

Introduction – City Rituals

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A century ago, early ethnologists, folklorists and scholars from related disciplines were still searching for illusional, unchanged ritual practices that would allow them to reconnect to a distant and idyllic past. From the comfort of their study or, less frequent, from the field, they had turned their attention to rural life, which they saw as less corrupted than life in the cities. This approach has since long been replaced by the study of the constantly changing and adapted traditions. Looked at from a long-term historical evolution, traditions appear to be “under constant construction or reconstruction, whether the individuals and groups who participate in those traditions realize this or not” (Burke 2009: 103). Change, a constant of the human evolution, is inherent in all social constructs, including culture, which is passed on, from one generation to another, through tradition.

If change cannot be avoided, what is it about the ever-changing tradition that we dread? Folklorist Thomas McKean offers an answer, when he writes: “tradition is predicated on constant change, as long as it is not so fast that its entire ‘content’ changes in one generation” (2021: 7). Thus, the threat lies not in the change itself, but in the speed with which it occurs.

Since entering the new millennium, it has become clear that we live in a high-speed society, driven by increased time pressures. Our reality accelerates so rapidly that we can hardly keep up with the change. This frenzied rhythm, that sociologist Hartmut Rosa calls social acceleration (2010), is most visible in cities and large urban centres, which continue to attract more and more people. Since 1950, the world’s urban population has grown as a proportion of the total population, increasing more than 500% in 65 years (UN DESA 2018). By 2018, it reached 55% of the world’s population and the United Nations projects that the percentage will surpass 68% by the year 2050 (UN DESA 2018). As these percentages reveal, the rural-urban balance has recently been reversed, with more people now living

in urban, rather than in rural environments. Facilitated by the rapid changes in communication, the influence of urban centres is today stronger than ever before.

Cities are contact zones (Pratt 1991), places of encounter and interaction between people and cultures, where objects and ideas are exchanged and circulated, thus making them the ideal ground for innovation and change. Cities attract people not only from rural areas, but also from other parts of the world, as they tend to be centres of trade and industry. As people migrate, they bring with them traditional rituals, that they adapt to their new home. Scholars today are no longer merely confronted with the challenge of identifying patterns within homogenous societies, rather they are faced with the multiple tasks of mapping and understanding interactions within blended, heterogeneous urban societies.

While social acceleration intensifies, affecting more and more people, one can only wonder if there will still be a place for traditions in the future. Will we still find time for ritual practices, in our busy lives? Will we still need them? For now, the papers reunited in this publication bring good news, showing the resilience of traditions and the persistence of rituals within the city.

The first volume of *City Rituals* addresses ritual practices and public events (such as seasonal festivals and traditions, national holidays and commemorations, and religious feasts) that mark the life of urban residents in cities in all corners of the world. Based on one, or more examples, the authors highlight their connection with local traditions and history, describe their evolution over time, and draw attention to more recent trends, due to globalization.

In the opening article of this volume, Laurent Sébastien Fournier examines European urban rituals through the *longue durée* perspective of historical anthropology, while choosing to focus on the idea of urbanity, instead of the term “ritual”. Using historical as well as more recent ethnographical examples of urban festivals, he brings forward several permanent features of European urban rituals, as well as some of their contemporary transformations.

Drawing on more recent examples, Honey Libertine Achanzar-Labor, writes about the consequences of changes in the academic calendar on the performance of various rituals, both sacred and secular, in the Philippine urban areas, where most of the country’s universities are located. The author shows the reasons and the manner in which the initial flexible academic calendar was replaced with a fixed August-May calendar, starting with 2014. Despite some initial setbacks in the conduct of some city rituals, the reconfiguration of these rituals has finally been accomplished by means of accommodation, simplification and alternation.

Vito Carrassi discusses the recent revival of an old Catholic ritual known as the *Rosary of 100 Requiem*, in Castellaneta, a city in Southern Italy. Consisting of a collective prayer for the dead, in particular the souls in the Purgatory, in 2016 the ritual began to be carried out as a monthly procession throughout a cemetery. It

soon became a community event, that established a deep connection between the world of the living and the world of the dead.

Terry Gunnell considers the changes that have taken place in the new urban festivals in Reykjavík between 1998 and 2018, noting how they have been influenced by tourism and migration, a growing sense of international involvement, and the wish to make the city an all-year round attraction. The author also considers the key differences between these new festivals and those that preceded them.

Using the same, evolutionary approach, Mare Kõiva and Andres Kuperjanov explore the ways in which contemporary cultural events and festivals in the city of Tartu (Estonia) reflect local traditions and history and have, more recently, been infused with contemporary elements. Four categories of events are brought forward: student traditions, ethnic events, agrarian events and the Hanseatic Days celebration. While most remain local, the student events have over time spread to other cities and the diaspora.

