

# CULTURE OF FEASTS TODAY. COMMEMORIAL RITES OF NATIONAL AND CALENDAR FEASTS\*

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**Abstract:** The traditional ritual year which was characterized by Christian feasts for centuries on one hand, and the cosmological, agrarian (economic), individual, family, and local communal holidays on the other, has been rapidly changing between 1945 and 1956 during the first Socialist/Communist years. A new system of the ritual year was established according to the new ideology and power situation: the so-called Socialist ritual year. It was characterized by international, Soviet and national-communist feasts, refusing the religious holidays. Some softening were introduced only after the 1956 Hungarian revolution. The main Christian feasts were again accepted (Christmas, Easter). This Socialist period with its Socialist feasts lasted for 45 years when in 1989/1990 the legal power system was changed.

After the election in 1990 the totalitarian Socialist ideology with its symbolic holidays has mostly disappeared. New national feasts were created e.g. the memorial day of the 1956 revolution which was a prohibited alternative feast during the Socialist period. Patriotic holidays have regained their importance. The symbols of the feasts have been totally changed. The traditional Christian ritual year has been partly restored, but in a rather secularized society. Christmas, Easter have been commercialized. Local feasts have emerged which serve first of all the restoration of the civil society and express the local identity.

The paper deals with the process of changes in Hungary showing the role of the holidays and the ritual year in society.

**Keywords:** feast, memory, power, Socialist, Christian, patriotic and local feasts, role of the feasts in society, commemorial rites

## THE FEAST

Feasts bring the feeling of order and stability to our lives and world.<sup>1</sup> The most important social and cultural function of the feast is its role of ordering time, ensuring order.<sup>2</sup> People celebrate on a particular occasion. That is, they remember something, or hope for

\* The research work was supported by the Hungarian National Research Fund (OTKA) under grant No: K68325.

<sup>1</sup> BÁLINT 1943.

<sup>2</sup> LEACH 2000: 101.

something.<sup>3</sup> The feast makes the past present. The relationship to the past shapes the identity of the remembering group. Remembering their own history, faith, religion, making it present at the feast shapes their own self-identity. Collective identity is often expressed not in everyday but in ceremonial communication.<sup>4</sup> The feast is the world's approval that everything that is good and it is good to be.<sup>5</sup>

Andreas Bimmer, a German folklorist, classified feasts into two groups: public and private feasts.<sup>6</sup>

Public feast	Private feast
National day	
Local and regional days	
a) recurring regional days	
b) days celebrating the foundation of provinces and cities	
Feasts of work	Factory feasts
Calendar feasts	Calendar feasts (in families, companies, etc.)
Feasts of the church year	Feasts of the church year (family)
Anniversaries	Anniversaries
Local feasts	Feasts of formal and informal groups
a) village days, church fair, shooting meetings	Feasts of societies (if the society does not organise public feasts)
b) town feasts	Family feasts
Feasts of town districts	Feasts among friends and acquaintances

There are some coincidences in this table, and the elements of the two columns complement each other.

Christmas, Easter and Pentecost are our biggest Christian feasts. This list now not only reflects the chronology but also shows the order of importance in religious practice. In other words, Christmas has become our biggest feast, followed by Easter that has been eclipsed by it, while Pentecost hardly registers at all. But it was not always so. In the early Christian world at first only the Resurrection was celebrated. It was only from the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century that Christmas gradually became a feast day. Theologically, Easter is still the greatest Christian feast. The background and reasons of the shifting of importance from Easter to Christmas is not enough investigated and interpreted.

Today many different forms of the celebration of church feasts can be observed in Hungarian society. The person celebrating a feast rises above the everyday, steps out of the accustomed time, exceeds the spatial and temporal limitations of existence. The celebra-

<sup>3</sup> NYÍRI 1975: 140–141.

<sup>4</sup> BARNÁ 2006: 259.

<sup>5</sup> NYÍRI 1975: 139.

<sup>6</sup> BIMMER 1977: 40.

tion of feasts opens wider connections and relativises the world of work and the everyday.<sup>7</sup> The feast is an exceptional time when we rejoice at the whole of life because we rejoice at one stage of it.

