

TRADITIONAL CULTURE OF SLOVAK COLONISTS IN THE LOWLAND – SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ADAPTATION ISSUE

Peter SLAVKOVSKÝ

Institute of Ethnology, Slovak Academy of Sciences
Klemensova 19, 81364 Bratislava, Slovak Republic,
e-mail: peter.slavkovsky@savba.sk

Abstract: The process of cultural adaptation of the Slovak colonists to the new living conditions in Lowland did not result in the cultural destruction. There was a selective transfer of cultural information that corresponded with the Slovak enclaves' current needs in the new environment. However, the Slovak material culture did not lose its previous role of the main symbol of ethnic identification. Interaction between Slovaks, the majority community and other ethnic minorities, was reflected in the material culture. Social conditions in Lowland were favourable for the Slovak colonists' efforts to negotiate the differences between their original material culture and the new one that they were building in the process of construction of their new living environment. The Slovak enclaves in Lowland manifested a high degree of "cultural literacy" – the ability to exist in certain material and social environment. Their cultural competencies that were acquired in the native cultural environment in Slovakia (socialization) were effectively implemented in the multiethnic and multicultural environment. The ability of ethnic community to adapt to the changed living conditions which does not have significant impact on ethnic identification is known as cultural adaptability.¹

Keywords: agrarian culture, cultural adaptability

The Slovaks in the Lowland

As early as in the Middle Ages the historico-political development in the territory of Slovakia determined the creation and shaping of peasant and shepherd cultures whose character was influenced by two factors in particular – geographic location and low economic potential of this area, which was at that time, economically and socially speaking, on the European fringe. In spite of the fact that the cultural system of the traditional folk culture, which frequently bordered almost on seclusion, featured substantial stability, the local population was forced to abandon their homes in times of crises and social movements hoping to improve their economic and social situation. This was the case of Slovakia at

¹ The contribution was supported by the project of the Institute of Ethnology SAS "Slovakia and its identity" („Slovensko a jeho identita“)

the turn of the 17th and 18th centuries during the time of excessive impoverishment of peasants caused by wars, feudal clashes but also due to existence of large estates (manors). Landowners running the lands on their own had to keep increasing the taxes from their leaseholders and the quantity of their work on the estate because of the level of contemporary agrarian culture, underdeveloped market and monetary relations. As the historical documents prove, the first third of the 18th century brought such an enormous growth of landless people and agrarian overpopulation in the mountainous and foothill regions of Slovakia that the migration in search of work, initially seasonal and later permanent one, became inevitable.

Slovak colonists became interested in the Lowland (territory on the borders of present-day Hungary, Romania, Serbian Vojvodina, and Croatian Slavonia). Beginnings of the Slovak migration to this area date back to the 17th century. The last phase faded as late as the second half of the 19th century.² These colonists started to be referred to as the *Lowland Slovaks*.

The Danubian region has always had a specific cultural position within traditional agrarian culture of the central and southern Europe. This geographical area had been taking shape since the prehistory as a transitional cultural zone where different national cultures could absorb various cultural elements and develop them further on. Apart from common features growing from common cultural basis, different ethnic areas gave birth to cultural specifics as well, that represent a proof of creative abilities of different ethnic communities in this multiethnic milieu.³

Development of the scientific interest in Slovak minorities in central and southern Europe

The research of Slovak minorities living abroad and their culture started to play a significant role in Slovak ethnology only at the end of 1950s. That development reflected the institutionalization and professionalization of science in Slovakia. And manifested itself mostly in various journal articles, that were not always of ethnological nature. More systematic work started as late as the 1970s, that is reflected in numerous bibliographical data comprising of book monographs, scientific proceedings, and studies as well as popular science articles.

From the institutional point of view the research of Slovak minorities was led by two research institutes – Matica slovenská and the present-day Institute of Ethnology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences (IE, SAS). As for the subject matter, the former focused primarily on ethnic history issues, while the latter concentrated on the matters related to traditional culture. And from the geographical point of view, the greatest attention was paid to former Yugoslavia and Hungary. In both cases, the research of local Slovak minorities was carried out not only by researchers from Slovakia but also by the experts from within the Slovak minorities living outside Slovakia. Somewhat less information was available on the Slovak minorities in Romania and Poland. There were minimal findings, or almost none, on the Slovak minority in Ukraine.

The fact that the research of traditional culture of Slovak minorities in central and southern Europe was not a subject of systematic scientific work at that time was caused by

² STRÁCKY 1966.

