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Protection of cultural tradition through celebration of St. George's Day in Turopolje: documentation, presentation and transfer of traditional patterns

Summary

The celebration of St. George's Day belongs to the ancient Croatian tradition whose historical and ethnographic retrospective leads back to the pre-Christian times. Accordingly, the celebration of St. George's Day is a centuries old tradition in Turopolje region as well, but with distinctive characteristics deriving from the cultural and historical heritage of the community. The intangible cultural heritage is especially sensitive because it is the first to vanish as the result of social changes. It is necessary to determine the methodology that will secure the transfer of the traditional cultural patterns and their sustainability. Through the celebration of St. George's Day in Turopolje we would like to show the efforts of experts and the local community in preserving cultural tradition within the context of the UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage

Key words: Intangible heritage, St George's Day in Turopolje, protecting and documenting intangible heritage, The Museum of Turopolje, The City of Velika Gorica

Introduction

The region of Turopolje is in the very center of the northwestern Croatia, near the largest cultural, economical and administrative centre – the City of Zagreb. The City of Velika Gorica is the largest administrative and political center of the region, only 16 km from the capital city. With the population of 35 000 in the City of Velika Gorica, the entire region (app 550 square kilometers) numbers almost 70 000 inhabitants. Nearly three quarters live in the lower parts of the region (Tourism development Strategy of the City of Velika Gorica, 2012). The hilly parts of the region, *Vukomeričke gorice*, are somewhat less populated, mostly by elderly residents. The economical development of the region is based on the smaller economies and agriculture, and the people in the peripheral areas work in Zagreb. The region has 4700 registered family farms, and the entrepreneurs do mostly trading and other service industries. The region is known for wood processing industry, and the main material is oak wood.

FROM LEGEND TO NATIONAL TRADITION

According to history data, St George was a Roman soldier, born in Cappadocia in the 3rd century. During Diocletian's persecution of Christians, St George died a martyr, somewhere around 303 AD, defending them. The news about martyr George spread fast throughout the Roman Empire, and it was transferred by soldiers and officers proud of this hero from their own ranks. The legend was brought to Croatia by Roman legions. By the 12th century he was worshiped throughout Europe. Legends of St George were spread in the 6th century, and in

the 11th people attributed him miraculous deeds. In the 12th century the motif of fighting the dragon was introduced. (Belaj, 1998:169). He was the most popular saint during the middle Ages because of his miraculous deeds. He is the protector against the pestilent diseases, death at sea, in war time, protector at court cases, and generally in life threatening situations. He is the patron saint of the Crusaders, knights, soldiers, and all sorts of trades related to warfare. Because of his place in the calendar, in the rural areas, he became the patron of the land, of the crops, of greenery and cattle. To answer the question how he became so popular in Turopolje, we have to turn to history. Being so close to the borders of the Turkish Empire, it was not so long ago that these were rural, agricultural, shepherd's lands.

Merits for the acceptance and preservation of the custom in this region go to the Noble County of Turopolje, who for centuries considered St George as their patron saint. The Noble County of Turopolje is the oldest administrative and political organization, which continually governed the region of Turopolje from the 13th century up until 1947 when it was dismissed and banned. The name itself depicts basic identity traits: "noble" denotes free men owning and managing the land, and "county" describes the way the territory is organized administratively. The noblemen in Turopolje were actually poor peasants and their very existence was subject to natural and social changes, and their patron saint was their safe haven in troubles and hardships.

In the whole northwestern Croatia, especially in Turopolje region, people celebrate St George's Day as the beginning of spring and the agricultural year. On that day people hired or let go shepherds and servants, the cattle was ceremonially propelled out to pasture, crowned with green wreaths. People link telling fortune and doing magic spells to that day, the evil forces and witches have special powers on that day. For instance, by witchcraft, the cattle could lose their milk if they trespassed on the neighboring field, or simply by transferring morning dew from one field to another. The herbs have magical power; some people wash for the first time because of the belief that the water was unhealthy before that day. You cannot sleep outside the house, and the girls wash their faces in the water previously soaked with herbs and flowers to make them prettier. The custom of celebrating St George's day in Turopolje in the past, as well as in the present, has three indispensable elements: lighting the bonfire, processions around the villages and willow rods that the members of the procession give to the household they visit. Groups of young boys and girls go around the village the day before St George's Day, or on that very day. They come to the yard or beneath the window and sing procession songs about the coming of George and of spring, wishing the household the prosperity and asking for a gift. If they get it, they thank them with a song, and if they don't they scold them. They always leave some willow rods that people later put in their fields, barns, henhouses, beehives, or they put them away to save them from thunder. Members in the St George's procession (Jurjaši, Jurjašice) usually get eggs, but also bacon, flour and wine, and lately also money. At the end of the procession boys and girls divide the gifts amongst themselves, or sell them and split the money, but that is the new practice. In the old days they used to make a feast and celebrated all together. In the evening people light large bonfires made of bramble, juniper and straw. People dance around the fire, singing celebration songs and at the end they jump over the embers. The whole village gathers around

the fire because of the saying: “who's not at the bonfire, this year he'll be in coffin.” People believed that the fire and the smoke of St George's bonfire keeps them from illness and evil, and crops from vermin and natural disasters. Because of their magical features, ashes and char were spread around the fields and gardens (Huzjak, 1992:4-15).