Feasts can also have an important role in our post-modern world and complex society: the feasts ensure the flow of formative (regulating, shaping) knowledge within the group and within society. Repetition in the feast abrogates the difference between “was” and “is”.<sup>8</sup> The feast enables the individual to become one with himself. The feast brings together existence on two time planes: the vertical time of the feast and the horizontal time of everyday life.<sup>9</sup>

## FEAST, MEMORY, POWER

The feast links past, present and future, giving meaning to human life. People who celebrate embrace the past and the future, accepting also dimensions of time that are hidden.<sup>10</sup> The feast appears in time as history.<sup>11</sup>

Until recent times interest in the past was not a special historical enquiry but a stake in the existing system, in fixing, legitimising and confirming the given relations, in conciliation and change.<sup>12</sup>

Our structure of feasts orders occasions for remembering of different origin and groups them into a whole. Obviously, a feast structure is effective if these components are organised into a whole on the basis of a largely uniform world-view, there is the least possible discrepancy among them and it is accepted and adopted by the widest possible strata of society or its whole. However, this is rarely the case in today’s pluralist nation states.

This means that the interests, aspirations, and identifiable character of the given power can be clearly seen in the system of feasts which is the fixing of memory in time. The power itself is one of the stimulants of remembering. The state feast is the forum and means for creating a connection between the citizen (the individual) and the existing political power (communal organisation).

The state organisation is an institution not only for administration but also for the exercise of power. The feast culture of a state power reflects the goals projected before the community. The political culture of the given regime can also be observed in the feasts. (How the state makes people celebrate, what feasts it makes compulsory.) We can also see whether the political administration is capable of creating an emotional and intellectual community with the thinking of the citizens through the feast culture.<sup>13</sup> This is well illustrated by the changes in feasts following changes of political regimes in Hungary in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and in competing and conflicting the state feast versus religious, church calendar feast.

<sup>7</sup> NYÍRI 1975: 140.

<sup>8</sup> ASSMANN 2000: 193.

<sup>9</sup> ASSMANN 2000: 194.

<sup>10</sup> NYÍRI 1975: 143.

<sup>11</sup> ELIADE 1996: 103–105; VÁRNAGY 1993: 356.

<sup>12</sup> RÜSEN 1999: 42.

<sup>13</sup> ALDRIDGE 2008: 142.

## THE FEASTS IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the structure of feasts in Hungary largely coincided with the system of European Catholic feasts. It was a system with multiple layers: determined by state, national, church, economic, natural, individual, communal and occupational factors.<sup>14</sup> No major changes were made in this stabilised structure until the communist take-over of power in 1948. The first step the communists took was to exclude the Catholic feasts from the public holidays (in 1947 the Immaculate Conception, in 1948 the Feast of the Purification of the Virgin Mary, the Feast of the Assumption and the Feast of the Nativity of Mary), then in 1949 a few general Christian feasts were eliminated (Epiphany, Ascension Day, the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul). The only old (Christian) feast retained was New Year's Day. In 1953 Easter Monday ceased to be a public holiday. The second day of Christmas and then Pentecost were dropped from the list of the public holidays in 1954. (The second day of Christmas and Easter was not restored until after the 1956 revolution.) Parallel with this, the ideology of the centuries-old customs was re-interpreted: Christmas became the "pine-tree feast", Nicholas became "Father Winter". 20<sup>th</sup> August, Saint Stephen's day, was a feast of both state and church in the earlier system. The feast of Saint Stephen on 20<sup>th</sup> August became the day of the new bread and the socialist constitution. The communists transformed the day of the first Hungarian king and saint and the anniversary of the founding of the state, the celebration of the state administration into the day of the new bread and the socialist constitution introduced in 1949.

The national days introduced in earlier decades met with the same fate: in their case the objection was that their Hungarian and national, patriotic character was incompatible with the ideal of socialist internationalism: while 15<sup>th</sup> March, the day of commemorating the bourgeois revolution and freedom struggle of 1848/1849 against the Habsburgs, which became an official national feast only in 1927, continued to be called a national day but after 1951 it was no longer a public holiday. In the dictatorship of the proletariat the tradition of national uprising against a foreign power was incompatible with the official pro-Soviet sentiment. The strength of the resistance to the ban could be measured during the 1956 revolution: the outward symbols of March 1848 (the national flag red-white-green in place of the red flag, the Kossuth arms in place of the socialist arms) had a great mobilising power during and after the days of the revolution and still have today.