³ FROLEC 1992: 13.

various political and financial reasons. Existing findings were mainly a result of individual interests and were scattered in different journals and collections of academic papers. The only attempt at a more complete picture was a monograph represented by R. Bednárík entitled *Slováci v Juhoslávii*.⁴

Various atlases, produced from 1997 to 2003 by the Institute of Ethnology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, have offered the most complex portrayal of traditional culture of Slovak minorities in this region so far. In 1990, the Slovak Academy of Sciences in cooperation with Slovenská kartografia (Slovak cartography) published a major cartographic work *Etnografický atlas Slovenska* (EAS). During the preparation of this atlas, the authors were already planning to use the ethno-cartographic method also in the research of Slovak minorities in neighbouring countries. However, the extent of research work on the territory of Slovakia, difficulties stemming from the processing of collected data as well as financial problems had in the end prevented this part of the original project of the *Etnografický atlas Slovenska* to be completed. However, the gnoseological efficiency of the *Etnografický atlas Slovenska* aroused the interest of A. Divičanová and O. Krupa from the Slovak Research Institute in Békéscsaba (Hungary), which resulted in the preparation of methodically similar project in cooperation with the Institute of Ethnology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences.⁵

The Atlas initiated similar research in other countries of central and southern Europe that was in 1997–2002 institutionally supported by three scientific projects of the Scientific Grant Agency (VEGA) of Ministry of Education, Slovak Republic and Slovak Academy of Sciences. In Poland, Romania, Ukraine, Croatia, and Yugoslavia, the research was carried out by the members of the IE, SAS with the participation of researchers from other Slovak scientific institutions as well as by many members of Slovak minority organizations in the respective countries. Research materials are now available from sixty-seven Slovak localities in Poland, Ukraine, Romania, Hungary, Yugoslavia and Croatia.⁶

Common as well as diverse cultural features of ethnic communities can be expressed very efficiently by the cartographic method. It represents relatively exact means of determination of scope of monitored cultural phenomena, which has been an ambition of ethnography since its inception. The research material was collected in a relatively short time by a uniform method and it offers the means of documenting the impact of the interaction among various majority socio-cultural systems on ethno-cultural phenomena in the environment of Slovak minorities and determines the level of their adaptation, acculturation or cultural stability.

⁴ BEDNÁRIK 1964.

⁵ *Atlas ľudovej kultúry Slovákov v Maďarsku* (Békešská Čaba 1996).

⁶ The obtained findings from these countries were processed into the following books: Benža, Mojmir, Slavkovský, Peter, Stoličná, Rastislava : *Atlas ľudovej kultúry Slovákov v Maďarsku* (Békešská Čaba 1996), Benža, Mojmir, Slavkovský, Peter, Stoličná, Rastislava : *Atlas ľudovej kultúry Slovákov v Rumunsku* (Nadlac 1998), Benža, Mojmir, Slavkovský, Peter, Stoličná, Rastislava : *Atlas ľudovej kultúry Slovákov v Juhoslávii* (Báčsky Petrovec 2002), Benža, Mojmir, Slavkovský, Peter, Stoličná, Rastislava : *Ľudová kultúra Slovákov v Chorvátsku* (Našice 200), Benža, Mojmir, Slavkovský, Peter, Stoličná, Rastislava : *Atlas ľudovej kultúry Slovákov v Chorvátsku* and synthesis *Atlas tradičnej kultúry slovenských menšín v strednej a južnej Európe* (Nadlak 2006).

Traditional culture of Slovak colonists

The ethnologists and historians studying Slovak enclaves in the Lowland (J. Sirácky, A. Divičanová, J. Botík and others) agree that *“the creation of compact, relatively homogenous and historically stable Slovak islands in the Lowland together with the prevailing peasant work and settling of colonists in rural environment with its typical social and economic isolation, can be viewed as decisive elements in the sense that ethnic and cultural developments of these islands frequently corresponded in many respects with the developments taking place in the original territory. That means that the prerequisites for continuous preservation of the basic elements of their ethnicity, i.e. »Slovakness«, which are considered to be the language, national consciousness (ethnonym) and various expressions of material and spiritual culture, were not disturbed in the lives of the Slovaks in the Lowland, even after their settling in their new homeland.”*⁷ The decisive factor for their further ethno-cultural development was that this process was taking place in the agrarian-rustic environment in relatively numerous enclaves.

In spite of the J. Botík's view quoted above, we must say that in regard to traditional culture the Slovaks settling in the Lowland had to overcome also a very important cultural break and had to be able to pass an examination in cultural adaptation.⁸ Of great importance in this process was the experience of Slovak seasonal agricultural workers, who in the course of their frequent trips to the Lowland represented a certain cultural intermediate step in the process of adaptation of the Slovak colonists to the new environment. As the historical and ethnographical realities have shown, the Slovaks succeeded in passing this crucial examination and have been considered excellent farmers and good economists throughout the whole territory of southern Hungary, Vojvodina, and Slavonia.

