

Folklore Function in the Development of Creativity

An overview of Hungarian experiences and some general examples

In our times industrialization, the wide-spread use of the means of mass media as well as a more general access to cultural values have led to an increase in the disappearance of some important and positive elements in traditional cultures. These phenomena concomitant on some basically positive social and cultural changes are wellknown and efforts have been made to describe them and make proposals for their elimination. We wish to dwell upon one such phenomenon and, on the basis of our experiences, suggest how to stop this negative tendency or, more precisely, transform it into a positive trend.¹

In today's culture the creativity of traditional culture often fades, disappears and is replaced by mechanical, uniform values.² Creative participation gives way to passive reception. It is often welcomed as a sign of progress when traditional customs, works of art and ways of thinking die out and are replaced by a global, impersonal way of life. At the same time, those who are aware of the values of traditional culture and are making a more profound analysis of contemporary changes have stressed from the outset that this process is not unequivocally positive and has series of concomitants hard to eliminate.

In traditional culture creativity is expressed in several fields. The community and cultural traditions play an important role, and it is almost under their constraint and within the limitation of technical and social possibilities that individual works of art are born. The lack of written records or their limited use in traditional societies results not only in an excellent oral performance and an incredible memory (the value of these positive elements is incontestable) but also hinders exact recording, axiomatic working, the accumulation of the cultural achievements of a community, their retrieval and the possibility of placing them into new connections – all that is made possible by written records even if they are impersonal and mechanized. Primitive earthen huts and pile-dwellings are not convenient for holding world congresses or for setting up universities or libraries. Ritual masks and dances cannot replace the visual experience given by radio and TV. In this context, the dying away of traditional culture would always take place even if we look back to the past with a certain nostalgia and appreciate much more an interesting mask than a fashionable beauty whose make-up comes from

1 For a general view of the problem see the Proceedings of the UNESCO workshop in Kecskemét (Hungary) 21 - 24. August, 1982. Voigt ed. 1984 (forthcoming).

2 See the three volumes prepared for the above mentioned UNESCO workshop. Földes-Györgyi ed. 1982; Hosszú ed. 1982; Voigt ed. 1982.

Paris. Despite the losses, the whole process has to be positively evaluated and supported and speeded up by all means.³

However, in traditional culture, creativity has some features which absolutely should be preserved. Fifty years ago, a pioneer of structural ethnography and of folkloristics, P.G. Bogatyrev, was already distinguishing the manifestations of active and passive, collective and individual traditions from each other. He argued that these manifestations co-existed in folklore and that the force of collective and active factors was greater than in professional or modern culture.⁴ In the framework of folklore a story-teller represents an active and individual tradition and his activity has a great value from the point of view of creativity. The community of receivers, sitting around the storyteller, represents a passive tradition, but their collective censorship does not allow the creator to deviate definitely from tradition and, in this way, their passive and collective tradition is also indispensable for the survival of culture. A custom like a wedding or potlatch is of a collective and creative character, and each participant has his or her own role without which the custom would not be genuine. The use of tomb stones in the cemetery, in its most varied forms, is of an active character for the sculptors, but it is individual and passive for the mourners since they only consume and receive the cultural values produced – but even this phenomenon has an important value for traditional culture and contributes to the creation of a cultural environment (ecoculture) which no community can dispense with.

These factors are altered by cultural changes; more and more passive and individual phenomena are produced, but as long as active and collective traditions are preserved in important strata of the community, the whole cultural ecosystem remains alive. The bare modification of proportions is not harmful in itself and should not be hindered.⁵

A folklore-type creativity, in its most important features, corresponds to all kinds of creativity; it is a heuristic process, of an expressive character, put into the service of direct aims and results in the development of the personality. These are

3 The very first important international meeting devoted to the topic was only recently organized: Committee of Governmental Experts on the Safeguarding of Folklore (Unesco House, 22-26 February, 1982) Paris. Because of the practical working character of the meeting there will be no publication of the conference materials, but in a short news item concerning the meeting in a forthcoming 1984 issue of the *Folklorismus Bulletin* (see note 12), however, we try to give an evaluation of the meeting, with some significant parts of submitted written contributions.

