination of German speaking elites within this corner of the Habsburg empire persisted until the demise of the Dual Monarchy in 1919 when, for the first time in modern history, this intersection of Alpine valleys was partitioned by three autonomous European states. Indeed these contemporary state frontiers appear to be the nearly inevitable consequences of the 'nationalist awakenings' which gripped the Habsburg Empire and Italy during preceding century.

But for many of the three country region's elderly indigenous residents the creation and maintenance of these state frontiers has been a traumatic experience. During the past 70 years the distant decisions of state builders and the subsequent nationalist policies of fascist regimes and of cold war statesman have arbitrarily, and often tragically, disrupted the networks of kin, friends and commercial relations which have integrated the families and villages located within these adjacent Alpine valleys. Since the demise of the Dual Monarchy these marginal agrarian communities located at the interface of Europe's three major language traditions have been especially exposed to the arbitrary encroachment of the institutions and policies of the modern social order in Europe which increasingly concentrates political and economic power at strategic central locations.

With the onset of state building and the consolidation of Europe's newly emerging 'nations' at the turn of the 19th century, a significant portion of the three country region's population was bi- or multi-lingual.<sup>3</sup> That is, the region's indigenous residents have long been proficient in verbal codes representing at least two of the region's three lan-

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1 Vernacular is understood in this paper as a verbal code which is learned locally, usually within the family and a network of social relations which demarcate the local community from encompassing society. A more specific designation of vernacular as a 'mother tongue' or 'native language' is not intended, except where specified. The vernaculars discussed do, however, represent dialects which are distributed across the 'international' frontiers outlined here.

2 Steinicke (1984: 26) indicates on the basis of extensive documentation that continuous settlement of the Canal valley was broken during the period of *Volkerwanderungen* following the demise of the Roman Empire and first reestablished by settlement of the Slavs. Frass-Ehrfeld (1984: 49) observes that in the 7th century "die einheimische Bevölkerung Kamtens wurde von den Slawen überschichtet und nahm die Slawische Sprache an." According to Grafenauer (1975: 114) the continuity of Romance codes (i. e., Friulian) in the region (i. e., Kanalska dolina) cannot be dated from immigration occurring any earlier than the valley's colonization by Germanic speakers.

3 This is documented from the early 19th century by Janko Pleterski (1965: 12).

guage groups.<sup>4</sup> And plurilingualism persists yet today among a significant segment of the region's population. In the interim, however, standardized verbal codes (standard European languages) which are based upon these local vernaculars have come to prevail in the communicative practices of the societies which are incorporated by the states partitioning the region.

Because of the historical continuity, territorial association and political legitimacy of these standard languages within the states where they now prevail, they are potent symbols of collective identity. German, Italian and Slovene standard languages have come to signify distinct 'peoples' in this corner of Europe; they are popularly understood as symbols of national or ethnic identity. However, as I have discussed elsewhere (Minnich 1988a), this explicit linkage between a specific people and its supposed linguistic heritage (which has been arbitrarily determined through the modern standardization of language is commonly avoided by Slovene speakers in the two villages where I concentrated my field investigations: Ugovizza/Ukve in the Canal valley and Achomitz-Feistritz/Zahomec-Bistrica in the Gail valley.<sup>5</sup> These speakers of Slovene vernacular very seldom identify themselves as Slovenes, or even as speakers of a 'Slovene' dialect. It is much more common for them to express their collective self-image and allegiances, both implicitly and explicitly, with reference to their village, valley or province (*ibid.*). Such collective self-identifications avoid to implicit declaration of one's allegiance to the 'nations' or 'language traditions' implied in those centrally constructed models of collective identity which during the past century have been relentlessly imposed upon these minority speakers of Slovene.

This disparity between 'national' or 'ethnic' categorizations of social groups propagated by political and intellectual elites (regardless of whether they represent the national majorities or minorities of Austria and Italy), and the grass roots formation of collective self-images sets the stage for the theme of this paper. Namely, I would like to contrast the analytical utility of inclusive cultural categories such as the 'Slovene people' or 'Slavic culture' with a more flexible 'social anthropological' conceptualization of 'folk culture'. What are the possibilities for using the latter as an idiom for investigating collective self-images as they manifest themselves in the context of local life?<sup>6</sup> How can we

4 These codes can be sorted into the following language varieties: Germanic - Standard Austrian and Carinthian/*Kärntnerisch*; Romance - Friulian, Standard Italian and N. E. Italian dialects; Slavic - Standard Slovene and Carinthian Slovene dialects. (Until the incorporation of the Canal valley into Italy in 1919, Friulian and Venetian dialects were the only Romance codes indigenous to the region.

