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# The Role of the Museum of Donja Kupčina in the Preservation of Cultural and Regional Identity of Donja Kupčina

*Encouraged by the results of my own field research in the village of Donja Kupčina and the insight into the preserved ethnographic material in the Museum of Donja Kupčina founded in 1973, in this text I will in an analytical manner try to explore the presence of the feeling of cultural and regional identity among the inhabitants of Donja Kupčina. I will discuss the preservation of cultural and regional identity on the example of the Museum of Donja Kupčina as a cultural institution located in the village center, established and built on the villagers' initiative, and on the example of the dialect, textile and general significance of traditional architecture in the contemporary life of the village.*

Key words: traditional culture, regional identity, Donja Kupčina. Museum of Donja Kupčina

## Introduction

According to Raymond Williams, there are three general categories when it comes to defining culture: "ideal" – according to which culture is "a state or process of human perfection, in terms of certain absolute or universal values" (1965: 57); "documentary" – according to which culture is "the body of intellectual and imaginative work, in which, in a detailed way, human thought and experience are variously recorded" (ibid.); and "social", which defines culture as "a description of a particular way of life, which expresses certain

meaning and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour“ (ibid.). Bearing in mind Williams’s suggestion that researcher’s attention should be directed at their interrelation, in this text I will focus on the third, social definition of culture, since “Such analysis will [also] include ... the structure of institutions which express or govern social relationships, the characteristic forms through which members of the society communicate“ (ibid.).

I will try to give an informative overview of my past field research of social relations and culture in Donja Kupčina, museum activities of the Museum of Donja Kupčina conducted over the last year and the discoveries that opened new questions in the research. Has the museum in its thirty-five-year long presence in the Donja Kupčina area strengthened the people’s need to preserve their own traditional culture, on the conscious or unconscious level? To what extent has the Museum of Donja Kupčina – as a cultural and social institution – and the related extensive ethnological field research (since its foundation till today) in the area affected the local population in terms of encouraging a specific form of social communication? Apart from the example of the Museum of Donja Kupčina and its role in the preservation of identity, I will address this issue in relation to the dialect, textile and general significance of traditional architecture in the contemporary life of the village.

The village of Donja Kupčina<sup>1</sup> is located in the Pokuplje valley, at the mouth of the Kupčine creek. According to the inhabitants’ accounts, it consists of sixteen hamlets: Dolnje selo, Krajačko, Barečko, Japarsko, Matasičko, Konječićko, Ulica, Petrinjsko, Stupljansko, Pušačko, Kuličko, Marušičko, Mikuličko, Gornje selo, Stepičko and Jantolsko.

According to the villagers’ accounts, the hamlets were named after the family names of communal families in each hamlet, although their answers to this question are not always consistent<sup>2</sup>. For example, it is certain that the hamlets of Matasičko, Petrinjsko, Mikuličko, Marušičko, Stepičko and Konječićko were named after communal families’ names. Dragutin Lugarec (born in Donja Kupčina) in his book «Prilozi za povijest sela i župe Donja Kupčina u županiji Zagrebačkoj (Pokuplje)» (*Contributions for the history of the village and parish of Donja Kupčina in the Zagreb county (Pokuplje)*) says that Barečko selo was named after the family name Barek, which he had found in archive documents on family names of Kupčina, and that Japarsko selo had been named after the population that moved from Japra, in Bihać county (Bosnia) (Lugarec, 1999: 186). According to some informants, the name of the hamlet Ulica originated from the family name of Vularić; this hamlet carried the name of Vuraličko selo, after the family name Vuraliće. Over time, consonants *r* and *l* switched places in everyday speech, and the family name Vularić gave the name to Vuraličko selo. Considering the fact that in the dialect of Donja Kupčina many words are shortened in everyday speech, Vuraličko

<sup>1</sup> The form Dolnja Kupčina has also been used till the 1980s. In the most recent published work the consonant *l* has been lost and the name Donja Kupčina remained. In this text I will be using the name Donja Kupčina, since I encounter it in more recent records and published work.