This fact takes on a special significance when we consider the economico-social level of the area from which the Slovaks had come from. In the 18th century, Slovakia had been outside modern civilization movement in Europe and found herself on the periphery of its economic and social development. This historical trend of marginalization was also strengthened by agricultural revolution, which started in Europe in the 18th century and represented a qualitatively new development of European agriculture – a transition from traditional methods and technologically outdated techniques to the new ones: to an alternating system of crops, intense shed-breeding of cattle, the growing of fodder, potatoes and technical crops. The villages from which Slovak colonists originated could not respond to this challenge. Their cultural heritage in the area of agrarian culture consisted of traditional forms. That makes it even more imperative to appreciate their cultural vitality and ability to draw from the original traditional culture of Slovak regions that could be used in the new conditions as well as the ability to incorporate new elements in the multiethnic environment, the corresponding to the production conditions existing in their new homeland.

That is why it is possible to agree with the opinion that *“the members of ethnic minorities are important not only because they have been representatives of genetically varied national cultures but also because they have been preserving and developing various manifestations and values of these cultures in a specific way, different from the conditions in the original ethnic territory.”*⁹

⁷ Botík 1995: 433.

⁸ FILOVÁ 1975; Botík 2007; ŠTOLC 1971; PODOLÁK 1975.

⁹ Botík 1995: 432.

Ethnological research of material culture have shown that in the realm of the organization of material environment, the possibilities of economic and social growth as well as the acceleration of modernization processes are becoming much stronger factors than the tradition. As S. Švecová pointed out in her study,¹⁰ no information of this kind has been preserved for as long as the period of three consecutive generations. The information on the phenomena of the material culture that stops to fulfil their actual functions in everyday life is very quickly forgotten. A. Divičanová points out that commensurately with this phenomenon the traditional culture loses its position in the cultural identification of an ethnic community.¹¹

The development of threshing methods used by the Slovaks in Vojvodina and Croatia can serve as an example of these processes. The Slovak colonists came mainly from those parts of Slovakia where flails represented a main threshing tool. A method of trampling the crops by the cattle, so-called stamping, is a technique, that was imported into Slovakia from the Balkans via Hungary. Southern Slovakia represents the northern boundary of its occurrence in Europe. M. Gavazzi views this method to be one of the manifestations of the Mediterranean culture.¹² It is therefore only natural that the Lowland Slovaks had the opportunity to become familiar with it as with a widely spread and used method and to adopt it. However, its usage ceased to exist among all ethnic communities in the Lowland because of the introduction and the availability of machine threshers (*vršalice*), that ethnically unified this part of agrarian culture as early as after World War I.

Slovak villages in the Lowland consisted of an agrarian population that was tied for a long time to one place due to their bond with the land, while living in a multiethnic environment. This fact went hand in hand with the progressive process of agriculture modernization, which kept drawing agrarian cultures of the Lowland Slovaks and the members of other ethnic communities in this region more closely together. The picture of local agrarian culture in the first half of the 20th century is therefore a result of this ethno-cultural development in soil-climatic, economic, and social conditions of the life of the Lowland population.

Conclusion

The process of cultural adaptation of the Slovak colonists to new living conditions in the Lowland was not one with cultural destruction; it was happening in an open cultural system and on a rational basis. The transfer of cultural information was selective, able to adapt to the needs, and to cope with new social and cultural environment. In this process, especially the material culture of the Slovaks kept losing its role in their cultural identification as an ethnic community. The result of the cultural dialogue that the Lowland Slovaks initiated with the majority community and other ethnic minorities was a common material culture within which only the terminology preserved its ethnic potential. Favorable economic and social conditions in the Lowland helped the Slovak colonists to overcome very quickly the differences between their original material culture and the one, which they had to build in order to organize their new life environment.

¹⁰ ŠVECOVÁ 1990.

¹¹ DIVIČANOVÁ 1994.

¹² FROLEC 1992: 15.

