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Hungarian Folk Customs and Traditions



Summary

In folk cultures the complex system of folk customs regulated and determined the everyday lives and festivities of the members of long-established communities. As a consequence of the social and economic changes that have taken place over the past century, the entire system of traditions has been reshaped and it has become part of our everyday lives to continually pass on folk customs between nations and cultures. The passing on of traditions played a key role in peasant society for many centuries, and was influenced by a number of factors. Today, however, the place and role of the generations have been transformed by this process. In contrast to past centuries, the present day is characterised by the development of technology. The information society has brought a substantial change to people's lives, and today most of traditional folk culture is only a historical relic. Traditions can, nevertheless, still fulfil their role if we can pass them on to the coming generation, and so it is the responsibility of all of us to maintain and carry on traditions.

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The theme of folk customs has long been at the centre of interest of academic research and public opinion. The category of customs is an extreme complex concept, being applicable to the whole of the folk culture; therefore customs can also be defined in many ways. Some researchers consider them to be a pattern of behaviour that a given social group regards as appropriate and correct because they are in keeping with living cultural traditions. According to others it is the aggregate of ritual activities which are not present in urban culture. Their main characteristic is that the members

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of a community learn and copy them, and thus they are the outcome of socialisation. The passing on of traditions can be a result of conscious learning, but it can also be an unnoticed by-product of upbringing and following in others' footsteps (Dömötör, 1974:20–21). From another point of view, folk customs are behaviours and actions which have developed over a long period of time during social coexistence and have become permanent through repetition, and their increasingly uniform patterns have become socially accepted and part of tradition. Customs regulate, regularise and organise the ways in which people express themselves and the course of people's lives. Thus they are of normative value and the pattern nature of the customs prevails during learning. In peasant society they were values to be followed, even compulsory, and it was not advisable to act against them within the community (Verebélyi, 1998:402).

Today's rhythm of life and work is not influenced by the changing seasons, whereas they used to determine the lives of rural people. In folk chronology the four seasons jointly comprised a natural life cycle which determined not only the order of agricultural work of the peasantry, but also their everyday lives, days of rest and feasts. Over centuries they learnt how much time was needed for which work, and longer work processes were always followed by recreation. After successful work, they held a feast and they drank a toast (harvest toast, feast on pig-killing day, and harvest celebration).

The peasants' calendar and time schedule did not adjust to the time measured by the clock. For the people the concept of time was marked by concrete events that happened to them or happened in their surroundings (e.g. ever since I had my wits, when I was a lad, when I served in the army, when I was a baby clinging to mummy, I have lived long enough etc.). The daily working hours of peasants adjusted more to the course of the sun in the sky, and the daily schedule was different in winter and summer, depending on the length of the day. The other concept of time was defined by events linked to seasons, and field work was especially crucial in the concept of time, as this was the most important series of events in the year. Time was defined in this way: during harvesting, threshing, corn snapping or hay collection. The folk calendar based on seasons is primarily linked to the course of the moon in the sky. This "moon-time" is kept in many of our traditions: it is believed that ploughing should be started at new moon and the changing date of Easter is also based on a lunar calendar. Typically if people define time by the calendar, then events related to certain days are mentioned (at New Year's Eve, on the Twelfth Night or Epiphany, at Candlemas, during Lent, on Shrove Tuesday, or on Ash Wednesday), or names saints instead of the actual date on Saint George's day (24 April), on the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul (29 June), during the feast days of the Ice Saints (11, 12 and 13 May).

So the church year was broken up by various Christian religious festivals, which the church required to be celebrated based on the most important events in the life of Jesus. Religions before Christianity had their own feasts, for example the beginning of the year, the beginning of spring, the harvesting of the crop or the remembrance of military victories. In each case Christian holidays replaced the old festivals in the calendar, and so customs became contaminated, but as time went on they blended into each other to form a unity (Bihari-Pócs, 1985:123–124).

HOLIDAYS AND FEAST DAYS

A basic function of folk customs is to organise and break up the uninterrupted flow of time. Among customs, special significance was given in folklore to holidays, which were special occasions when individuals behaved differently than in everyday life and followed norms established by the customs – for example specific costumes, meals and behaviour. In our country there are two main systems that determine the forms of holidays and feast days: on the one hand *peasants' work* (agriculture and animal husbandry), on the other *Christian liturgy*. Thus customs follow the changing seasons, but also embrace the movable holidays of Christian liturgy (Verebélyi, 1998:415).

In Europe long ago, there were various customs for counting the beginning of the year. In our country, for example, the new year began at Christmas on 25 December. The first of January was the beginning of the year in the secular calendar and became widespread after the introduction of the Gregorian calendar in 1582. The naming of New Year's Day as small Christmas is a trace of the changing ways of beginning the year.

