

Current Activities

Mythologies and Rituals in Contemporary Europe in Local and National Dimensions

*An Ethnologia Europaea Conference in Radziejowice, Poland
Oct. 9th–14th 1989*

The 14th Working Conference of *Ethnologia Europaea* was held on October 9th–14th in Radziejowice, Poland. The host and arranger was the Head of the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Warsaw, Professor Zofia Sokolowicz, and the meeting was held within the framework of the inter-university research project "Foundations of European Culture".

"Mythologies and Rituals in Contemporary Europe" was a good choice of theme of considerable topical interest to ethnological research. For a long time, in both east and west, there was a tendency to think that rituals were more or less a thing of the past. Not many people believe this today. On the contrary, all over Europe we are at present seeing a re-ritualization – not least in the area of baptism and marriage. Why is this? Is it the uncertain boundaries of existence, the fluidity of norms, that are causing this, as researchers like John Gillis and Barbara Myerhoff think? At all events it is an important issue and a research challenge for the ethnologist.

Because of uncertainty about the date of the conference, some of the scholars who have worked with these problems were unfortunately unable to attend. Nevertheless, the conference programme was able to bring together a number of important and inspiring papers; some of these will be found in this issue of *Ethnologia Europaea*, others will appear in a forthcoming issue. The meeting was attended by about twenty ethnologists from about ten European countries – very nearly the ideal size for a scholarly gathering. And the conference did indeed develop into a particularly fruitful

environment for discussions, where everyone "spoke the same language" – and this is by no means always the case when European ethnologists, often with widely differing research traditions, come together.

Three lectures by Václav Frolec (Brno), Kornélia Jakubiková and Lubica Chorvatova (Bratislava) illuminated different aspects of the life-cycle rituals and the changes in them in recent times, but kept in the main to the descriptive level. Dunja Rithman-Augustin (Zagreb) succeeded in taking a more problem-oriented approach, analysing some of the new, socialist "feast-days" in Yugoslavia, and traced developments all the way down to the current reaction against the secularization of feasts and rituals.

The role of the socialist state as the active fashioner of a festive pattern (as an element in the creation a new human type) was the theme of a lecture by Klaus Roth (Munich). There were efforts to bring this about in the Soviet Union in the sixties, and in Bulgaria in 1978 "Guidelines for the development and Perfection of the Systems of Holidays and Rituals in the People's Republic of Bulgaria" were issued. A "National Commission for Socialist Holidays and Rituals" developed a ritual calendar and scenarios with ethnologists and folklorists as consultants. A thought-provoking parallel to this was brought up by Esther Gajek (Munich) in a lecture on the National Socialist transformation of the Christmas tradition in the Germany of the thirties.

True, re-ritualization is an important feature of modern European daily life; but at the same time it is interesting to note where rituals are

not found in the life cycle. This question was taken up by Christine Burckhardt-Seebass (Zürich) in a stimulating lecture on "Gaps in Life-cycle Rituals" or "passages without rites". Institutional rituals were discussed in one lecture: Jonathan Benthall (London) offered an interpretation of corporal punishment in British schools under the heading "Invisible wounds".

That national myths and rituals, as we are seeing at present, are alive and well and have a major role to play in political change, was fully documented by the most interesting papers of the conference. It is highly to the credit of Hungarian and Polish ethnologists in particular that during the upheavals they have been able to observe perceptively and document the ritual stage-management of current events. Peter Niedermüller (Budapest), in his lecture on the myth of folk culture and the celebration of national culture, referred to some of these events in the very recent history of Hungary, while Zofia Sokolewicz (Warsaw) showed in her paper on "European Heroes Today" how the images of modern Polish hero-figures like Josef Piłsudski (the great statesman of the thirties) and Jerzy Popiełuszko (the modern martyr, kidnapped and murdered in 1984) are formed in popular consciousness according to quite traditional patterns.

Ants Viires (Tallinn) dealt with a special aspect of the construction of a national identity in Estonia: the creation of a pre-Christian Estonian mythology, mainly copied from the Finnish tradition, taking form in the latter half of the nineteenth century, but with revivals in

the thirties and during the upheavals of 1989–90. Finally, Sławoj Szynkiewicz (Warsaw) spotlighted a quite different kind of "mythology": the one that has been built up, with the aid of the ethnologists, around the interpretation of ethnic relations in the Soviet Union.

Radziejowice, which is a 18th-century country house surrounded by a park, about 40 kilometres south west of Warsaw, formed the most beautiful and best setting imaginable for the successful conference. The arrangers ensured that there was a pause in the intense discussions for a refreshing excursion to the Chopin cult site in Żelazowa Wola and the old town of Łowicz. For participants with no knowledge of Poland, the impression the bus trip gave of the Polish countryside, with its many traditionally-farmed smallholdings, was perhaps the most important part of the excursion. An experience of a quite special kind was an evening visit to Professor Marian Pokropeks, whose great collection of modern Polish folk art gave us an almost startling impression of the validity of traditional folk culture in Poland.

The last day of the conference was set in Warsaw, where there was an opportunity to attend a session on ethnological film, before a dinner at the "Bazyliśzek" restaurant on the square of the old quarter of town brought the conference to a festive conclusion.

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