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Bell-Ringers of the Northern Adriatic: Local Croatian Tradition as World Heritage

Abstract. This essay describes the importance of a popular Carnival ritual — bell-ringing — as a contemporary symbol of local culture, visible at a time when many other markers of identity have vanished. Since the tradition's inscription on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity changes have begun to occur in which it has gained visibility, but also an unwelcome notoriety. A ritual that has historically served primarily to tighten the bonds of community has been transformed into a global cultural asset, and the bell-ringers' activities are portrayed and interpreted by individuals and groups outside their communities, often resulting in misunderstandings and frustration.

Keywords: Carnival traditions, bell-ringers, local identity, UNESCO, heritage

Introduction

Children scream with fear as a hundred or more bell-ringers, men wearing terrifying animal masks, brandishing clubs, and wearing loud bells, march close by them. Women withdraw from the first row of onlookers and try to hide when a bell-ringer 'little devil' or 'bear' (common masks in the huge bell-ringers' group) cannot be controlled by two 'soldiers'. These characters often approach women bystanders, hugging them or lifting them into the air, or even knocking them to the ground. Many are impressed by these expressions of raw masculinity and basic instinct. Thus bell-ringers showcase their traditions during Carnival season in both large cities and small rural villages, with some groups performing for tourists and others outside Carnival season. Regardless of time or place, most onlookers agree that the bell-ringers reflect basic and primordial, but completely natural and authentic qualities of men in that region, and perhaps even men in general.



Fig. 1. Bell-ringers from Rukavac in the circle, the crescendo of their performance, 25 January 2009.

Photo by Lidija Nikočević

A (Re)construction of Primordial Significance

Widespread interest in all things natural, ecological, and 'authentic', together with a fascination with the supernatural, fantastical, legendary, and magical, promoted by global media in recent decades, serve as an ideal basis for the mythification and positive perception of bell-ringers and their traditions. In fact, their practices are modern-day successors of ancient late winter rituals. Centuries ago, many similar customs were well known and widespread throughout Europe, especially in regions that once belonged to the ancient Roman Empire. These rituals live on today, practised actively in the northern Adriatic area, especially in the hinterland of the harbour city of Rijeka and the tourist destination of Opatija on Kvarner Bay.

According to ancient beliefs and traditions, the ringers were entering into contact with the supernatural, wearing large, hand-made bells

and chasing away evil spirits with their noise and appearance. As interpreted by anthropologists such as Niko Kuret, their masks enabled them to come close to these spirits, scare them away, and at the same time, protect the wearers, who remained safely covered and unrecognised.¹ Protection was important: it was crucial to protect sheep in the early springtime when they were about to leave for fresh, new pastures. It was equally important to protect people from curses and spells, to ensure the fertility of fields, animals, and humans, and to stimulate spring growth in general. The bell-ringers' long marches (up to sixteen kilometres) through their territory have been, and still are, patterns of closed circles, within which nature and people remain 'protected'.

The Bell-Ringers of the Croatian North Adriatic – more precisely, the Kastav area – have preserved most of the magical practices and objects associated with this tradition. Some groups wear masks, others have specific headgear that consists of multicoloured paper flowers and green branches symbolising vegetation that functioned in the context of imitative magic centuries ago. The sheepskins in which they are clothed are turned inside out, since wearing something thus has long been considered to protect against evil spirits. The massive wooden clubs they carry and wave about are also threatening to evil, as are shouting and an animated way of marching which causes the bells strapped around their waists to ring loudly. The bell-ringers' role in stimulating fertility is still reflected today in the phallic shape of their clubs, the ash-filled socks they swing to gently hit onlookers below the waist, and their aggressive attitude toward women, all of which have obvious sexual connotations. Furthermore, traditional names, such as *stari*, *stara* (the old one), for the bell-ringers may suggest that their ancestors' spirits played an important role in the ritual.² It is no wonder that such phenomena and practices inspire today's urban population, nurturing ideas and fantasies about a tradition unspoiled by modern civilisation, connecting to the natural world and rural life as they supposedly once were, and connecting with an interest in the supernatural perpetuated in the popular media.

