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HEROES AND CELEBRITIES

PhD DISSERTATION SUMMARY

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I. OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of this dissertation is to analyse the contemporary cult of Hungarian heroes and celebrities. According to my hypothesis the historical heroes and contemporary celebrities are in close relation. Their formation was generated by similar circumstances but their cult and its peculiarities accommodate to the parameters of a given historical period.

My PhD dissertation has four main objectives. First, it tries to investigate those historical and socio-psychological processes that generate the cult of contemporary celebrities and historical heroes.

Secondly, it tries to introduce the forms of manifestation of these cults and at the same time to understand its function on the life of fans and followers (construction of identity, world view, behaviour).

Third, I would like to examine if the “hero patterns” of Joseph Campbell is present in the life story of some outstanding Hungarian celebrities.

Finally, by using Ninian Smart’s theory of “seven dimensions of religion” my dissertation aims to analyse how certain forms of celebrity cult are related to religion. I attempt to answer whether celebrity cult can be defined as vernacular religion in post-modern age?

II. RESEARCH METHODS AND RESOURCES

Both in the case of studying historical heroes and contemporary celebrities I took up several interviews and questionnaires - about 700 all together. My sources include the Hungarian yellow press and the accounts and messages of fan-groups in the internet. I applied the accomplishments of several fields that were related to my dissertation: Folklore, History, Cultural History, Study of Literature, Sociology of Religion, Social-Psychology, Media Studies and Political-Psychology.

III. RESEARCH FINDINGS

In the first part of my dissertation I analyze the cult of those historical heroes who have a living cult even nowadays.

The formation of hero cult is a psychological peculiarity. Heroes were brought to life by a characteristic void. Besides gods related to religions, people need points of orientation from the human realm. People need for role models who assist guiding them in our world through their actions, life, basic behavioural patterns, roles and values. This somewhat archetypical perspective has never disappeared from human minds, especially from the mind of folk people. This way of thinking creates exemplary heroes from historical figures. Based on the archetypical myth paradigm the heroes in this sense are such archetypical figures who are not tied to a given historical period.

Beside the psychological factors, the invention of heroes is also brought to life by the fact that common historical remembrance is not primarily connected to events but persons. A historical hero may re-establish the shattered cultural canon. The living cult of historical heroes is in every case related to the national identity from the time of formation and the significant breaks in Hungarian history (1848/49, 1920, 1956).

Lajos Kossuth's cult has the longest historical retrospective and the most varied forms of manifestations. The creation of his cult began in Kossuth's lifetime. In the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century his figure meant a lot more than a hero. The references to Kossuth among people are not only interesting in a sense that they embalm biblical traditions but they clearly show that Kossuth became a 'saint', part of the sacred sphere by means of these references. Well-known folk-songs, legends and anecdotes sprang up about Kossuth. Hundreds of thousands pilgrimaged to his funeral (1894). After his death there was a wave-like spread of erection of Kossuth statues and as a manifestation of collective public remembrance streets were named after him. Kossuth statues were erected outside Hungary as well. His cult is continuously alive since 1894 and each political system used it.

István Széchenyi's cult had suffered several breaks consequently he was hardly present in public thinking in certain political periods. His cult was revived in the Horthy-era, then ignored from 1948 during the communist dictatorship and in the Kádár-era Széchenyi was not favoured either. After the change of regime several attempts were made to restore Széchenyi's prestige and to incorporate his figure into the 'national pantheon'. Since 1989 his cult has revived.

Imre Nagy's public cult began with the reburial ceremony on June 16, 1989 and with the reburial a novel approach to 1956 commenced. The forming of 1956's collective memory is still taking place. One of the reasons is that during the Kádár-era it was not allowed to discuss the 1956 events so there was a pan-Hungarian suppression. Natural myths telling about 1956 were replaced by artificial myths which were used to manipulate society. More generations did not even know who Nagy was because the national historical remembrance was wiped out and collective amnesia enhanced. The generations growing up after the collapse of the regime only knew about 1956 history and Nagy's figure from the history books and school commemorations.

Analysing the questionnaires and interviews we can conclude that in his cult the reverence of his figure, his persistence, honesty and patriotism is intermingled with the reverence of the 1956 events and 1956 heroes. Imre Nagy became a symbol of the 1956 events assimilating all the characteristics and essence.