Thus the folk calendar does not start with the official beginning of the year, the first of January, and so winter festivities commence in November, starting from Saint Catherine's Day (25 November). In the folk calendar this was the first day of winter. This day is mostly associated with prohibitions on women working and with predictions for the weather, the best known among them being, "Frosty Catherine is followed by mild Christmas" ["Ha Katalin kopog, akkor karácsony locsog"].

The liturgical calendar commences with *advent*, four weeks before Christmas. *Advent* is a Latin word meaning 'coming', and we hold it in remembrance of the preparations for the birth of Christ at Christmas. Long ago, all festivities were forbidden during this period and, what is more, in the 18th century no weddings could be held then. What also characterises this period is the efforts made to predict or influence the next year by magic: the harvest, the success of agricultural work, marriage, children, or the reproduction of animals. As this was the beginning of the year, it was thought that whatever the beginning is like so will be what follows too, and thus the whole year (Tátraí-Karácsony Molnár, 1997:13, 25; Bihari-Pócs, 1985:125).

St Andrew's Day (30 November)

It was a widespread custom in the Carpathian basin that girls spent this day fasting and could only eat three grains of wheat and drink three gulps of water. At night they put some kind of men's clothing under their pillow and believed that in this way they could dream of who their husband would be (Tátraí, 1990:210). In Sokorópátka (in Győr-Moson-Sopron County) there is a story that people remember as true: there was a girl who saw in her dreams a tall, lean man with a whip in his hand. It was only later that she got to know her husband, who looked like the young man in the dream and was a farm labourer. There is even a well-known song about this in this village. Jenő Huszka uses this theme in the well-known entrance song to his operetta, Prince Bob.

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*“On St Andrew’s day young girls sleep
on men’s trousers.*

*[„András-nap éjjel az ifjú lányok
férfinadrágon alszanak.*

*I had my mother buy me a pair and hid
them under my pillow.*

*Én is vetettem anyámmal egyet,
elrejtettem párnám alatt.*

*I lay on them excitedly to dream about a
handsome lad.*

*Reá feküdtem izgatottan, hogy szép
legényről álmodozzam.*

*Although I close my eyes, I endlessly see
trousers.*

*De hiába hunyom le szemem, nadrágot
látok szüntelen.*

*I poured lead, cooked dumplings and
knocked to see the devil.*

*Ólmot öntöttem, gombócot főztem,
fölkopogtattam az ördögöt.*

*I give no credence to superstitions, I will
be a bride in the end.*

*Keveset adok a babonára, menyasszony
leszek nemsokára.*

*My life is a golden flower and a brown-
eyed lad is my sweetheart.”*

*Aranyvirág az életem, barna legény a
kedvesem.”¹*

St Nicolas’ Day (6 December)

Various customs are followed in memory of the bishop Saint Nicolas, who lived more than 1500 years ago in Myra in Asia Minor. Saint Nicolas was greatly honoured in Hungary, with more than fifty towns and villages bearing his name e.g. Kunszentmiklós, Szigetszentmiklós, and Mosonszentmiklós – he was the patron saint of these villages. The legends surrounding him tell that he did good to children, merchants, sailors, millers and fishermen.

In olden times there was a Santa Claus procession [“mikulásjárás” in Hungarian] in Transdanubian villages: young lads clad themselves in red or white clothes as Santa Claus or a chain-holding Saint Nicolas, who was flanked by a scary, black, sooty figure called Krampus. They visited houses one after the other, where they received soft sweet bread, wine or money. Krampuses scared girls with canes and chains, praised or scolded children or lightly whipped them. St. Nicolas day costumes and the giving of presents to children are new customs in our country that became popular along with the Christmas tree (Edelényi, 2005; Tátrai–Karácsony Molnár, 1997:171–174).

St Lucy’s Day (13 December)

According to the legend, Saint Lucy died a martyr for her Christian faith. Her name originates from the Latin word, lux, meaning light. Before the introduction of the Gregorian calendar the thirteenth of December was the shortest day of the year, i.e.

the longest night. For this reason the medieval church chose this day as the feast day of Saint Lucy, who symbolises light. This was the time when people should be most afraid of witches, therefore long plaits of garlic were placed in a cross-shape in windows or the door was barricaded with a sweep. This day is also associated with customary actions and beliefs which are not linked to the figure of Saint Lucy.

At this time people began to fabricate *Lucy's chair*, which in most locations was made from thirteen different woods. The purpose was to stand on it on Christmas Eve and see witches who wore horns on their heads. The chair was put together slowly, which is reflected in the saying "it is taking as long as Lucy's chair" ["Sokáig készül, mint a Luca széke"]. There was a custom mainly in Transdanubia which was named "lucying" ["*lucázás*"] or "clucking" ["*kotyolás*"] and was when boys went from house to house, singing songs and citing poems to conjure up fecundity. The "lucies" came at dusk. They knelt down on the hay and wished all the best to the people in the house with a song that began "Lucy, Lucy, cluck, cluck, may your chicken lay eggs..." ["Luca, Luca kitty-kotty, tojjanak a tyúkok..."]. In many places housewives scattered corn on hens so that they could be as copious as corn. As a reward boys got apples, walnuts or money (Bihari-Pócs, 1985:128–130).

