

Why do We Talk About Customs?

Summary

Although customs are one of the concepts basic to ethnology, Croatian ethnology has dealt very little with defining the concept. Questions related to theoretical issues have been habitually avoided by implying that there were no dilemmas involved, that everything was implicitly obvious. The few definitions of customs that have appeared are actually versions of the definition proposed by Serbian ethnologist Tihomir Đorđević in 1923. According to him, customs are "postulates that are formed through experience and habits, that govern, like unwritten laws, life as a whole and the work of a certain society".

More recently, several ethnologists have tried to define the concept of custom, but their work remains without final and published results. Unfortunately even the problem of classifying customs is still not adequately resolved.

Recent literature in the field of ethnology presents considerable terminological confusion. Three terms are used, and their meanings and interrelations are not specified (*custom*, *rite* and *ritual*). The three can, at times, be seen in the same text, with no explanation offered. Two of them (*rite* and *ritual*) are often treated as synonyms, but even that is not usually explicitly stated.

The purpose of this discussion of research into customs is to point to the open issues that still plague this area, to provide initiative for work on defining concepts and accepting a common terminology. At least we should decide what terms we will treat as synonyms, and what are the distinctions between those words that are not synonymous.

(Translated by Ellen Elias-Bursać)