

Heritage-Making in the Metropolitan Area. The Case of the “Wedding at Ecser”

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Abstract: The paper focuses on the case study of a settlement in the immediate vicinity of the Hungarian capital, which became nationally recognized in the second half of the 20th century through the staging of the community’s wedding customs, known as *Wedding at Ecser*. Over the decades, the element lifted out of the local lifeworld – and ultimately constructed – has become linked with various community meanings and interpretive structures, through the examination of which the underlying historical, economic, and socio-cultural processes are being presented. Not only has the cultural relic – initially constructed by and through external actors – appreciated for local society, it soon developed into a central element of self-representation. At the same time, the cyclically growing interest in the staged custom and the repeated re-articulation of the wedding in new ways were closely linked with the social changes of the given period and the transformation of the local community and also dependent on the nature of power discourses at the local level. However, the wedding became not only an economic, ideological, political resource for the local community but also a valid meaning structure beyond the local level. This study pays special attention to discussions of the role that this phenomenon – which has nearly 60 years of history and many layers of meaning – may have played in the heritagization practices of the 21st century. There is particular emphasis on how the wedding as a heritage element and – more broadly – heritagization are linked to local experiences of a changing rurality.

Keywords: staged folklore, (self)representation, brand building, heritage, changing rurality

Since the discovery of folk culture, its prominent elements have made certain villages famous nationwide and, in exceptional cases, even beyond the national borders. Located near the capital, Ecser became famous in the first half of the 1950s through the staging of the community’s wedding customs. Recognition for the settlement was generated by the inaugural performance of the Hungarian State Folk Ensemble, formed in 1951, which included, among other things, the stage production of the wedding customs and dances of Ecser. The success of the Hungarian State Folk Ensemble’s choreography, *Wedding at Ecser*, inspired the organizing work aimed at staging local traditions and

played a significant role in making the presentation of the wedding the focal point of the community's self-representation. At the same time, the cyclically growing interest in the staged custom and the repeated re-articulation of the wedding in new ways were closely linked with the social changes of the given period and the transformation of the local community and also dependent on the nature of power discourses at the local level. It is no coincidence, then, that the heritagization practices that started in the settlement in the 21st century started with the re-contextualization of this key element of the community's past and in which the wedding continued to play a prominent role later on. In this study, I first provide an overview of the more than 60-year history of the *Wedding at Ecser*, then try to explicate how the wedding as a heritage element and – more broadly – heritagization are related to local experiences of a changing rurality.

I.

The Birth of Wedding at Ecser

Ecser is located about twenty-two kilometers east of the capital, on the Budapest-Szolnok railway line. After the Ottoman-era depopulation of the settlement, it was repopulated in the first decades of the 18th century as a result of a wave of migration from the north-western part of the Kingdom of Hungary. The settling Catholic population was characterized by an individual use of the Slovak language, which by the first half of the 20th century was increasingly relegated to the realm of private life. The proximity of the capital played a decisive role in the livelihood of the population.¹ In the interwar period, agricultural activity and – largely industrial – work in the capital requiring daily commuting existed side by side within the community. With the development of the industrial sector, more and more of the labor force of those unable to make a living on the small peasant farms migrated to the factories and construction sites of Budapest instead of taking up agricultural wage labor. Selling fruits and vegetables cultivated in kitchen and field gardens on the markets of Budapest, although part of the livelihood strategies of daily commuters making a living mainly in the industrial sector, was particularly significant for the narrower stratum of those whose livelihood was based solely on farming.²

The visually characteristic elements of Ecser's folk culture, primarily costume, dance, and music, became the subject of scholarship and later of wider public interest in the second half of the 1940s, after the Second World War. The settlement was one of the earliest collection sites that garnered the attention of institutional folk dance research that started after the Second World War: a film was shot here in 1947, on the occasion of

¹ According to the ethnic data of the 1941 census, out of the settlement's population of 2,056 at the time, 1,036, i.e., slightly more than half, spoke the Slovak language (KSH 1983:96).

² According to the 1930 census, 33% of the population (1,847) made a living from farming, and 28% of the population was considered an independent farmer. The industrial sector already supported 34% of the population at that time. The proportion of people employed in transportation was also significant (8%) (the data also include earners and dependents) (KSH 1934:54, 186–187). According to 1935 data, the vast majority of farms were under 3 acres (KSH 1938:354).

a wedding. The filmed wedding was made famous by its artistic treatment, the *Wedding at Ecsér* choreography, which was created by Miklós Rábai, the leader of the Hungarian State Folk Ensemble, for the newly formed company.³ After the Hungarian Communist Party came to power (1948), it aimed to transform the peasantry into a working class through its agricultural policy. At the same time, it supported the presentation of the dramatic, staged expressions of the folklore and folk art of the communities. The presentation of folk dance was ensured by an institutional network following the Soviet model, within the framework of which the Hungarian State Folk Ensemble was also established in 1950.⁴ The company premiered the *Wedding at Ecsér* choreography in its first show on April 4, 1951, on the anniversary of “liberation” that was declared a state holiday, at a ceremony held at the Opera House (LELKES 2015:133–140).⁵

