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RITUALS OF DISSENT: A PARTICIPANT OBSERVER'S MUSING AT THE FUNERAL OF IMRE NAGY

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Conceiving folklore as a segment in the cultural configuration of any human community, the authoress would like to stress the importance of the contribution folklorists can make to the study of rites of dissent. The stock of traditional symbols, emblems, structures, patterns and concepts must be identified as empty formulas and then, as expressive statements, after being manipulated by dissenting or consenting groups.

This title, dear Maja, I feel, needs an explanation because it contains or implies diverse, seemingly contradictory phenomena and because its intended target, a special kind of spectacular public display of human creativity is differently conceptualized by a folklorist (like myself) than by social and cultural historians who dealt with it most. It is a welcome endeavor of related disciplines in the humanities and the social sciences of our time, to join forces and apply their diverse methodologies to understand better identical problems. But interdisciplinary collaboration is not without difficulty. To secure parity and avoid the superimposition of the bias of one of the disciplines to the detriment of others is not easy, even if a consensus about the purpose and the degree of shared participation was decided beforehand. It often happens that in the study of a folklore phenomenon, like ritual behavior, the folkloristic point of view is suppressed and overwhelmed by competing propositions.

As an American folklorist with deep roots and commitment to European tradition, I would like to stress the importance of the contribu-

tion folklorists can make to the study of rites of dissent. I would like to argue for the folkloristic point of view because I see its status declining and blurred. The folklorist seems a rapidly declining endangered species in Europe today. Few identify themselves as folklorists and those who do at heart, survive under assumed prestigious names calling themselves students of tradition, empirical students of culture, ethnologists, or cultural anthropologists. This is symptomatic, not caused by the refinement of underlying theoretical thinking framing more polished ideas but rather by intimidation through petty academic politicking. Maybe an inferiority complex is haunting folklorists baffled by the array of trendy (fashionable) jargons and terms which often do not mean innovation but rather an illusion to substitute for lacking new ideas.

Following the end of the second World War, new political and ethnic conditions forced folklorists to rethink their position and take issue with traditional concepts of their *raison d'être* - often in a spectacular self-critical soul-searching exposé similar to the Soviet routine. As two extreme examples, the West-Germans ran the full course of voluntary self flagellation whereas the Soviets and their satellites conducted centrally choreographed séances to confess to bourgeois deviations and to the disparagement of the working people in their research work.

Not that there was no previous awareness of the nationalistic ideological aims of folkloristics at its roots. The concept of folk as the collective genius of the people and its emanating lore that unifies groups and justifies the formation of independent nations as defined by the forerunners of the discipline of folklore, served as ideological weapon supporting revolts of consent and dissent since the late 18. century. It never was a secret that folklore as an emergent discipline was a by-product of political ambitions of the 19. century, and that folklore as the subject of this discipline was and continues to be regarded as politically valuable propaganda material to be exploited by the ideologists of subsequent governments.

Much has been written about the applicability of folklore to political aims over the ages and particular attention was paid to the modes of oppressive dictatorial systems that used certain kinds of folklore to legitimize their rule, coercing scholars to serve their purposes. Folklore in the Soviet Union was regarded as carrier of supportive, useful ("progressive") as well as harmful, potentially dangerous ("decadent, folk-alien") ideology therefore folklorists were constantly under ideological supervision. Rightly or wrongly, folklorists were held accountable for their ideological support of Nazism and Stalinism and sometimes accused to be *l'art pour l'art* decadents who are oblivious of the well-being of the folk. Evidently, critical reviews had to appeal to the moral obligation of scholars in order to clear

the way to a new beginning after the demise of dictatorial systems abusing the lore of the folk.