The different social groups have very different affiliation to the abovementioned three historical heroes. We can clearly see the difference between the pre-1989 generation and the after-1989 generations. The difference does not only result from the change of regime but the spreading of western consumer society taking place at the same period of time. Due to these changes and the information revolution mass media plays a more important part in people's worldview, thinking and behaviour. At the same time the cult of historical heroes are gradually fading away and become simpler. The image of historical heroes in upgrowing generations is defined by school materials, education and mass media replaces historical heroes with their own celebrities. The cult of historical heroes is more and more interlinked with politics as we observed in the case of Lajos Kossuth, István Széchenyi and Imre Nagy. The state and the political parties use these figures on official celebrations and their symbolic figure might gain propagandistic content as well. We can state that none on the

abovementioned historical heroes cult embedded into the everyday life on the public. The upgrowing generations only have a vague recollection of their personalities, historic importance, deeds and the meaning of their symbolic figure.

A problematic issue in studying celebrity cult is that in Hungarian the prevalent 'star' (sztár) notion does not cover the phenomenon itself, hence it is used as an adjective for famous people. The notion of celebrity bears significantly multilayer contents and involves the manifestation forms around a celebrity as well.

Celebrities can be categorized along different perspectives. One might be the length of a given person's cult. However, there are more possible aspects such as fame, the intensity of the cult or the 'expertise' of the celebrity. Let us underline, that there is no clear-cut division between categories and there is overlapping as well.

The phenomenon of celebrities is not a product of the 20th century. The circumstances of its origins are in close relation with secularization and the social /cultural / economic changes brought about by the industrial revolution. Besides historical processes, psychology is also an important driving force. The celebrities become role models who embody the ideal life in the eyes of their fans. An ideal life the individual is not able to achieve, but it is necessary to see a good example to prove that this ideal state might come true in real life and not in dreams or fairy tales. In this sense celebrities are identification patters, aspiration models regarding mobility and social goals. Usually representing the life-style the individual would like to achieve.

In this dissertation I analyze and discuss the living cult of three categories of celebrities: singers (Magdolna Rúzsa, Jimmy Zábó), sportsmen (Ferenc Puskás, Tibor Simon) and politicians (Viktor Orbán).

In case of singers the so called halo-effect is the most obvious when a favourable characteristic (voice) is projected on different characteristics on the whole personality. Consequently, in the case of Zábó we find features of sacralization. Several fans pray to Zábó, they believe, that his songs shine a supernatural power healing the sick, giving energy and peace to body and soul. Magdi Rúzsa is of key importance for specific groups of Hungarians living outside the borders of Hungary (maintaining identity, self-representation).

In the fans' flats we can find postmodern holy corners where posters of the celebrity, autographs and concert tickets function as a relic.

A remarkable myth cycle emerged around the figure of Jimmy Zábó. Initially most myths arose in connection to the circumstances of his death. Similarly to the highwaymen (betyars) who also had sudden, mysterious death.

A significant 'secular pilgrimage' commenced after Zábó's death that can be described as 'rites de passage'. The grave and the cemetery function as hierophany for the participants.

The chapter on sportsmen is based on two football-players who already passed away. In the dissertation I analyse the phenomenon and manifestations around the figure of Ferenc Puskás, the legendary player from the golden age of Hungarian football, and around the figure of Tibor Simon, a defender who played for Ferencváros and was beaten to death under brutal circumstances in 2002. Puskás was a pan-Hungarian celebrity evoked similar reactions from everyone. The attitude towards his figure was similar than in relation to historical heroes. As a celebrity of the entire nation he activated the whole nation. As the personification of the nation, the entire nation is respected. In other words, he was fighting for the people, leading the Hungarians to victory. He set an example for the society that there is a way out from repression. In 1956 Puskás emigrated, he disappeared from Hungary. His name and memory was pushed aside in the official media and he was treated as if he had died, the leaders wanted to suppress his memory. However, the cult could not be fully suppressed. After the return of Puskás, a nostalgic 'liberation' is experienced after the collective suppression. After 1989 when politics had less control on culture, the public turned their attention towards the golden age outcropping the legends and myths of the once celebrities strengthening Puskás' cult. Tibor Simon is also a representation of a community, the so call 'Fradí family' (fans for Ferencváros Sports Club). All the morals central to the fans' is condensed into his figure. That is courage, loyalty and fighting for your goals. Simon's person became a symbol for these morals. Even in his life he was considered to be a leading figure whose presence significantly influenced the mentality of the other players. He was the ideal Ferencváros player, who not only remained in close relation with his fans but even endangered his life for them.