Between Power and Self-representation – The 1950s and 1960s

Research interest, and then the success of the Hungarian State Folk Ensemble, had an almost immediate impact on the local community’s relationship to its own traditions: the people of Ecsér became regular participants in various (mostly political) celebrations in the capital, presenting their costumes, dances, and songs. A film was made from Rábai’s choreography in the year following the premiere, in 1952 (KALMÁR 1952). The film centers around the dance troupe, orchestra, and choir of the Hungarian State Folk Ensemble, but members of the community also appear in the film, and some of the scenes were shot on Ecsér’s main street. The renown of Rábai’s choreography was expedited by that fact that, in addition to stage dance performances, it could now be viewed in cinemas as a film, and its music was regularly featured in radio programs. It didn’t take long for the people of Ecsér to bring the custom to the stage themselves: in the course of almost five years, the wedding became the principal feature of Ecsér dance groups of various compositions, performed at local, district, and county-level public celebrations and cultural competitions.⁶ The dominant political system of the first half of the 1950s, the Rákosi dictatorship, gave special prominence to public celebrations and their concomitants, speeches by politicians and parades, and sought to integrate them as much as possible into the lives and individual experiences of citizens. In contrast, the system associated with the person of János Kádár, established after the defeat of

³ Building on pre-war precedents, the collections started with the collaboration of the National Institute for Regional and Ethnological Studies (Region and Folk Research Institute) and the Hungarian Dance Working Group, and the collection in Ecsér was also carried out within this framework. For the history of the National Institute for Regional and Ethnological Studies (Region and Folk Research Institute), see Sozan 1979:296.

⁴ After the end of the Second World War, Hungary became part of the Soviet sphere of interest. After a short period of democratic experimentation, a communist takeover took place in 1948, and the period of the one-party dictatorship marked by Mátyás Rákosi (1892–1971) commenced, which lasted until the outbreak of the 1956 revolution (GERGELY 1999:191).

⁵ According to the official ideology, on this day in 1945, the last German soldier left Hungary, retreating from Soviet troops.

⁶ Cultural competitions were forums and contests with a strong ideological content, created by socialist cultural policy for amateur art movements (HALÁSZ 2013:67–88).

the 1956 revolution, sought to fit, as much as possible, the prominent events of private life within the social framework created by socialism (KALMÁR 1998:259–260). On the other hand, the purpose of instituting secular name-giving ceremonies, weddings, funerals, and various inauguration ceremonies held within the framework of various social organizations was to banish religious content from the celebrations of personal life.⁷ Following a standard scenario, they were organized by council staff and local representatives of various social organizations (TÓTH 2016). After the introduction of the guidelines instituting social holidays, the first high-profile example was a large-scale wedding organized in the capital within the framework of the KISZ [Communist Youth Association] on August 20, 1958, on the occasion of “Constitution Day.” The case is especially important in terms of the history of the *Wedding at Ecsér*, because in the “role” of wedding guests, it featured a group of Ecsérians of various ages, dressed in folk costume, displaying the outward expressions of the famous wedding on the streets of the capital.⁸ The timing of the event emphasized the intertwining of the socialist state holiday with a prominent personal life event, whereby the wedding was also a celebration of “Constitution Day.”

By the end of the 1950s, farming had come to occupy an even less significant place in the employment conditions of the local community. In 1960 – just before the socialist transformation of the agricultural sector, the end of collectivization at the local level – only about a tenth of the population made a living (solely) from agricultural activity (KSH 1961:115). Non-agricultural employment was mainly focused on industrial work in the capital, for both men and women.⁹ The expansion of the daily commuter lifestyle was accelerated by the experience of the anti-peasant atmosphere that accompanied the transformation of the agricultural sector.¹⁰ In response to the labor needs of expanding industrial facilities, the young adults of families with a less lively economy were no longer involved in the upkeep of the family farm, or if so, only as a part-time activity. The most visible domain of the lifestyle change that took place as a consequence of daily commuting was the transformation of women’s clothing, the abandonment of peasant clothing, which was initiated in the 1950s by unmarried girls commuting to the capital for work or secondary education, and joined over the course of the decade by young women who were also commuting. However, as the success of the choreography of the Hungarian State Folk Ensemble made the “Ecsér attire” famous, wearing folk costume

⁷ Even though the 1956 revolution was crushed by the Soviet army, the revolution exposed the widespread social discontent generated by the dictatorship of Mátyás Rákosi. It was clear to János Kádár (1912–1989), who had just come to power, that Rákosi’s policies could not be maintained after 1956. On the religious front, Kádár continued endorsing tough action against the religious establishment and its representatives, but unlike the Rákosi dictatorship – which did not shy away from methods that involved physical violence – he envisioned the offensive against the religious worldview in a more indirect way, as a slower pace of transformation. Part of this process was the replacement of church ceremonies with state ceremonies in connection with the celebrations of the events of private life.

⁸ For the genesis of “Constitution Day,” see KÜRTI 1990:6–7.

⁹ The essence of collectivization is the abolition of the framework of individual farming and the introduction of co-production in cooperatives created by aggregating previously privately owned areas. See VARGA 2016.

¹⁰ There was no significant difference between men and women in the rate of staying in agriculture (KSH 1961:120–121).



Figure 1. Hungarian News Agency (MTI) staff takes photos of the wedding performed by the children's dance group. Ecsér, Hungary, 1956 (Property of Emese Kósa)

for special occasions became extremely popular and widespread in the 1950s.¹¹ The most typical occasions for this were school ceremonies and the performances of the local dance ensemble, which, in accordance with the political expectations of the era, were often also socio-political events (cf. FÜLEMILE 1991:68–75).

