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Contemporary children folklore in towns
„Theory” and „practice”
in Buda children’s games and texts

Thesis

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The purpose and process of the research

The primary task of the research related to the contemporary children folklore in towns in Hungary is collecting material, which is also a very important objective of this disquisition. The Hungarian children folklore research has a long history. Ever since the turning of the 19th century we have had outstanding results in the subject. Although we have numerous texts and game descriptions from different regions and villages, we miss the collections, research and analyzes of the contemporary children folklore. The own games, texts, and pastimes of the metropolitan children, which is less known than the “official” children culture coming from the adults is an undiscovered area, a white patch on the fictive map of the Hungarian ethnography. That’s why the first task is to collect a corpus through which the subject can be presented and examined.

The exceedance of the pedagogic aspect, the selecting along value judgments, the descripting method and the research, which are not query the implicit or explicit preconception – which are sometimes appear in the Hungarian research tradition – are also important objects of the study. That’s why this disquisition uses new analytical considerations focusing on the real practice of the children folklore instead of the usual systematization based presentations and analyzes.

The research raises of course a lot of basic questions: is there children folklore today? Where can we find it? What is its role today in our world and in the children’s everyday life? It also introduces the changing and transformation of the children folklore – in the absence of the earlier research of the children folklore in towns according to the traditional children folklore in villages. Moreover with the recent analyses of the data it tries to get an insight into the real functioning of the texts and games. The disquisition investigates in four chapter the following questions: Are the earlier traditions and the effect of the media appear in the today’s children folklore? Can we see the children’s creativity in their pastimes? What can we see, if we contemplate the children’s texts and games in the point of view of the users, the children themselves? How did our changing world, the significantly changed urban living conditions effected the children folklore? How much time do the children have to play, and what kind of places do they have for this? And probably the most important, summarising question: how does this folklore look like in the real practice, beyond the data, the factual and textual description?

Placing this disquisition in a wider context these questions are important not only for the children folklore research but the whole discipline. Not only because the dissertation shows the colorful world of the less studied contemporary folklore through the children’s pastimes but also because it presents the possibilities of collecting and methodology of contemporary folklore occurrences with the presentation of the international research results and the novel aspects of analyzes. Additionly certain parts of the dissertation can show the possibilities of answering a very difficult, but for the discipline also very important question: how does the folklore itself work and how can we map the bequeathing processes?

I have collected my data between 2010 and 2016 in our capital, Budapest, in one of the districts of Buda. However I would like to interpret the contemporary children folklore concept in a wider sense. The last monumental – and also published – children folklore research in Hungary has adapted the data from the 1970’s villages and small towns. In order to don’t be a great distance between the already published and my data and to study the
changes of not only generation relations, but also between age groups, my collections frame is from the 1990’s till today. Of course the rates in the analysis tip in the favor of the last six-seven years because my observations happened in this period. My research is related to the 6-12 years old schoolchildren’s age group (talking to older informants I have also concentrated on this stage of their lives). The sixth year in a child’s life is a very important landmark: most of the children go from nursery/kindergarten to school at this age. The twelfth year is also a kind of turning point: at this age the children start to connect to the teenagers’ world, their field of interest begins to be very different from the youngster mates. The places of the research are schoolyards and playgrounds of different schools. On weekdays the children spend most of their time in these institutes, and they have the possibility of the casual games with the peer group in these places. Besides I have made observations in the streets, playgrounds and parks of the district, and also in summer camps for children. I have also made interviews, and a small survey research. (191 children has filled the questionnaire.) Moreover as a teacher I’m seeing a group of 8-12 year old children on a regular basis and so I also had many opportunities to talk to them informally.