4 For the most concise presentation of his views, see Bogatyrev 1939. For a more convenient (Russian) version see Bogatyrev 1971, 384-386, with further references, bibliography etc. in the same volume.

5 I tried to develop the active-passive dichotomy as regards new forms of folklore in my short paper: Voigt 1980.

values no culture can renounce. In the recurring processes of its learning, testing, change and discovery it is often not the result which is important but the way in which it has been achieved by the individual and the community. In the case of village balls or the whitewashing of peasant houses, flower decorations which fade for the next day, or "objectless" activities like the looking at the moon in the Far East, participation, planning and composition, and the expression of aesthetic and social cohesion are more important than the result. In all circumstances, these values have to be preserved by all cultures because their fading away leads to the breaking up of the coherence of culture. It is paradoxical but nevertheless true that the elimination of illiteracy and the possibility of getting to know national or world literature is often coupled with the adoption of a terrible, twisted, nonplastic and bureaucratic language, full of grammatical inaccuracies and unfit to delineate different phenomena. An illiterate swine-herd would express his ideas in a more artistic way than a sadist village school-master, a witch-doctor from the jungle taken as a slave would know much more about curing than his new "master", the drunken European sailor stricken with venereal disease.

Formerly, creativity fixed direct an achievable goals for itself. This should be further maintained. Its forms of expression could be admired not only in cases such as Melanesian wood-carvings, Maori tattooing or Canadian Indian totem poles, but where similarly present amongst young people of all cultures, and they should be kept even in that form.⁶ The most difficult task might be the preservation of the original, heuristic features of creativity. In traditional cultures the making of a simple object is something personal, depending on momentary possibilities, the idea and the inspiration. Decorated knives and spoons or drinking vessels are known all over the world. No two pieces are the same, although the material, the decoration and production techniques are not greatly varied even in the case of a whole continent. Since every single piece is unique, one can feel the harmony between the "imaginary tool" and the object thus produced by one's own hand, and sometimes also the fight with both the material and the technique. When the bride sews her wedding-dress (or some parts of it) herself the result may be inferior in skill to something made in a factory which functions with clockwork regularity, but the fact that the object comes from the direct and personal environment is generally much more important.⁷

6 Curiously enough there is no existing summary on the similar phenomena in Europe. Concerning other continents see Graburn ed. 1976., with further references.

7 Mostly in French cultural theory and sociology a specific trend arose called the "theory of objects", which, however, scarcely deals with ethnographic or folklore facts. See the pioneering work by Lefebvre 1947-1961, and further Baudrillard 1982. The most important papers by Bourdieu are collected in his French (and German) books, as well as in his corrected English book 1977.

The preservation of folklore and in general of traditional creation is a many-sided task, to which there are three possible approaches through different institutes would proceed in different ways.

The preservation of material results lies in the sphere of museums and archives. These cultural values have to be preserved in their state of reliable accuracy. There are ethnographic museums in all European countries and folklore archives in most. The training of specialists takes place at several universities. Fortunately, there are many local collections presenting the traditional popular culture of a given region. Outside Europe the situation is much worse: there are only a few ethnographic museums, collections or archives in Latin America, Africa, in most parts of Asia and Oceania; much more material is (or has got lost) in the hands of private collectors or amateurs than has been saved by institutions open to the public. Storage of the culture of other peoples is not always reassuring. Several European ethnographic museums keep African or Asian objects, but have only limited material for the worthy presentation of the traditional culture of neighbouring peoples, and we have no knowledge about the keeping and presenting of European folklore objects in Third World countries or of the remains of their neighbours' traditional culture. Without the preservation of material results no ethnographic and folkloristic research can be imagined and the relevant knowledge cannot be utilised for the general education of the people in question. Everything possible should be done to maintain a continuous collecting, archiving, exhibition and communication activity and to extend it to all parts of the continent.