But there is another cultural dimension that has led to perceptions of the bell-ringers as bearers of 'authenticity': a groundswell of inte-

¹ Niko Kuret, *Maske Slovenskih Pokrajin [Masks of Slovene Regions]* (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva Založba, 1984), p. 49.

² Kuret, *Maske Slovenskih Pokrajin*, p. 58.

rest in, and revival of, local culture in its traditional forms. The idea of belonging to a local culture has become increasingly important alongside, and in response to, globalisation. This, in turn, fosters a kind of elitism that plays an important role in distancing local community members from newcomers and members of out-groups. The great number of songs using local dialect and the festivals that promote this genre of music have given an additional impetus to this expression of local identity. The importance of using local dialect is also echoed in everyday communication; complemented by poetry and fiction, it contributes to a keen sense of nostalgia for the old traditions and a way of life as it once might have been.

Many characteristics of the traditional way of life have disappeared, their memory preserved only in old songs and poetry, and generations-old traditions have disappeared, or now remain only in traces, except for this one: the bell-ringing. Many emotions and practices tied to otherwise forgotten traditions and expressions of local identity are concentrated and coalesced around their practices. Obviously, they serve and nurture the need for markers and symbols of local identity; they are triggers for nostalgia, at the same time inspiring fantasies about the supernatural on one hand and very natural, basic, and authentic traits on the other. Being aware of these facts, the bell-ringers endeavour to serve all of these purposes. Many today would say sincerely that their aim is to 'chase away the winter' and fight against evil spirits, echoing the way ethnographers and the media explain and interpret their activities. However, there are other significant reasons why there are some fifteen active groups of bell-ringers in the area today.

New Significance of the Bell-Ringers' Practice

Bell-ringers are not insensitive or indifferent to the fact that they are attractive to observers outside their home territory and to the media. They like to see their photos and videos on the internet and in the press. Nonetheless, their most compelling motivations are to represent their villages and families, to bond with other male friends, to strengthen connections within their villages and with other local communities, and, in general, to have fun.

Undertaking a long march around their own and surrounding villages from dawn till late into the night and marching in their specially exaggerated way requires being in top physical condition. Thus,

bell-ringers in most cases are young, healthy, and fit men. They represent their villages and are watched by everyone on performance days, making their villages, families, and girlfriends proud. It is little wonder that bell-ringers are considered desirable by local women and girls. At the same time, they thoroughly enjoy bonding with their male counterparts, claiming that this bonding within an all-male group has a special meaning and quality.

In addition to gaining personal affirmation, they compete with other groups as representatives of their villages. Locals closely analyse which group does a better job of marching and performing each Sunday between 17 January and Ash Wednesday. During this time, each group marches and performs their pageant on a specific Sunday, according to a schedule set more than forty years ago. In this way, everyone can see all the groups over different Sundays, since their routes often partially overlap. A bit like a sporting team, everyone tries to be the best, meaning the strongest and mightiest, full of energy but also disciplined, since they must appear as a unified force. If someone were to fall, or fail to march the full distance, or get heavily drunk, it would bring shame on that person, his family, friends, and his whole village; the story would be remembered for decades. Who was better, whose tradition is the oldest, whose tradition is the most authentic – these are topics of hot-tempered discussions during the season, in local pubs and private wine-cellarers filled with men. At other times of the year, in contrast, most people have occupations outside their villages and their personal and social lives in recent decades are much more private and individualistic than they were half a century ago.