The famous wedding has been in constant transformation in the settlement since the early 1950s. From the 1960s on, in line with the nationwide process, the number of participants in weddings and the amount of goods invested in the event or returned as revenue began to increase (cf. SÁRKÁNY 1983:291–282). The importance of weddings was further enhanced by the fact that the community became nationally renowned precisely because of the showy outward expressions of their weddings.¹² From time to time, weddings in the village became the focus of interest in the county press. Journalistic works (assessed the weddings of the 1960s in comparison to the spectacle and atmosphere of the stage production, i.e., they sought “real,” “patinaed,” “traditional” customs (DELI 1966; v. Z. - P. I. 1969; (G.) 1969) (cf. KESZEG 2018:44–48; COHEN – COHEN 2012). The community itself sought to showcase the representative elements of the tradition that reinforced the prestige of the families involved (cf. SZÉMÁN 1983:295). Such efforts were most evident among the prominent families of the former smallholder farming

¹¹ Besides economic considerations, it was also the atmosphere of the anti-peasant policy of the Rákosi dictatorship, which attached negative meanings to the peasant way of life, that played a role in the abandonment of folk costume (cf. FÜLEMILE 1991:53–55). Even in the interwar period, men largely followed the urban example in their clothing choices.

¹² In 1960s Ecsér, weddings of 200-300 people were considered large-scale.

class and culminated in the showcasing of costumes. That is why it was mostly weddings that remained for the longest time the traditional occasions for wearing folk costume.¹³ Due to the national recognition of the stage production, when it came to the folk culture of Ecsér, the outside world also responded most readily to the festive wedding attire and used it to identify the community.

The 1970s – Local history and the tourism industry

The wave of folklore and folk art revival and the growing interest in local history that started in the late 1960s have also ushered in a different kind of attitude towards the phenomena of folk culture: interest in local history and culture. As a result, a local history club was established, within the framework of which the compilation of a local history collection began.¹⁴ The need to collect and preserve the phenomena of material culture and folklore seemed especially timely and desirable for those participating in the collection of local culture and history. The 1960s saw a dynamic population growth, but only a small part of it could be attributed to natural reproduction: it was largely due to the positive net migration rate. The rapid growth of the resident population led to an expansion of the housing stock.¹⁵ In the first half of the 1970s, residents were confronted with the experiential evidence of modernization, such as the construction of two smaller housing complexes in the village.¹⁶ Alongside the extant peasant houses and the so-called “cube houses” that had by then come to define the character of the village, these implied a radically different character and the penetration of the urban into the rural (cf. BÉKÉS 1973:6).

By the 1970s, the booming domestic and international tourism had become a significant domain for the *consumption* of folklore and folk art. International tourism propaganda sought to incorporate elements of folk culture it considered suitable into the national image it was building. From the 1960s on, the marketing of traditions created for foreign tourists was typical, a trend that was given a new impetus by the dynamically growing number of Western tourists in the 1970s (cf. SCHLACHTA 2014:96–103). Among the “folk customs” marketed as tourist attractions, the wedding met the criteria of having

¹³ This peasant stratum making a living from vegetable cultivation continued individual farming activities until collectivization. It was essentially this one-tenth of the population that provided the basis for cooperative agriculture in the next decade (KSH 1972:516–517). Ecsér’s population in 1970 was 2,633. Only 22% of active earners worked in Ecsér, and local agricultural activity involved even less, only 9% of all workers. 98% of those who commuted for work were employed in Budapest, predominantly in industrial jobs (Ibid:438–439; KSH 1974:56–57).

¹⁴ For more on the wave of folklore and folk art revival that started in the late 1960s and its international context, see CSURGÓ et al. 2018b; BALOGH – FÜLEMILE 2008:47–52.

¹⁵ By the end of the 1970s, the resident population of the village had risen from 2,077 to 3,262 in twenty years. 26% of the increase was due to natural reproduction and 74% to the positive net migration rate (KSH 1972:438–439; KSH 1981:620–621, 625). For the analysis of developments between 1960 and 1979, I use the census data pertaining to the *resident population* instead of the data pertaining to the *present* and *permanent* population, so I do not exclude those who have a registered temporary residence in Ecsér mostly for the purposes of employment in Budapest.

¹⁶ 55% of the housing stock surveyed in 1980 was built between 1960 and 1979, and 40% between 1970 and 1979 (KSH 1981:772).

the capacity to being transformed into an experience, becoming a tourist attraction: tied in with the custom's course of action, it presents the visually characteristic elements of folk culture, such as dance, music, and folk costume, while also encompassing culinary delights. Ecsér – having been dubbed as *wedding country* in the journalistic discourse by the middle of the decade (Lakodalomországban 1960)¹⁷ – attempted to enter the international tourism scene in 1978 with a presentation of the custom. The local council, mainly at the urging of the council chairman, entered into an agreement with IBUSZ, the national tourism company with the monopoly of organizing domestic and foreign tourism, to bring foreign tourist groups to Ecsér (G. J. 1972; JANDÓ 1978).¹⁸ The goal they set was achieved only once, as tourist visits did not become regular. At an event that lives on in community memory as the *Canadian wedding*, the wedding custom was performed by the Ecsérians for a group of tourists from Canada. According to the people of Ecsér, the expected continuation was called off because the show did not yield significant benefits; in fact, some believed that the elaborate, exacting presentation of the *peasant wedding* was not at all profitable. At the same time, the plan to (re)construct the tradition has aroused lively interest within the community. The number of participants exceeded the number of active dance group members, bringing together a much wider crowd, representing several age groups. The *Canadian wedding*, despite being a failed



Figure 2. A Canadian tourist group attends a performance of Wedding at Ecsér. Ecsér, Hungary, 1978 (Property of Márta Langó)

¹⁷ On the production and consumption of *folk festivals*, see BÍRÓ 1987:91–92.

