

Crafts Revival in Ecovillages

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ABSTRACT

The basic goal of ecovillages is to create a sustainable lifestyle and community. Many residents of Hungarian ecovillages consider traditional peasant culture the example of an ecological lifestyle; for them, traditional peasant ecological knowledge and practice is an important reference point. Therefore, the pursuit of ecological ideology and an eco-conscious, sustainable way of life naturally leads ecovillagers to peasant material culture. In this study, I present the revival of handicraft heritage in rural eco-communities. I provide an insight into how traditional artifact-making activities come to life, how the old tools of Hungarian peasant culture are used, collected, and copied, and I present the place and interpretation of these old trades and their masters in these communities. The study is based on my ethnographic-anthropological research conducted in Hungarian ecovillages since 2007.

KEYWORDS

ecovillage, intentional communities, sustainable heritage-based livelihoods, traditional handicraft heritage, intangible heritage

INTRODUCTION

I would first like to provide a brief introduction to ecovillages (see: [FARKAS 2017](#)). The first ecovillage initiatives emerged in the 1970s in Western Europe and the United States, and then the idea and concept of the ecovillage spread in the 1990s. The international institution of the movement, the Global Ecovillage Network, was founded in 1994. Beyond the common goal that connects ecovillages around the world, they are characterized by extraordinary diversity, as the natural, climatic, and socio-cultural environments in which they have been created are very

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diverse. From hamlets to so-called *inner-city* ecovillages, from the jungle to the desert, there are now ecovillages in many places and on every continent (see www.gen.ecovillage.org, JACKSON – SVENSSON 2002; in Hungarian: BORSOS 2016; KILIÁN 2006).

The majority of ecovillages are *intentional* communities, that is, a village community created as a smaller or larger group's conscious endeavor. The inhabitants of ecovillages are primarily middle-class, urban intellectuals who are motivated not by economic factors but by a better life in a moral, cultural, or ideological sense. They believe that current ecological, economic, social, and ethical processes are threatening the Earth and humanity.

The ecovillage concept provides a critique of contemporary processes interpreted as negative (global economy, global power elite, consumer culture, ecological crises, degraded countryside, urbanization, modern slavery, etc.), and their response to these is a radical lifestyle experiment. In their view, these undesirable processes can be offset by creating small-scale, independent, and community-based settlements that protect the natural environment and provide a meaningful human existence and well-being in the long run.

Ecovillagers strive to create settlements that adapt to their natural environment as efficiently as possible and cause the least damage. To achieve this, residents use environmentally friendly techniques and lead an ecological lifestyle in every aspect of their lives: chemical-free farming, environmentally friendly technologies in architecture, waste management, wastewater treatment, and renewable energy sources. They strive for subdued consumption, which includes the principle of recycling in addition to the conservation of natural resources. They believe that all this can be achieved in one place – the concept is based on localization and a local community: they want to live, trade, and relax locally. These are communities that strive for autonomy and self-sufficiency, aiming to “separate from the umbilical cord,” that is, to be as independent as possible from the networks that cause various dependencies and vulnerabilities, be they social, infrastructural, or economic (see TAYLOR 2000). Most ecovillagers also want to set an example: they see themselves as a model for a more livable, more humane lifestyle that can be sustained over the long term.¹

The ecovillage movement in Hungary started in the 1990s, after the regime change, when the international movement itself began to flourish. Representatives of the Gyűrűfű ecovillage were already at the first major international meeting (Findhorn 1994). The Hungarian ecovillages are brought together under the umbrella of the informal Magyar Élőfalu Hálózat (MÉH) or Hungarian Living Village Network (HLVN) (Fig. 1).²

This network comprises ecovillages (Galgafarm, Gyűrűfű, Krishna Valley), eco-communities established within a settlement (Máriaalom biovillage, Nagyszékely community, Nyimi Eco-community), as well as educational centers (Drávafok, Agostyán, Gömörzölös). Some of the settlements do not like and do not use the term ecovillage, preferring to call themselves a living village. Hence the name Magyar Élőfalu Hálózat (Hungarian Living Village Network) (FARKAS 2017).

¹The international ecovillage movement defines itself as follows: “An ecovillage is an intentional, traditional or urban community that is consciously designed through locally owned, participatory processes in all four areas of regeneration (social, culture, ecology and economy) to regenerate their social and natural environments.” <https://gen-europe.org/ecovillages/what-is-an-ecovillage/> (accessed January 27, 2021).