The Lowland Slovaks adjusted themselves to new conditions also in terms of building their homes by using unfired and burnt bricks instead of using archaic building methods and materials, by using burnt roof tiles as roof covering instead of the straw, and by adapting the layout of the houses as well as of the outbuildings to their Lowland environment. Changes also took place in traditional clothing, which acquired very significant urban character already as early as in the beginning of the 20th century. This urbanization did not consist only of new types of factory-made materials for making the clothes but also involved changes in the styling, in particular, that of upper garments. The modifications in the diet of the Lowland Slovaks can be also judged in a positive manner. Better economic conditions enabled them to use a greater amount and variety of foodstuffs in their diet. Their food was therefore not only more nutritional but also more varied. The Slovaks learnt to make use of new foodstuffs (corn, tomatoes, pepper, and meat products) that gradually made their way also into their agrarian culture and terminology. Their food repertory, however, preserved many of traditional meals coming from their cultural heritage that the Slovak housewives had brought with them from Slovakia.¹³ On an everyday basis, they kept interacting with the members of Hungarian, Serbian, Romanian, Bulgarian and other ethnic groups. *“Their contacts were mutually urgent, and from the survival point of view inevitable and profitable. Requirements of the new environment undoubtedly came into conflict with production methods and social traditions kept alive in their old homeland. Many of those, therefore, acquired in the new environment only the value of a tradition.”*¹⁴

This process of mutual influence in the spheres of material, social, and spiritual life of the Slovak emigrants is viewed by J. Botík as acculturation, or even transculturation since this process could also be multidirectional. In terms of qualitative line – adaptation course – acculturation – assimilation, I would consider the term “adaptation” most appropriate to express the development of the material culture of the Slovaks in this multicultural environment. The adaptation of an ethnic community to modified life conditions without changing their cultural and ethnic nature is understood as the ability of cultural adaptation. In another article J. Botík himself states that the Lowland Slovaks as a community were characterized by several common features that can be best labelled as *peasant world*.¹⁵ This is related to the fact that the Slovak emigrants heading for the Lowland came almost exclusively from the peasant population. The agriculture remained their main occupation and main source of living even in the new environment. They preserved all elements of the agrarian culture, which were compatible with their new way of farming. The introduction of a new crop into the sowing procedures and adoption of new forms of already known agricultural tools that had been more suitable for the local soil and climatic conditions, I consider to be only quantitative changes – the ability to adapt to new production conditions.

Tradition as a qualitative category of cultural values, concentrated in collective consciousness of people and passed down from one generation to another is an essential prerequisite for the existence of every ethnic community. In spite of that, the Slovaks in

¹³ BENŽA 2002; STOLČNÁ 2002.

¹⁴ ŠTOLC 1971: 67.

¹⁵ BOTÍK 2007: 179.

their minority environment were quickly forgetting the information on cultural phenomena, which lost their real function in everyday life. In order to avoid the tradition acting as a conservative force in the social organism, the new generation selects from it those cultural phenomena that in terms of their lifestyle correspond to their expectations.

Every period of the social development presents new ideals in terms of values, which then the people try to attain.¹⁶ This dynamic cultural process is based on the adaptation of cultural values to the needs and the potential of a society, in which they are being created and which, at the same time, they help to shape. Cultural values change and develop in their complexity and sophistication by means of innovations that can be of two kinds: either they are being created within a culture or they come from the outside as cultural borrowings. L. Pospíšil notes that the innovations formed within a culture are considered in general the main factors of culture development, while the cultural borrowings are only regarded to be the culture's secondary source of growth. In reality, both kinds of innovations are equally important for the culture's development.¹⁷

Cultural diversity is a proof of human civilization's ability to adapt to actual life conditions. For the life's sustainability, it is as important as the diversity of nature. However, thanks to nature, historical and economico-social conditions the cultures of different nations became interlinked by mutual influence and display many common manifestations. Even though of the fact that the cultural values of traditional peasant communities, passed down for generations, represented the basis of cultural diversity in the past, the cultural convergence with other ethnic communities was also taking place. This was the case of the Lowland Slovaks who in the multi-ethnic environment of the Lowland had to create a life model based on the cultural foundations brought with them from Slovakia so that it would offer them a real chance to survive in the new conditions too.

The Lowland Slovaks succeeded in reaching a high level of cultural literacy – the ability to exist in a given material and social environment. They were able to use efficiently in practice the cultural competences already acquired in the original Slovak environment in the multiethnic and multicultural environment of the Lowland. They were involved in all essential activities that helped to meet material, social, and spiritual needs of individuals as well as whole social groups. The culture itself, however, cannot rely only on its past, it must keep renewing itself with new creativity. Cultural heritage is merely its precondition. It is the creativity that can ensure the adaptation of this form of cultural identity to new material and social conditions.

LITERATURE

DIVIČANOVÁ, Anna. Ed.

1966: *Atlas ľudovej kultúry Slovákov v Maďarsku* [The atlas of folk culture of Slovaks living in Hungary]. Békéscsaba

BEDNÁRIK, Rudolf

1964: *Slováci v Južoslávii* [Slovaks living in Yugoslavia]. Bratislava

¹⁶ PRANDA 1978.