<sup>2</sup> Maiden name of one of my informants, Kata Matas, who listed the names of the hamlets, was Stepušin. She lived in Barečko selo and moved to Matasičko after marrying a Matas.

turned into Uraličko, and its name was changed into Ulica in the late 1970s and early 1980s<sup>3</sup>. Even though all hamlets are the part of the same village, Donja Kupčina, the structure of the population has changed significantly since the time the hamlets were founded. Dragutin Lugarec writes that the village was formed in the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Lugarec, 1999: 10), so, for example, today only two houses in Konječičko bear the related family name. The villagers proudly say that every hamlet bears a signpost thanks to their personal engagement with the town council. When explaining someone's origins or the place of residence in everyday speech, they frequently refer to hamlet names or family nicknames, which, same as family names, are inherited from generation to generation.

## Dialect

The people of Kupčina (*Kupčinci*) have preserved their dialect, which is the part of the kajkavian dialect, in everyday speech. Regardless of the relative vicinity of larger cities and towns, such as Zagreb and Karlovac, and business and social relations with the people from other towns, among themselves the people of Donja Kupčina use their local dialect.

According to sociolinguistic theories, each language carries an implicit norm that composes a set of rules inherent to the speakers of a certain language system. This norm is the foundation of the possibility to communicate, where the speaker and the listener possess at least a partially identical system and rules of usage. The norm arises implicitly from communication practice, it is dynamic and changing (Grbić, 1994: 39).

I have witnessed the accuracy of this statement in the field. The people I talked to often used to translate certain words, even parts of sentences to me, especially when they talked of their past. Considering the fact that my idiom is shtokavian, closer to standard Croatian, it was very difficult for me to understand even the topic of the conversations when talking to the older inhabitants of Donja Kupčina.

While talking to me they tried to talk more slowly, clearly and in standard Croatian. Still, they were unable to find an adequate standard Croatian replacement for some objects or descriptions of certain situations.

Therefore, during my field research, I composed a dictionary of unknown words in order to understand the older people more easily. The younger generation also uses the dialect, although archaic expressions in their speech are lost and they use standard Croatian they use in school.

The awareness of language diversity (in this case, diversity within a single language system) is deeply rooted in human practice of communication (Grbić, 1998: 186). The

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<sup>3</sup> The information on the genesis of the name Ulica came from Anđelka Vidović, born in 1965 in Donja Kupčina. She remembers that at that time the hamlet was called a village, Vuraličko selo. She thinks that the name change occurred in the early 1980s.

*Kupčinci* proudly point out to their dialect as an important identity feature. On November 11, 2006 the people organized the celebration of St. Martin's day in the Firemen's House (near the Museum of Donja Kupčina) where they put up a small play about the baptizing of wine in their local dialect.

On the basis of sociolinguistic theories we come to a "hypothesis that language practice is one of the indicators of the status of group consciousness, therefore of the status of identity, because it reveals self-perception, as well as the mostly unspoken, yet present attitude toward others ..." (Grbić, 1998: 187), for example, the relation toward one's own local/regional belonging, but also toward the local/regional belonging of others. Over the last several decades in Europe and the world different social movements have been revived, including ethnical (Grbić, 1994: 42), ethno-cultural, and other movements, which revitalize the feeling of belonging to one's own community.

One of the side-effects (whose primary goal is the preservation, cherishing and further development of ethnic identity) was the tendency to emancipate local dialects (ibid.). Through its activities the Museum of Donja Kupčina has offered the possibility to preserve and revitalize the local dialect as one of the principal identity features of this area.