²www.elofaluhalozat.hu (accessed January 27, 2021).





Fig. 1. Map of Hungarian living village network (Magyar Élőfalú Hálózat). Hungary, 2021. (Made by Zsuzsanna Farkas)



Some communities are relatively easily accessible and offer a more comfortable version of the ecological lifestyle. One such example is Galgafarm, built next to the settlement of Galgahévíz, which is not far from the capital and provides its residents off-the-grid³ electricity, central heating, water supply, and sewerage. Nonetheless, most of them were deliberately set up in remote and often inaccessible places, away from big cities and industrialized areas, where they found a natural environment – sometimes relatively untouched – free of industrial pollution, suitable for farming and creating a community (Gyűrűfű, Visnyeszéplak). The low cost of the areas available for purchase was also a major factor in the selection of sites. For these reasons, some of the members of the HLVN are located in economically and socially depressed areas (Somogy, Baranya), which have not seen major industrial development. As a result, the beautiful and healthy natural environment has been preserved, on the one hand, and on the other hand, emigration due to a lack of livelihood has made land and real estate cheap.⁴

Some of the communities were established as greenfield investments, on the border of an existing settlement (Krishna Valley, Galgahévíz ecovillage, Magfalva). Others were created on the site of extinct or almost extinct villages (Gyűrűfű, Visnyeszéplak), while still others were established as a part of still functioning settlements (Nyimi Eco-community, Nagyszékely community). The members of the Szeri Ökotanyák Szövetsége (Eco-Farm Association of Szer) settled in the farmlands of the Great Plain in southern Hungary.

The population of each Hungarian community is between 10 and 150 people, and there are currently a total of about 500 people living in settlements in the HLVN. They did not move to the countryside for economic reasons (economic deprivation), but to live a better life in a moral, cultural, and ideological sense. The basic goals of Hungarian ecovillages are the same as those of the international movement, but, as elsewhere in the world, they must adapt to the climatic, natural, and socio-cultural environment of the area in which they were created.

Since 2007, I have been conducting ethnographic-cultural anthropological research in Hungarian ecovillages and the members of the HLVN in general, focusing on their sociocultural dimensions due to my expertise. I studied the history and antecedents of the international ecovillage movement in created communities and green movements; I examined their worldview, both the spiritual and scientific aspects, their concept of freedom, their use of time and space, their vision of an ideal community, the relationship between eco-conscious in-migrants and locals, the possible connection points between ecovillages and rural development, and so on.

In the first stage of my research, I got to know all the members of the HLVN, then after my initial, comprehensive orientation, my primary sites became Nagyszékely and the Hungarian Krishna Valley (Krisna-völgy).⁵ Most but not all of the examples I have given in this study are from these two places.

³I.e., it is not connected to the national grid, but rather produces its own electricity, etc.

⁴At the same time, the appearance of the new residents soon drove the prices up. Moreover, the emergence of large-scale farms makes it increasingly difficult for them to purchase new land suitable for farming. Such communities, wedged between large-scale farms, also face other difficulties: the use of chemicals by large-scale farmers threatens their chemical-free farming and clean water; their big machines damage the network of roads and cause air pollution; they are radically changing the landscape image. Nagyszékely is one of the best examples of this.

⁵More precisely, Krishna Valley became my research site for the second time, as I have previously done research there for my doctoral dissertation, but at that time the subject of my research was religion and the religious community.



My analyses are based on empirical data; in the course of my research, I employ primarily qualitative methods used in cultural anthropology, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews. Additionally, I am constantly gathering written (online and offline) primary sources. The long fieldwork has allowed me to track the changes in these communities and observe their responses to micro- and macro-level challenges, both at the level of individuals and communities.