In place of the old feasts, the new feasts of the new power system and the ideology it represented were introduced. The model was the Soviet Union that placed great emphasis on its system of rites as conscious political action. The communist system was built on rationalism, materialism, atheism, and the victory of science over religion. However, for the most part its festive rites were created as a replacement or substitute for religious rites.<sup>15</sup> The parts of this system are: the calendar feasts, the rites of passage, mass parades, the leader cult, the places of secular pilgrimage.<sup>16</sup> According the Christel Lane this was already a political religion.<sup>17</sup>

The former Christian church feasts were replaced by a large number of occupational

<sup>14</sup> BÁLINT 1943.

<sup>15</sup> ALDRIDGE 2008: 153.

<sup>16</sup> ALDRIDGE 2008: 153–157.

<sup>17</sup> Cited by ALDRIDGE 2008: 157.

and strata feasts created by the communist party and state. Foremost of these were women’s day (8<sup>th</sup> March) and the army day (29<sup>th</sup> September), followed by children’s day, teachers’ day (first Sunday of June), railway workers’ day, miners’ day, etc.

Following the Soviet pattern, family life was also politicised. Propaganda began against the church feasts. A name-giving celebration was introduced in place of christening, civil weddings became almost the only forms of wedding, at funerals colleagues officiated in place of a priest and cantor, and school or factory choirs sang. To be “progressive” meant to be against the church and religion. The opposition to religion and the relentless struggle against national/patriotic sentiments, movements and feasts indicate what the alternatives to socialist ideology were.<sup>18</sup>

The feast calendar (1945–1989)

Date	Name	Public Holiday	Note
1 <sup>st</sup> January	New Year	yes	
8 <sup>th</sup> March	International Women’s Day	no	
15 <sup>th</sup> March	Day of the 1848 Revolution	no	National Day, but working day, after 1956 school holiday but with compulsory school event
21 <sup>st</sup> March	Day of the Republic of Soviets	no	observed from 1969
4 <sup>th</sup> April	Liberation Day	yes	introduced from 1950
1 <sup>st</sup> May	Labour Day	yes	observed from 1949
20 <sup>th</sup> August	Day of the Foundation of the State	yes	state day, day of the new bread and day of the 1949 (communist) constitution
29 <sup>th</sup> September	Day of the People’s Army	no	day of the victory of the Hungarian army over Austrian forces at Pákozd in 1848
6 <sup>th</sup> October	Day of the Martyrs of Arad	no	day of national commemoration, commemoration held in secondary schools
7 <sup>th</sup> November	Day of the Great October Socialist Revolution	yes	a public holiday from 1955, it was a working day only on 7 <sup>th</sup> November 1956
25–26 <sup>th</sup> December	Christmas	yes no	from 1950–56 observed as pine-tree feast

After the 1956 revolution, at the same time as the reprisals there was a certain easing: for example Easter Monday and the second day of Christmas were again made public holidays. But 15<sup>th</sup> March, the national day, the most dangerous “national feast”, became only a school holiday. The state recognised as public holidays New Year’s Day, Easter Monday, 4<sup>th</sup> April, 1<sup>st</sup> May, and 20<sup>th</sup> August. In 1969, 21<sup>st</sup> March, the anniversary of the short-lived communist dictatorship (1919 Republic of Soviets) was also added to the system of feasts.

<sup>18</sup> ALDRIDGE 2008: 152–153.

The intention was to reduce the role of 15<sup>th</sup> March by linking 15<sup>th</sup> March, 21<sup>st</sup> March and 4<sup>th</sup> April as the so-called Revolutionary Youth Days. This remained the system of state feasts for decades.

The majority of the Hungarian people could not identify with the socialist feasts imposed by the political authorities. This can be observed especially in the alternative celebrations and demonstrations on 15<sup>th</sup> March and 23<sup>rd</sup> October held regularly from the 1970s and suppressed with great brutality by the socialist authorities. Only Women's Day and the picnic-like celebrations held for May Day became popular. However, this situation eroded both festive structures: the people rejected the socialist system but were not able to observe the other and parallel with the secularisation excluded it from their lives and so it was marginalised, partly forgotten.