¹⁸ IBUSZ: Idegenforgalmi, Beszerzési, Utazási és Szállítási Vállalat [Tourism, Procurement, Travel and Transportation Company]. Domestic and foreign tourism in Hungary was initially organized exclusively within the company, and since the 1970s it has also been done through offices who had a partnership contract with the company (SCHLACHTA 2014:93–100).

attempt as an enterprise, can nonetheless be seen as an event that shaped the identity of the community: in addition to the experience of community cohesion, it provided an opportunity for the community to define itself and present itself to the outside world (cf. BENDIX 1989:131–132).

In the 1970s, the community, having perceived the change in the settlement's image, began to reflect on the distance between its famous past and its present: by organizing a local history club, and by compiling and exhibiting an ethnographic collection. On the other hand, the wedding emerged as a brand, and its presentation as a tourist attraction can be seen as an attempt to use it for business purposes. Such attempts also include the crispy cheese wafers baked locally in the second half of the decade, marketed under the name *Wedding at Ecser* and with a trademark featuring a dancing couple (–E –A. 1975). Brand building thus evolved around an already renowned phenomenon: the community sought to turn the popularity of its wedding into its own brand. The period from the late 1980s to the late 1990s was seemingly characterized by a relatively low degree of local and wider social interest in the wedding. The decade after the regime change, on the other hand, brought many changes to the community that made it timely to re-articulate the wedding.

II.

Changing Rurality – Cultural Responses

The nearly two decades after 2000 – a period of special prominence in heritage-making – brought about some new interpretation(s) of the wedding. In order to understand the phenomenon, the changes in rurality and the characterization of the changes are worthy of closer consideration. According to Hana Horáková and Andrea Boscoboinik, the essential feature, or axis of rural spaces is the land, on the one hand as the basis of agricultural production, and on the other hand as a component of the landscape (HORÁKOVÁ – BOSCOBOINIK 2012:12). From this point of view, it is striking that in the 1960s, after collectivization, the abandonment of land became more prevailing in Ecser. Compared to the job opportunities offered by the capital, the production cooperative was not able to evolve into a viable alternative. When the regime change reached the settlement, there was in fact no agricultural production that would have been worth pursuing within this changed framework. The majority of those whose lands were restituted did not start farming them, but sought to sell them with the best possible options.¹⁹ There were two major waves of land sales. During the construction of the Ecser section of the Budapest ring-road, the M0 motorway (2005–2008), the owners were able to sell their lands that fell within the bounds of the construction site at a good price. On the other hand, those with restituted land on the northwestern peripheries of the settlement, the so-called Kálvária [Calvary] Hill, had gained building plots in the early 2000s by declaring it an

¹⁹ After the regime change in 1989, the restructuring of rural areas began as a result of the establishment of a liberal market economy and the processes of restitution and privatization. In the agricultural sector, private farming has once again become dominant. For more details, see CSURGÓ et al. 2018a:97–102.

inner residential area, developing infrastructure, and subdividing it. Some of the plots created in this way were retained by the families of Ecsér, but most of them were sold. The buyers were mainly those who had moved to the settlement: the emerging suburban milieu of the village proved to be extremely attractive for the in-migrants. In-migration has been the primary source of population growth since the 1960s (KSH 1972:438–439; KSH 2001b). Even though the settlement has had a natural population decline since the 1990–2011 period, the large number of in-migrants has nonetheless resulted in a dynamic increase in the population. The influx that started in the early 2000s was the largest population increase due to in-migration in the history of Ecsér: in ten years, the population increased from 3,250 to 3,775 (KSH 2011). Most of the new residents were out-migrants coming from the capital. There was no sharp delineation between old and new rurality, villagers and in-migrants.²⁰ Even though Kálvária Hill, which was at the heart of the new residents' interest, having had become a clearly marked unit with a suburban image, in-migration affected the entire residential area of the village.

In the case of Ecsér, the fate of the land that defines rurality indicates the direction of the transformation of rurality and the nature of that change: it reveals the process by which the rural environment morphs into an urban space. This new form of rurality is more and more fulfilling the function of a suburb from which the capital – the primary venue for daytime activities and production – becomes even more easily and quickly accessible. While the settlement is actually located outside the city limits, the emerging new rurality is characterized by the blurring of the boundaries between rural and urban ways of life.²¹ At the same time, different versions of rural life can exist side by side in this changing space, where diverse experiences of history and expectancy for the future (may) converge. In these circumstances, the question the community must consider is this: is it possible to define one's own uniqueness, and if so, how? From this point of view, heritagization practices are a set of cultural responses to a changing rurality and new challenges (cf. CSURGÓ et al. 2018a:83–91).

Production of Locality – Frameworks and Opportunities

Arjun Appadurai reminds us that locality – which he defines as a property of social life – is a fragile achievement, not a given but the result of specific everyday routines—the

²⁰ According to the data of the 2001 census, only half of the population at the time had been “born in Ecsér,” or more precisely, could claim Ecsér as their first place of residence after birth. 26% of the population came from Budapest, and another 15% came from another city. The proportion of people in-migrating to Ecsér from other villages was 8%. By 2011, the proportions had shifted even further in favor of those who came from the capital. 45% of the population claimed Ecsér as their previous place of residence, while the proportion of those who came from Budapest rose to 35%. Moreover, the proportion of those whose previous place of residence was recorded as another village fell to 5% (KSH 2001, 2011). The current document has been prepared using the tabular data set Census 2001, 2011 compiled by the Hungarian Central Statistical Office upon individual request of the author (www.ksh.hu). The calculations contained in this document and the conclusions drawn from them are the sole intellectual property of Ágnes Eitler as author.