This day is also associated with *prohibitions on work*, mostly linked to fertility magic on chickens. It was forbidden to spin and weave because then chickens would not lay eggs and whoever sewed "would sow up the rears of hens" (Vehrer, 1992a:23). Housewives had to sit a lot so that hens would sit well on their eggs. *Marriage fortune-telling* procedures were performed on Saint Lucy's day. The most well-known of them was putting slips of paper with male names in dumplings and cooking them in boiling water. Whichever slip came to the surface first would be the name of the girl's husband. Similarly, male names were written on slips of paper and thrown each day into the fire. Whichever remained to be thrown in at Christmas was expected to be the name of the girl's husband. Lead was also poured into water and from the solidified form conclusions were made about the occupation of the prospective husband (Tátrai, 1990:221–228).

Christmas

In villages in olden times, it was not the decorated Christmas tree and the lit candles that signified the beginning of the festivities. In many places it was, for example, customary to hang an evergreen plant like juniper on the crossbeams. It has only become common to have a Christmas tree in the last fifty or sixty years. In former times, neither was it customary to give presents, with children receiving at most some shiny coins from their godparents. In those times it was rather the programmes that were attractive to children: they could go and sing carols ["*kántálás*"] and recite Christmas greetings ["*mendikálás*"], act out the nativity scene ["*betlehemezés*"] or congratulate on their name days any relatives called Stephen [István] or John [János]. Between Christmas and Epiphany adults had a rest and the family was together (Tátrai-Karácsóny Molnár, 1997:186–188).

On 24 December, people fasted until the first star appeared, and so this day was called the fast of Christmas. The festive dinner consisted of food eaten during the fast: soup from dried fruit, pasta sprinkled with poppy seeds, pumpkin, walnuts, apples and kalács [a braided egg-enriched bread similar to challah]. Animal fodder was put under the table: hay, oats, straw or corn. At Christmas people came to *act out the nativity scene* and serenade with Christmas folk songs. They acted out the story of Christ's birth, with the addition of funny stories over time, such as the deaf shepherd who was hard of hearing and misunderstood everything. Often the actors were young people, but in Transylvania the actors were male adults (Tátrai, 1990:232–238).

On 26 December it was customary in West Transdanubia and in Transylvania to *sing and recite Christmas folk songs* [“*regölés*”]. The performers were called “*regös*”, a word denoting travelling minstrels who used to visit medieval royal courts, but they only share the name. Calendars dating back to the 16th to 18th centuries call the Monday after Epiphany tale-telling Monday. According to the calendar this was the festival of drinking, revelry and merry-making, i.e. a part of the carnival period. The singing of folk songs at Christmas often preserves the memory of ancient magic songs and they were sung with the conviction that whatever they say will happen. This kind of singing is not, therefore, of religious origin, but it is more ancient and wishes good fortune for the beginning of the year.

Youths clad in animal skins and equipped with pipes made from ceramic jugs and sticks with chains hanging from them walked around the houses. They did not play a tune with their instruments, but accompanied the rhythm of the song. They expressed their good wishes to each family member and even extended them to animals. They wished fertility, wealth and good health for the New Year: “May God give this farmer two small oxen, a small farm-labourer, a golden plough and a silver whip handle, [chorus] *hey regő rejtem, God has permitted it!*” [“*Adjon az Úristen, ennek a gazdának két kis ökröt, egy kis bérest, annak a kezibe arany ekeszarvat, ezüst ostornyelet, hej regő rejtem, azt is megengedte a nagy Úristen!*”] (Bihari-Pócs, 1985:136). In the second part of the song, a maiden is conjured up for the young man: “There would be a pretty girl called Fanny Dutch, *Ej regő-rejtem, Regő-regő-rejtem*. There would be a handsome young man called Michael Shoemaker, *Ej, regő-rejtem, Regő-regő-rejtem!*” [“*Itt is mondanának egy szép leányt, kinek neve volna, Német Franciska volna, Ej regő-rejtem, Regő-regő-rejtem. Amoda is mondanának egy szép legényt, kinek neve volna, Varga Mihály volna, Ej, regő-rejtem, Regő-regő-rejtem!*”]. This was taken so seriously that even into the 1970s when old people were asked to sing these songs for recordings, ethnographers often noticed that they started to ponder over which two young people should be matched in the song, so as not conjure up a pair who would not be good partners for each other (Edelényi, 2009:95).