5 Both villages are clustered settlements located at the base of the southern (Ugovizza/ Ukve) and northern (Achomitz - Feistritz/ Zahomec - Bistrica) slopes of the Lower Carnian Alps. At the crest of the Carnian ridge which demarcates the state frontier established in 1919 between Austria and Italy, these villages retain in the proximity of one another highland common pastures and forests, as well as highland summer residences and quarters for livestock. (In fact Zahomec and Bistrica, which are contiguous but separate settlements in the valley, each have their separate highland commons in the Carnian highlands.) A significant portion of the active population still participate in at least certain aspects of the agro-pastoral and forestry activities which are the essential elements of the historical adaptation of Slovene speakers throughout the three country region. The historical contact over the Carnian ridge between these and other neighbouring transhumant communities has been cited by various linguists as the basis for the similarity of the Slovene dialect spoken in both

view folk culture as an aspect of social discourse as it unfolds in local society? In order to apply this analytical understanding to the concept of folk culture, it is essential that we recapitulate the term's origins and meaning in the context of European history. I shall do this by outlining the career of Ziljska dolina's perhaps most prominent 'Slavic' son. We shall consider the biography of this preeminent liberal spokesman for the aspirations of the awakening Slovene nation in 1848 with reference to the historical era of which he was part.

### MATIJA MAJAR - ZILJSKI<sup>7</sup>

Matija Majar was born in 1809, the son of a poor tailor in the village of Goriach (Gorje).<sup>8</sup> Although the lower Gail valley was essentially agrarian at this time, the heads of many local peasant households reared horses and were teamsters who hauled freight between such distant commercial centers as Venice and Salzburg. Regular contact with the diverse vernaculars of this greater transalpine region led to the relatively early development of plurilingualism among a large portion of the peasant population which spoke Slovene vernacular as its 'first language' or mother tongue. Matija Majar was born into this multilingual universe on the fringe of what he came to understand as pan-Slavic civilization. At the age of 8 he learned to read German and a year later through the initiative of his father began reading the Slovene bible. In his old age Major acknowledged that his early introduction to literary Slovene was fundamental to the entire course of his life (Čurkina 1974: 8).

Matija Majar - Ziljski was born into a social order which has been described with terms such as 'The Old Order' (Blum 1978), 'Old Europe' (Gerhard 1981) and 'Traditional Europe' (Anderson 1971). Majar's career as a protagonist of the 'Slovene people' and 'pan-Slavism' paralleled the transition of this social order into what has been termed 'Modern Europe' (Anderson 1973). Majar - Ziljski was an heir and proponent of the Enlightenment. It is during the course of Majar - Ziljski's life that 'folk culture' became established as an essential subject for Romantic literature and systematic academic investigation by students of the Enlightenment. It is during the course of Majar - Ziljski's life that 'folk culture' became established as an essential subject for Romantic literature and systematic academic investigations by students of the Enlightenment. And his promotion of pan-Slovene and pan-Slavic ideas parallels in many respects the development of the concept of folk culture as a basis for organizing scholarship in folklore and ethnographic studies during the same period.

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6 By virtue of the Slovene dialect which is indigenous to my field region we can classify this language community as 'Slavic'. But this inclusion of a local cultural phenomenon into a greater cultural category is of little relevance for investigating local level social process where the speakers of this dialect create and maintain a system of knowledge (a system of shared symbols) which shapes their collective self understanding.

7 The biographical information presented here is taken from Čurkina (1974) unless otherwise indicated.

8 He was priest in the same parish for 19 years. During this period he arranged for decoration of the local parish church with artwork bearing Cyrillic inscriptions in the all-Slavic (vseslovanski) language which he developed as a common code for Slavic civilization. And these inscriptions remain today in the Gorje church as a memorial to the innovative work of this extraordinary native son.

The original uses of the terms 'folk' and 'folk culture' refer to the predominantly agrarian society of 'traditional Europe'. Jerome Blum (1978: 6) has conceptualized the 'Old Order' in Europe as a 'society of orders' which "presupposed the natural inequality of man." These 'orders' or 'estates' have been categorized in various ways. For example, Robert Anderson (1971) has referred to them as the 'aristocracy', 'burghers' and 'peasantry'. A distinguishing feature of the 'old order' in Europe was the horizontal integration of society, that is, social integration within each of the estates but not between them<sup>9</sup>. In fact, Anderson has characterized these 'estates' as separate cultures because of the historical persistence of very distinct social boundaries between them.<sup>10</sup> The concept of 'folk' so prominent in European ethnography and early North American anthropology, is thus derived from the clearly demarcated peasant 'estate' which accounted for the vast majority of 'traditional' Europe's population. And the concept of 'folk culture' is tantamount to the 'tradition' (the social and cultural heritage) manifest within the unchanging but very heterogeneous social order.