²¹ Bernadett Csurgó defines the rural space created by those moving from the city to the countryside not as a stage of urbanization but as an independent entity, a specific type of rural space, where signs of suburbanization and retraditionalization exist simultaneously (CSURGÓ 2013:268).

production of locality (APPADURAI 1995). If we interpret heritagization as a kind of *production of locality*, it becomes evident that what lies behind heritagization efforts is the local-level experience of social changes (cf. PUSZTAI 2018). A condition for heritage-making, according to Francois Hartog, is for the community to be aware of the distance between its own past and present so that the *rupture* between the present and the past becomes recognizable. All of this raises concerns for the future: preserving *ourselves* for the future becomes important. Heritage, which plays a role in the production and maintenance of identity, is a series of elements selected from the community's past that are intended to be semaphores for the future survival of the community (HARTOG 2005:14–16).

In Ecser, heritagization practices started in the early 2000s—not surprisingly, with the revival of the stage production of the *Wedding at Ecser*. In 1999, the village celebrated the 300th anniversary of its repopulation after Ottoman occupation. It is particularly significant that for the anniversary, which can be seen as a celebration of the genesis of the community, it was the wedding custom that was highlighted as a representative element of the village's past.²² The anniversary rejuvenated a piece of the community's past and jumpstarted the processes of group organization. After the event, there was a demand from the community to continue, and the Ecseri Zöldkoszorú – Zelený Veniec in Slovak [lit. Green Wreath] Heritage Preservation Club was established in the same year, which has since been providing the organizational and legal framework for folk dance groups of different age categories. The context of the intensified search for identity on the occasion of the anniversary and the consequent momentum of the retraditionalization processes was determined, on the one hand, by the formation of the rural space around the city (see CSURGÓ et al. 2018a:86–87), and on the other, by the processes of minority and ethnic policies at different levels. After the regime change, changes affecting minority rights included the incorporation of the right of national and ethnic minorities to self-governance into the text of the constitution in 1990, which was enacted into law in 1993. After the first minority self-government elections, local minority self-governments were established within this legal framework throughout the country in 1994, all of whom enforced the right of self-governance mainly through the use of mother tongue and culture.²³ In Pest County, taking advantage of the possibility of creating minority self-governments, communities that considered themselves as having Slovak (*tót*) ancestry formed a number of Slovak minority self-governments, including Ecser, where the first minority self-government elections were held in 2002.

According to the 1941 census, just over half of the settlement's population spoke Slovak. During the socialist period, the official classification of the settlement was variable in terms of recognizing the presence of national minorities. According to the data of the 2001 census, out of the settlement's population of 3,250, only 27 declared an affiliation with a national minority, while 200 people indicated strong ties to cultural values and traditions. Regarding language knowledge and language use, the data of the census recorded 21 people as native Slovak speakers and 43 people as using the language with family and friends (KSH 2001a). Regarding the rights of national minorities,

²² After its depopulation during the Ottoman occupation, it was the tax census of 1699 that first indicated a population in Ecser (ASZÓDI 2000:18).

²³ Act LXXVII of 1993. The regulations for minority self-government elections were amended in 2005 (Act CXIV of 2005).

currently Act CLXXIX of 2011 is in force in Hungary.²⁴ The advocacy and cultural activities of national minorities are organized around two categories: national minority self-governments and non-profit NGOs (associations and foundations).²⁵ The financial resources are received by the national minority organizations from the state budget in the form of normative payments, i.e., operational and task-based allowances for national minority self-governments, while distribution is also done through a tender system in which both self-governments and NGOs participate. By joining the “circuit” of national minorities, Ecsér became a component of the organizational network of both self-governance and civil society.²⁶ The local, in this case settlement, national minority self-government is connected to the county’s other self-governments through the Pest County Slovak Self-Government. The national level is represented by the National Slovak Self-Government.²⁷ The community’s presence in the civil sphere is ensured through the Zöldkoszorú – Zelený Veniec Heritage Preservation Club. At the same time, the Dolina Regional Association of Slovaks in Pest District provides a larger, territorial umbrella for the heritage preservation club operating as an association. The cultural associations of national minorities of different territorialities are united under the Union of Slovak Organizations in Hungary. In Ecsér, the coordinated activities of the national minority self-government and the heritage preservation club are focused mainly on the protection of the built environment, the implementation of investments, publication of books, organizing of community events, liaising with national minority organizations in other settlements, and ensuring the community’s social media presence. The vast majority of the various manifestations aimed at the *production of locality* within the framework presented above are organized around the prominent elements of the peasant past.

Efforts to articulate the uniqueness of the community and to designate its regional place and role thus seek to access various development resources through networks, which are used for the *production of locality*. Among the opportunities provided by the tender system, taking advantage of local cultural resources can be a successful strategy for local society to advance its own socio-economic interests (RAY 1998). Interest in the community’s past – from which mainly the visually characteristic elements of folk culture become emphasized – becomes one of the possible domains for the reproduction

²⁴ The relevant categories of the 2001 census were the following: those belonging to the national minority, those with ties to cultural values and traditions, native speakers, and those who use the language with family and friends. With the number of the population claiming ties to the cultural values and traditions of a national minority, Ecsér stood out among the municipal data of Pest County. In this category, only three settlements surpassed the settlement numerically, i.e., not in relation to the proportion of the total population. According to the municipal data published by the KSH for the 2011 census, of the 3,775 population of Ecsér, 225 belonged to the Slovak national minority in terms of meeting the requirements for any of the categories of ethnicity, mother tongue, language use with family and friends. For the data collection methodology of the censuses that have taken place since the regime change (1990, 2001, 2011), see MORAUZSKI – PAPP 2015.

