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Traditional crafts

On Problems of Ethnological Definition of a 'Clear Concept'

*I came up with a great definition, and the
concept just wouldn't fit into it!*

I.Š.

On the example of the usage of the term 'traditional crafts', the author is discussing the usage of terms whose meaning appears so self-evident, that we do not notice that their clear definition does not exist. What makes things more interesting is that in this group of concepts we can include concepts which form the base for defining the fields of study of ethnology, such as 'tradition' and 'heritage'. The solution of the problem of non existence of these definitions, the author sees in the subjective evaluation of experts for every example respectively. As much as we want to avoid subjectivity in a scientific work, we are constantly aware of the fact that this is not altogether possible, and hence this subjective aspect becomes the criterion of expertise.

Key words: traditional arts and crafts, terminology, ethnology

Introduction

To an ethnologist who deals with the topic of 'traditional crafts', lacking any clear definition of this concept, the only possibility he/she has is to decide on the criteria of selection through which he/she will chose the activities he/she plans to analyze. The result of this approach are the articles which deal with selected activities on specific regions or in specific pe-

riods, and which always leave open the question whether some of the crafts were left out, i.e., whether the author's criterion of selection could have been different.

The common criteria are: archaic production technology and form of the product; social group for which these products were produced for; market production or production for the needs of one's family; the share portion of income from crafts in the income from agriculture or cattle-breeding; means of paying the laborers, etc.

Even though we have to keep in mind these selection criteria, their rigid application will lead us to an imprecise and, actually, quite common division on skills which are applied as trades (crafts) and those which are used in home industry (handicrafts). On the example of traditional crafts, I would like to point to the difficulties we are faced with in the ethnological analyses of other topics as well, and which are related to the problems of their imprecise definition.

As *terminus technicus* in this article I will mostly use the syntagm 'traditional crafts', because I think that this one can be the most commonly found in ethnological texts, but I also consider it necessary to analyze its variants, because they are not synonyms: traditional/folk/old trades/crafts.

For a start, I will analyze the meanings of the terms from which this syntagm is composed of (tradition, trades, crafts), but only to that extent to which I could use it to illustrate the complexity of the problem of defining the whole syntagm, and not each individual component. Each component is difficult to define, and that is especially the case with the term 'tradition'. The same goes for the ethnological (anthropological) framework of this topic, so I will use the works of only three theoreticians (Rihtman-Auguštin, Bausinger, Boyer), considering them sufficient for the understanding of this problem.

It is beyond discussion that the analysis of all the phenomena from traditional culture should include the components of time and space, so I am only pointing this out to explain why I used these specific sources. In this way, using also my own field material, I will try to detect what was the attitude towards this topic of the authors whose work (and activities) in the field of Croatian traditional crafts should undoubtedly be included in any discussion of this topic, even though they never dealt with the exact definitions of the concept of 'traditional crafts' (Radić, Berger, Hefele).

On definition

The term 'traditional crafts' belongs to the group of concepts whose meaning appears self-evident (the meaning appears obvious)¹, so this was at least partly the reason why

¹ 'self-evident' concepts

there were no discussions about its definition. The stereotype that the meaning of this syntagm is self-evident stems from a similar stereotype related to its components: tradition, folk, trades, crafts.

Tradition

In spite of volumes of anthropological literature written on tradition and traditional societies, a scientific definition of tradition does not exist (Boyer:vii). Ethnological and anthropological definitions of the word *tradition* have not gone too far from the literary interpretation of the Latin word *tradition*, *tradere*: legacy, oral literature, custom, order, rules of behavior transmitted through generations. Since it is expected that we all know the literary meaning of this Latin word, consequentially, we all know what tradition is (Boyer:vii). Pascal Boyer is quoting Shils's definition, according to which the common opinion on what tradition is could be expressed in the following way: *tradition includes everything that a society at a given moment possesses and that also existed before it came into possession of the current bearers*. They both agree that this definition is useless, because if we would bear it in mind, then the answer to the question which crafts we can today consider as traditional would include all those which exist in the contemporary society and which existed in the past and that would, next to others, include the auto mechanics, tire repairmen, plumbers, as well as carpenters who are producing kitchens by special order. If we try to, however, be more precise and say that under the term 'traditional crafts' we understand all those whose skills were transferred orally, outside an institution (school), then we would exclude lace making of Pag and Lepoglava, the making of embroidery of Konavle, sewing of the *lajbek* (waistcoat) of Šestine, production of the children's toys in Laz and others, whose skills were obtained through various schools.

Trade/craft

The meaning of the other two concepts which formulate the syntagm: trades, crafts, often seems self-evident, and we even consider them synonyms, and if we try to find the difference in their meanings, we can easily make a mistake.

In *Croatian Dictionary* by Vladimir Anić, the word 'craft' is defined as a 'private enterprise' and 'circulation of money and capital' (397)², and 'trade' as a learned activity, occupation, skill, knowledge (837)³. Skok adds that the word stems from the Arab word 'zanaat' which means: skill, knowledge (642).⁴ From this, we could conclude

² Craft 1.a. craftsmanship b. craft as a private enterprise; 4 turnovers, circulation (of money and capital).

³ Trade 1. learned activities in production industries, manufacturing industries, service trades 2. *coll.* a. occupation, job, calling, profession b. skill, artistry, knowledge, craftsmanship.

⁴ Trade «craft... Balkan-Turkish word of Arab origin (Ar. Zanaat «skill, knowledge» > tur. sanat, sanatli, sanatçı) from guild-terminology: Bug. zanâjat, arab. zanât, cinc. zânate.