Tradition manifest within the little agrarian communities of traditional Europe was far from uniform. Indeed, dialects (the quintessential verbal codes of the peasantry in traditional Europe) persist yet today as contemporary artifacts and reminders of the highly localized pattern of social and cultural integration characteristic of traditional Europe's peasantry. Following his education, which was made possible through the financial support of the church, Majar-Ziljski was appointed secretary of the Bishop of Klagenfurt/Celovec in 1837, the year of his ordination as a priest. During the next decade he traveled extensively as a student of 'folk culture' throughout much of what we call today the 'Slovene ethnic territory'. He collected and documented, much to the chagrin of many of his clerical brothers, all manner of local oral traditions (songs, anecdotes, folktales) and customs (dances and various kinds of locally established rituals). Through this intimate experience in his early years with a very wide segment of the speakers of Slovene vernacular Majar-Ziljski became increasingly confirmed in his love for his 'people' - the Slovenes. And most important for his later work, his first hand experience at the grass roots of a very heterogeneous traditional peasant society dispersed between the Adriatic, Alps and Pannonian Plain enabled him to identify common features of this peasant society's folk culture.

Through his extensive travels, correspondence and study which took him far beyond the world of Slovene vernacular Majar-Ziljski attained the comprehensive knowledge necessary for conceptualizing a synthesis which encompassed all Slovene speakers, and eventually all speakers of Slavic tongues. Already before the short lived but tumultuous events of 1848 he was designing, on the basis of the Cyrillic alphabet, an all-Slavic (*vseslovanski*) language. And it is precisely through this exercise in standardization,

9 In the case of the 'peasantry' this integration was atomistic and localized into relative small social systems (see: Minnich 1988). Ernest Gellner (1983: 9) conceptualizes this integration of the peasantry in the Agrarian society of traditional Europe as "laterally insulated communities of agricultural producers."

10 See Gellner (1983: 8-18) for a more comprehensive discussion of agrarian society's social and cultural integration.

which we associate with the creation of standard European languages from their constituent dialects/ vernaculars, that folk culture became reified in a manner which extricated it from its substantial role of designating the grass roots manifestation of culture among the peasantry of traditional Europe.

While in substantial terms the heterogeneous folk culture of traditional Europe's peasant estate was an essential subject for Romantic literature and burgeoning national ideologies, folk culture simultaneously attained through this intellectual effort another more abstract meaning. It came to designate common or standardized traditions which were arbitrarily associated with specific peoples inhabiting specific territories, sharing common origins and/ or speaking groups of dialects which could be conceived as singular language traditions. Like the emerging standard languages and literary traditions of Europe, this new abstract understanding of folk culture became a paradigm for conceptualizing the distinct cultures of Europe's respective 'peoples' (Minnich 1988b).

Majar-Ziljski's intellectual endeavors in the standardization of language and culture were intimately incorporated into his efforts to consolidate the speakers of Slovene vernaculars into a political force. He recognized the importance of mobilizing the peasantry and the church, of which the peasantry was inseparable part, as vehicles for social transformation. This was to be achieved not only through the introduction of universal education and standardized language as well as programs for improvement of the peasantry's well being which were founded upon the idea of 'rationality' advanced by the major philosophers of the Enlightenment (Gellner 1983: 20-23). It also emphasized the propagation of a common cultural heritage among the peasantry.

This standardization of heterogeneous peasant heritage was the inevitable consequence of the emerging 'modern' social order in Europe. The work of the men of the Enlightenment, such as Majar-Ziljski, became an important ideological instrument which statesmen and capitalists could use to consolidate centralized political authority and to motivate a mobile army of workers conversant in a common code (i. e., standard language). The legitimacy of the modern state societies which replaced the Habsburg empire was immeasurably enhanced by the national ideologies which grew out of the Enlightenment and Romantic Movement in Central Europe.<sup>11</sup> In this way the 'folk culture' of the heterogeneous peasant society which was the inspiration for Majar-Ziljski's work became a reified popular model of national identity.<sup>12</sup> And this occurred in rapidly changing urban-industrial states where the traditional peasantry rapidly diminished in favor of the burgeoning class society of modern Europe.

## FOLK CULTURE IN MODERN EUROPE

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<sup>11</sup> I assume along with Ernest Gellner (1983) that the integration of modern society through the instruments of the centralized state authority and according to the premises of the industrial division of labor is precondition for the construction of national ideologies ('nationalism'). It is a consequence of this reasoning that the reification of 'folk culture' as the common tradition of nations is a manifestation of such large-scale complex social integration.

<sup>12</sup> This is reflected in the Romantic concept of folk culture as an unchanging spiritual 'tradition' which renders the nation with legitimacy (Slavec 1988: 38).