Respect for and acknowledgement of the creator is also a significant task. Fortunately, we have good examples in this respect.⁸ Those responsible for cultural and political matters have understood that those creating traditional culture values should be appreciated as much as professional artists. In Hungary, for example, storytellers, dress-makers, potters, embroideresses and wallpainters, outstanding singers and dancers have been awarded the honourable title: *Master of folk art*. Some of them have received state prizes, their work has been exhibited in museums, contests and prizes have been named after them, their places of birth or of work have been transformed into small museums. Radio and television programmes have been made with them, and their names are well-known. In the 1950s, when this process started, many people thought that we would soon run out of people who would merit a decoration. They were right in part, for there were only a few sandal-makers or dyers in blue left in this changing world. But the expression of respect has encouraged young people to follow their predecessors,

⁸ For the summary Varga ed. 1978.

mainly in the case of technically renewable branches and where creativity is not so much dependent on the material (singing, dancing, making of musical instruments, pottery, blacksmithing, the making of fancy-leather goods, etc.). Today young people can also be proud of having received similar titles, decorations, awards (eg *Young master of folk art*). Respect for the creator also means respect for their creations, the indispensable condition of which is a careful scientific analysis and the collection of works for museums and archives. At the same time, mainly with the help of the means of mass media, it is necessary to make known the creators. This can be done by films or exhibitions (presenting outstanding "masters" of the old culture) but the creators themselves can also prepare autobiographical writings, retrospective exhibitions, shows which have to be adequately presented to individuals and the public. *Masters of folk art* are as well prepared (or sometimes even better) in a particular branch as research-workers. This type of knowledge should also be exploited and appreciated. In Northern and Central Europe and also in Hungary, ethnographic contests are held every year on a voluntary basis in which not only village intellectuals (teachers, doctors, priests, engineers, etc.) but the people themselves also take part. They often prepare monographs which usually stand high among the works rewarded. This "scientific activity" should also be highly appreciated since irreplaceable data are supplied and, even more important, the creators express the sense of their activity in their work.⁹

The preservation of the creative and receptive communities is more difficult. If possible, original communities should be maintained. But even if the dresses, dances, meals and jokes of fishermen living in groups can be kept, how can for example tales by Siberian exiles, plaintive thrillers by singing beggars, unwritten laws of nomadic herdsmen and the primitive snow huts of the Eskimos be preserved without condemning the community to stagnation? Where possible, traditional communities should be preserved. It makes no sense to curtail wedding customs, ban the putting up of a maypole, declare Christmas-tree a clerical left-over, eliminate *romanikris* from the Gipsy form of self-government, or the traditional knowledge of a community maintained singing of old soldiers' songs, using the herdsmen's empiric knowledge about the curing of animals or meteorology, teaching century-long student traditions in school, not modernizing the miners' holiday attire, etc. However, it is not enough to preserve creativity. The receptive community should also be preserved, and tradition should be appreciated by the society. Today there are presumably more possibilities of doing so. Some years or decades ago, in a euphoria of plastic-culture in a

⁹ A detailed analysis and a tentative bibliography is made in my forthcoming booklet Voigt/Zelnik 1984.

"hyper modern" world, members of the younger generations cruelly despised and laughed at "backward" older generations, "respectful of traditions". Today the receptive community (through the "preservation" of objects and of creators) has become broader and better informed. However, it is not enough to preserve the "old" receptive community. New ones should be established.