All this is, I am sure, not new, nevertheless, I want to call it to mind because there is here something in this connection we should not overlook. Something about the nature of folklore that has not been realized as long as it was regarded as the traditional illiterate heritage of the rustic folk, not as we see it now: a segment in the cultural configuration of any human community. (In some of the East-Central European countries, unfortunately, academic folklorists still regard archaic peasant poetry their main field of study and oral performance its main manifestation). The relationship of the folklorist to folklore - his personal heritage and what he studies - is comparable only to the relationship of the psychoanalyst to his psychological projections. Thus, the choice of subject to study, the method and interpretation is reflexive of the scholar's personality, folklore, education, social and cultural relations. By collecting, studying, and publicizing folklore he himself becomes a part of the creative process that ensures its continued persistence, future formulations and variations. There would be no folklore without the folklorist, the scientific observer, as much as there would be no folklore without tradition, audience, individual transmitter and popularizer. As part of the folklore conduit, the folklorist works under subjective impressions and through his conceptualization of the world in which he lives and works. Because of his personal involvement, dependence on his own life experience, his interpretations are more valuable than that of representatives of neighbor disciplines. Not to hurt anyone's feelings, let me rephrase this: the folklorist's virtue is his human shortcoming, his reaction to observed reality he helps shape, and his tireless effort to understand creative human response to threatening conditions. Response, by symbolic action to real danger to existence.

These ideas were on my mind little over 3 year ago, June 16, 1989 in Budapest when I myself with 200,000 other mourners solemnly walked to the symbolic funeral site of Premier Imre Nagy and his fellow martyrs executed 33 years ago, to ritually express our respect by placing a white carnation on a designated place in front of the platform of distinguished speakers. Perhaps the carrying and the placing of the white carnation was the most forceful symbolic act of dissent and defiance, along with the uniform wearing of a black armband with the mutilated flag on top. The cutting out of the Soviet-enforced emblem and writing '56' into the black hole was the most appealing to the mood of the masses because the deprivation of the traditional coat of arms signifying the Hungarian nation, was the worst symbol of colonization. (No wonder the example became contagious, later other nations also removed the hated hammer and sickle marked design from their flag.) This remarkable mass demonstration was

orderly, disciplined and silent, almost soundless. The presence of a whole nation was felt as people patiently waited in rows until their turn to pass by came. Strangers held hands, hugged and cried but their whisper was absorbed by the blaring sound of microphones. Two eminent actors of the National Theatre who served terms for their role in what the government stubbornly branded as counterrevolution until a fortnight before this event, read the names of those few hundred of the thousands secretly executed. In the stunned silence, the monotonous mournful litany and honor-roll, for the first time, gave account of never heard before government atrocities. The recital, introduction of heroes, from all walks of society, preceding the ceremony, took two hours. After name, age, profession, time and mode of execution was given, the hero was personally addressed: "You are with us! You stay with us! You are not forgotten."

In this ceremony that became the prelude to the liberation of East Central European nations from Soviet rule I, saw a remarkable combination of careful planning and spontaneous improvisation filling spatial and temporal gaps. The crowd moved smoothly from departure point to destination and back, halting at points but never violating designated boundaries while small groups and individuals performed their assigned or assumed roles. Newsmen, media crew, organizers, policemen, vendors of refreshment, memorabilia and pamphlets played their designated roles stationed on the fringes of the space.

The theatricality of the event was obviously underscored by the organizers, but after all, public funerals are demonstrations by their very nature. Hungarian national philosophers brooding over the fate of the nation often expressed pessimism concerning survival and their voice sustained a sense of impending tragedy of annihilation which should be met with dignity. That sacrificial, heroic death is preferable to life in slavery - became part of the national ideology, doctrine, patriotic education of children. Maybe the most eloquent dramatization of the idea of the death and the funeral of the nation is contained in the poem of Mihály Vörösmarty, written after the defeat of the 1848 revolution. This poem, ingrained in the minds of every Hungarian child, is the apotheosis of national demise. It predicts a glorious, and spectacular death with blood soaked throughout the sacred grounds of the country. While the nation sinks into the grave, people stand by and tears of mourning flows down the faces of millions. "We know how to bury in style", noted someone from the crowd close to me.

The 1989 event indeed showed the importance of burial of heroes as ritual enhancement of national feeling marking the termination of the past, reconciliation, and the opening of a new era. The choice of place for the historic turning point is notable, it signals loyalty to national values and re-

spect for tradition. The declaration of independence from Austria by the poet Sándor Petöfi, March 15, 1848 was made from the steps of the National Museum (symbol of the national language culture), the launching place of the revolutionary march in 1956 was the square at the statue of Petöfi sculpted in the posture, delivering his 1848 address, and the place of the symbolic burial of the fallen heroes of 1956 was the Hero's Square (Hősök Tere) with the speakers platform on the steps of the National Gallery. The Hero's Square was dedicated at the millennial anniversary of Hungary in 1896 with the statues of its founding kings elevated to sainthood. This national shrine, destination of pilgrimage, tourism and forum of political demonstrations was overshadowed by the nearby erected gigantic statue of Stalin, removed and desecrated by the revolutionary crowd in 1956. For intended symbolic appeal to the masses the selection of location for meaningful celebrations is crucial.