The Slovene ethnologist, Slavko Kremenšek (1988: 56), has appropriately noted that we are confronted with formidable analytical problems when we attempt to apply a historical rooted model of 'folk culture' to the social order manifest in modern Europe. The contemporary European 'peasantry', insofar as it still exists ( a point to which I shall return below), is integrated into encompassing society in fundamentally new and different ways. In the interim a 'society of orders' has been transformed into 'class society' and more recently, into the 'welfare state', both of which "presuppose the natural equality of man" (Blum 1978: 6).

This dramatic transformation of European society inspired many of the bi-polar typologies of society which we know from social science, for example, Ferdinand Tönnies (1935) 'Gemeinschaft - Gesellschaft' and Robert Redfield's (1947) 'Folk Urban Continuum'. The conceptual heritage has not only been fundamental to the formulation of European ethnography's theoretical orientation, it has been used by Redfield and numerous other North American anthropologists as a means for interpreting the relative place of non-European peasant communities in encompassing social systems. Redfield's concepts of 'folk society' and 'folk culture', the 'little' and 'great' traditions and 'little community' are all constructed with regard to this intellectual tradition. But the transfer of the concepts, folk and folk culture, to the New World removed them from their historical context. They became relatively neutral tools for description. Nonetheless American social scientists and anthropologists became increasingly disenchanted with the above mentioned bi-polar typologies of society as a means for explaining the integration of complex society where folk society (i. e., the peasantry) could no longer be realistically considered as a separate estate (cf. Silverman 1979-80, Steward 1968). As a result the terms, folk and folk culture, have fallen into relative disuse. The largely descriptive terms were easily replaced with a more analytical concept of the 'peasantry' which, following the Second World War, gradually acquired different analytical connotations.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, this abandonment of 'folk' and 'folk culture' had no serious ramifications for the underlying general theories of society and culture which render anthropology with legitimacy as an academic discipline.

It is my impression, however, that the response of ethnography and ethnological science in Central Europe to 'folk culture's' dwindling analytical adequacy as a model for investigating a modern social order has been fundamentally different. This has to do with

13 At this time anthropologists first became interested in the peasantry as an analytical category. They began to build systematic definitions of the peasantry which were based upon distinctions derived from the classic bi-polar typologies of society and culture. In 1948 Alfred Kroeber suggested that peasants represented 'part-societies' and 'part-cultures'. And a decade later Eric Wolf (1966) was developing a perspective for the study of peasants which acknowledges their ambiguous location between small scale and large scale social systems, that is, between what Robert Redfield conceived as 'folk society' and 'urban civilization'. As the peasantry became an analytical category in anthropology it was considered increasingly in functional terms that emphasized the peasantry's economic and political integration into complex society. The original usages of 'folk' and 'peasant' by Redfield and others emphasized the 'ideational' quality of this social formation as an expression of the 'tradition' or 'culture' identified with an idealized typology of 'folk society'. This brief summary is extracted from Sydel Silverman's (1979-80) review of the peasant concept in anthropology.

the fact that the concept of 'folk culture' has been essential to the definition of ethnography and ethnology as discrete academic fields of study conceived initially with reference to the 'peoples' (nations) which they have studied.<sup>14</sup> In Slovenia, for example, it seems that the on-going theoretical debate which guides ethnological research in that country still involves, at least in part, the reformulation and redefinition of an increasingly abstract understanding of folk culture (Slavec 1988).

Within anthropology we have been more at liberty to selectively employ 'folk culture', in the terms of its original substantial connotations, when the circumstances of our research favor such use. And it is my intention here to argue for the relevance of the terms 'folk society' and 'folk culture' as appropriate substantial designations of certain contexts within contemporary European society which reflect patterns of social and cultural integration reminiscent of 'traditional Europe'. But in order to do this it is necessary to disengage these terms from connotations which we associate with the bi-polar typologies mentioned above.

It is clearly unrealistic to assume that the small marginal communities which I have studied in the three country region are historical vestiges of traditional Europe's folk society or that they are enclaves of 'Gemeinschaft' ('little communities') which are isolated from a fundamentally different encompassing social order characterized by 'Gesellschaft' (Minnich in press). These villages are permeated by the institutions of the modern welfare state and the specialized and complex economic systems which assure the reproduction of these societies. These villages are neither isolated from nor fundamentally different from the social order which encompasses them. Nonetheless their integration into the institutions of greater society remains incomplete. In fact, these villages and their constituent family households are significant loci for the integration of those social and economic relations and systems knowledge (i. e. culture) upon which their members depend for their subsistence and social reproduction.

For example, the relatively antiquated mode of production (based upon minimal capital outlays) and the economic rationality represented within these villages emphasizes the long term viability of their constituent families as domestic 'enterprises' which assure the material welfare and reproduction of their members. Participation in modern commercial institutions and the industrial division of labor is evaluated in terms of a locally maintained set of values and convictions created around these historically proven local strategies for subsistence (cf. Minnich in press). The local integration of culture (i. e. shared systems of knowledge) is further demonstrated by the retention of Slovene vernacular among these villagers who are in many ways interdependent with institutions where they must use other verbal codes (various German and Italian codes); their Slovene vernacular has utility as a means of communication only within the context of local society encapsulated by their village and immediate existential concerns.