HIGH TECH, LOW TECH

Some Hungarian ecovillagers use state-of-the-art ecological technology (such as solar panels, wind turbines), while others consider this technology to be a dead end and favor so-called low-tech solutions (Figs 2–4). In the case of most Hungarian ecovillages, the choice is a matter of individual decision, indicating goals and tendencies at best: The population of Gyűrűfű and Galgafarm uses modern ecological technology, while the Krishna Valley, Visnyeszéplak, or the Nagyszékely community prefer to avoid it. Those who have opted for low tech believe that the tools of so-called green technology also use a number of non-renewable resources (e.g., as raw materials) and are therefore not really a true solution. In addition to trying to use as little non-renewable energy as possible, they prefer animal and human labor, so they often use fewer power devices than the



Fig. 2. Gin. Krisna-völgy, Somogyvámos, Hungary, 2010. (Photo by Judit Farkas)





Fig. 3. Gin. Krisna-völgy, Somogyvámos, Hungary, 2010. (Photo by Judit Farkas)

average Hungarian household (Figs 5–7). As a result, amenities of modern households that work “with the push of a button,” such as hot water, clean clothes, or food, require much more time and energy in ecovillage households than the push of a button. These include laundering by hand, hauling water, heating with wood, cooking with stove or oven, using storage methods other than a freezer (cellars, canning, drying, dehydration, storage pits). The most commonly used organic farming methods (permaculture, biodynamics) are also characterized by the use of relatively few tools, most of which are mechanical tools. Instead of motorized tools such as cultivators or petrol-powered or electric lawnmowers, they use hoes and scythes, irrigate by hand—and I could go on and on. In light of the foregoing, it is not surprising that the supporters of low tech “discovered” the material goods of the traditional Hungarian peasant way of life (Figs 8–11).

There is a vast literature on the change of function in the materials and artifacts of folk culture and their contemporary application methods, but a survey of these is beyond the scope of this study.⁶ Instead, I focus mostly on the process I have encountered in Hungarian

⁶To give just a few examples: [HOFER 1983](#); [MOLNÁR 1994](#); [JAKAB – VAJDA 2016](#); [JAKAB – VAJDA eds. 2018](#). Balázs Balogh and Ágnes Fülemile briefly summarize the changes in Hungarian peasant culture and the associated new practices and contents from the 19th century to the present ([BALOGH – FÜLEMILE 2020](#)).





Fig. 4. Making adobe bricks. Gyűrűfű, Hungary, 2009. (Photo by Judit Farkas)



Fig. 5. Communal oven. Nagyszékely, Hungary, 2010. (Photo by Róbert Havasi)

ecovillages, eco-communities, and communities seeking to pursue a traditional way of life. The essence of this is that these objects are not endowed with new meaning – or at least not within the framework of folklorism and heritagization (see [KESZEG 2018](#), esp. 33–38; [JAKAB – VAJDA eds. 2018](#)) – thus they are used in new ways but seen as functional objects and used as originally intended. As Péter Illés put it: “In the footsteps of Jean Baudrillard, two systems of objects, not unknown in the ethnographic literature, are beginning to emerge here: a *functional* and *non-functional* system of objects ([BAUDRILLARD 1987](#)). Functional objects are objects in general that are still in use, while non-functional ones are embedded with new kinds of meaning and are used in new ways, creating a kind of marginality” ([ILLÉS 2004:420](#)).

Further motivations for turning to traditional peasant culture are discussed in another joint study by Balázs Balogh and Ágnes Fülemlile (“International trends are also helping to increase the nimbus of rurality, handicrafts, ethnic and folklore traditions,” [BALOGH – FÜLEMILE 2020:30](#)), and they also include in this the process by which environmentally conscious thinking leads to the discovery of traditional peasant farming ([BALOGH – FÜLEMILE 2020:31](#); [FÜLEMILE 2018](#)). The antecedents and earlier examples of this are presented in a 2021 study by Fruzsina Cseh, where findings regarding the nomadic generation also apply to contemporary ecological communities: “One of the ultimate dreams of the artifact makers who joined the Young Folk Artists’ Studio was to make artifacts for their own use, in which both the raw material and the labor were in harmony with nature” ([CSEH 2021:38](#)). All of this fits into the broader context of Simpson and Filip’s claim that “the peasant is an incarnation of the ‘noble savage’” ([SIMPSON – FILIP 2013:29](#)). The same is pointed out by Estonian researchers: “In the anthropological literature we often encounter the concept of ‘indigenous knowledge,’ which generally covers traditional knowledge and skills of indigenous peoples, thus overlapping with the terms ‘local knowledge,’ ‘folk knowledge’ and ‘traditional knowledge’” ([PARTSA et al. 2011:402](#)).