## Textile

Many of the inhabitants of Donja Kupčina keep the loom (*tkanica*) in their attics. Some have even been using it until recently<sup>4</sup>, while the others have dismantled it and kept it in the attic (mostly in very good shape) and do not use it any more. Men and women alike are aware and have the desire to preserve traditional inventory. For example, father and son, Stjepan and Ivan Konječić, have lived alone for several years, and keep a *tkanica* in a converted *čardak* located in the yard by the brick house which used to be the home of the Konječić communal family (*zadruga*). Considering the fact that weaving was a woman's job, in this case the *tkanica* has the status of a museum object. They would perhaps give it to the Museum of Donja Kupčina, they say. However, the fact that a loom exhibited in the museum is in a relatively poor condition does not motivate them, or the other villagers, to give it, as they fear it will face the same destiny<sup>5</sup>. This is an issue that calls for further research and discursive reflections, which I will only partially address in this paper, as I think they demand additional research.

<sup>4</sup> Until recently Kata Vularić, born in the 1950s in Donja Kupčina, used to weave on her loom, together with another older woman from the village. Since the older women could not weave anymore, Kata Vularić herself stopped doing it, because, as she says: "I don't have company any more, and I don't feel like doing it alone ...". Kata and her coworker mostly used to weave kitchen towels for everyday usage.

<sup>5</sup> The *tkanica* was exhibited by Ivan Herceg (born in 1933 in Donja Kupčina) in the Museum of Donja Kupčina in the spring of 2007. Its parts were scattered in several *čardak* buildings, damaged by rodents and in very poor condition. Ivan Herceg found these parts and assembled the *tkanica* that is now exhibited in the upper room of the Museum's first *čardak* by the road.

Women's folk costume of Donja Kupčina consists of a blouse (*opleće*), skirt (*rubacha*) and apron (*zastor* or *fertun*). Men's folk costume consists of wide-legged white trousers (*gaće*) and a wide shirt (*rubacha*). Married women mostly carried a scarf (*rubac*) on their heads. The younger women's *rubac* used to be decorated with colorful roses (*rože*) (while older women mostly wore plain *rupci*). In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century men used to wear hats (*škrljak*) on their heads. After the Second World War Mr. Vlašić, school teacher in the village, became the head of the Culture and Art Society. He came from Gornje Pokuplje (a village near Karlovac)<sup>6</sup>. He thought that *Kupčinci* have originated in Bosnia and that they moved to this area in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, fleeing from Ottoman Turks. According to his research, the ancestors of *Kupčinci* in Bosnia wore fur hats (*šubare*), due to which he asked the male members of the Culture and Art Society to replace their hats with *šubara* hats. Although men used to wear *šubara* during winter, after the teacher's intervention, it became the basic element of men's folk costume and used to be worn on all kinds of occasions, in summer and winter. Therefore, photos dating before the Second world war show men wearing hats, and in more recent pictures (from the 1960s onwards), they wear *šubare*. The people of Donja Kupčina accepted the *šubara* as part of their own folk costume, however, in conversations they often point out to the hat as part of their tradition. The memory of the hat as the «older» part of the folk costume, and the acceptance of the *šubara* as the «newer» one, suggests that this segment of folk costume is one of the elements that contributes to the analysis of the complexity of village social life.

Was the further presentation of men's folk costume as part of the local and cultural identity affected by individual initiative of the more educated and therefore «more competent» (in the eyes of the local population) person for determining the symbols of cultural identity? The fact that the people of Donja Kupčina accepted the suggestions and accepted *novelty* as part of their own tradition is also interesting and should not be overlooked in ethnographic research and descriptions.

Today a smaller part of the people of Donja Kupčina wear their traditional costumes on special occasions, such as the day of the patron saint of Donja Kupčina, Saint Magdalene, on July 22, or children wear them for school events when the teachers expect them to. Until a few years ago the village had a Culture and Art Society; due to its activities most of the households preserved their folk costumes. Older women took care of their grandchildren being dressed properly for certain festivities, so most children in the village have their own folk costumes, regardless of the fact that they do not wear them often.