This localization of social and cultural integration into relatively small-scale social

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14 This is stated quite explicitly by Slavko Kremenšek (1988: 55) who notes that much of the debate about 'folk culture' in Slovenia during recent decades has had to do with the definition of the subject of ethnology, "the identity of the ethnological sciences in contemporary circumstances.



systems which are organized around an agrarian adaptation, as in the Slovene speaking villages of three country region, encourages me to suggest that the terms 'folk society' and 'folk culture' are appropriate for describing this social reality. Namely, even though these villages are decisively more inter-dependent with the institutions of encompassing society than was the case in traditional Europe, they nonetheless continue to manifest a uniquely local integration of culture and social relations characteristic of that earlier social order.

This use of folk society and culture as descriptive terms draws attention not only to manifestations of agrarian 'marginal society' in contemporary Europe. It also alludes to the kind of social reality which has been the primary subject for investigation by social and cultural anthropologists, that is, small-scale social systems based upon primary material adaptations (such as hunting, gathering, animal domestication and various forms of agriculture) which are organized primarily within domestic households and small communities integrating these family units. When applied to this type of study, the terms of folk society and culture can be seen to designate together something which Roger Keesing (1981: 68) has called the "way-of-life-in-ecosystem". This is a **socicultural system** which refers both to the empirical, functional organization of human adaptations and the systems of knowledge ('native theory') which can be seen to organize this adaptation. If we transfer this understanding to folk society and folk culture, we can identify the former with the empirical functional organization of the localized adaptations of marginal social systems in contemporary Europe and the latter to the systems of knowledge or meanings which the members of such adaptational systems hold in common and which guide their actions.

This anthropological understanding of culture excludes it from the realm of empirical phenomena, it is not the material or ideational artifacts produced through social interaction, but rather the codes, ideas and values which can be seen to guide the action. From this perspective material culture, the texts of folk songs and other folklore, and the empirical organization, mythology and performance of rituals are examples of the artifacts of folk culture. These are abstractions of culture which can be extricated from the context of their creation for the purpose of analysis and description. In contrast, the above understanding of culture suggests that 'folk' culture is manifest in social process, it is not a detached system of knowledge, for example a 'tradition', which can be disengaged from the social process where it is produced as socially constructed meaning.<sup>15</sup>

These associations of folk society and culture with theory taken from cultural ecology and social and cultural anthropology enable us to investigate 'folk culture' as an idiom for collective self-images.

#### FOLK CULTURE AS AN IDIOM FOR COLLECTIVE SELF-IMAGES IN THE

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<sup>15</sup> I am quite aware that this understanding of 'culture' as a manifestation of social discourse in which its student is a direct observer and, in many cases participant as well, is uniquely available to the anthropologists through his chosen field method of participant observation. Ethnographers and ethnologists emphasizing the collection of 'historical' data are of course restricted to the study of what I have qualified here as cultural artifacts. The two approaches are of course complementary and often both are a part of either the ethnographer's or anthropologist's research strategy.

## SOUTHEASTERN ALPS

If we reexamine the portrait of social categorization within the three country region presented in the first pages of this paper, it is possible to understand the 'national' categories of German, Italian and Slovene, which in a wider sense are the reflection of folk culture as a model of a people, as elements of a cognitive environment shared by the residents of these marginal villages. They are to a certain extent imposed, arbitrary social categories which are evaluated through the social construction of meaning which is integrated within each of these small communities and within the region of which they are a part. The actual creation and maintenance of collective self-images which are valid for these people is manifest in the universe of social interaction which they have with one another and the greater world of which they are a part. Their image of themselves in relation to others is revealed not only in what they consciously profess to believe, it is also manifest in their overall communicative behaviour. For example, by examining their code-switching behaviour (1988a) I have postulated that it substantiates, perhaps more convincingly than local statements of allegiance to one group or another, the kinds of self-identifications specified in the first section of this paper.

How shall we then investigate folk culture as a manifestation of local social process where collective self-images are created and maintained? I shall respond to this question with a brief discussion of the voluntary fire brigade movement in the three country region and will then conclude with some field notes which demonstrate the integration of this institution in the overall context of local life.

Since the voluntary fire brigade movement is established throughout the three country region, it is an attractive medium through which to compare local village communities. But the way in which we design these comparisons is critical for our subsequent possibilities to systematically investigate the local construction of shared meanings, that is, locally integrated cultural universes.