Thus, the growing popularity of green/eco, local products and lifestyles has also placed traditional handicrafts in a new context ([PARTSA et al. 2011:418](#)). The definitions of intangible cultural heritage also reflect this: “Thus, intangible cultural heritage includes ‘social practices,’





Fig. 6. Stove, Nagyszékely, Hungary, 2010. (Photo by Róbert Havasi)

‘knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe,’ and ‘traditional craftsmanship’” (PARTSA et al. 2011:402). Ecovillages undoubtedly fit into this phenomenon.

The inhabitants of the studied communities are not (primarily) re-thinking the tools of the peasant way of life (see ANDRÁSFALVY 2001; BALASSA 2001; SZILÁGYI 2001; VARGA 1972), as they do in various branches of art or design, but are rather bringing the original way of using the tools to life and maintaining them in their daily lives. This is because, as Keith Halfacree puts it, “They envision a lived and worked landscape, with humans integral to their environment” (HALFACREE 2007:135). The wicker basket is therefore not – or not just – an ornament on a shelf, but a storage device, and agricultural tools like the scythe or sickle are not just decorations on the walls of a ciderhouse or restaurant, but used in the garden, in the fields.

Of course, there are many tools and methods that are also known and used in contemporary households (broom, hand washing, baking and cooking, possibly preserving), even when it comes urban out-migrants. However, they have almost no experience with many of the tools and their uses. Milking, well cleaning, a good scythe and its proper use and maintenance, stalk cutter, spading fork, or thistle cutter, or even the preparation of the breakfast staple cocoa roll (grinding the flour, kneading, baking in an oven) – just to name a few – constitute knowledge and practices that must be newly acquired by most of them.





Fig. 7. Well cleaning. Nagyszékely, Hungary, 2010. (Photo by Judit Farkas)

A significant portion of the tools can be purchased – the peasantry itself bought some of its tools. However, the “adjust-to-fit,” maintenance, and upkeep of the tool was always up to the user, and in the case of finer repairs, they may have sought the help of more skilled locals (FÉL – HOFER 2016:304–307). Members of contemporary eco-communities also buy their utensils and tools primarily in specialty stores, but in the long run they attach great importance to old trades and their masters. In the course of my research I met several such masters and specialists: blacksmiths, carpenters, glassblowers, stove builders, potters, weavers, etc. Often they themselves live in a particular eco-community or maintain a close relationship with a community.⁷ Some of them have acquired the basics of the trade in school, while many have come into contact with it through the rural ecological way of life, and their interest or quest for a livelihood has motivated them to choose the trade. Diversification is one of the most important elements of the economic strategy of ecovillage life, so handicraft trades are usually acquired for this reason – mostly individually, i.e., not within the framework of public education. A young blacksmith who also

⁷The emergence of this phenomenon in Estonia is discussed in this issue of *Acta Ethnographica* by Madis Rennu and Andres Rõigas (2021).





Fig. 8. Plowing with oxen, Krisna-völgy, Somogyvámos, Hungary, 2010. (Photo by Judit Farkas)



Fig. 9. Beehive, Association of organic farms of Szer, Pusztaszer, Hungary, 2014. (Photo by Róbert Havasi)



Fig. 10. Beehive, Association of organic farms of Szer, Pusztaszer, Hungary, 2014. (Photo by Róbert Havasi)



Fig. 11. Apiary, Association of organic farms of Szer, Pusztaszer, Hungary, 2014. (Photo by Róbert Havasi)

makes garden tools justified his decision by saying that a good tool is very important but difficult to obtain, therefore he concluded that he would rather make it himself. He experiments with tools and materials, and also puts the tools to multiple uses. Thanks to his skills and good connections, he now makes and repairs tools not only for his own use but also to order. He also provides advice or teaches courses on good tools and their uses on request. As he put it: “My goal is to pass on the practical know-how, to show the organizing principles that anyone at home can immediately benefit from.”⁸

These local specialists therefore offer not only their tools and services but also their knowledge—by means of courses and lectures. This is a common feature in ecovillages and related movements anyway: their knowledge is seen as a commodity that contributes to their livelihoods and helps to promote and pass on these trades and tools. In their interpretation, therefore, by presenting renewable and local resources and craft techniques, they are also teaching sustainability.

The more skilled specialists soon gain a reputation in the ecovillages and other circles of similar lifestyles, and start receiving numerous orders. This is especially true for trades offering show-pieces, such as furnace and oven building; this is how one can encounter the works of the same young oven builder in different parts of the country (who himself lives in Visnyeszéplak, one of the settlements of the HLVN).