The singing of Christmas folk song contains some interesting elements that are still mysteries to academic research. One such element is the part of the introduction about the mythical stag. Among many European, Asian and North Indian peoples the stag is the symbol of the starry sky, principally the winter sky, so this part may evoke the winter solstice and the renewal of seasons in this mythical image. Interestingly,

although the custom of singing these kinds of Christmas folk songs was widespread all over Europe, its Hungarian name is special. Linguists say that the word “regölés” is of Finno-Ugric origin and the chorus “hej, regő rejtem” retains the traces of Shamanism, hinting at the trance or ecstasy that the shamans of the ancient Magyars fell into (Verebélyi, 1998:416–417).

Holy Innocents’ Day (28 December)

Holy Innocents’ Day commemorates the children massacred in Bethlehem who became martyrs for Christ. On the one hand *caning* and *whipping*, which was common on this day, is related to the biblical story as believed by the people: on this day in Bethlehem male children died therefore girls have to suffer at this time. On the other hand it is a ritual to bring fertility and health.

The custom of whipping was well known all over the country. The scourge used to be a clerical sacrament back in the 15th and 16th centuries. Then in one of his surviving sermons the famous preacher Temesvári Pelbárt scolded those people who distorted this clerical custom, using it for indecent jokes (Dömötör, 1979:163–164). In the 16th century, Hungarian students studying in Krakow were punished several times for this custom. Later, as the custom was fading away, only children would be flogged: “Be obedient, be healthy, be fresh and do not get boils” – they were told while they were given a light spanking with a cane. For women and girls there was a custom with a similar function. They would be caned by youths while the latter wished not to get headaches or toothache. For example, along the Danube (in Győr-Moson-Sopron County) boys conducted floggings before being initiated into manhood. The youths would go to houses containing girls and whip the people in the household. Girls would tie ribbons on the whips and mothers would give pieces of meat that had been wrapped up to the group of youths. Then the young men would return to the tavern where they cooked the meat in a cauldron. The youths would eat this together on the feast following their initiation (Bálint, 1989:127–129; Tátrai, 1990:258).

New Year’s Eve – New Year

In old villages people spent New Year’s Eve differently to how they do nowadays. *Noise-making* [“kongózó”] youths and shepherds went around the village, making a lot of noise with horns, bells, pots and lids. This custom evoked ancient traditions for repelling evil. On New Year’s Eve people ate pork but not poultry, as people believed that pigs dug out luck, while hens kicked it behind. Lentils were believed to bring a lot of money to the household. On New Year’s Day various greetings and toasts were customary. For example, groups of boys went to houses, expressing the following good wishes: “A happy New Year! Wine, wheat, apricots, piglets, wheels to my cart, bottom to my jug, red wine to my glass, let me drink plenty in the New Year!” [“Boldog új évet! Bort, búzát, barackot, kurta farkú malacot, szekerembe kereket, köcsögömbe feneket, poharamba vörösbort, hadd ihassak bőven, az új esztendőben!”]. In the end

they wished a happy New Year again and received money from the inhabitants of the house. In some regions it was a custom that on New Year's Day a youth would be clad as an old man and a child would flog him all along the main street of the village to symbolise that the new year had driven away the old year (Bálint, 1989:130–134).

Epiphany (6 January)

Christmastide ends at Epiphany [*“Vízkereszt”* in Hungarian, meaning water baptism] which was the day when people cleared the Christmas table and, in later times, removed the Christmas tree. In Hungarian, the day is named after the christening of Jesus in the temple as described in the Bible. In remembrance of this event, water was consecrated in the church in Catholic regions (the Three Magi's water). Each household kept a small portion of the consecrated water throughout the year so that it could be used to heal illnesses. Consecrated water was also believed to keep evil away from the house, and so some was poured into the well.

This was the time for the custom of the *visitation of the Three Kings*, or the Three Wise Men from the East, who were named Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar in the vernacular. This was a custom of personification, mummering and greetings. Children clad in white or young women with paper crowns on their heads would go from house to house with stars in their hands and sing greeting songs. In some regions, the custom was also called “adorning with stars” [*“csillagozás”*] (Tátrai–Karácsony Molnár, 1997:30–37).

Carnival Period (from Epiphany to Ash Wednesday)

In folk culture carnival time was the season of feasts and weddings. For centuries the church forbade merry-making; priests regularly preached against carnival revelry. In the 16th century, for example, Miklós Telegdi spoke from the pulpit that, “Whoever goes around in a mask against the commandment of God, men clad in women's clothes and women in men's clothes, boozing... forgetting themselves as they serve their stomach and throat, absorbed in revelry and drinking and fooling around in masks and costumes ...” (Dömötör, 1979:88).