Namely, if we consider the voluntary fire brigade movement as a discrete institution and detach it from the larger context in which its activity unfolds in the course of everyday local life, our comparison is of cultural artifacts which are arbitrarily defined as a representative of the volunteer fire brigade institution. Our attention is drawn to such matters as the formal organizational structure, the repertoire of activities sponsored by such brigades, the patterns of socialization into the skills of fire fighting through various kinds of training and competition and the *ideology/mythology* which can be seen to organize this institution. And we might compare the performance of the members of this institution by observing their roles as 'members of the brigade'. Such comparison focuses upon arbitrarily selected features of an institution which consistently reveal themselves in the localities being studied.

But the activity of voluntary fire brigades and their individual members unfold in the full context of local life. It is through observation of the events organized by the fire brigades and the roles performed by its members in relation to the overall flow of routine and not-so-routine activity of local society that we begin to discover the relative place of the fire brigade in the localized integration of meaning. In this way this 'folk' institution

becomes an idiom for self-realization, and eventually, for the articulation of collective self-images.

As a conclusion to this paper I would like to share my field notes on a specific non-routine event involving Slovene speaking inhabitants from all three countries comprising the region. This occasion for dedicating a new wooden cross on a peak in the Carnian alps cannot be identified easily with any specific village institution. It is noteworthy as an occasion which incorporates into a single organized sequence of activities most of the institutions which are central to the integration of social life in the region. In this way we are able to observe single actors on the stage of local life in their performance of several of the roles which constitute them as social persons. And we can observe through this sequence of activities how collective self-images are negotiated. I offer these field notes as a text - a 'thin description' (Geertz 1975) - which manifests folk culture as an idiom for collective self-identification in contemporary Europe.

#### DEDICATING THE CROSS ON STARHAND OR AT THE INTERFACE OF THE GERMANIC, ROMANCE AND SLAVIC WORLDS

On Saturday, September 28, 1985, a wooden cross was dedicated on a prominent summit overlooking the lower Gail valley. During the preceding week the voluntary fire brigade of the village of Vorderberg/ Blače had erected this religious edifice. Since lightning bolts had frequently incinerated the former cross located on the very exposed summit of the Starhand peak (1965 m. above sea level) the fire brigade chose to place its successor somewhat below the summit at the top of a precipice which rises from the Dolinza alm/ Dolince a couple hundred meters below. Still of wooden construction the new cross was appropriately equipped with a lightning conductor.<sup>16</sup>

The Vorderberg Fire Brigade sponsored and organized this dedication ceremony. Announcements of the event were posted in neighbouring villages (in both Austria and Italy) and three other voluntary fire brigades were officially invited to participate in the event. One brigade came from a small town southern Germany (The Federal Republic) where the Vorderberg brigade had once been guests, one from Alpine village in nearby Slovenia (the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia), also a former host of the Vorderberg fire brigade, and one from Ukve (Italy) which is Vorderberg's closest neighbour along the Carnian ridge where two villages maintain adjoining highland (summer) pastures. The dedication ceremony was explicitly organized as an international event. The crossbar of the new cross was adorned with miniature national flags representing the participating countries and these pennants were inscribed with the names of the invited voluntary fire brigades. Full size national flags accompanied by the Carinthian flag also hung on the exterior wall of the highland inn next to which an open air mass was con-

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<sup>16</sup> On the nearby summit of the Oistering peak (2052 meters above sea level) immediately to the east of Starhand this problem has been rather eloquently resolved by the erection of a stainless steel cross of similar proportions (approximately 3 meters in height) which was dedicated on October 18, 1980 under the auspices of the voluntary fire brigade of the neighbouring Gail valley village to the east, Feistriz/ Bistrica a. d. Gail.

ducted following the cross's dedication and blessing.

On the day of the dedication I happened to make an early morning call at the residence of the parish priest in Feistritz a. d. Gail/ Bistrice na Zili. Learning from him about the ceremony to be held at noon on Starhand peak I accepted his invitation to accompany him on this clerical errand. On our way to the site of the day's events we drove through the village of Vorderberg (7 kilometers east of Feistritz), the location of two parish churches where he was temporarily serving as priest. Here we drove past a large inn (originally called 'Ortsburg') which during the village's incorporation into the Third Reich was given to the people of Vorderberg by Nazi authorities after every adult in the village had formally declared himself/ herself to be of German nationality.

We then had a very bumpy ride for several kilometers up the road which winds its way to the Dolinza alm, one of Vorderberg's highland summer commons, which is located in the immediate vicinity of a natural pass across the Carnian ridge into Italy. First, we visited the apartment section of the alm's large dairy buildings where the priest undertook with the participation of the family residing there the ritual required for replenishing his supply of holy water.