Besides collecting and analyzing the data – in absence of developed methods – the research should solve also the problem of the systematization. Since in this disquisition the analysis is based on the practice of the children folklore and not on the systematization of the texts and games, I have made a practical, but of course not perfect system only for the transparency of the data. I publish the collected children’s folklore elements in separate games and texts collection with references of the linkages where needed. In the games collection my system is based on the traditional systematization with smaller changes, omissions and insertions. (I had to omit for example the pair selection games and I had to add new sections like games of bodily sensation and role plays.) With these changes the triad of instrumental, movement and intellectual games is suitable to present the contemporary children’s games in towns. The situation is a bit more difficult at the texts because the changes here are much bigger compared to the traditional data. Since I am trying to analyze the text in the practice and in their real environment I have created a system which shows the real use of these songs and rhymes. This is how the two parts of the texts collection – games related texts with action, and games unrelated texts without action – have evolved. The further sub-groups, for example counting out rhymes, clapping games or parodies are in these two big groups.

**The results of the research**

Besides the results of the Hungarian and international children folklore literature, the anthropological research of this field and also the pedagogical and psychological literature had an important role in my work. The overview of these researches shows us that in Hungary we have a lot of results of this field, but we can’t talk about integrated children folklore research. The articles and the literature from the different fields of science don’t form a coherent picture. We can’t report comprehensive research results in contemporary children folklore but we have more and more accurate data and analysis from different smaller parts of the field. It also becomes more and more important to show these games and texts in the practice, in the real occurrence without any judgement from the researcher. There are more and more interdisciplinary publications and articles which is also a very important result. In the field of the international children folklore research the theoretical disquisitions and the
modern occurrences had an important role in the last decades. We can find a lot of articles and publications also about obscenity and aggression in children folklore – which were taboo topics in the Hungarian children folklore research for a long time. Besides the much more commonly used child-lore conception helps to see the children folklore in a bit wider perspective and pay attention to new occurrences like cheerleading as children folklore and new fields like playgrounds and school yards in the towns.

The 146 games, 221 and texts, the variations of these games and texts and the 68 tunes in the appendix of the dissertation proof the efficiency of the work. This collection has showed that contemporary children folklore is not so different from the traditional one, but at the same time many changes and transformations have occurred.

There are game and text types (for example pair selection singing games, or rhymes about nature and animals) which have disappeared from the children’s pastimes, or the popularity of them vigorously declined. There are also text- and game groups (for example touching games, parodies, hand clapping games) which we can’t find in the traditional children folklore in Hungary, or the role of them was not so important earlier, but today they appear frequently in the children’s pastimes. It is also a very significant change that the children use the different types of texts less and less in the practice. The songs and rhymes (specially the counting out rhymes and the longer ballad-like texts) have suppressed, started to disappear from the children’s folklore.

The resources – out of which the children draw their ideas, learn their games and texts – have also changed a lot. As the result of the expansion of the media children encounter a lot of indirect experiences. Instead of the real, concrete examples they usually “meet” the follow-lasted people, professions and behavior patterns only on the screen. The effects of these are still as lively as the real life examples. The inspiration of the role games in children folklore today are usually figures and occurrences from the media. Besides the material devices have also changed a lot and this brought force transformations like disappearing of games with skirts and appearing of new games like “bag-war” played with school- or gym bags.

The ready built environment – specially in big towns – has significantly transformed, the method of timing and time management have altered, the society itself has transformed, and so the place and role of the children in the society. However it didn’t involve the disappearance of children’s own folklore.