The highlight of the carnival festivities was the appearance of the masked and costumed figures at houses to perform mummering. Back in the time of King Matthias the Italian relatives of the queen sent artistic masks as presents to their Hungarian relatives. In the 16th and 17th centuries, people in villages, towns and at the royal court all wore masks at carnival time to amuse themselves. Carnival festivities were popular in the court of the ill-fated Louis II until the time of the battle of Mohács. Records from 1525 attest that on Shrove Tuesday there was a masked procession in which an elephant also participated. Louis II himself appeared at the festivities in costume wearing a devil's mask. There were storks, goats, horses, and young men and women swapping clothes, while others were clad as craftsmen and made people laugh by imitating their trade (for example tinker or smith). The best fun was had by young

men dressed as expectant mothers. Across Europe there are customs that welcome spring and the awakening nature which mark the end of winter and the cold (Burke, 1991:217–221; Verebélyi, 1998:419–422).

During carnival the only sad young women were those left on the shelf, who had not managed to get married. Young men ridiculed them and made them “*pull a log*” on Shrove Tuesday. This custom had several variations; for example, in Szatmár youths shouted into the house while knocking a piece of tin under the window, “Time is up, time is up, you’re still on the shelf!” [“Húshagyó, Húshagyó, itt maradt az eladó!”]. In Jászág borken pots full of ash were thrown into the yards of houses with maidens. In West Transdanubia a mock wedding was performed together with the *log pulling* if there was to be no wedding in the village that year. Its participants were a mock bride, a mock bridegroom and wedding guests (devil, gypsy, clown, and craftsman) who acted out a humorous wedding (Edelényi, 2009:98). In the Vend region² this still-living custom is known by a number of names: log pulling, lumber pulling, and fir tree wedding. The custom is first mentioned in the 17th century; there are records from this time referring to the custom of the community denouncing those who do not comply with their first and foremost public duty i.e. to bring offspring into the world. Csokonai also records this in his notes to Dorottya: “Pulling a stump. It is customary in many places when the carnival period ends, unmarried youths and maids were made to lift or drag a log or piece of wood from place to place as a joke. The good-looking would put wood shavings, splinters, wood chips or the like into the pockets of such people, perhaps folded in envelopes or paper” (Dömötör, 1979:93). András Dugonics also mentions the custom of log pulling: “In times past those girls of marriageable age who did not marry during carnival were made to pull stumps on Shrove Tuesday like untamed mares” (Dugonics, 1820:287).

Easter Festivities (from Palm Sunday to Easter Monday)

Palm Sunday

This day commemorates Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem. People lay palm leaves at Jesus’ feet. In remembrance of this event in the Mediterranean people bless palm leaves, while in Hungary they bless willow twigs in Catholic churches. The blessed willow is taken home, as it is believed to ward off illness and lightning strokes from the house.

Palm Sunday was both a clerical and a popular holiday. On this day, long ago, there was the custom of *kiszé* driving or carrying, which was preserved in its best-known form in Zoboralja in Slovakia [Zoboralja was a region in the former Kingdom of Hungary] and among the *palóc* people along the river Ipoly. Maiden women would make a straw doll, clad it in married women’s clothes and carry it through the village in a group. At the end of the village it was thrown into the water or burnt. Through this action they drove away the winter and illness from the village and signalled the end of the fasting period. The song sang as part of this custom begins like this: “Hey, out kiszé, hey!

Come in, ham, come!” [“Haj, ki kische, haj! Jöjj be, sódar (sonka), jöjj!”]. Names of the straw doll would be: *kische, kishi, kiszőce, kiszice, kice, kicice, kicevice*, or sometimes *banya* or *villő*. Maiden women would do fortune-telling on their marriage prospects from the direction in which the straw doll, or handful of straw torn from the doll, drifted away. Sometimes they rubbed their faces with the wet straw to avoid freckles. They asked for clothes for the straw doll from newlywed women and those who did not provide clothes were mocked in a song (Manga 1987:220–221). The lyrics of the songs along the river Ipoly, Galga and Zagyva all mention taking out the kische soup and bringing in the ham with a view, perhaps, to driving away illness (Gulyás–Szabó, 1989:373–381; Vehrer, 2012:293–315).

Maundy Thursday

On this day the bells remain mute in Catholic village; they are said “to have gone to Rome”. Instead they rattle away in the church spire until Holy Saturday. Often children flocked together and went around rattling on the street. The custom of rattling is a remnant of noise-making to drive away evil. In some places Maundy Thursday was also called Green Thursday, as women cooked fresh spinach on this day, believing that they were contributing to a good harvest (Bálint, 1989:207–210).

Good Friday

The church remembers the death of Christ on this day, so this is the time of the greatest fasting and mourning. Processions and passion plays were customary from the medieval era. People considered Friday an unlucky day, especially Good Friday. On this day it was forbidden to go out to the fields or to work with animals. Most of the prohibitions related to women’s work, for example: whoever bakes bread this day, her bread will petrify (Bihari–Pócs, 1985:150–151).