¹⁷ POSPÍŠIL 1997.

BENŽA, Mojmir

- 1994: Tradičný odev ako znak etnicity [Traditional costume as an indicator of ethnicity]. *Etnologické rozpravy*, n.1, p. 63–67.
- 2002: Odev a obuv [Costume and footwear]. *Ludová kultúra Slovákov v Chorvátsku* [Folk culture of Slovaks living in Croatia]. (Ed. Benža, Mojmir) p. 29–32., Našice

BOTIK, Ján

- 1995: Etnokultúrne procesy v podmienkach etnického rozdelenia [Ethno-cultural processes under the conditions of ethnic division]. *Slovenský národopis*, 43, n. 4, p. 431–444.
- 2007: *Etnická história Slovenska* [The ethnic history of Slovakia]. Bratislava

DIVIČANOVÁ, Anna

- 1994: Variabilita kultúrnej identifikácie Slovákov v Maďarsku [Variability of cultural identification of Slovaks living in Hungary]. *Etnologické rozpravy*, n.1, p. 27–34.

FILOVÁ, Božena.

- 1975: *Bývalá uhorská Dolná zem ako predmet záujmu slovenskej národopisnej vedy* [The former Hungarian Lower Land as an object of study of the Slovak ethnography]. *Slovenský národopis*, 23, n. 2, p.193–204.

FROLEC, Václav

- 1992: Kultúrny prostor strední a juhovýchodní Evropy: dimenze lidové kultúry [Cultural space of Central and south-western Europe: dimensions of folk culture]. *Ethnologia Europae Centralis*, n.1, p.11–23.

GOMBOŠ, Ján

- 2008: *Slováci v južnej časti Dolnej zeme (Od konca 17. do konca 18. Storočia)* [Slovaks living in the southern part of Lower Land]. Békéscsaba

KOVAČEVIČOVÁ, Soňa Ed.

- 1990: *Etnografický atlas Slovenska* [The ethnographic atlas of Slovakia]. Bratislava

PODOLÁK, Ján

- 1975: Niektoré otázky štúdia ľudovej kultúry Slovákov v Slavónii [Several issues of investigation of folk culture of Slovaks living in Slovenia]. *Slovenský národopis*, 23, n. 2, p. 265–270.

POSPÍŠIL, Leopold

- 1997: Nezávislé myšlení, věda a civilizace [Independent thinking, science and civilization]. *Acta Universitatis Carolinae – Philosophica et Historica 3, Studia Ethnographica X*, p.13–17.

PRANDA, Adam

- 1978: Formovanie nového systému hodnotových orientácií na súčasnej slovenskej dedine [Formation of a new system of values in the Slovak countryside at present]. *Slovenský národopis*, 26, n. 2, p. 235–249.

SIRÁČEK, Ján

- 1966: *Sťahovanie Slovákov na Dolnú zem v 18. a 19. storočí* [Migration of Slovaks to Lower Land in the 18th and 19th centuries]. Bratislava

SLAVKOVSKÝ, Peter

- 1997: Etnokartografická metóda a výskum slovenských enkláv v Maďarsku [Ethnographic mapping and the research of Slovak enclaves living in Hungary]. In: *Evropský kulturní prostor – jednota v rozmanitosti* [European cultural space: unity in diversity]. (eds.Vařeka, Josef, Holubová, Markéta, Petráňová, Lýdia), p.110–113. Praha
- 2001: Etnicita a civilizačné trendy v materiálnej culture [Ethnicity and trends of civilization in material culture]. In: *Etnológia a kultúrne dedičstvo* [Ethnology and cultural heritage]. (eds. Danglová, Oľga, Stoličná, Rastislava), p.138–144. Bratislava

STOLIČNÁ, Rastislava

- 2002: Chlieb každodenný [Daily bread]. In: *Ludová kultúra Slovákov v Chorvátsku* [Folk culture of Slovaks living in Croatia]. (Ed. Benža, Mojmir) p. 45–50. Našice

ŠTOLC, Jozef

- 1971: Slovenské jazykové ostrovy na Dolnej zemi ako predmet jazykovedného výskumu [Slovak language islands in Lower Land as an object of linguistic research]. In: *Slováci v zahraničí* [Slovaks abroad], n.1, p. 33–77.

ŠVECOVÁ, Soňa

- 1990: Tri razy o tradícii [Three times tradition]. *Acta Universitatis Carolinae – Philosophica et Historica 1. Studia Ethnographica VI*, p. 9–18.