

Hungarian Folk Customs in December

Background

Some of the most important Hungarian celebrations are linked to the Christmas season. Both pagan traditions and the more recently developed peasant customs merge into the holidays of the ecclesiastical year. Ancient beliefs of the pagan period, more newly developed peasant superstitions, Germanic and Slavic influence, customs that spread because of the influence of Christianity and certain elements of the religious concepts of antiquity – all of these can be found in the folk customs and celebrations that are attached to the holidays of the ecclesiastical year. The best example of this is the holiday cycle of Christmas.

Advent



Christmas celebrations begin with Advent, the first day of which is the Sunday that falls closest to St. Andrew's Day. In some places they indicated its beginning by ringing the bells at midnight, and from then on all loud musical entertainment was forbidden. The girls and women could only go to church if they were in black, or at least in dark-coloured dresses.

Saint Nicholas' Day



The celebrating of Saint Nicholas' Day (December 6) is a more recent folk custom. So the giving of gifts to children began to spread in the Hungarian villages only in the 19th century. The Hungarian peasantry adopted the mummery (alajoskodás) from the West, but that seems to be older than gift giving. Thus in Csepreg in 1785 they were already prohibiting this custom: "And because it has been common from ancient times that some people among the citizens, during the night before the day of Bishop Saint Nicholas, go from house to house in different garbs and try to frighten the young children with scary, ugly figures, contrary to common sense, it is strictly ordered that nobody among the citizens shall dare to let their children or their servants go around in such colourful garbs during night before Saint Nicholas' Day."

St. Lucy's Day



Before the Gregorian calendar reform, St. Lucy's Day (Luca-nap), December 13, was the shortest day of the year, which explains why in many places until quite recently the Hungarian peasants counted the lengthening of the days from this day. The women didn't have to work on this day. The men started to make the "Lucy chair" (Luca szék), carving a different piece one day at a time from different kinds of wood, so that the chair could be finished exactly by the time of the Christmas Eve Mass. The person who sat on it during Midnight Mass would see the big-horned witches in the church, but then he had to run homeward right away because if they recognized him he would have been torn apart by them. (Géza Róheim wrote one of his first large-scale monographs about the beliefs of Lucy's Day, the historical precedents for the making of the Lucy chair, its international connections, and its ethno-psychological meaning.) In Transdanubia, children go from house to house on this day and charm the hens with ditties so that they will lay eggs throughout the whole year. They wish all the best to the people of the house with a poem.

Looking for lodgings



A custom called “looking for lodgings” (szálláskeresés) is a recent religious custom. Nine families gathered together and from December 15 on carried the picture of the Holy Family to a different house every day, singing and praying in front of it. Then they would give gifts to a poorer family, as if they were giving them to the Holy Family.

Nativity plays



The most popular Christmas custom is the Nativity play (Betlehemezés), which was known throughout the entire Hungarian linguistic region until recently, and was played even in the cities. The earliest of the Nativity play records speak of mystery plays in the church, going back to the 11th century, but later these were ousted from the churches and in the 17th to 18th centuries were performed in schools and by religious societies. It appears the custom became standard only in the 19th century, at least in the form and by the name known currently.

Generally 16 to 18-year-old boys would play in the Nativity play, girls doing so only among the Matyós, where the Nativity in the shape of a church was carried by an older woman. A runner (kengyelfutó) from among the players goes ahead of the rest, who in Torda of Transylvania ask for admission to enter the house. On an affirmative answer the participants come in. Two “angels” bring in the church-shaped Nativity, and they are followed by King Herod, Joseph the father, and two or three shepherds who lie down in front of the Nativity. Only when everybody has settled down will they start to pretend awakening and begin songs the content of which changes by regions.

Generally after such an introduction comes the brief description of the birth of Christ, then Joseph tells how he tried without success to find lodging, and then the shepherds render homage in front of the infant Jesus. A comedy follows, the humorous rivalry and squabble of the shepherds, and after the performers have been given food and drink, the players sing their blessing together:

Hurry, Goodman, if you would,
Give us speed for go we should.
May God give you every good,
You, your house and neighbourhood.

