

RESTRUCTURING OF THE RITUAL YEAR IN THE POST-SOCIALIST COUNTRIES

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The panel, under the title *Restructuring of the Ritual Year in the post-socialist countries: European values, ideology and ethnography*, was held in Stockholm in August 2010 at the 8th congress of ICEES (International Council for Central and East European Studies) and was dedicated to multifaceted processes in the festival year of former socialist countries. Three specially invited panelists (Ekaterina Anastasova, Bulgaria; Gabor Barna, Hungary; Arunas Vaicekauskas, Lithuania) made their presentations aiming to outline the major trends in the development of the corresponding national ritual years. The discussant Mare Kõiva (Estonia) made some points regarding the relations between official and personal celebrations and summed up the meeting.¹

The theme for this academic discussion continued the questions raised on a smaller scale in 2007 in Stražnice (Czech Republic) where the SIEF (Société Internationale d'Ethnologie et de Folklore) Ritual Year Working Group (President Dr Emily Lyle) held its annual conference under the general title *The Ritual Year and History*. Proceedings of this conference were published in the series of this working group's publications (*The Ritual Year and History* (The Ritual Year 3). Ed. by Irina Sedakova. Stražnice, 2008). At this conference and in the proceedings the correlation between holidays (be them official – state, church, or non-official) and history was set up as a major research problem, especially for the countries of the former USSR and the socialist bloc. At the Stockholm panel we decided to concentrate on a certain historical period – that of the last two decades when the socialist regime gave way to another new period in the history of many East European countries.

The change of epochs, regimes (and leading political and religious figures) results in new rituals, rethinking of heritage and inventing of traditions followed up by restructuring of the whole ritual year. Thus the official bank holidays, a single ritual or a part of one festivity (performance, folklore, magic object or art object), even individual celebrations are subject to historical transformations.

The changes in the ritual year(s) in the Eastern Europe and former socialist republics of the USSR proved to be a very deep, active and on-going project.

Gradual rejecting or rethinking of socialist celebrations, restoring of older, pre-socialist holidays and inventing of new national ritual complexes are still taking place in many countries.

Constructing of a ritual year has its specific features in each country. The historical dates which are incorporated into the run of the festival year and the political and religious (including the confession) background differ, as far as the balance between church and secular celebrations, the attitudes towards the European Union are concerned. The speed of changes and establishment of new (old new) values involved is also different. The first to change the calendars were the countries which regained their freedom in 1991.

The modern Russian ritual calendar can be opposed to that of many other former socialist countries which include such dates as “The invasion of the Red Army”, “Soviet occupation of the country”, or “the Day of the socialist revolution” as black memorial dates, and vice versa, with the liberation as a red day in the calendars. Each of the former Soviet republics in their turn develops their own attitudes toward the Soviet and pre-Soviet past. Smaller and bigger corrections (like the date of the Day of Independence in Belarus – from 27th to 3rd of July), innovations (a new memorial date on the 27th of June – the Day of Reconciliation in Tajikistan), discussions on potential calendric changes (introduction of the Day of the Soviet Occupation in Georgia), etc. demonstrate hard work by the government in shaping of the national ritual year.

Thus the panel in Stockholm aimed at drawing more attention to **comparative** studies of the social, political, cultural, religious, ethnological, philosophical, etc. status of modern festivals, which during the last two decades developed new semantics and structure. Along with the specific elements, which I mentioned above, all the changes in the system of the calendar festivities in post-socialist countries exemplify identical facets, based on old and new European values. All these and many other issues have to be analyzed for each country separately and then systematically compared.

SEVERAL COMMENTS ON THE CASE OF MODERN RUSSIA

The last decade of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century made “the restructuring of the ritual year” one of the most topical subjects in the fields of religious and cultural studies, sociology, ethnology, political science and folklore in Russia. Unfortunately there are no academic studies which have interpreted these processes in depth.

The significance of this restructuring becomes obvious if we compare the Russian official calendars of 2000 (not to mention 1985) and of 2010, or just name the changes in the calendar celebrations during the last years. Many governmental decisions were made immediately after the decay of the USSR,

in the early 90s, when the new Day of Independence was established and the religious celebrations were legalized.