If the Hero's Square was the proper site for the ritual celebration of the martyrdom of Imre Nagy and his allies, expression of grief, repentance and eulogy, a cathartic outpour of emotions, there was still the burial. Shortly before, volunteer cabinetmakers, expert craftsmen joined forces after hours to carve the wooden grave markers for each identified hero (characteristically they carved the romantically respected Transylvanian "kopjafa" of debated origin, a characteristic product of popular folklorism) for the exhumed skeletal remains of the heroes lifted from the unmarked burial ground of executed criminals, and the carcasses of dead animals from the nearby Zoo. This section of the damned known as 301 Parcel but only secretly visited by mourning relatives, was to become the national shrine of martyrs, a new place of worship. The funeral procession marched from grave to grave, placing a wreath, flags, picture, symbols, poems, letters, slogans, etc. on the premises. Clergymen accompanied family members and friends performing religious and political rites at each grave while the two actor's recital of the roll-call was replayed. Weeks later the cemetery parcel was still full of individual visitors, whole families, out of town tour groups. People carried flags, deposited flowers, pictures, slogans, letters, poems while retelling stories about the life and tragic death of the martyrs. In equal measure, store bought and home crafted flags, printed texts, pictures, buttons were placed on the graves where people prayed, cried, lamented, sang, made pledges and expressed devotion to political causes.

Regarding the broader context from which the event emerged, consciousness raising was largely conveyed through the mass media. The fact itself that for the first time in forty years, government censorship was lifted and hundreds of new publications were sold on the streets, representing great variety of political viewpoints from the extreme right to the extreme

left gave a tremendous lesson in freedom of thought. Radio journals gave information of the past that could have never be told through official channels before, broadcasters reported and discussed political events with never heard of openness, as they emerged day by day; the cameramen and reporters of the two TV stations covered literally everything noteworthy as things were taking place. Famous dissidents appeared on the shows, unknown new politicians were introduced. The dramatization of the tragedy of 1956 was particularly effective through a series of television interviews with surviving relatives and politicians who shared exile and imprisonment with Imre Nagy and companions. Memory of personal sufferings of widows and daughters enlightened the watchers about the magnitude of human sacrifice and of the web of conspiracy, treason that destroyed who wanted to restore national independence. Generations who learned how to read meaning from between the lines of government controlled newspapers, those who had listened to Radio Free Europe behind closes windows were, for the first time, overwhelmed by facts of the truth accompanied by diverse interpretations concerning events they guessed only from whispered rumors. The public was intoxicated from this political saturation: the speedily unfolding events in the mass media came as chapters of a horror fiction keeping people spellbound. For months, average citizens spent most of their waking hours with reading the news or watching television as the world rapidly changed around them. Everybody became involved. The funeral was a peak event, the nation was ready for the solemn display. No one wanted to be left out.

As folklore performance, the funeral was a mass demonstration of dissent, a political statement conveyed within the frame of a conventional procession, studded with traditional formulas in its content and structure. Ways population groups express dissatisfaction with the state of things are innumerable. Common to them is that all are dramatic processions, showy staging of desires or explicit demands through symbolic behaviour using linguistic, paralinguistic gestures and crafted props and paraphernalia, and that all attack an existing condition with the determination and trust that they can effect change.

In the early fall of 1984, an international conference of East European scholars discussed at the Rockefeller Foundation Center in Bellagio, Italy, the uses and abuses of folklore by the state to control citizenry and legitimize itself. Reference was made to calendar dramas that were rewritten to fit ideological projections and performed obediently by the masses to display the prescribed idyll of joyous peasant life and labor. On the other hand, rites of dissent where never given scholarly attention although they seem to be a part of the normative social process. Dissenting groups were always the yeast of progress in history, in fact, history is the

account of conflicts between population groups. Therefore, to put the examination of mass movements, demonstrations as political rituals of consent and dissent on the research agenda is timely. From the perspective of the folklorist, rites of dissent can be studied with concern of the nature of human symbolic competence and the ways that humans give material and aesthetic shape to values and to social and political goals.