While some of the previous examples show the gradual internationalisation of urban festivals, Victoria Legkikh brings forward an example that opposes this trend. The author follows the evolution of the newly established feast of family and faithfulness, celebrated during the commemoration of Saints Peter and Fevronia, in the city of Murom (in Central Russia). This celebration was meant to replace the western feast of Saint Valentine's Day, with a Slavic equivalent. Since 2008, the feast has gradually become popular in other Russian cities.

Maria Bernadette L. Abrera investigates the devotion to the Virgin of Antipolo, a 17th century old tradition carried out in the Philippines. Each year, from May until July, devotees visit the shrine and the statue of the Virgin, called Our Lady of Peace and Good Voyage; many make the trip by foot. On account of the millions of pilgrims that visit the shrine, the local government has initiated a city festival, in an effort to create other economic and commercial opportunities beyond the religious event. This civic celebration, however, struggles to justify its existence. As the author points out, it is the religious devotion to the Virgin of Antipolo that sustains the influx of people to the city and gives it identity.

The following article is dedicated to the celebration of Christmas among the Vlachs from Eastern Serbia, currently living in Vienna, on a permanent or temporary base. The author, Natalia Golant, compares their Christmas practices with the ones celebrated by Vlachs in Eastern Serbia, focusing on particular ceremonial practices, such as the use of the Christmas log (*badnjak*) and the Christmas cake with divination objects inside (*banica, cesnica*).

Based on extended fieldwork, Evy Johanne Håland scrutinizes the festival dedicated to Saint Nektarios, celebrated in the city and the island of Aegina, Greece, on 9th of November. This is an important healing festival, dedicated to the former bishop of the Greek church, who spent the last years of his life secluded, at the

monastery he founded on Aegina. He died in 1920 and was canonised in 1961, becoming the island's patron saint. Known as a healer of cancer, Saint Nektarios' relics are today spread among many sanctuaries worldwide. His body is of the highest importance for the worshippers, and although several churches both in Greece and abroad today have a share of it, his monastery on Aegina, the main pilgrimage centre, possesses the most important parts, among which is his head. The author focuses on the healing function of the festival both for Greeks and the many pilgrims coming from abroad, especially from Romania.

Laura Jiga Iliescu builds up her argument from the observation that in contemporary Romanian urban society, there is a multilevel trend to revive the 'archaic tradition', a particular return-to-nature movement. This involves the creation of new rituals, which have little to do with original old rituals, despite appropriating their descriptions and interpretations. The case study brought forward by the author is the wedding in a vegetal sanctuary (*biserica de brazi*). By analysing an article from a new-age magazine with a large audience, the author discloses the strategies that are being used in order to turn a genuine ritual into a legend.

Observing the Women's March of 2017 as a response to the election of Donald J. Trump to the Presidency of the United States, Jack Santino investigates ways of analysing such large-scale public performances. Despite the apparent resemblance to carnivals (it was large, festive and carnivalesque with its costumes and bodily imagery), the event was not a carnival, as the participants were serious in their presentation of a counterpoint to the apparent validation of values they saw embodied in Trump. In order to discuss this case study, the author suggests the term "ritualesque" as a useful complement to the idea of the "carnavalesque".

Cozette Griffin-Kremer examines two invented festivals of Rambouillet, France: the Lily-of-the-Valley Festival (*Fête du Muguet*, celebrated in mid-May begun in 1906) and the Festival of Saint Lubin (*Fête de la Saint-Lubin*, celebrated every two years in September, begun later, in 1990). Based on archival records and oral testimonies, the author investigates the efforts to mobilize the energies of the town folk and to create a festival with multiple benefits. Everything comes from somewhere, so this examination attempts to trace the landscape of social context, precedents and often impressive personal networking that enabled inventors to carry town festivals over into broad acceptance and make of them, as they explicitly intended, a tradition.

In the next article, Skaidrė Urbonienė analyses the temporary and more permanent memorials commemorating the victims of the violent confrontation between the civilian population of Vilnius and the Soviet Army, following the restoration of independence in Lithuania, on the 13th of January 1991. Today, the memorials are still used by locals for memorial services, mourning and other commemorative

rituals on special dates. In her article, the author analyses the rituals performed at these sites, as well as the written messages left behind by attenders.

The last article of this volume is also focused on Vilnius. Based on extended fieldwork in the city and various published sources (historical documents, legal acts, memoirs and periodicals), Žilvytis Šaknys addresses the aspect of seasonality in relation with six national holidays in Lithuania, between 1919–1940 and 1990–2019. The author's conclusion is that seasonality has little impact on the vitality of the celebrations, and this is best illustrated by the Day of the Restoration of the State (the birth of the modern state of Lithuania, celebrated on the 16th February). Despite the unfavourable cold weather, it is the only festival that retained the status of public holiday and non-working day between 1919–1940, as well as after 1990, surpassing in popularity all other national holidays.