With the paraphernalia necessary for performing religious rites at the cross stowed in a back pack we then began an hour's climb up Starhand to its summit overlooking the Dolinza alm and Gail valley to the north. Vorderberg people of all generations accompanied us, as well as a few representatives of the German and Slovene fire brigades which had arrived at the Dolinza alm. When we arrived at the crest of an extension of the main Carnian ridge which runs north to the Starhand peak we encountered numerous villagers from Ukve who had undertaken a much longer hike which began midway up to the southern slope of these mountains not far from their village situated in the floor of Canal valley. This group of about 15 persons included not only the captain and other members of the Ukve fire brigade but several women and girls from Ukve as well. Shortly before meeting up with us they had crossed the unpatrolled Austro-Italian border where it runs east-west along the main mountain ridge and divides, between the two countries, the Ukve highland pasture known as Lepi Vrh. With the exception of the German and Slovene volunteer firmen who were dressed in the shirts and slacks of their respective brigade's uniforms, all those ascending Starhand were appropriately attired in mountaineering clothes and climbing boots; they were dressed for the occasion and many were laden with pack sacks including everything from brandy to binoculars.

As we walked along the ridge toward the Starhand summit the priest and I were casually chatting in Slovene and we noticed that the middle-aged Ukljani were speaking Slovene among themselves while some of the younger Ukljani were talking in Italian. Conversation among their Vorderberg neighbours was as far as we could hear only in German. Greetings exchanged between the two groups as they met were exchanged in German. Arriving at the summit the priest and I encountered the captain of the Vorderberg fire brigade who also commands the local Slovene dialect. He immediately offered us his hand and greeted us with a salutation common to German mountaineers, "Berg heil!". Unlike his Vorderberg colleagues he was wearing his fire brigade uniform shirt which with its shoulder stripes confirmed his superior rank within this organization. By

then a couple of his fire fighting colleagues had stripped to the waist, as had the priest. The sun was intense on this calm and clear early fall day. It was time to quench our thirst and survey the Gail valley stretched out below us, before continuing to the site of the new cross.

As we arrived at the new cross, the priest approached several of the Ukljani who were already resting there. He sought their help with a language he did not know, but was about to use. They seemed pleased to help him jot down the proper Italian liturgical phrases which he wished to include in the liturgy for blessing the new cross.

On our way to the summit the priest explained to me his intension to conduct an 'international' blessing and mass. Since the Vorderberg fire brigade had explicitly organized the day's celebration as an international event, it was clearly in place for the priest to render his services within such a framework. The mother tongue of nearly all of the people from Vorderberg and Ukve who attended this event is a common dialect of the Slovene language indigenous to both the Austrian and Italian valleys draining the lower Carnian Alps, namely, the Gail and Canal valleys. Since he originates from the southern part of Carinthia the priest grew up with another dialect of Slovene. Nonetheless he identifies all Slovene dialects with a standardized literary Slovene which he perceives as the equivalent of any other standard European language. And most of his parishioneres are aware of his pan-Slovenian self-image. As a result of these convictions he actively seeks to promote the use of standard Slovene in public settings where speakers of Slovene dialect are present. But he often runs into obstacles. The church parish council of Vorderberg, the older members of which all grew up speaking the local Slovene dialect, have prohibited him from using Slovene in all public religious rites which he conducts within the confines of the parish. They are firmly convinced that standard Carinthian/ Austrian German is the only proper language for public discourse within the village. But since the fire brigade from the Socialist Republic of Slovenia (where standard Slovene is the state language) was invited to the dedication, it was possible for the priest to use standard Slovene in religious rites on the condition that he also employed the other national language which was represented, Italian. Even the members of the Vorderberg church parish council attending the cross dedication could not object. In the eyes of all present this was a thoroughly correct protocol for conducting an international 'summit meeting' such as this.

Using standard Austrian German the captain of the Vorderberg Voluntary Fire Brigade officially welcomed the group of nearly ninety people who had found their way to the new cross. He was then followed by the Captain of the Ukve brigade who read in German a short written statement in which he thanked on behalf of his brigade for the invitation to participate in this historical event. He stressed the close historical ties between the two villages and praised the annual competition between their respective fire brigades held every summer at the state frontier near Dolinza alm.<sup>17</sup> A representative of the German brigade also thanked for the invitation to visit Vorderberg and wished the local fire

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17 This competition had in fact been initiated only two or three years previous to this event. The organization and background of such fire brigade competitions is discussed elsewhere.

brigade and community well on this special event. A similar greeting was made by the Captain of the Slovene brigade who spoken Slovene which was then translated by the priest into German.

The secular part of the ceremony at the cross was concluded by the local mayor who elegantly addressed the gathering in standard Carinthia German. He noted that representatives of the three countries which are sovereign in this corner of the Alps had been invited to attend this local event. This was a confirmation of the neighbourly relations enjoyed by the peoples (Volker) which inhabit the region. And he attributed these good relations in part to the historical cooperation between the voluntary fire brigades which have historically played an essential role in the small communities of the three country region. The mayor concluded saying that the erection and dedication of the cross on Starhand by the Vorderberg Voluntary Fire Brigade was a confirmation of this organization's positive role in the local community and it was a very appropriate demarcation of the fire brigade's 100 Anniversary which was to be celebrated in the coming year. The erection of the cross was a benevolent community undertaking which the people of Vorderberg would associate for many years to come with their voluntary firemen and their Catholic faith.