A new system of feasts took shape with the change of the political system in 1989–1990. The feasts with socialist and communist ideological connections disappeared and there has been a strengthening of national feasts and the church feasts that were already partly secularised. And new feasts also arose. Special emphasis was placed on the celebration of 15<sup>th</sup> March, 20<sup>th</sup> August and 23<sup>rd</sup> October, that had earlier been opportunities for alternative celebration. Because of the separation of church and state, the state does not tolerate all the Christian church feasts, but on the basis of tradition accepts Christmas, Easter, Pentecost and All Saints Days as public holidays. These feasts have lost their religious and denominational aspects and have become largely secularised and commercialised.<sup>19</sup> This is particularly the case for the so-called bronze, silver and gold Sundays before Christmas now known only as major Christmas shopping occasions. The declaration of All Saints Day as a public holiday makes it easier to cultivate the memory of ancestors. Over the past decades this day has lost its Catholic character, and together with its Catholic rites (such as lighting candles on the graves) has become a social feast above denomination. But it is only on the following Sunday that the Catholic church is able to observe and celebrate many feasts recognised as public holidays in many countries of Central Europe, such as Ascension Day or Corpus Christi.

After the elections in April 2010 when the conservative right-wing government won with a two-thirds majority certain days of a national/patriotic character were added to the public feasts: 4<sup>th</sup> June, the day of the Trianon peace dictate (1920), for example, was declared a day of national cohesion.

<sup>19</sup> DeCHANT 2009.

## The new feast calendar in Hungary

Date	Name	Public Holiday	Note
1 <sup>st</sup> January	New Year	yes	
1 <sup>st</sup> February	Day of the Republic	no	
25 <sup>th</sup> February	Commemoration for the victims of communist dictatorship	no	commemoration held in secondary schools
15 <sup>th</sup> March	Day of the 1848 Revolution	yes	National Day, first made a public holiday in 1989. Official national state day from 1990.
	Easter	yes	Sunday and the following Monday
16 <sup>th</sup> April	Day of Commemoration for the Victims of the Holocaust	no	from 2001 commemorative day in secondary schools
1 <sup>st</sup> May	Labour Day	yes	observed from 1949
	Pentecost	yes	Sunday and Monday since 1994
4 <sup>th</sup> June	Day of National Cohesion	no	anniversary of the signing of the Trianon peace dictate
19 <sup>th</sup> June	Day of Independent Hungary	no	since 1991 the Red Army have lost Hungary
20 <sup>th</sup> August	Day of the Foundation of the State	yes	national and state day, day of the new bread and day of the 1949 (communist) constitution
6 <sup>th</sup> October	Day of the Martyrs of Arad	no	day of national commemoration, commemoration held in secondary schools
23 <sup>rd</sup> October	Day of the 1956 October Revolution, declaration of the 3 <sup>rd</sup> Hungarian Republic	yes	national day
1 <sup>st</sup> November	All Saints Day	yes	
25–26 <sup>th</sup> December	Christmas	yes	

## SUMMARY

The traditional ritual year which was characterised for centuries by the Christian feasts on the one hand, and the individual, family, and local communal feasts on the other, has been rapidly changing between 1945 and 1956 during the first Socialist/Communist years. A completely new system of the ritual year was established according to the new ideol-

ogy and power situation: the so called Socialist ritual year. Some changes were introduced after the 1956 Hungarian revolution. One part of the Christian feasts were again accepted (Christmas, Easter). But this Socialist period with its Socialist feasts lasted for 45 years when in 1989/1990 the legal power system was changed.

After the election in 1990 when the first democratic Parliament and government was elected basic changes started in Hungary. The traditional Christian ritual year has been partly restored, Pentecost and some Marian feasts have again been accepted but in a rather secularised society. Christmas has been totally commercialised. Local feasts emerged which served first of all the restoration of the civil society and expression of the local identity. New national feasts were created, especially the feast of the 1956 revolution, which was an alternative feast during the Socialist period.

Beside the former dominating traditional Christian world-view many other views which their festivals appeared in the pluralistic society.

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