As a consequence of the effective help of the media the figure of Viktor Orbán is (neo)folklorised and remained in postmodern folklore. This phenomenon can be explained by the collusion of several factors. First, his first public appearance took place in such a specific situation which predestinated him to fulfill a symbolic position. In 1989 the atmosphere was revolutionary in Hungary. Under these circumstances Orbán became one of the central figures of a politically sacred moment, at the reburial of Imre Nagy and his companions on June 16, 1989.

Viktor Orbán as a member of the whole society is identified by the nation; he is the survivor of the nation who is given almost messianistic attributes. His followers expect him to solve their everyday problems they cannot handle on their own. They expect him to show the way out from the crisis, to boost the economy, culture and to restore security, order and public morality.

He is present in contemporary folklore in jokes, verses, anecdotes, myths and pictures spreading via the internet.

In my thesis I analyzed the life story of the celebrities from a folkloristic perspective. The life stories appearing in the media are usually simplified versions with certain parts emphasized and other insignificant or embarrassing elements left out, resulting in a life that resembled that of folktale heroes. The themes became part of popular culture, and fans started making and circulating their own versions orally. The key stages of the life stories are the following: youngest son, exceptional birth, exceptional talent, poverty, wandering, returning home, success, mysterious death, religiosity.

The listed elements show significant similarity with Campbell's heroic patterns for mythical heroes. However, the elements listed by Campbell are not necessary true for celebrities. On several occasions the life story of celebrities becomes similar to the use of time in myths, therefore the story simplifies, becomes more schematic and the miracle is less important.

All of Ninian Smart's dimensions of religion (practical or ritual, experiential or emotional, narrative or mythic, doctrinal or philosophical, ethical or legal, social or institutional and material dimension) more or less can be found in celebrity cult. Although not all of them appear together in every celebrities' cult and they have quite different impact as well.

According to my dissertation celebrity cult can be defined as religion from a functional point of view, however, if we have a substantial approach we realize it's "deficiencies" to traditional religions. Ninian Smart's dimensions affirm this as well, since some of the given dimensions of religion can only be filled with content if we enlarge the borders of the given category. If we use the substantial aspect of studying religion celebrity cult can be defined as "quasi-religion" or "pseudo-religion". We can also say that the cults of different celebrities hold religious components to a different degree. We might say that the most important parameter of the comprehensive celebrity cult is not religion, although it seems to be dominant in certain cases. This kind of celebrity cult can function as religion in sub-cultural level and can act as religion among fans. However on the entire Hungarian society' level we can define it as a certain form of consciousness and behaviour form in post-modern age rather than vernacular religiosity.

IV. PUBLICATIONS RELATED TO THE TOPIC OF THE DISSERTATION

Articles

1. *Népi kultúra vagy populáris kultúra?* Tiszatáj 2004/8. 84-89.
2. A hős élt, él és élni fog. Mítoszteremtés a populáris médiában. (*Heroes lived, live and will live forever. Creating Myths in Popular Media*) in: Gulyás Judit – Tóth Arnold (szerk.) *Mindenes Gyűjtemény II.* Tanulmányok Küllös Imola 60. születésnapjára. *Artes Populares* 22. 339-356.
3. A média szerepe napjaink populáris kultúrájában. (*The Role of Media in Popular Culture*) in: Ambrus Vilmos – Schwarz Gyöngyi (szerk.) *Változó folklór. Folcloristica* 10. 153-160.
4. The Apostle of Love. Secular Pilgrimage in Post-Socialist Hungary. in: Peter Jan Margry ed. *Shrines and Pilgrimage in the Modern World. New Itineraries into the Sacred.* Amsterdam University Press. 173-200.
5. “The Sacralized Heroes of Hungarian Civil Religion” in: Ulrika-Wolf Knuts (ed.) – under publication
6. “A szeretet apostola” *Ethnographia* 2008/2-3. 133-158.

Conference lectures

1. “The Sacralized Heroes of Hungarian Civil Religion” Conference presentation at the 9th SIEF Congress at Derry (Northern Ireland) June 16-20, 2008
2. “The Sacralized Places of Hungarian Civil Religion” Conference presentation at the 9th Conference on Vernacular Religion, Szeged, October 8-10, 2008