As each of the above speakers took their turn the priest, who was now dressed in his clerical robe, stood in a respectful pose next to them at the side of the cross. Following the mayor's presentation he commenced with the blessing of the cross. He organized the liturgy for the blessing the cross in such a way as to invite liturgical refrains in German, Italian and Slovene. Most of the Ukljani present, including members of the fire brigade, responded in both Italian and Slovene when such response was indicated. The people from Vorderberg and Germany responded only when German was evoked by the liturgy. And the two or three representatives of the Slovene fire brigade remained silent through the liturgy. The priest concluded by blessing the cross three times in each of the languages.

A member of the Vorderberg fire brigade recorded on video tape the entire proceedings at the cross.

Descending from to the Dolinza alm we joined another 200 people, primarily from Vorderberg, who had gathered there. They had traveled to the alm by car, jeep and wagons drawn by tractors. An open-air mass was then celebrated as we sat at the tables especially set up for the day's festivities in a meadow next to the Dolinza inn. A statue of the Holy Mother Mary was placed on a table which became the altar from which the priest administered mass and communion. Once again he incorporated the three languages into the mass in order to evoke liturgical responses in each of them. And responses were precisely the same as at the cross: Ukljani responding in both Italian and Slovene and the Vorderberg and German participants in German. The Slovene fire brigade did not take part, but rather stood at a distance talking among themselves.

Upon completion of the mass the four voluntary brigades then took up a military like formation in the proximity of the outdoor tables. Under a very hot sun each brigade stood at attention in full uniform with their respective captains taking the most prominent position in the formation. While the priest, now changed into civilian dress, for-

mally participated in the ensuing fire brigade ceremony, most of the other people who had come to the mass demonstrated a blatant lack of interest in these formalities and engrossed themselves in conversation with one another.

The fire brigade ceremony required that most of the Vorderberg and Ukve fireman change into uniforms from their mountaineering gear worn when hiking to the cross. The wife of the Ukve Captain had driven forty kilometers through the nearest international border crossing (Thorl-Maglem) at the eastern end of the Carnian mountains transporting the neatly pressed wool uniforms of the Ukve firemen.

Once in formation, the captains of the four fire brigades addressed each other with formal speeches emphasizing their common bond as servants to the local communities where they are constituted as voluntary organizations. With the exception of the Slovene captain's presentation these speeches had explicit religious undertones through reference to St. Florian the patron saint of all firemen and to the religious motives for their community service. The Vorderberg, Ukve and German brigade captains spoke in German. When the Slovene captain also attempted to address the gathering in broken German the priest intervened insisting that this was an international gathering and that the Slovene captain had the right to speak his mother tongue. The priest then translated the Slovene captain presentation and began translating the German response of the event's formal host, the captain of the Vorderberg brigade. After a couple of sentences, the Vorderberg captain felt this translation protocol was somehow unnecessary - he continued his response to the Slovene brigade in Slovene, a language which he had been required to learn as a boy in the compulsory primary and middle schools which he had attended in this bilingual region of Carinthia. The Italian fire brigade captain's use of German was not challenged by the priest; he is not, as we have noted, proficient in Italian.

A highlight of these formal exchanges among the fire brigades was the presentation to one another of brigade banners. The priest was also presented with each of these brigade banners. The ceremony was recorded on both video and with still photographs which included the posing of individual brigades as well as the group as a whole.

Once the formal ceremonies were concluded among the fire brigades most of the other present on the Dolinza alm had already eaten a meal of grilled sausages and meat and potato salad and had quenched their thirst with a draft of beer. After eating, many of the young Ukljani present were joined by several middle aged and elderly Blačani who spoke Slovene dialect with them and sang songs in the same vernacular. Elderly members of the Vorderberg church parish choir who were sitting at another table countered with German translations of the same local repertoire of Folk melodies. But eventually even this 'German' choir sang in the mother tongue of most of its members: Slovene dialect.

Shortly before I departed from the Dolinza alm the priest introduced me to a young woman from Vorderberg who immediately apologized to me for not being able to speak Slovene. She said that her parents, who are both fluent in the local Slovene dialect, stopped speaking this vernacular in front of their children in 1959 and thus she was unable to converse in what was properly her 'mother tongue'. She shared with me the futility of her numerous attempts to persuade her parents and her uncle, the captain of the Vorderberg Fire Brigade, that it was a rejection of their heritage and very origins to refuse