Special powers were attributed to fire and water. Maidens and youths went out to the stream to wash in the morning in order to stay healthy. The fire was put out in houses and it was only rekindled on Holy Saturday from the embers glowing in the church yard. The new fire was believed to bring good luck and make the house’s hearth lucky. If a herd of cattle was driven across the smoke coming from the new fire, it was believed to protect the animals from plague. Easter eggs were painted on Good Friday. This was the duty of women and they had to know the decorative patterns customary in the village. The old name of this ornamental pattern was “hím”, and this word can be found in the word embroidery [“hímzés”], which mean “decorating” (Róheim, 1925:248–250; Tátrai–Karácsony Molnár, 1997:95).

Easter Sunday

Easter Sunday is the first Sunday after the first full moon following the spring equinox (21 March), therefore the variable date of Easter can fall between 22 March and 25

April. This is the greatest celebration of the Christian church, given in remembrance of the resurrection of Christ. The Easter festivities began in the afternoon of Holy Saturday, with the bells ringing again and Catholics going on procession. The “*visiting of the fields*” [“*határkerülés*”] that was customary on this day survived into the 20th century. Villagers went out to the land surrounding the village on the procession, inspected the green crops, prayed for good yields, and so they protected the growing crops from evil and hail with magic.

The most beautiful event of the old Easter was the *consecration of food*. In Catholic areas people would go to the morning mass with a carefully arranged basket covered with embroidered cloth, in which there was kalács, eggs, ham and perhaps even Easter lam. During the mass the priest blessed the food. By eating this food at lunchtime, they began to eat meat again after the fasting period.

The importance of consecrated meals is reflected by the accompanying beliefs. people rushed home, because whoever reached home first would also be the first to begin working in the field. The leftovers were kept; for example, what remained of the soft bread was thrown into the fire so that it could protect the house from storms and lightning strikes (Tátrai–Karácsony Molnár, 1997:96–98; Bihari–Pócs, 1985:152).

Easter Monday

Water-pouring [“*locsolás*”] was the holiday for young people who had not chosen their partners yet, and it was a disgrace to miss it. Rather than eau de cologne being used [the present day custom in Hungary], maidens were taken to the well and a whole bucket of water was poured on them. As a reward youths generally received painted eggs, but in Upper Hungary it was a custom for the young women to “flog” the young men in return. In Csík in Szeklerland [Csík was an administrative country in the former Kingdom of Hungary, which now lies in Romania], in Szatmár [an administrative country in the former Kingdom of Hungary, which now lies in northwest Romania and northeast Hungary] and in Nyírség maidens returned the favour on the Tuesday by pouring water on the youths. Originally water-pouring was a custom to bring fertility, as water symbolised new birth and reproduction. This is also visible in old calendars where Easter Monday is called throwing-water Monday (Bálint, 1989:312; Tátrai, 1990:159; Vehrer, 1995:7; Vehrer, 1996:48).

Pentecost

The Christian church celebrates Pentecost to commemorate the Holy Spirit coming down to the apostles after the ascension of Jesus into heaven. The name comes from the Greek word *pentecostes*, which means the fiftieth, i.e. the fiftieth day after Easter, and so Pentecost, like Easter, is a movable festival. In Csík in Szeklerland, a white dove is released to fly away during the mass as a symbol of the Holy Spirit.

Pentecost is a complex festival and there are all kinds of Christian, pagan and ancient Roman elements intermingled in its celebration. Folk customs are dominated by the celebration of fertility and nuptials and their symbolic expression. In the Roman Empire the *Floralia festival* was held during May. The celebrating crowds went out from the towns to the nearby fields, holding banners with the name of the goddess Flora, and shouting her name in a toast. Flora was a goddess of plants and flowers in Roman mythology. Flowers still play an important role in the celebration of Pentecost, above all the peony, jasmine and elderflower that are indigenous to our country (Frazer, 1993:173).

At this time of year villages were clad in green, and gates and fences were decorated with tree leaves. Long ago on this day maypoles were erected. Children also had their traditional custom in the *procession of the queen* [“királynőjárás”]. Small girls went from house to house in groups with the small queen who they elected from among themselves. She was clad in white and covered with a table cloth, which was the veil. She would carry flowers in a small basket, scattering rose petals all around. The queen was a mute character and she was not permitted to laugh if people cracked jokes. In Transdanubia the veil was lifted after the greeting and the queen was lifted up high: “Let your hemp be this high!” The purpose of this rite was to ensure the growth of hemp. As a reward for the fertility magic they received fruit or a few coins. One of the girls would bring a basket to collect the rewards (Kósa–Szemerkenyi, 1973:210–211; Tátrai–Karácsony Molnár, 1997:112, 118–119).