The fact that some game types have survived for centuries of course due to the age group needs. The 6-12 years old children need a lot of action, they try to show their own skills and cleverness to their mates and being a part of a team or band is also very important for them. That’s why in the children folklore there have always been – and I think that also in the future we will always find – different chasing, competition and team games. So the function of the children folklore haven’t changed radically, the basic structure haven’t transformed substantially. Only the method, the quantity, the form, and the content of the games and texts have changed – usually because of the changes in the environment of the children. The illustrations form of the international children folklore research results show that this is not only a Hungarian occurrence. Children in other regions of the world react to the changing world, the changed way of life, the new phenomenon and situations they have to live with in a very similar way. So we can find very similar transformations and innovations also in their folklore.
In the dissertation I have analyzed the children’s folklore in an original way. The judgment-free presentation of the collected material was a very important part of this. The collecting and analyzing children folklore was in a very close connection with the pedagogics, the use of these texts and games in the education. On the one hand this is a very natural relationship arising from the nature of the analyzed material. On the other hand this relationship also limits the potential research and publications. The presentation of the children folklore material along value judgment is still occur also in the scholar-like publications too Sometimes we can read about conscious destruction, impairment, or about a kind of battle we should fight against the adaptations, technical games, the aggression and the dull of the television with the traditional folk games. From the pedagogic viewpoint this can be relevant, but if we would like to analyze and show the children folklore material in an ethnographical point of view and in the real function we have to ignore these kind of aspects. Moreover we shouldn’t forget that the traditional children folklore was not exempt from obscenity and aggression. At the same time the contemporary children folklore is not only consist of aggressive and pedagogically unacceptable games and texts. The opposition of “good”, “valuable” traditional children folklore and “destructive”, “unworthy” modern children pastimes are disagree with the scientific attitude.

In the dissertation I have reviewed the collected materials in a complex manner paying a special attention on its context. This means that the research focuses on the real function, the practice of the children folklore and on the users – the children themselves. In the dissertation I use – in Hungarian viewpoint – original aspect like children’s creativity, effect of time and space on children folklore, the social environment (children-children, children-adult relationships), or the practice, the performances. The most important results and edifications of the analyzing chapters are the following:

Children folklore is dual-natured: traditional but at the same time innovative, creative. We can find the significant part of the material used by the children today in the historical descriptions, but this doesn’t mean continuous connection between the players of course. It rather shows the children’s spirit, their developmental attributes. We can map the bequeathing processes notedly in the family. The relatives can be very important resources of the children’s folklore. The effect of the educational institutions is also very significant. They inspire children not only with games and texts, but also as motif. The media, and the opinion of the leader groups are also have a great effect on children’s folklore. Children respond to the world around them very susceptibly, that’s why their folklore always transforms. The changing conditions makes them use the already known material in a creative way, make new rules, bring new elements and instruments into their plays. That’s why we can talk about children folklore as an independent phenomenon. The language games, the transformation of the material world shows that children can make plays and games from anything. Owing to the experience and pleasure of creation they interpret activities – for example drawing, or different hobbies – as play activities which not used to be part of the children folklore research. The myth of disappearing childhood seems to lurch. Childhood and children folklore have always been and always will be. Children are playing and find the way being children in every situation.

The differences between age-groups, the relationships between children and between children and adults, and the gender differences can determine the preferred and used games
and texts and the use and bequeathing of this materials. There are some age characteristic differences: the smaller, 6-9 years old children likes the simple games, the elder children prefer the sport-games and team games. There are also differences in the examined 20 years. The most striking is the retreat of the street games and the disappear of the children folklore texts. The friendly or hostile relationship between children plays an important role in the participation of the pastimes, the development of games, and the judgment of the players actions. The number of players is also a cardinal question, because the too many, or too few children may affect the birth of new game-variations. Adults also appear in children folklore. Often the children themselves engage them in their pastimes, the youngers usually as partners, or as a judge, the older ones usually to test them, or to overwhelm them with different jokes and pranks. The gender segregation of 6-12 years old children and the children playing with, or against the opposite sex are also appears in the contemporary children folklore. Many activities are loved by both sexes but the use, the form and the aim are usually differs by the boys and the girls. That’s why it is very important the research of both the differences and the equalities not just in the texts and the games but also in the practice. Sometimes the smaller variations and gender differences appear only in the latter.