²⁵ In this study, I do not address the changing frameworks of national minority advocacy efforts—the structure is described on the basis of the law currently in force. However, for the sake of traceability, I would like to draw attention to a change in terminology that took place in 2012 with the enactment of the Basic Law, which replaced *national and ethnic minority* with *nationality* as the official term.

²⁶ On the operation of the national minority self-government system, see EILER 2005; DOBOS 2016a; 2016b.

²⁷ National minority self-governments on the county level were introduced by Act CLXXIX of 2011.

of social capital.²⁸ Besides concentrating resources, the NGO set up for this purpose and the national minority self-government as institutions create opportunities and practices for group members (cf. BOURDIEU 1986:248–252). In the following, the heritagization practices that have been increasingly present since the early 2000s are described in detail.

Local Heritagization Practices in the Network of National Minority Organizations

The production of local history – the publication of reference works and monographs dealing with the settlement’s past from various aspects – started at the turn of the millennium (ASZÓDI 2000; ASZÓDI – LAMI 2001; ASZÓDI – HARAZIN 2005; 2007; ASZÓDI et al. 2018). The need to build a common narrative composed of prominent pieces of the past is also present at the extra-local level: this is exemplified by publications addressing the past of the Slovak national minority at the regional level (ASZÓDI – KIRÁLY 2009; ASZÓDI – LUKICS 2016). The financial support for the publication was provided in the early 2000s by the municipality of Ecser.²⁹ From the middle of the decade, the volumes were financed by the heritage preservation club, and support for the publications at the regional level was provided by the Dolina Regional Association of Slovaks in Pest District. The latter positioned Ecser within a larger unit, the Slovak national minority in the Budapest metropolitan area. In the period considered, the language of the volumes changed from primarily Hungarian to Hungarian-priority bilingual and then to Slovak-priority bilingual. The growing prominence of the Slovak language may be due to both local intentions and the requirements and effects of the national minority tender financing system analyzed above.

Heritage enters the local space with the renovation of elements declared as built heritage and the measures taken to preserve them and is embodied by the efforts to produce new heritage elements. In presenting the built heritage of the village, Ecser’s current villagescape image manual emphasizes the relics of folk culture, which it locates in the dwellings of the former peasant stratum and the sacral monuments (CSOHÁNY et al. 2017:6–16). In the early 2000s, various projects, mainly backed by the Slovak self-government and the heritage preservation club, restored the cemetery (2002), opened the historic house museum (2006), and renovated (2005) and constructed outdoor chapels and statues (2007, 2012). The Cserfa [Oak tree] statue erected in 2015 for the 700th anniversary of the settlement differs somewhat from the former. Engraved on

²⁸ To interpret this phenomenon, Christopher Ray coined the term culture economy: “This attempt by rural areas to localize economic control – to (re)valorize place through its cultural identity – is called here the culture economy approach to rural development” (RAY 1998:3). Ray’s theory advises the examination of the interactions between different levels, as he places the model of the *culture economy* at the intersection of local forces and forces above the local level, which he calls extra-local, and assumes that its operation was triggered by the simultaneous application of local-global influences.

²⁹ The main motivator and principal author of the volumes was András, who played a central role in the formation of the heritage preservation club, was the initiator of the establishment of the national minority self-government (then known as the minority self-government), and is currently still active in the political and cultural life of the national minority both at the local and at the regional level. In order to protect my informants, I do not disclose the personal data of the interviewees, and only use first names when referring to them.

metal plates on the body of the monument, which depicts an oak tree – the symbol of Ecsér – are family names: of all the families who consider themselves natives of Ecsér and requested that their name be displayed. Thus, the spatial aspects of heritagization are present, on the one hand, in the renovation of the built environment, and on the other hand, in the reinterpretation of restored/reconstructed elements placed in a new environment, as well as in the invention of completely new elements. The built heritage is typically concentrated in the historic center of the settlement. Széchenyi Street (the former Main Street), which is lined with the homes of the landowning peasant stratum of the interwar period, is an iconic streetscape of the village anyway, as it was made famous by the 1952 film of Rábai's choreography. The heritage elements highlight this part of the settlement, making it an essential space in which the past and the essence of the community are concentrated. Most of the community events and customs organized by the Ecséri Zöldkoszorú – Zelený Veniec Heritage Preservation Club take place in this space highlighted by the heritage elements.

However, there is one event which, like the Cserfa statue erected for the 700th anniversary of the village, displays the unity of the current population of Ecsér and the integration of the newly formed parts of the village and their inhabitants. The organizers of the harvest parade plan the route of the horse-drawn carriage ride in such a way that it touches all parts of the settlement, from the oldest core through the area of block houses built in the 1970s to Kálvária Hill, which became a residential area in the 2000s. In the Hill's case, the technique of symbolic inclusion can also be observed in the naming convention. The streets of the newest part of the village, which represents the suburban character within the rural space, were mostly named after prominent figures in local history, thus including the area as a symbolic part of the settlement.