To conclude this chapter, I would like to present a specific example: the agricultural tools of a family of four from Nagyszékely, and their origins. On an area of about 7 ha, there are 2 residential houses, buildings serving as stables and storage, an outdoor kitchen, a ciderhouse, orchard, kitchen garden, pasture, forest, and forest garden. In addition to growing crops, the family also keeps farm animals (poultry, rabbits, goats, sheep, donkeys, horses, cows). This is important not just because their maintenance requires new, special tools, but also because they themselves function as tools in the farm’s system: the scrubby parts are cleaned and maintained

⁸<https://falusifortelyok.hu/kovacs-peter/> (accessed April 15, 2021).



by the goats, the sheep act as a “lawnmower,” while the foraging hens loosen the soil around the fruit trees and feed on pests.⁹

The list has been compiled at my request, and – in the case of a farm this size, of course – something may have been left out. The young woman lived in England for years and brought her favorite tools home, “from England” denotes this. They couldn’t specify the number of pieces for everything, so they either didn’t write anything here or just wrote “a lot,” and “new” denotes items they purchased or received:

The horse-drawn carriage from Szentendre was assembled by an acquaintance from existing parts (brake, axle, wheels). For the hoofed animals, they keep a hoof knife, hoof trimmer, and rasp. They have an old horse-drawn harrow. There are four weeding hoes, including some old ones and some new ones received as a gift. One was inherited from the parents and one was brought home from England by the young woman. There are many types of spades, as well as hoes—the latter are all old. They also have a lot of rakes (e.g., garden, hay), both old and new. They have two scrapers and also two weeders brought from England. There are at least six or eight scythes and sickles in the household, including some old ones, some new store-bought ones, and some that were inherited from the parents. In addition, they also have a so-called scythe-sickle, which is “like a small scythe” (K.E., Nagyszékely, 2021). There are several iron and wooden pitchforks, both old and new. The same holds true for pickaxes. There is also one iron haystacking pitchfork. They found the hay pole in the ciderhouse when they bought it, and this is what they use now.

They use several tools for drying fruits, including some drying racks they made themselves, and they also own an old wicker drying tray. Only two of the potato picking baskets are usable. There are many wicker baskets, some they made themselves. Of the many types of brooms (such as corn broom, besom broom), many are also home-made, in addition to the store-bought ones. They have two troughs, and also have a wooden oven peel. Of the three fire pokers, some are store-bought and some they made themselves. There are many iron shovels, as well as sieves, the latter being old, made of horsehair and metal.

In addition to two hatchets, they also have many axes – these are usually old, some have been inherited from the grandparents. Planers were also inherited, mostly from the parents. They have several different saws, and one of each of secateur, pruning saw, and budding knife. There are also a lot of whetstones, as well as pincers, pliers, and chisels. In addition to two dibblers, they also use a hole pincer inherited from the young woman’s father. The many various watering cans are made of tin and plastic. There is also a wide variety of wheelbarrows, including old ones, lightweight new ones, and home-made ones. They use an old corn sheller, but also an old, large, iron-wheeled hand grinder (“We grind about half a tonne of corn a year with it by hand,” K.E., Nagyszékely, 2021). The hand-operated grain flaker (for muesli) is a store-bought piece, as are the electric mill, electric hedge trimmer, electric lawnmower, electric brush cutter, chainsaw, and petrol wood shredder.

It is clear from the list, therefore, that the tools come from varied sources: there are tools bought in a store, among them those that the young woman retained from her life in England. They also use the tools they found in the house and ciderhouse they purchased that were left behind by previous tenants. They also have tools made by master craftsmen, and some of the tools and instruments they made themselves. And there are apparently several objects that have

⁹The farm operates according to the principles of permaculture, one of which is that each element performs several functions, i.e., poultry provides meat and eggs, loosens the soil, destroys pests. www.permakultura.hu (accessed May 7, 2021).



been inherited from ancestors (parents, grandparents). Such inherited tools are highly valued, especially as a memento of their already deceased owners.¹⁰ Inherited tools may indicate another important thing: that the ancestors themselves were gardeners, for example, therefore such activities were not completely new in this family's life, as they may have watched their parents and grandparents or even practiced it themselves.