On October 21 and 22 Ivan Herceg, one of the initiators of traditional festivities in Donja Kupčina, organized a celebration called «The days of bread». Several children dressed in folk costumes appeared at the celebration, and several women, also wearing traditional clothes, enacted the horse harvesting and grain sieving in front of the

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<sup>6</sup> The informants Kata Antolčić and Bara Milčić from Donja Kupčina knew the teacher Vlašić, who, according to their accounts, came to live to Donja Kupčina with his wife and, after retirement, moved to Karlovac, where he died.

Firemen's House. The audience, consisting mainly of local people, loved the folklore performance of a traditional custom. While women were breaking flax, men gave them advice, recalling «how it used to be done». This was also an opportunity for women to wear their traditional folk costumes, which they did with joy, as they said.

On October 17, 2007 together with Marija Živković from the Ethnographic museum in Zagreb, I made a short ethnographic film about the production of bread in Donja Kupčina. We wanted to record memories of the traditional way of making bread, which is still cherished in some households, that is, the process of making bread, not only as a reconstruction of the past, but also as a demonstration of a traditional custom in modern context. However, our informant, Kata Matas (born in 1933), insisted on wearing the traditional folk costume, and demonstrated the bread making in the festive Donja Kupčina costume, which she found «appropriate» for the occasion, although she had previously been informed that she could wear her modern everyday clothes<sup>7</sup>.

The fact that folk costumes are an important indicator of regional, local and cultural identity is shown by the fact that during the shooting for a television show women from Donja Kupčina wore a traditional costume, mostly on their own initiative<sup>8</sup>. When exhibiting their own hand-made work they did not want to «mix» with women from other parts of the Pisarovina district (Bratina, Pisarovina, Lasinje and Rečica), thinking that their costume would be overshadowed<sup>9</sup>.

The continuity of making and wearing traditional folk costumes on special occasions has, in comparison to the past, been only partially broken. Some younger and older women still make, arrange, and until recently have been weaving, folk costumes for the female members (less for male members) of their families and the old Culture and Art Society.

One of the special characteristics of Donja Kupčina folk costume is the technique of special ruffling of fabric in female and male *rubāča*, *zastor* and *opleće*, called *šćipanje*. Only one woman in the village has until recently been practicing the *šćipanje* technique; her name is Ljuba Stupljanec and she is over eighty year old. Although some older women are familiar with the technique, they do not do it, because, as they say, it requires much concentration and good skills of finger work, which can be very physically and mentally difficult.

In early 2005 unpaired pieces of the folk costume in a rather poor condition (ruined by rodents and humidity) were found in the Museum of Donja Kupčina. Due to the

<sup>7</sup> These circumstances made us change our scenario, because Kata Maras appeared at the shooting with her own «prepared scenario».

<sup>8</sup> The television shooting for the television show «+30 u hladu» was organized at the Museum of Donja Kupčina on July 11, 2007, and the goal was to present the traditional folk costume, handicrafts, architecture, and the cuisine of the Pisarovina region.

<sup>9</sup> At one moment the women from Kupčina and those from Bratina confronted verbally because a woman from Bratina placed her table between two women from Kupčina. Women from Kupčina agreed that they would not consent to the shooting if their handicrafts were not exhibited together. The organizers intervened and arranged the tables according to the women's wishes.

need of a prompt intervention, the textile was transferred to the Ethnographic museum preparation department in order to perform disinfestation, after which it was stored in dark metal boxes. Anđelka Vidović from Donja Kupčina, who has been working as an assistant at the Museum from November 2006, handles further textile preservation and restoration. Considering the fact that the museum folk costume had to undergo the process of *šćipanje* in order for the restoration to be complete, Anđelka turned to her fellow villager Ljuba Stupljanec for help (after learning the basics of the process from her mother-in-law) and she showed her the whole process. After she had arranged several costumes, the women from the village asked her for help in arranging their own costumes. Thus Anđelka, along with Ljuba Stupljanec, actively started to perform *šćipanje*. This led to the revitalization of a part of intangible heritage, and traditional skill has been preserved for a longer period of time.