Among Hungarian folk customs the *Pentecost king* was elected from youths taking part in races that required dexterity. In most parts of Europe this custom existed from the medieval era with horse races, various dexterity races and fights being common. In Hungary the tradition appears in written records dating back to the 16th century. The most interesting description was written by Mór Jókai in his novel *A Hungarian Nabob*. The Pentecost king “ruled” for one year after his election – therefore we say “short as Pentecost kingdom”. In the 17th century he could even be a judge, but later on his power was limited to giving instructions to other youths, being able to drink for free in the tavern and being invited to all wedding feasts and parties. According to a description from the 18th century, in West Transdanubia it was a condition for the dexterity race that each lad should run a course of rope obstacles three times without interruption on his own horse and without a saddle and stirrup. The winner became the Pentecost king, who had “immunity” and could not be punished. He received a wreath of flowers from the maidens and wore it on his head throughout the evening feast. He was invited to all parties, and he could drink for free in all taverns, and his animals were kept free of charge (Verebélyi, 1998:425–426; Tátrai–Karácsony Molnár, 1997:110–111). The size of this festival the superstition surrounding it is illustrated by the following event: after the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1876, the Emperor Franz Joseph was meant to be crowned [as King of Hungary] on Whit Sunday, but somebody remembered that the glory of the Pentecost king is short-lived, so the ceremony was brought forward to the Saturday (Tátrai–Karácsony Molnár, 1997:111–112).

Csiksomlyó Festival

The Csíkсомlyó [Șumuleu Ciuc] Festival is traditionally held at Pentecost and is an important holiday for the Szeklers, whose are ethnic Hungarian sub-group living in Romania. Pilgrims come from far away to the church to worship Mary. The story of the festival dates back to 1567, when the Szekler defeated the army of John Sigismund Zápolya at the “Thieves Mountain Pass” of Harghita. Believers started to flock to the church in remembrance of this victory so that they could wait together for the coming of the Holy Spirit on Whit Sunday. Nowadays several thousand believers come from all over the world. Csángó people, Szekler and Hungarians pray together to the Blessed Virgin Mary, and many people hold birch twigs in their hands, which symbolise Mary. In the procession the Hungarian hymn ‘Our Blessed Mother’ [“Boldogasszony Anyánk”] and the ‘Szekler (Székely) Hymn’ are sung (Edelényi, 2006:75–77).

Erection of Maypoles

Throughout Europe spring festivities going back centuries are linked to the first of May and Pentecost. The rituals of these two essentially identical festivals have intermingled for a long time, and in certain cases are doing so even today, but nowadays the custom of *the erection of the maypole* is only connected with the first of May in our country. The historic facts show that in the north and west of the Hungarian-speaking area maypoles were also erected at Pentecost. In [modern day] North West Hungary the maypole erected on the first of May was often, and still can be, taken down at Pentecost. The taking-down ceremonies, such as tree climbing and dancing out, are likely to be related to the dexterity races of the election of the Pentecost king.

The maypole has a dual function: on the one hand it is the symbol of the rebirth of nature, and on the other hand it is a symbolic accessory of the spring customs of young people across Europe. A maypole erected in front of a public building expresses its symbolic power to welcome spring and represent the community, while a maypole erected in front of a house where a marriageable girl lives shows that it is a love symbol (Németh, 1987:506–508; Vehrer, 2011; 1995; 1996:48).

Our sources contain records of the erection of maypoles dating back to the 15th century, although the custom is even older. As with most folk customs, the erection of the maypole has a legend of Christian origin. We can read in Sándor Résző Ensel’s first collection of folk customs, which was published in the 19th century, that, “It is written about the maypole that while St James and St Philip were going out to preach the gospel, an unmarried virgin girl named Valburga became their companion. For this reason the pagans declared them unclean and spoke slanderously about them. In order to chase off those mocking her, the girl took her walking stick, stood it in the ground and kneeled down in front it praying. Barely one or two hours had passed when the stick standing in the ground started to bud and bring forth green leaves. This happened on the morning of St James’ Day (1 May). Therefore unwed youths

stand a tall green tree in front of the windows of well-behaved single girls, if possible without being noticed.” The fact that the maypole is also called the James tree or James bough refers to this explanation of its origin (Tátrai, 1994:126–130).

St. John's Day (24 June)

On Saint John's Day there was a celebration of the summer solstice, from when days start to become shorter. The name of the festival originates from the event of John christening Jesus on this day in the water of Jordan. In the Orthodox church St John is named St Ivan, so the name originates from the time of the Magyar's relations with Byzantine before their conquest of the Carpathian basin. In the 16th century the church recorded that the festival of St John had taken root in the 11th century but had degenerated into a “pagan superstition” throughout the centuries and had become more associated with blinding light, jumping around the fire and ceremonial dancing.