The transformed social and built environment, the changed locations of the games and the restructured time management can have a restrictive but at the same time inspiring effect on children folklore. The places in towns and in schools used by children usually have very strict borders, fences. Besides these places effects the formation of new, typical city games, for example stair-tag, or tram/metro-surf. The pastime in closed places and home play activities extended compared to traditional children folklore. Playing with electronic games and toys bought in different shops is also preferred today. The time in the broadest sense is also a very significant frame of the children’s folklore. Each season offers different gaming options. In the spring children are climbing up trees, playing with bugs. In the summer they prefer playing water games or games with water. In the autumn the different crops and the puddles inspire them, and in the winter the snow and the ice helps them find special play activities. Besides the weather phenomena usually inspire also different texts. The order of the weeks and the weekdays, the time measured in minutes are also effect on the transformation of children folklore. Most of the children spend the weekends and the holidays with their families. On the other hand they spend the vast of their weekdays at school. The timetable, the school agenda, and the order of the tutorials in the afternoon limit their free time and the time of their play activities. In these frames the too much, or too little time can also be a significant folklore-forming factor. The former may result the shortening or disappearing of game starting formulas, the latter may effect on the flare of text repertoire or formation of ad hoc play activities.

The practice, the real use of the texts and the games, and the children’s own conception about their pastimes are usually differ from the theories and the itemized descriptions. Studying the use of the game rules we can find that children usually transform them during playing, the friendships, or in favor of the game’s continuity. In the apparently democratic play activities like counting out we can find the enforcement of individual will. In the practice we can discover that some texts are not simple songs but song-games. Similarly, we can find the meaning of some seemingly pointless scales when we see and hear them in the practice with the proper gestures and expressions. In this regard we have to pay attention to the
peculiar interest in obscenity and aggression in children folklore. It attracts attention rather of its extraordinariness in publications than quantity in the children folklore. In children’s interpretation the seemingly aggressive games usually means shared experience, not real aggressive approach. We should make a difference between real and played aggression – the latter is much more usual in children folklore. Studying the obscenity we have to keep in mind that curiosity, recognition of this taboo world is a natural behavior for a child who wants to know and discover the world around him. The children also have performance-like playing activities. They perform it sometimes only for themselves, sometimes to an audience usually consisting of the family members. The central element of the children’s shows, the choreographies learned for their own sake, and a part of the skill testing games is the perfect performance, that’s why we can interpret them only in the real use.

During the collection of the data I have met a thousand variations of practice. On the one hand it was a very positive and instructive experience, on the other hand it made me very difficult to review and interpret this living, moving and transforming material with the preservation of variegation. That’s why I have studied the play – text – movement triformity together in its natural presence, not separated. In consequence there are quite a lot of interlacements, recommitments, and sometimes repetitions in the different chapters. This shows us the complexity of this material and also the close relationship of the different sections of children folklore. That’s why it’s very difficult for the researcher to analyze only one phenomenon. Children folklore is a living, transforming process, so we can’t apprehend it with only the texts and the games. We have to observe also the users, the children, their environment and the games and texts in the practice.

Interpreting the results of the research in a wider context, in the folkloristics we can see that the towns are full of very interesting, colorful, worthy of recording folkloristic occurrences. However collecting of these materials and separation them from the non-folkloristic elements is not an easy job. The researcher have to specify and define (also for himself) what is folklore, where are the borderlines of the collected materials. In the practice folklore and non-folklore live together, sometimes in a mixture, interaction, or complementary to each other. The communities today, the users and makers of contemporary folklore have to deal with a lot of effects. They can easily get different cultural properties, get almost any information. The knowledge they have the opportunity to learn about is actually unpredictable. The boundaries have expanded – also in physical and virtual manner. This also means that in the research and analysis the interdisciplinary approach is indispensable. The researchers have to use the methods and results of the related disciplines to interpret and systematize the materials. The research keeping in mind the practice and the real use of the materials can show us a lot of things about the bequeathing of the different folklore elements. It also shows the transformation and variation of these materials aligned to the external coercive powers and the demands of the users. Via research like this we can insight the mechanisms of functioning of folklore.
Publications in the topic of dissertation