This process is not over – the state ritual year in Russia is still under construction, or reconstruction, and historical events play a crucial role in this process. It is a difficult task to make the new ritual year applicable to a new country and a new society, and meanwhile to keep the “old-fashioned” people pleased. We are at present witnessing a variety of attitudes to the events of history and different ways of incorporating them into the calendar

I will take as an example some of the new Russian holidays where important modifications to the ritual year followed in 2004–2005. To the unpopular Day of Independence, or Day of Russia (12 June), another “red” date was added. The Great Red Day of the October Revolution, which marked the ideologically most important ritual complex, was declared a memorial date and an ordinary working day. Instead, as the official holiday and day-off work, there was introduced an enigmatic date of the 4th of November – the Day of People’s Unity – in commemoration of very ambiguous historical events of 1612. Minin and Pozharsky coming from Nizhniy Novgorod fought off the Polish-Lithuanian occupation forces (and Pseudo-Dmitry) and the ruler became Tsar Mikhail Romanov, thus putting an end to the time of turmoil. Another motive for choosing this date came out later on, in 2006, from the Orthodox Church authorities, for this is the day of the Kazan icon of the Mother of God, celebrated also on the 4th of November. The coincidence is even more impressive to those who know that in Moscow the memorial to Minin and Pozharsky is erected close to the Church of Kazan Mother of God (destroyed by the communists and rebuilt during 1990–1993) in Red Square.

The combination of historical and religious content for facilitating the development of the national idea is at the core of many modern calendric decisions. Even more, religious content sometimes dominates and gives way to the invention of new national holidays. In 2008 the Day of Family, Love and Fidelity (8 July) was introduced in Russia and it immediately became very popular. This celebration grew up from the local veneration of the Saints Peter and Fevronia of Murom (beatified in 1547), the patrons of spouses, and was declared as nation-wide. The monuments of Saints Peter and Fevronia are erected in many Russian cities (and will be erected in many more), marking the places for new celebrations and performances (like bestowing specially issued medals with the images of the Saints to the couples who have lived together for 50 years). This holiday has a Russian flavor, in opposition to the Western celebrations of St Valentine’s Day which is still very popular in Russia. St Valentine’s Day is complementing the other “gender holidays” of Soviet origin – the Day of the Defender (23 February) and the International Women’s Day (8 March), which lost their ideological contexts and turned into commercial celebrations of love and romance. The new holiday has to be regarded in

the context of a series of other meaningful opposing factors: “Catholic/Russian Orthodox”, “somebody else’s, imported” as opposed to “our own”, “new/ traditional”, “partnership/family”, etc. This is not a bank holiday, but the mass-media made it very popular all around Russian territory.

There are also unending discussions of the restructuring of the calendar in the Russian Duma: whether to change the status of the Victory Day (9 May), and which memorial dates to add to the ever growing list of them in Russia.

In conclusion. Being so vivid, obvious and well-illustrated, the transformations of the national ritual years, as it seems to me, are underestimated by the scholars in many countries. Probably one of the reasons for that is the similar “simplicity” and availability of the ethnological, folklore and sociological data. The traditional folklorists and ethnologists of the so to say before-Internet generations are not used to obtaining the research material so easily, close at hand, and to utilize it for theoretical generalization. Another reason, in my opinion, is the reluctance of the post-socialist societies, at this historical stage, to follow the decisions of the governments which in many countries are unpopular and are subject to crucial criticism.

Meanwhile the study of the modern calendric celebrations, if investigated in a typological and contrastive prospective, can give a lot to the understanding and evaluation of the dynamics of the official and non-official holidays and reasons for that. The analysis of this synchronical layer undoubtedly leads to the understanding of crucial diachronic points. The change from the ideological to non-ideological politics, correspondingly from closeness to openness (which brought in many borrowings), from aggressive atheism to open, supported and even advertised religiosity, etc. created a revolution in the scope and scale of values. It coincided with the universal process of globalization and the development of new technologies, which added to the rise of visual characteristics in any celebration, its commercialism, and the new achievements of the new generations of the 21st century, as some sociologists and psychologists note – joyfulness, infantilism, eagerness to perform. This last point goes along with some positive developments in society – the growth of the non-official support for local festivities and folklore events. Thus globalization is accepted in post-socialist countries but is resisted by keeping and promoting of the national ethnographic calendric customs and rituals.

NOTES

¹ This topic was found that interesting and promising that in September a panel was arranged in Tartu at the conference *From Language to Mind. On the occasion of 110th Birthday of Academician Oscar Loorits and 75th Birthday of Pille Kippar*, see <http://www.folklore.ee/r/fo/konve/2010/loorits/teesid.pdf>.