Fire lighting was customary among many of Europe's peoples. The people of the village would sit around the bonfire, and maidens and youths would jump over the fire. Fortune-telling would be made about when the maidens would get married based on how far they had jumped, and fragrant grass was sprinkled into the fire to ward away the evil. Fruit thrown into the fire was said to have healing power and therefore children ate baked apples so that they would not fall ill. It was also a custom to make a wreath from flowers and hang it on the top of the house as protection against fire (Dömötör, 1974:162–165; Róheim, 1925:315; Bihari-Pócs, 1985:157).

SUMMARY

From the above facts it is clear that numerous symbols appear in folk customs. *Water* was attributed cleaning, healing and fertilising power (water pouring at Easter, consecrated water), *fire* had a purging power and drove away the devil in folk customs (kiszed-driving on Palm Sunday, fire lighting on St. John's Day, lighting candles at Christmas and on All Souls' Day). Making a noise was meant to drive away evil and bring fertility (Santa Claus procession, carnival, Holy Innocents' Day), while branches, twigs and canes symbolised life, fertility and the renewal of nature (carrying of willow branches [“villőzés”] on Palm Sunday, flogging on Holy Innocents' Day, erection of the maypole, which is also a phallic symbol) (Edelényi, 2009:104).

Folk customs can be individual or communal, but even individual folk customs are passed on according to community norms. In the world of peasants customs were attached to genders and age groups. In the customs of winter festivities it was overwhelmingly men and youths who took part, while during spring festivals women and maidens were more active (customs requiring the participation of men were: St. Lucy's Day merry-making [“lucázás”], the nativity scene [“betlehemezés”], Christmas singing and recital [“regölés”], the welcoming of the carnival, ridiculing spinsters; customs acted out by women included: kiszed-doll carrying, and the Pentecost proces-

sion [“pünkösdlés”]). Folk customs can sometimes have widely differing regional characteristics – for example, the paloc wedding feast or the carnival in Szatmár –, but the customs of Christmas and carnival festivities also have regional variations. Some days may be distinguished more in one region or in one place. Individual ethnic groups have various kinds of customs such as, for example, the busó-walking celebration of the Šokci [an ethnographic group of South Slavs mainly identified as Croats] or the log-pulling of the Vends [an archaic term for the Hungarian Slovenes].

Customs may differ on religious basis, and so Catholic and Protestant customs can show differences in some cases. The customs of Protestant communities seem poorer, less colourful and less variable than in Catholic villages, although many Protestant customs retained more archaic elements. There are both sacred and secular customs, as archaic, pre-Christian elements can be found in the customs prescribed by the Catholic church. There are customs of greater ecclesiastical significance and customs that are more important in folk practice. Among the celebrations tied to specific times there are some that are linked to belief (St Catherine’s Day) and others to which various customary acts are tied (St Lucy’s Day) (Edelényi, 2003:60; 2009:89–90).

The complex and complicated system bound to folk customs in peasant society regulated and determined the day-to-day lives and celebrations of community members. A consequence of the social and economic changes that have taken place over the past century, as well as the rise of the information society, is that the entire system of traditions has been reshaped; today it is a day-to-day practice to continually pass on and adopt folk customs between nations and cultures. The old peasant society began to disintegrate more intensively after the World War II as it lost its economic basis due to collectivisation. The surviving elements in small household farms almost entirely lost their importance as a consequence of the changes brought about by the end of communism in Hungary. Urban life also changed but was not accompanied by the strengthening of civil society. As village people’s mobility became greater, the changing cultural elements did not revolve around the values any more, and so it was no longer as important to maintain traditions (Lentner, 2005). Only those customs were able to survive which were not so closely linked to peasant work and whose power to maintain and build the community kept the tradition alive for a few decades: erecting the maypole, log-pulling, carnival and harvest processions. Tourism also played a role in the survival of these customs. Among the customs of the family and close relatives perhaps only Christmas and Easter retain century-old features. The passing on of traditions played a key role in folk culture over the centuries, influenced by a number of factors, but by today the place and role of the generations have been transformed by this process. These days it is not history, but another important factor, technology, that determines our world. The information society has brought a substantial change in people’s lives, and traditional folk culture is, in many respects, merely a historical relic. A tradition can only be called living and realise its potential if we can pass it on to the coming generation so that it can find its identity and community, and so it is our common responsibility to maintain and carry on traditions.

NOTES

- ¹ Data provided by Mrs Lajos Tuba née Adél Novák, born in Sokorópátka on 24 April 1929 and residing in Sokorópátka.
- ² Slovenian villages in the West of Vas county: Kétyölgy, Orfalu, Apátistvánfalva, Felsőszőlnök, Alsószőlnök, Szakonyfalva, and Rábatótfalu (today a part of Szentgotthárd).

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