The Place of Wedding at Ecsér in the Heritagization Practices of the 2000s

The prelude to the heritagization practices of the 2000s was the revival of the *Wedding at Ecsér* on the 300th anniversary of the repopulation of the settlement, in 1999. Some of the speeches and songs in the show were performed in Hungarian, some in Slovak. The wedding also played a significant role in building the image of the village in the atmosphere of increased interest for the community's past and origins. That year, on the occasion of the anniversary, the village also designed a coat of arms. The coat of arms condenses the elements considered to be the most characteristic and thus attempts to articulate the image of the settlement. In a triangular arrangement, Ecsér's coat of arms features three mounds with three oak trees, the village's Roman Catholic church, and three female and two male figures dressed in folk costume that evoke the wedding procession. Below them is a silvery stripe symbolizing the waters of the Szerelem [Love] Creek that flows through the center of the village. Just like the wedding procession featured in the coat of arms, the creek is also linked with the famous choreography. The music for Rábai's stage production was composed by Rudolf Maros, adapting folk songs and popular songs for the orchestra and choir of the Hungarian State Folk Ensemble. The lyrics of the musical piece during the opening scene of the choreography are as follows: "Az ecséri kertek alatt/ Folyik a szerelempatak/ Aki abból sokat iszik/ Babájától elbúcsúzik." // "Beyond the backyards of Ecsér/ Flows the love creek/ Whoever drinks



Figure 3. The inscription, in Hungarian and Slovak: Welcome to Ecsér! Ecsér, Hungary, 2019 (Photo by Ágnes Eitler)

too much from it/ Will part with their baby.” Based on these lyrics – widespread in the Hungarian language area – the members of the community started to refer to their creek as *Szerelem patak* [Love Creek] because of Rábai’s stage production and the film made from it. The name was also incorporated into journalistic works: in the 1970s, the term *Szerelem patak* began to appear in the county press, the *Pest Megyei Hírlap* [Pest County Journal] (e.g., JANDÓ 1971; GÉR 1985; MATULA GY. 1993). After the revival of the stage production, the interest in the *Wedding at Ecsér* remained lively in the few years following the 1999 anniversary. In 2001, a volume of rich photographic material of the wedding customs and the associated costumes of Ecsér was published, presenting the community’s past as part of the culture of the Slovak national minority in Hungary (LAMI – ASZÓDI 2001). This latter idea is reinforced by the fact that, also in 2001, under the direction of Katalin – who plays a leading role in the cultural life of the Slovak national minority in Pest County – and in cooperation with the people of Ecsér, a documentary about the origins and ethnographic background of the *Wedding at Ecsér* was produced (KIRÁLY 2001).³⁰

Spatial references to the wedding started to appear in the 1970s: the very first example of this was the use of the above-mentioned term *Szerelem patak* [Love Creek]. The next in line was the naming of the cultural center, opened in 1975, after Miklós Rábai. Besides Rábai, folk music collector, ethnomusicologist, and composer István Volly, a

³⁰ In the early 2000s, Katalin worked for the Slovak Program of the Hungarian Television, and since 2004 she has been the director of the Cultural Center of the National Slovak Self-Government. Currently (2019) she is the director of the Institute of Slovak Culture in Hungary.



Figure 4. The statue *Wedding at Ecsér*. Ecsér, Hungary, 2019 (Photo by Ágnes Eitler)

leading figure of the 1947 wedding dance collection, and composer Rudolf Maros were highlighted in the 2000s among those connected to the birth of the *Wedding at Ecsér* choreography. The local government added the names of these two people to the list of street names on Kálvária Hill that emphasize the settlement's past. In 2013, at the request of the local government and the NGOs, Péter, a sculptor from Ecsér, created the public sculpture entitled *Wedding at Ecsér*, which was erected next to the Miklós Rábai Cultural and Community Center. The text of the marble plaque placed in front of the life-size statue of a dancing couple dressed in folk costume is as follows: "This work shall be a symbol of the cultural heritage of our settlement, a tribute to the centuries-old traditions of our ancestors and the success of the renowned folk dance ensemble of Ecsér. It shall proclaim Ecsér's unity, the cooperation of its non-governmental organizations."

In 2015, two years after the statue was erected, there was yet another major wave of interest in the contemporary story of the wedding. The occasion was once again a special year: the 700th anniversary of the first written mention of the settlement, as well as the 70th anniversary of the folk dance ensemble of Ecsér, which became famous for its stage production of the wedding custom. The Ecséri Zöldkoszorú – Zelený Veniec Heritage Preservation Club organized a performance for the anniversary celebration of the dance ensemble. The narration and the welcome speeches were in Hungarian and Slovak, taking turns in prioritizing each language. The closing program of the ceremony was the performance of the wedding, in which all the dance ensembles of Ecsér of various age groups took the stage. That year, the *Wedding at Ecsér* film was also re-shot on the initiative of the heritage preservation club, funded by various national minority organizations and tenders (NYÁRI 2015). The perspective shift at the end of the ten-minute recording places the short film within the framework of a Facebook timeline, thereby linking the element elevated to cultural heritage status with the present.³¹ The dance film's cast was made up of members of the heritage preservation club, and it was

³¹ Sponsors of the film: Ecséri Zöldkoszorú – Zelený Veniec Heritage Preservation Club, National Slovak Self-Government, Association of Slovaks in Hungary, Slovak Youth Organization of Hungary, Human Capacities Grant Management Office.