It is our intention to organize, through further Museum activities, several workshops in order to transfer the knowledge and skills of this valuable segment of local intangible heritage. In this case the Museum of Donja Kupčina has played an important role in the revitalization of a traditional skill.

According to R. Williams it seems “to be true that meanings and values, discovered in particular societies and by particular individuals, and kept alive by social inheritance and by embodiment in particular kinds of work, have proved to be universal in the sense that when they are learned, in any particular situation, they can contribute radically to the growth of man’s powers to enrich his life, to regulate his society, and to control his environment“ (1965: 57).

## The museum of Donja Kupčina

The Museum of Donja kupčina was founded in 1973. One of the main initiators of this kind of cultural heritage preservation was Marijana Gušić, the ethnologist and long-time employee of the Ethnographic museum in Zagreb<sup>10</sup> who conducted field research in the area in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>11</sup>. The first local heritage collection was created in 1968, before the founding of the Museum, in the meeting hall of the Community House. This exhibition by Marijana Gušić encouraged the villagers to take further steps in preserving their heritage<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> At that time Marijana Gušić was the director of the Yugoslav Academy of Sciences and Arts’ Ethnologic Institute that took over the purchase and buy-off of ethnographic material in the area of Donja Kupčina with the purpose to exhibit it as part of the local ethnographic collection.

<sup>11</sup> Apart from Marijana Gušić, the area of Donja Kupčina was later the subject of research of the ethnologists Dragica Cvetan, Aleksandra Muraj, Paula Gabrić, Ana Mlinar and architect Zdravko Živković, and ethnologists from the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb and the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities in Zagreb.

<sup>12</sup> Today, while I conduct field research in Donja Kupčina, the older inhabitants like to remember Marijana Gušić as the “lady from Zagreb who was interested in everything that was going on in the village at the time” and who often used to ask the people to preserve old objects or give them to the museum.

The Museum is located in the village center, in the Ulica hamlet. It was formed after the relocation of wooden residential buildings and barns that had no longer been used in everyday life after new brick objects had been built. Most wooden buildings were built in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The museum includes the part of a larger communal family house built in 1785. Its appearance and construction method make it the example of typical rural architecture of the Turopolje region.

The Museum has been designed as a method to preserve old wooden buildings as a permanent characteristic of the traditional past and cultural heritage of the area. Residential buildings and barns located in the Museum area were selected by the villagers themselves and in this way they “documented” a part of their traditional culture. In a sense the selection of cultural elements began during the lived period: specific values, considered especially significant among the participants in the activities of the time, have been selected from the whole range of activities (Williams, 1965: 60). This example justifies and makes acceptable the theories that interpret the process of identification through the selection of those cultural elements considered by the members of the culture as especially distinctive features of their culture and symbols and factors of identity (F. Barth; u Grbić, 1994: 26).

Many wooden residential buildings are present in the village today – *čardaci* and *prizemnice* – as well as wooden barns, which have been converted and preserved near the newly build houses. The transitional form between the wooden *čardak* and brick residential building are the residential objects and barns built half of stone, and half of oak planks in the upper section (Gjetvaj, 1987: 52). These old building are still being used, but they have changed their original function. So, for example, wooden residential buildings that used to be homes to communal families, become storage facilities, work facilities and garages for tractors, agricultural tools etc. One such converted building is a mill for larger production of flour located in the yard of the already mentioned Konječić family.

*Čardaci*, *prizemnice* and wooden barns in the Museum are shown in their original function as a reconstruction of residential facilities. A rich traditional inventory is stored in these buildings, inventory that the people from the village gave to the Museum over the years, simultaneously with the modernization of village households.