The wine-cellarers where they gather are decorated with objects associated with quotidian life, old hand-powered coffee grinders and other kitchen utensils, agricultural tools, pots and jugs, traditional musical instruments, bell-ringers equipment, and other memorabilia that turn conversation to topics of the past. Frequently they talk of the 'good old times', legendary bell-men who have passed away, stories of those who lost control when marching, and many themes within the sphere of domestic life, history, and tradition. In this way, the men are the ones who constantly create and re-create the history of the community at that time of year. As people socialise throughout that period more than at any other time, this is undoubtedly a time when each community grows closer, rebuilding a kind of common denominator of qualities that are characteristic for that particular group and that

keep them together as a cultural and social unit. More than ever, despite many hot-tempered discussions, they (both bell-men and the local community in general) feel the ties among them more intensely than at other times in the calendar year. In this way, bell-ringers foster cohesion within their local communities and contribute to social survival, much as they contributed to prosperity and fertility many centuries ago by fighting against evil spirits. Where they previously fostered man-to-nature relationships, in modern times they foster man-to-man relationships.



Fig. 2. Bell-ringers from Bregi, 15 February 2010.

Photo by Lidija Nikočević

Bell-Ringers as Heritage

After UNESCO introduced the Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2001,³ several anthropologists at Croatia's Ministry of Culture began working on the theme,

³ UNESCO, 'Proclamation of the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity (2001–2005)', <https://ich.unesco.org/en/proclamation-of-masterpieces-00103> [accessed 13 October 2020].

leading to the development of the Department for Intangible Culture and the Advisory Committee for Intangible Cultural Heritage, founded in 2004. As one of the members of that committee since its founding, I advocated for the term 'intangible culture' as more appropriate and flexible than 'intangible cultural heritage', but UNESCO's approach was consistently followed, and our terminology adjusted to fit. Regardless of confusion over the term 'heritage', we emphasised repeatedly that our work was about 'living traditions', not about historic or moribund ones, or those alive only on stage. One of the paradoxes of the heritage paradigm is that if a phenomenon is alive, it probably does not require preservation and, if it has vanished, preservation will not help it. The word 'protection', repeatedly used in our Advisory Committee discussions, led to many misunderstandings among the bell-ringers following eventual inscription on the Representative List, which uses UNESCO's preferred term, 'safeguarding'.

The Croatian Minister of Culture had an ambitions to propose a remarkable number of cultural phenomena for inclusion on UNESCO's Representative List in the space of just one year and the bell-ringers were one of sixteen candidates. Personally, I felt ambivalent. Having worked with bell-ringers for decades, my position as an ethnologist became more complex because I was no longer only a researcher, but now also the person assessing and evaluating a tradition according to externally imposed criteria. Gradually, I became quite critical of UNESCO's concept of intangible culture, resenting the 'top-down' approach and the fact that local communities were only marginally involved in the process.

One could also ask what I wanted to achieve with my work on the Committee. As a researcher dealing with intangible cultural phenomena, I was interested in whether this initiative would lead to petrification and alienation from living social and cultural origins, and whether this approach to specific assets would also stimulate the invention of traditions and other processes. I was also interested in what happens to phenomena of intangible culture once they become politicised through international and national governmental 'protection' programmes. It seemed that almost everywhere, such regimes are mainly about the pride of national governments, as the number of cultural phenomena on the list gives outsiders an impression of the wealth of cultural heritage of a particular state, while at the same time, the *bearers* of those cultural traditions seemed to be of lesser importance. Last, but not least, I realised that it was not easy for someone educated as

an ethnologist to judge the value of an isolated cultural asset, since ethnologists, folklorists, and anthropologists insist on contextual cultural analysis.