New creative and receptive communities have been created in the last decades. In some European countries a spontaneous effort to form communities by up-and-coming generations has coincided with the fashion of respecting traditions, and, as a result, a movement has developed. Much interest has been expressed at youth dance clubs and public places in folk dances and music, and later young people started to get acquainted with and imitate to a certain extent folk ornamentation. When only dances, songs and folk-dresses collected from the elderly characterized the movement, it was but a limited expression of creativity. A new community of receivers was formed but no genuine creative activity was present. The latter was born in the last decade. Youth caps were organized, meeting houses were built for the community, young people learned traditional techniques (weaving, wood-carving, pottery, the making of folk music instruments and playing on them). They prepared objects for themselves and, in the meantime, small communities were formed which do not interpret culture anymore as a single cultural model, but are able to live with it as a tradition and a "secondary culture".¹⁰

This "new" creative and receptive community brought about the revival of creativity. Though the fading away of traditional culture had earlier led to the disappearance of handicrafts or their transformation into a "tourist art", as a result of which, co-operatives and offices have been set up the world over of a more or less authentic character, creating "ethnic tourism" and important revenues for the countries – this phenomenon, from a scientific point of view, is not a revival of folklore but a manifestation of folklorism. On the other hand, the new creative communities belong to "folklorism" only by their ideology, and their work usually has not been commercialized. Their activity is also characterized by conscious, modern innovations, and the recognition of cultural traditions. This "new creativity" movement has the merit of counting on the spontaneous creativity of children as well. It is not so much through education as through games and similar activities that it teaches children the values of traditions. To form a children-orientated creativity is a proper basis for directing the ability, creativity of young people towards knowing and recreating the values of traditional culture. In general, it might also be possible to overcome the generation gap

¹⁰ A bilingual Hungarian and English book summary: Bodor 1981.

when forming new creative communities: young people like to learn from the elderly who have preserved traditions, and they apply this knowledge when forming their own environment, their home. The formal education of children can also take this direction.

Another question is the relation between creativity thus developed and naive arts,¹¹ leisure time activities and, in general, amateur art movements. This new activity has to be organized to a certain extent, but there is a difference in comparison with the lucrative activities of professional folklore ensembles. In this case the guarding of traditions is more conscious, continuity is not forced, the representatives of new creativity stress that for them the values preserved are not the expression of a continuous process but that of a conscious return to traditional values. They want to express their own way of living and their direct environment from a social point of view. It is partly a leisure-time activity, but it has to be differentiated from the rather individualist and merely aesthetic manifestations of naive arts inclined to privacy. It is a social movement with aesthetic features, but through creativity it forms creative communities in order to reconstruct direct human working relations inherent in traditional cultures.

As far as relations with professional and national cultures are equal, social and historic formations whose development is an unstoppable process. More and more interest is expressed all over the world in a country's own cultural past and values, and it appears in the teaching of the native language, in the setting up of national museums, archives, exhibitions, in organizing "state" folklore ensembles and festivals, and in guiding scientific research in this direction. Examining traditional culture in a stricter sense is all the more important as it fills the dry and empty patterns of history and of the knowledge of a language with everyday knowledge about a people's life. "New creativity" should be placed in this framework. It represents the preservation of the modified historical values of national culture, but it does not cover the entire national culture; it only creates the values of this culture in small communities, by a direct activity. As the examples show, this solution is far from being nationalist; on the contrary, it leads to the honest appreciation of the culture of neighbouring and kindred nations. There have been initiatives to imitate, in a creative way, certain elements of the traditional culture of distant continents (origami, string figures from Polynesia or mask-making). These are only by-products. The main objective and merit is to creatively express the values of one's *own* culture. We think that this movement

¹¹ Despite various attempts there is no general summary of European naive arts. The best known book was made in 1959 by Bihalji-Merin (new, updated German edition 1977). On Hungarian naive art an introductory book: F. Mihály / Bánszky 1972.

has already achieved results. It contributes to the maintenance of a living national culture and as such, should be followed. Its experiences can largely be used for removing the unnecessary contradictions between tradition and modernity.¹²

¹² For some further important aspects see our international newsletter *Folklorismus Bulletin* / No. 1. April 1979; No. 2 Oktober 1980; both in Budapest (the next issues will be published in Bratislava), as well as the Proceedings of two international conferences on folklorism, Verebéli ed. 1978/a, 1978/b, 1981/a, 1981/b, 1982.

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