Social historians, sociologists, anthropologists and folklorists have studied state-sponsored or supported public events from a variety of perspectives. They were considered as celebrations of the past; they have revealed their political role in enhancing nationalism, reinforcing state ideology, and shaping ethnic and national identity. National-patriotic festivals were studied, such as coronations, royal weddings, burial of rulers and war heroes, important anniversaries in the history of the nation, the rituals of state that support elite interest groups. Much attention was paid to the ritual life of professional groups, organizations and institutions (student brotherhoods, guilds, the military, sports, banking, industry, women's benefit boards, exchange clubs, etc.). Ritual forms of consent and dissent displayed by opposition, even illegal groups (such as emergent forces of political factions, the labor movement in particular) was also subject to research. In many instances, the ideologists of dissenting groups were themselves the students and the designers of public rituals, adapting patterns and formulas from traditional hegemonic forms to serve the purposes of their anti-hegemonic drive to power.

The substantial literature that describes and analyses the structure, form, artistry, and symbolic behavior of these myriad events is extremely diffuse, slanted according to the interest of diverse disciplines and diverse ideological factions. Yet this vast material gives us enough information about these mass movements and demonstrations to posit certain fundamental and common denominators among them and to conclude that these spectacles are not as spontaneous, amorphous, and chaotic as they might appear to be. There is a certain kind of planning in the selection of tradition-sanctioned formulas and it is the task of the folklorist to explore the reason of the choice of materials and the ways of infusing them with new meanings.

In the study of the rites of dissent the stock of traditional symbols, emblems, structures, patterns and concepts must be identified as empty formulas and then, as expressive statements, after being manipulated by dissenting or consenting groups. From action to action, or movement to movement, certain formulas are familiar and are repeated, even as they are adapted and adjusted to diverse political goals and reinforced in unlimited variations. Festive street shows, floats, marches, burning of effigies, donning costumes, false faces, wearing jewelry, carrying candles and torches,

rhythmic clapping, chorus shouting slogans, rhymes, chanting; the many uses of the national flag and symbols, colors, pictures, noise making, musical instruments, the choreography of walking, jumping, gesturing, dancing, etc., all display remarkable similarities, whether they appear in the official shows of Stalin's USSR and Hitler's Third Reich or during race riots or labor parades in the USA, or during ad hoc political events (nomination, elections of candidates), wherever they may occur. Groups of self-identified individuals use processions, pageants, dramatic enactments, or protests to identify or legitimate their identity, to differentiate themselves from others, to oppose perceived injustices to those with more power, and to unite against perceived authority. The individual features in the display of mass unity act as cement. They energize and activate individuals to join forces for a cause. Participants in these events, which are arranged to stimulate political change and to liberate from oppression, experience a highly emotional identification with the goal, or indeed formulate goals through the very activity of the mass demonstrations. Songs can be influential to bring success to revolutionary causes like in the case of the Marseillaise, the Kossuth song or the Dubinushka; processions carrying the effigy of a symbolically hung tyrant led to the real abolition of his power.

History has also taught us that following revolutionary changes the new recipients of power may apply the ritual symbols dear to the masses to once again enslave the masses. Thus, the stock features are meaningful only as they are enacted; and therefore it is important not only to attend to genre, but also to examine how it is performed, to seek its traditional base and to note innovation, and to observe its particular situation. It is here that folklore's ethnographic approach becomes central and adds a dimension missing in the work of historians, sociologists and political scientists in particular.

Modern political rituals are public events, performed in cities by masses of people, observed by still more people, who occupy and move about a large and open space. Between the performers and the onlookers are the mediating officials of law and administration, as well as the representatives of the mass media. Although aspects of public events are planned and rehearsed, they are simultaneously improvised, spontaneous, and unpredictable in nature, in such aspects as from role players, audience reaction, and outcome. They range from the chaotic and noisy mass spectacle to the small and silent procession, but they all reveal their essential folkloric and traditional nature in the roots in regional, occupation, ethnic, or cultural heritage. Therefore, folkloric methods of approach prove to be successful, seeking as they do a sensitive knowledge of cultural, historical, and political tradition; an understanding of the characteristics of the com-

munity; and the analysis of political issues. Folklorists use ethnography to "see" social life in action, to discover the ways in which the characteristics of public events are organized by individuals and to decipher their meaning to those who participate and observe.