In addition to emotional attachment, the durability of inherited (i.e., long-lived) tools is also emphasized. This attribute also fits into the ecological concept: long-lasting, good tools do not necessitate the purchase of newer and newer ones (subdued consumption); the peasant idea of a tool serving several generations emerges in these communities as one of the criteria of sustainability. When buying a new tool, it is also common to buy a more expensive but higher quality, more durable piece. The family under study also highlights the durability and reliability of tools brought from England, often as compared to the poor quality of products of the same type purchased at home in a store. The multiplicity of certain objects is also justified by the fact that they do not carry the tools everywhere within the estate, but keep one in several places.

SOURCES OF KNOWLEDGE

Today, the primary source of knowledge about traditional folk culture is a written source: scientific literature, ethnographic works. Residents of eco-communities research the tools that have mostly gone out of use via this literature. They attach great importance to the knowledge gathered by ethnography and strive to utilize the practical information gleaned from it.

Their other important source is related to orality, such as seeking out elderly people to learn from. The practical knowledge of elderly people is considered a particularly great treasure because they value the centuries-old experience that lies behind it. It is also a treasure because it is ever so rare, as the last generation to have used these tools is disappearing. Many of the ecovillagers try to discover traditional local knowledge, seeking out and interviewing local seniors and acquiring their knowledge. In this process, knowledge encompasses not only methods but also tools: for example, in addition to proper fruit tree grafting practices, recognizing a good grafting knife. (Not to mention the resistant varieties of fruit trees suitable for the landscape.) In their experience, these elders are happy to pass on their knowledge, which is often no longer needed in their own world. Although they find the “green” lifestyle of urban young people moving to the countryside strange, if there is mutual goodwill, both parties benefit from the relationship: young people gain knowledge, elders respect.

The lifestyle of eco-communities sometimes “revitalizes” tools that have disappeared from the public consciousness. One such example is the reed cutter or stalk cutter, which is used to cut off the young shoots of shrubs and used as animal fodder. Feeding with leafy branches was previously a known practice (see [ANDRÁSFALVY 1976](#); [GYÖRFFY 1941–43](#)), but, as the young man who was teaching how to use stalk cutters said, since green shoots were no longer fed to animals, this device became obsolete.¹¹

¹⁰“Ancient tools can carry the memory of deceased ancestors, but a tool that was bought or made by the owner can also be a reminder of the course of his/her life.” [FÉL – HOFER 2016:302](#).

¹¹<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PoiQldcAxVg>. (accessed January 28, 2021).



In addition to the elderly, they also learn from professional practitioners of certain crafts (blacksmith, weaver). The simpler (more traditional) a person's work, the better – here, too, they look for masters who use the least amount of non-renewable energy and the least complicated techniques.

I encountered people on the Hungarian ecovillage scene who specifically collected old agricultural tools and were willing to travel a long way to obtain one of these treasures. One of my interlocutors in the Krishna Valley (G.P., 45, male) was particularly fond of traveling to the Czech Republic in the early 2000s, because he found that their old tools were relatively intact; though no longer in use, they were not disposed of either. For him and his community, old, simple machines were also valuable (threshing machine, winnowing machine, gin): on the one hand, because there was no need to buy a new one; on the other hand, in his experience, once he fixed them up a little, they worked reliably for a long time (Fig. 12).¹²

As we saw above, the appreciation of old, traditional tools was also evident when buying a house: the agricultural and kitchen utensils that were left behind and were still usable were integrated into the household of the new tenants—a good scythe, kneading trough, or cauldron were a true treasure. Possession of these objects and tools is useful for them in several ways: they do not cost money, they comply with the practice they want to implement, and they also comply with the principle of recycling and subdued consumption. The ecological principle is therefore consciously applied here as well, even in such a simple case.

I have said before that in their practice it is not the re-thinking of the peasant tools that is paramount, as they are in the various branches of art and design. This does not mean, however, that everything is adopted without changes. Although we may sometimes encounter the image of a highly idealized traditional peasant culture – which they see as an eternal and unchangeable value, and which can and should be adopted one for one – this rigid perception does not characterize ecovillagers in general. In fact, the ecological concept considers flexible adaptation to the (natural) environment to be the right thing to do—just as it was in peasant life anyway.¹³ The same is true for the technologies and tools they use: if necessary, they are constantly adapted and improved, and certain materials and objects are given a new function.