Divided into two volumes, *City Rituals* reunites thirty of the studies presented during the 13th conference of The Ritual Year Working Group (SIEF), held from the 7th to the 9th of November 2018, in Bucharest, Romania, where it was hosted by the Institute of Sociology, Romanian Academy¹. This scientific event was an important landmark in our working group activity, as soon after, the world as we knew it would change forever.

The conference papers were collected for publication the following year, but once the Covid-19 pandemic was declared, in early 2020, they were put on hold, as were most of our usual activities. Despite the obvious inconveniences, the pandemic and the inherent restrictions surprisingly increased our working group activities. Banned from meeting in person, we met online, and we did so more often than ever before². Continuing to do what we knew best: studying, researching and discussing our findings, and our mutual support, helped us overcome everyday life difficulties during the pandemic. We hardly had the time to recover from the sanitary situation, when, in February 2022, the war in Ukraine broke out, and with it, old ideologies and divisions reemerged. This impacted us much worse than the pandemic, as it threatened everything we had accomplished and the values upon which our working group was built.

Established in 2003, at the initiative of Emily Lyle (University in Edinburgh), The Ritual Year working group soon became a bridge between East and West, built on the solid ground of scientific cooperation, a safe harbour for academics from behind the former Iron Curtain, where they could openly share their ideas and engage in dialogue with their more fortunate colleagues, from the West. When initiating The Ritual Year, our charismatic founder, Emily Lyle, certainly had a vision. She might not have changed the world, but she certainly changed the lives of many of us. In her unique, profoundly humane yet challenging approach, she always knew how to motivate and get us involved in our shared activities, advising us to take

one way or another, or simply gently pushing us in the right direction. This is how many of us advanced in our careers: through action, dialogue and mutual support.

The war in Ukraine, followed by the war in Israel, and the rise of extremism all around the world, reminds us today of what our working group stands for: open dialogue, academic freedom, and unconditional support of our members. All this considered, it is not an overstatement to say that this first volume reuniting fourteen papers of our conference in Bucharest, brings us back to the good times. It is the vestige of one of our most successful reunions, in which we enjoyed each other's company and the free flow of ideas, on the ground of genuine scientific cooperation. The *City Rituals* conference held in Bucharest, merely 500 meters away from the former House of the People, build by the communist dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu, will remain a highpoint in the history of our working group, a marker we should constantly look back to, and try to equal in the future.

Notes

¹ Partner institutions of the event were the Institute of Ethnography and Folklore "Constantin Brăiloiu" and the Institute for South-East European Studies, both from the Romanian Academy, together with the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant. The conference was attended by sixty-seven scholars from twenty-four countries from all over the world (from the U.S.A., Iceland, various countries in the European Union, to Albania, Serbia, Russia, and the Philippines). The conference included two plenary sessions, seven panels organised in three parallel sections and one special movie panel. During the conference the participants attended a city tour (which included visits to the Village Museum and the National Peasant Museum) and the annual pilgrimage occasioned by the Feast of Saint Nektarios, celebrated at Radu Vodă Monastery, not far from the conference venue. The Saturday following the conference, the participants attended an excursion during which they visited the Pelișor castle in Sinaia, the fortified Saxon church in Prejmer and the Museum of Urban Civilisation in Brașov.

² During the Covid-19 pandemic, the working group initiated The Ritual Year Seasonal Webinars, initially dedicated to seasonal rituals, feasts and festivals, and later including other topics of interests, as well. The recordings of the series are available online at: [https:// www.siefhome.org/wg/ry/seasonal_webinars.shtml](https://www.siefhome.org/wg/ry/seasonal_webinars.shtml).

For more on The Ritual Year WG activities and publications go to the end of this volume or access the working group's webpage at: <https://www.siefhome.org/wg/ry/index.shtml>

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Biographical note

Irina Stahl is a Senior Researcher at the Institute of Sociology, Romanian Academy, and a former Associate Lecturer in European Ethnology at the University of Bucharest. She is currently serving her 2nd term on the Executive Board of the International Society of Ethnology and Folklore and has been Secretary of the Ritual Year Working Group (SIEF), since 2014. She was the organizer of the 13th Ritual Year Working Group's conference, *City Rituals*, in Bucharest, in 2018. Since 2010, she has conducted fieldwork on, and published in religious studies, with particular attention to vernacular Orthodox Christianity and religious practices in the urban environment. She has authored over 60 articles, chapters, and dictionary entries and edited two books. Among her most recent publication is *Structures sociales en Europe du Sud-Est* (2024), reuniting the works of the French Southeast European ethnologist, Paul-Henri Stahl (edited with S. Șerban & A. Timotin).