Figure 5. The (re)shooting of the film *Wedding at Ecser*. Ecser, Hungary, 2015 (Property of the Ecseri Zöldkoszorú – Zelený Veniec Heritage Preservation Club. Unknown author.)

shot on Széchenyi Street, a cluster of the elements of the built heritage and once the setting of Rábai's film, as well as in front of the church and in the historic house museum. The songs and *vőfély* [Master of Ceremonies] speeches heard in the film are exclusively in Slovak. The re-filming of the wedding as a local initiative testifies to the existence of a reflexive attitude towards the settlement's past (cf. SZABÓ 2018:179). The film can be found on the YouTube video sharing portal under the profile of the advertising agency that produced it, with the following description: "A film that comes second in time but is first to capture the unique tradition of the wedding of Ecser in its true fidelity to the spirit of the Slovaks! A film about Ecserians to Ecserians, about Ecserians to the world! A film that was born today but brings yesterday to life!" (NYÁRI 2015). 2015 is a double anniversary, and in addition to the filming of the wedding, it is also extremely important in the history of the heritage element because it was this year that the *Wedding at Ecser* was inducted into the Pest County Repository of Values, the county level of the Collection of Hungarian Values established by Act XXX of 2012.³²

³² Act XXX of 2012 on Hungarian national values and Hungarikums established a hierarchical system of multiple levels building from the bottom up (Local Collection, Regional Collection, County Collection, Collection of Hungarian Values, Collection of Hungarikums), the purpose of which is "to collect the values of the Hungarian nation, to arrange them in repositories, thereby ensuring their proper protection and documentation, as well as their preservation for posterity" (Collection of Hungarikums 2019). The system prioritizes the ethnic interpretation of the concept of heritage, since the "repositories" of Hungarians living outside the state borders are also part of the collection of values, thus applying a fundamentally different approach than, for example, the UNESCO National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage, which applies to the territory of a given state.

The heritagization practices that started in the early 2000s were embedded in an ethnic framework. Among the components and nuances of local identity, ethnic consciousness stood out and became one of the possible contexts for the *production of locality*. In terms of the funding opportunities created by national minority policies, the emphasis on ethnicity is seen by the community as a successful strategy that creates the conditions for heritagization, which ultimately contributes to the *production of locality*. In practice, the processes of heritagization were set in motion by a reinterpretation of the famous wedding, and in the two decades since then, attitudes towards the wedding have remained central.³³ The articulation of the wedding as an element of heritage reflected, for one, the local, unique intentions of heritagization, as well as the impact of the operation of national minority organizations that provide the framework for heritagization. The most striking example of the latter is the way the Slovak language gained prominence over the Hungarian language in the staging of the wedding custom.

CONCLUSION

After the Second World War, the revival of interest in folk culture did not leave Ecser untouched either. Through its dance ensemble and in cooperation with several other settlements in the county, the village got involved in the efforts to present local traditions. Yet the local folk culture was made nationally recognized by an external influence – the success of the choreography of the Hungarian State Folk Ensemble. By making the wedding custom into a stage production, the community accepted the role of “famous village” and sought to make the wedding a primary element of its identification. Especially in the 1950s and 1960s, folk culture brought to the stage by the community necessarily became a part of political representation as the political power sought to reinforce its own legitimacy by embedding the visually characteristic elements of folk culture in a new context. An important scene of fitting in with power aspirations was the KISZ wedding held in 1958, in which the wedding appeared as the framework of the newly created holiday, the socialist wedding. With the abolition of the traditional peasant way of life, its key elements became a leisure activity, placed within the framework of various organizations established to cultivate and maintain them, and, on the other hand, as the outward expressions of the peasant wedding, they became a means of displaying family prestige and the peasant past. In line with the aspirations of the folklore and folk art revival that began in the late 1960s, there was a renewed interest in local history, which allowed other points of view to prevail in thinking about folk culture besides the stage-oriented approach. The desire to get to know, document, and preserve the past was made a topical task by the rapid changes in the image of the settlement and the local experience

³³ The need for a complex – social, economic, ethnic – approach to the phenomenon is justified by Thomas Hylland Eriksen’s statement that “(...) a one-sided focus on ethnicity may prevent the researcher from seeing social systems in other ways which may also be relevant” (ERIKSEN 1993:156). Moreover: “(...) if one goes out to look for ethnicity, one will ‘find’ it and thereby contribute to constructing it. For this reason, a concern with non-ethnic dimensions of polyethnic societies can be a healthy corrective and supplement to analyses of ethnicity” (ERIKSEN 1993:161). See also KASCHUBA 1999:143–147.

of the modernization processes. By the 1970s, the domestic and international tourism industry was paying increased attention to the possibilities of utilizing and making the prominent elements of folklore and folk art *consumable*. The first signs of brand building around the *Wedding at Ecser* manifested in the transformation of the wedding custom into a tourist attraction, as well as into the trademark of a local food product.

Ecser is one of the settlements in the Budapest metropolitan area where the counter-urbanization processes of the nearly three decades after the regime change have developed a new quality of *rurality*. Within the blurring boundaries of the urban–rural character, the need for community articulation arose, resulting in the efforts towards the *production of locality* coming to the fore. Heritagization – a possible embodiment of the *production of locality* – aims to create and maintain local identity by re-contextualizing elements selected from the community’s past. The heritagization practices that started in the early 2000s are intricately linked with developments in national minority policies since the regime change. Highlighting ethnicity among the components of local identity is a strategy for creating a framework for heritagization practices. Within the local community, heritagization organizes various groups whose activities are aimed both at creating a common past and heritage elements in space and at redefining selected customs of folk culture. In this context, the *Wedding at Ecser* appears in a prominent role. Its revival launched the group organization in 1999 on the 700th anniversary of the “genesis” of the settlement, which led to the establishment and consolidation of the framework for heritagization practices. References to the wedding were included in the village coat of arms, which articulates the essence of the community in symbolic space, as well as in real space, through the naming and development of the built environment. The people of Ecser reflected on their own past when the wedding was re-filmed in 2015: they wanted to shape the community’s self-image and simultaneously build an image for the outside world. In the same year, the wedding was included in the county-level registry of the Hungarikum movement, the Pest County Repository of Values, thereby entering the official state discourse on heritage.

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