Numerous other variations have also been recorded, especially if we take in consideration the puppet Nativity plays (bábtáncoltató betlehem), the most complete form of which were recorded in the north-eastern and western parts of the linguistic territory. The Szatmárcseke version has seven different puppets: two old shepherds, two shepherd boys, two angels, King Herod, the Devil, Death, Small Mike, and also the one who collects the candle money (gyertyapénzszedő). The sequence of the play and the songs are similar to those in other Nativity plays, but here a single child moves the puppets on the church-like, towered stage, made especially for this purpose. As a conclusion, the candle-money collector puppet comes on stage and recites a verse.

Nativity players began to prepare for their performance at Advent, when they learned the poems and songs, and went about in the village often for ten days, certain groups of them even going to neighbouring settlements.

Minstrelsy



One of the oldest Hungarian customs, the *regelés* or *regölés* (minstrelsy), is attached to the second day of Christmas, Saint Stephen's Day. According to philological findings the word *reg* probably meant an occasion of royal and lordly entertainment in the Middle Ages, during which the *regös* men (minstrels) entertained their lords. The word itself is related to the shamanistic word *révülés* (entrancement), so that it can be supposed that at least in some part it is traceable to pre-Conquest times, while on the other side it has links with the different types of European mummers' plays. The main role of the songs, melodies, and jokes of medieval minstrels was to entertain, but they often included some social problems, wrongs that the country or the leaders of certain large regions would otherwise not have heard about.

However, the custom of minstrelsy linked with a certain time of year must also have been known among the people. In a note from 1552 mentioning Transylvania, we can read: "After the birthday of our Lord Jesus Christ comes the big celebration of the Devil, the week of minstrelsy... There is no end to the plentiful drinking and abundant song."

In the 19th century the custom of minstrelsy was practised in almost two hundred villages of Transdanubia, especially in the western part, as well as in certain parts of the Székelyland. Children and young men went around the village usually dressed in pelts. They rattled their scary-sounding chained cudgels and tried to make as much noise as possible with their jug pipe—which is nothing other than an earthenware jug covered with a membrane—and in many other ways. They went from house to house and entered with such greetings as the following: "We, the servants of Saint Stephen, have arrived from a cold and snowy country, our ears and feet are frozen, and we want to cure them with your gifts. Shall we tell it or press it?" If they got

permission from the farmer to tell their story, they began the song. One of its parts, coming just after the introduction, are words wishing the magic of plenty, wishing all the good, heaped up to overflowing, to all the people in the house.

In the second part comes the part of those girls and young men who are going to be paired off or “minstreled” together. It is believed that those whose turn comes in this way will get married soon.

A mummer disguised as a bull usually runs in after the song and keeps frightening the children and young girls, after which the minstrels ask for their reward for the song they were singing.

Various versions often mention the oak- or birch-bark sandal (bocskor), and the minstrels most of the time call themselves the servants of Saint Stephen. Undoubtedly all of this refers to great antiquity. Besides the young men, married men also indulge in minstrelsy in the Székelyland, but they even formed a group of their own. They generally sang a verse at the house of recently married young couples rather than those of girls.

Holy Innocents’ Day whipping



Holy Innocents’ Day whipping (aprószentek, December 28) is one of the old customs of ecclesiastical origin, even though in the final count we can follow its trail back to antiquity. They would beat the children with switches in memory of King Herod’s killing of the infants. The following was written in an 18th century notation from Transylvania: “On this day the fathers or others hit the little children with switches early in the morning, in memory of the suffering of the infants for Christ, and because they too shall have to suffer in this worldly life.” But the switch would be also used on those they wanted to urge to do more diligent work. People also tried to get rid of sickness and boils with their ditties.

Bibliography:

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