Although it exists since 1973, the Museum still does not have the registry of all the items stored. Since the 1980s<sup>13</sup> the Regional Institute for the Preservation of Monuments in Zagreb has taken care of building maintenance and presentation. Since 1992 Zoran Petrčić (born in Donja Kupčina) works as the Museum janitor and maintains the green areas of the museum, but also takes care of the preservation and exhibiting and educational programs. Z. Petrčić has organized an occasional smaller exhibition and educational programs in cooperation with the experts from the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb and has cooperated with the ethnologist and conservator Ana Mlinar from the Conservation Department of the Cultural Heritage Preservation Board in

<sup>13</sup> The information from the Conservation Department in Zagreb dates from the 1980's.

Zagreb. This secured the maintenance of the Museum, but without expert guidance its development has been difficult. In 2004, trying to solve this problem, the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb took over the professional activities of the Museum of Donja Kupčina and hired a trainee curator in charge of making inventories, cataloguing and photographic documentation of the ethnographic collection, organization of the Museum documentation and exhibitions and educational activities, in order to revitalize local traditional skills and bring the Museum closer to the general public.

The question posed in this paper, and the overview of the former museum activities and information gathered through field research as possible guidelines for finding the answer, is whether one of the results of the existence of the Museum of Donja Kupčina is the consciousness of one's traditional past among the people of Donja Kupčina? Has the Museum of Donja Kupčina, whose initial idea was to preserve traditional culture and regional cultural identity through material and intangible heritage in Donja Kupčina, both on the unconscious and the conscious levels, preserved among the villagers the idea of the importance of one's traditional past, regardless of the long standing separation of the Museum from the population? Have the different traditional objects (that have long been out of use) and different skills that the villagers have today, as well as the desire (shown by many) to renew the tradition through different feasts been directly influenced by ethnology? The consciousness on the individual level greatly depends on the consciousness of social continuity or, more precisely, on the images of continuity created by society (Connerton, 1989: 12). The testimony of the past based on the lived practice of the old regime is the constitutive act of establishing a new social order (*ibid.*).

## Conclusion

Past research in Donja Kupčina led to a conclusion that several factors are included into the preservation of cultural and regional identity in this particular case. One of the factors is the individual initiative of an expert (M. Gušić) in the 1960s as well as initiatives of local community members – amateurs and enthusiasts. The second factor is institutional support: the Museum and the Culture and Art Society as a cultural institution that is founded at the initiative of individuals but grows into a common property.

Different cultural segments seen from different perspectives of informants offer a story on the social life in a village as something mutable, alive and sometimes “elusive” (Kelemen, 2004: 235). If all accounts are viewed as motives shaped by human experiences, memories and social stories, we can speak of the story that shapes social memory (*ibid.*). With the cooperation of the villagers, the Museum of Donja Kupčina reconstructs the contours of certain segments of life through exhibitions, educational activities and different segments of “social memory”. Traditional culture in its essence is a process of continuous selection and (re)interpretation of selected cultural elements and this is why the Museum's work would be impossible without the villagers'

cooperation. Museologist Tomislav Šola thinks that the theory of open museums – the type of museum which the Museum of Donja Kupčina aspires to be – places man in time and space at its center, as well as their heritage – the natural one, that he affected, and the artificially created one – and the need to be allowed always to build and never to destroy, to be different from one generation to the next, and never to change in the things that really make them different (Šola, 2003: 110).

According to Paul Connerton, the experiences we carry with us depend largely upon the experiences gained through life, as do the images from the past that in a way legitimize the modern social order (Connerton, 1989: 3). Thus the people of Donja Kupčina enriched their local community and social life through the preservation and revitalization of selected segments of lived culture, together with the influence of the existing Museum of Donja Kupčina and frequent interest of ethnology that has possibly affected the consciousness of the villagers about their traditional heritage through interventions and field research. This text could be an encouragement for further research into the influence of ethnology on the life of the local community and the selected segments of traditional culture as symbols of cultural, regional and national identity.

*Translated by Ivona Grgurinović*