Since the end of the Second World War, tyranny, the unjust drawing of national boundaries, wars, hostage taking, mass murder, ethnic suppression, ideological change, etc., have caused people to react with mass ritual symbolic action in order to realize political ambitions. It is the task of scholars to examine in depth single cases of ritual dissent, in order to identify the standard stock of usable formulas and their applicability in order to determine the ritualistic nature of mass demonstrations and the ways they stimulate social transformation.

During the fall and the winter of 1989 the ritual behavior of the masses was loaded with metaphors of triumphant dissent, as the TV watching public was able to tell. The crowd at the Berlin Wall chanted "We shall overcome"; Czechs in Prague's main square named after St. Venceslaw shook their key bunches to say "never again". In Temesvár, where the bloodshed began to topple the Ceausescu regime, Romanians and ethnic Hungarians joined to form a protective human chain to shield the Reverend László Tökés who championed the liberation. But dissent rituals are not limited to East Europe's rejection of Communism. Civil disobedience marches, picket lines, walkouts, protest parades are creative incidents in democracies that impress public opinion and bring about change. To name only a few memorable American mass demonstrations, the hostage taking of Iran made the tying of a yellow ribbon (originally belonging to a popular love song lately popularized by singer Tony Orlando), its most eloquent symbol to ornate march routes, buttonholes and public buildings. Its extended meaning persists signaling protest against military intervention (mobilization against Iraq in 1990) and the abduction of children (first in Atlanta: green ribbon "for life"). Demonstrations related to the Civil Rights movement, the Monument for the Vietnam War Veterans, Women's lib., etc., share in the wealth of traditional symbolism.

A year later no one spoke about Imre Nagy and continuation of the cemetery cult started in 1989. It seems, the symbolic funeral was the closure of an era rather than the prelude to a new one. Three years later - my visit to Hungary during the long hot summer of 1992 - Imre Nagy's name has not been mentioned in political speeches. Even an air of suspicion was apparent concerning his activities - after all, he was a Muscovite. In this era of transition, in the heat of reevaluation of political figures during the forty years of Soviet domination no one seems to be guiltless. Predictably, - however, - this does not mean the martyrs will be forgotten. Fast

breaking events and the hardships of building a democracy that had no solid foundation in Hungary brought other priorities and forced the evolving cult into latency. Concerning Petöfi's flamboyant poetic adhortation and address to the nation from the stairs of the National Museum March 15, 1948, it is a fiction. To be exact, it is folklore in its truest sense, an emotional, not a factual truth. Petöfi, the poet and ardent patriot, read his poem "Talpra magyar" to his friends at the Pilvax Coffee house, the most popular gathering place of young intellectuals. It was George Heltai, professor of East European history at the College of Charleston, S. C., and a former member of Imre Nagy's cabinet who reminded me of this. The legend is stronger than the fact and as a native folklorist, I presented the legend the nation believed.

RITUALI NESLAGANJA: RAZMIŠLJANJE SUDIONIKA PROMATRAČA NA POGREBU IMRE NAGYA

SAŽETAK

Shvaćajući folklor kao dio kulturne konfiguracije svakoga ljudskog društva, autorica želi naglasiti važnost folklorističkog prinosu izučavanju obreda neslaganja. Na primjeru pogreba Imre Nagya pokazuje kako se u tradicijskim simbolima, amblemima, strukturama, modelima i pojmovima mogu prepoznati formule. Tim formulama manipuliraju ljudske skupine kad žele iskazati slaganje ili neslaganje. Povijest je pokazala da novi vlastodršci mogu iskoristiti već poznate obredne simbole drage masama za novo porobljavanje. Zato u istraživanju nije važan samo žanr nego i način izvođenja. Potrebno je prepoznati tradicijsku osnovu simbola, zapaziti inovacije, promatrati pojedinačnu situaciju izvedbe. U tome folkloristički, etnografski pristup može dopuniti ono što nedostaje u radovima povjesničara, sociologa i politologa.