The ecovillage movement is thus an excellent example of contemporary movements utilizing traditional peasant knowledge. The search for relevant knowledge in written sources and orality continues tirelessly, and there are many opportunities for its transfer and acquisition. On the one hand, a lot of Facebook groups, blogs, websites have been and are being organized for this. One of the Gyüttment groups (Mindenegyüttmegy Egyesület – MEGy), which brings together and aids young people wanting to move to the countryside, is planning to create a so-called Organic Knowledge Repository, where “the expertise accumulated by community organizations,

¹²The community of New Vrindaban, West Virginia, considered as a model for the Hungarian Krishna Valley, has collected the tools needed for agriculture with a similar purpose and method: “An old barn holds a collection of traditional farm implements purchased from local or Amish farmers for scything, threshing, winnowing, flailing, drying, preserving, and sheathing. They used tools such as the scythe and hoped to reintroduce more of these human- or animal-powered, low-impact tools as the community increasingly emphasized sustainable food production.” *SANFORD* 2015:302.

¹³After all, peasant culture itself was not unchangeable and rigid, it constantly adapted to its environment. For more on this, see, among others, Veronika Lajos' case study of a Modalvian Csango settlement and woman (*LAJOS* 2011, 2014).





Fig. 12. Plows. Krisna-völgy, Somogyvámos, Hungary, 2010. (Photo by Judit Farkas)

specialists, and knowledge holders will be collected in a unified system, in a transparent, searchable form.”¹⁴

On the other hand, in addition to using social media and attending courses, a kind of itinerant learning is also characteristic in these circles: those wanting to learn visit places, communities, individuals with a great deal of knowledge and experience on the subject, where they then help out by volunteering, all the while acquiring the necessary knowledge of the tools, utensils, and their use. This type of learning can be organized individually, but there are also specialized groups that facilitate the exchange of experiences and connect volunteers with the places that host volunteers. One of the largest and best-known of these groups in Hungary is the WWOOF (World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms) established in London in 1971.¹⁵ But, among others, the Hungarian Permaculture Association (Magyarországi Permakultúra Egyesület, MAPER) also tries to bring together and aid volunteers.¹⁶

¹⁴<http://megyesulet.hu/kozossegi-portal-es-organikus-tudastar/> (accessed April 15, 2021).

¹⁵<https://www.studyingram.com/wwof-world-wide-opportunities-on-organic-farms/> (accessed April 15, 2021).

¹⁶<https://permakultura.hu/> (accessed April 15, 2021).



As I said, looking at the everyday lives of rural eco-communities, it soon becomes apparent that this way of life is very energy- and time-consuming. My research, which focuses specifically on their perception and use of time, also confirmed this (FARKAS 2015). Using hand tools and manual labor instead of fast and efficient modern implements usually results in slower workflows. This brings with it a number of considerations. I do not want my study to give the false impression that there are no modern tools in ecovillages at all. Yes, there are, and their use and the extent to which they are eliminated is affected by many things: how many members in a household, how many of them are capable of using these tools, the scale of the task, how experienced they are in using hand tools, what their livelihood strategies are, and to what degree they adhere to ideology. Experiences gained over the years also influence these decisions: the young couple from Nagyszékely, who used only hand tools and human labor when they first started their rural life, gave up on this in certain areas (mowing, washing) with the birth of their children and a radical reduction in their capacity. Although the washing machine is not an agricultural implement, it must be mentioned here, because it is exactly the agricultural work that makes laundering by hand particularly difficult. Members of another family, who for a long time also resisted the use of motorized lawnmowers,¹⁷ could no longer mow their expanded areas with a manual mower alone, so taking their capacity and time into consideration they decided to motorize the mowing of parts of their territory (K.E., Nagyszékely, 2018). After several years of trying, a single woman gave up cultivating a kitchen garden because she found that it required too much energy and took time away from other activities that supplemented her income, which was also her hobby. Moreover, she could obtain locally grown, chemical-free vegetables and fruits at any time from other members of the community who cultivate large gardens (H.I., Nagyszékely, 2016).