ST GEORGE'S PROCESSIONS IN TUROPOLJE AND SUSTAINABILITY OF THE CULTURAL TRADITIONS

The urbanization and globalization processes are rapidly melting away the traditions and cultural patterns of this region, creating new realities and forming new lifestyles, leaving less and less space for the intergenerational transfer of cultural traditions within the community. In the context of this new climate it has become clear how important it is to ensure the transfer of these cultural traditions and preserve them for the next generation, or they will otherwise disappear. Everyone is on the move – the bearers of cultural traditions, local institutions that preserve heritage, the expert public and the local political structures. Starting from the premises that cultural tradition is “a process of constant making and remaking choices of our ancestors” (Williams, 2006:44), and that every community will, “from the overall historical legacy choose the elements that in a specific moment fit their interests and values in the present.” (Čapo Žmegač, 1998:17), in the 1990s the local community started organizing the manifestation called *St George's Day in Turopolje*, that until today has grown into one of the indispensable elements in the creation of the cultural identity of the region. Its role is to entertain and present traditional cultural patterns, to teach and promote cultural heritage of the community. This selective approach to the rich cultural heritage has provided new possibilities for the presentation and the promotion of the custom. The manifestation *St George's Day in Turopolje* takes on the commitment of educating the public about the cultural patterns, which also secures its sustainability. With the support of the governing body of the City of Velika Gorica, the organization includes all the local tradition and folklore associations, as well as the cultural institutions. Overall, some 4000 individuals are participating in it.

Global surroundings can easily affect and change the cultural tradition of the community. In order to prevent the negative influences, it is necessary to raise the cultural awareness of the community about the value of their cultural heritage. It can be achieved through formal and informal education of their members because “the people, that is the community, are the best censors, but only if they know enough about their own culture and tradition” (Jelinčić, Žuvela, Bušnja, 2008:63). At this instance the most important role is played by the cultural institutions (museums, libraries, archives, specialized institutes), as well as all other relevant state and local institutions. Their mission is to identify, record, valorize, and provide access to the knowledge about the cultural traditions.

In Turopolje, the leading institution in preserving heritage and cultural traditions is the Museum of Turopolje. It provides technical and material conditions for studying and documenting the traditional culture. Permanent ubiquity and the activity of the Museum in everyday life of the local community, as well as participating in all the important events and ceremonies in the region, has brought to better understanding and achieving actuality in

performing the traditional cultural patterns. The Museum records and documents these patterns *in situ*, in the villages that still practice them or reconstruct them according to the memories of the tellers. The range and diversity of the collected data are the basis for the richness of the future presentational options. Establishing quality communication with the bearers of the cultural tradition has created the interactive link over which a two-way flow of information and knowledge is possible. In situations when the community is not certain of its memory, the Museum helps them reconstruct the custom, or sometimes suggests how to maintain the right amount of traditional elements and prevent over commercialization of the custom. By organizing the exhibitions, theme workshops for all generations, public debates, writing papers on the subject of celebrating St George's Day in Turopolje, we make ourselves ubiquitous in the public eye. And by the usage of the modern multimedia, we document and archive different performances, that is, the ways of celebrating and preserving the custom.

The custom of celebrating St George's Day is nominated for the UNESCO's Representative list of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, and for the national List of the Protected Intangible Cultural Goods. The synergy of all the above mentioned participants set the procedure in motion. It was done in the spirit of the Convention whose goal it is "to preserve and protect the intangible cultural heritage, to develop the respect for the legacy of the communities, groups and individuals, to raise the awareness at the local, national and international level for better mutual respect and cooperation" (Zebec, 2007:30), and with the belief in the value and the uniqueness of our own cultural tradition. In 2007 St George's processions in Turopolje were added to the Register of Cultural Goods of the Republic of Croatia – on the List of the Protected Cultural Goods. Prescribed measures of protection dictate that the bearer of the cultural good is obligated to stick to the historical and traditional matrix and incidence. Registration of the custom onto the national list created preconditions for registering it onto the UNESCO's Representative list of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The first application was a failure, but then we applied as a part of multinational nomination of St George's Day and its customs, competing together with the countries of southeast Europe and with Turkey.

Protecting the traditional customs on the national and international level promotes their values and secures their sustainability in the future. In Turopolje there are about twenty associations and cultural institutions (The Museum of Turopolje, the city library, Open University) that preserve, study, promote and present traditional culture, esp. St George's Day customs. Local government financially supports programs of associations and institutions that deal with traditional cultures. The City of Velika Gorica has realized the importance and has supported the nomination of St George's processions for the UNESCO's Representative list of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, by saying: "Registering St George's Day onto the List is of the utmost importance because it is being internationally valued and at the same time it empowers the local community's efforts to preserve its cultural traditions"(The City of Velika Gorica, 2013).

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