Adaptation is therefore important in this case as well: they consider different options and make decisions accordingly. This process is also taking place at the community level, which I would also like to illustrate with an example. The community of Nagyszékely, in its early days, tried to switch to a fully human- and animal-powered workforce. In the case of cereal fields, it soon became clear that it was not worth it and not sustainable in the long run. The community tried to plow with horses, but it proved so energy- and time-consuming that it exceeded their capacity. Eventually, the work was entrusted to a local farmer who plowed their lands with a tractor. The same thing happened with threshing: after a few experiments with a mechanical threshing machine, they gave up on it and had the grain threshed. At the same time, for example, sowing is still done by hand, as is part of the mowing, as well as the work in vegetable gardens and orchards.

The conclusions of a young man (A.B., 35, male), who oversees a garden of several hectares in the Krishna Valley, accurately summarizes the results of the experiments: “It all started last year when I reckoned with the last 10 years. I reconsidered the techniques used in the garden and read a few books. Then the season started, new methods and new tools came up. (. . .) My conclusion this year is a paradigm shift: sustainable farming is simple and modern. We stick to the human scale, but in an efficient, economical, environment- and human-friendly way. We do not need to dispose of the watering can, but we will not water by hand. And we can avoid weeding by covering the soil with sheets and cover crops, rather than hoeing and mowing constantly.”¹⁸

¹⁷For many, the motorized lawnmower is a symbol of an unsustainable lifestyle.

¹⁸<https://krisnakert.wordpress.com/2020/09/24/paradigmavaltas/>. (accessed January 28, 2021).



SUMMARY

Hungarian ecovillages and rural eco-communities are so-called intentional communities, their residents are urban intellectual out-migrants with a view to creating long-term sustainable ways of life and communities. To this end, they strive for a lifestyle that complies with ecological principles, and strive to achieve it to the extent that their circumstances, knowledge, and capacity allow. They are on their way, experimenting, as they say. The handicraft heritage offers objects that fit organically into the lifestyle and ecological principles of ecovillage residents. They essentially use this heritage according to its original function and integrate it into the modern toolbox of their everyday lives.

In his 1983 programmatic study called *To the “Theory of Objects”: Ethnographic Analysis of Equipment and Sets of Objects*, Tamás Hofer lists the possible benefits and results derived from the study of sets of objects and object universes. Among these he notes that a social group’s set of objects and system of objects are closely related to the group’s behavioral system, ideology, and ideas about a good life, therefore by “reading” the set of objects one can get an idea not only of the social status but also of the worldview of a group or family (HOFER 1983:58). 25 years later, Péter Berta similarly studied “how we use the interactive medium of the use of objects to create and define ourselves, how we construct and display (materialize) and manipulate identities, social boundaries, and relationships” (BERTA 2008:36), which also helps the researcher read the sets of objects and recognize ideologies and identities.¹⁹ We can fully agree with this idea when looking at the objects of rural ecological communities: the choice of renewable, possibly long-lived tools reflects the ecological idea of a long-term sustainable, right way of life. The set of objects also speaks to commitment in other, simple ways: the multiplicity of agricultural hand tools refers to an obviously different way of life, complex management, as opposed to, for example, a household with a single electric lawnmower.

If we want to place the phenomenon examined in this study in functional and non-functional object systems established in object studies, following Jean Baudrillard, we can clearly classify it in the former. Yet, it has a number of characteristics that distinguish it from the traditional use of objects, compilation of sets of objects, and mastering of their use.

On the one hand, members of ecovillages and other rural eco-communities put many non-functional objects back into function: the wicker basket and the scythe are stripped of their decorative role and put back into everyday use. However, this does not mean that the value of the tools they use is derived solely from their antiquity and traditionality. On the contrary, although such tools are highly valued, pragmatism is very much evident in choosing tools, and ultimately this will determine whether they use a tool that is store-bought or craftsman-made or old. Moreover, as we have seen, the life situation and capacity of the members of the household also play an important role in these considerations, which is how sets of objects containing both manual and mechanical tools are created.

Another peculiarity of this phenomenon is that the use of traditional tools is acquired through new types of learning mechanisms: (with a few exceptions) the knowledge is not passed

¹⁹Berta formulates the above in connection with the so-called material turn in the social sciences. This material turn, in Berta’s words, “attempts to rediscover and rehabilitate objects, to examine the ability of objects and the interactions with them to shape culture, society, and identity” (BERTA 2008:33).



down from generation to generation, rather the individuals who want to implement a new way of life do their research, acquiring the skills through courses, volunteering, or from more experienced community members, and then based on these skills they continue to experiment in practice in their own households.

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