At the UNESCO conference in Abu Dhabi in late September 2009, the Kastav region bell-ringers were inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, along with six other intangible cultural assets from Croatia. The inscription included all of the traditional bell-ringer groups from Bregi, Brgud, Frlanija, Halubje, Mučići, Mune, Rukavac, Zvoneće, Žejane, Vlahov Breg and Korensko.⁴ I learned of this one day before leaving for a trip abroad and shared the information with bell-ringers, especially the group leaders. While abroad, I monitored national and local press on the internet for reactions to the news. I incredulously read the articles on a local newspaper's website, which reported that only Halubje bell-ringers had been inscribed on the list, and that this was the result of their own long-term effort.⁵ The community of Halubje bell-ringers is the only group that wears masks, they are more than two hundred in number, and, thanks to their travels and dominance in the media, they are best known to the wider public. They are thus considered typical, the 'real' bell-ringers, and an interview with their leader was published in which he proudly claimed the same.⁶

Only a day later, another article was published discussing how it was possible that only one group was included on the Representative List while the others were not. I regretted being away as the misunderstandings kept piling up, culminating in discontent and conflict. I was faced with the dilemma of whether I should contact the newspaper and explain that all groups are indeed included on the list and also stress that this was not a matter of protection, but of inscription on a list, which instead implies safeguarding, care, and a certain acknowledgment of value. Later that day, I found an article, 'We are the Exclusive Bearers of the Protection', which included a statement by the president of the Halubje bell-ringers,

⁴ Republic of Croatia, Ministry of Culture, 'Annual Carnival Bell Ringers' Pageant from the Kastav Area, Nomination, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ivAc77gJgg> [accessed 13 October 2020].

⁵ Slavica Mrkić Modrić, 'Koji su to zvončari s područja Kastva?', *Novi list* (Rijeka), 1 October 2009.

⁶ Kristina Danilović Prijić, 'Halubajski zvončari na listi UNESCO-a', *Novi list* (Rijeka), 27 September 2009.

The fact that we are inscribed on the UNESCO list means also that we have the prerequisites to embark on the process of the protection of intellectual property, which will give us control over the usage of the Halubje bell-ringer mask for commercial or other purposes.⁷

It was difficult to believe that no one from the Ministry was able to explain to the media what had actually been happening by simply referring to the document. It remains unclear whether it was a matter of poor communication, of the media's tendency to construct an intrigue, and/or the insistence of the Halubje bell-ringers that they were the only ones to be included on the list. At the same time, many of my old doubts and criticisms concerning this type of evaluation of living traditions, or 'intangible cultural heritage', were intensified. I was surprised at the deep antagonism evident between the different bell-ringer groups. In this case they were divided into two blocks, those from the western and those from the eastern part of the Kastav area. However, the crescendo of tensions was yet to come.

Before I sent an explanation to the editors of the newspaper, which, as the journalist later wrote, 'solved all the dilemmas relating to which bell-ringer group is inscribed on the UNESCO list',⁸ the White Sunday (Bela nedeja), a three-day long traditional fair, had started in Kastav. On this occasion, a tourist agency printed T-shirts with the following text: 'I am also a bell-ringer from the UNESCO list', with UNESCO's logo in the middle. The function, they thought, was twofold: to provide an additional affirmation for the Halubje bell-ringers, who were indeed on the list, and to allow others to express their wish to be included on the same list by wearing the T-shirt. Even though those who designed the T-shirt claimed it was just a joke, the bell-ringers from the western part of the area who were at first not mentioned in the media and who also frequented that fair, saw this as the ultimate provocation and attributed it to the Halubje bell-ringers. 'I wanted to tear it to pieces!' said an angry bell-ringer from Mučići,⁹ remembering that a fight nearly broke out between groups from the western Kastav area and the Halubje bell-ringers, who were sponsoring a beverage booth at the *Bela*

⁷ Slavica Mrkić Modrić, 'Mi smo isključivi nositelji projekta', *Novi list* (Rijeka), 2 October 2009.

⁸ Slavica Mrkić Modrić, 'Svi zvončari halubajskog i matuljskog kraja pod zaštitom', *Novi list* (Rijeka), 4 October 2009.

⁹ Interview with bell-ringer D. G. from Mučići, 10 February 2010.

nedeja fair. Several months after the event, another bell-ringer said to me indignantly,

Whom did you ask!? I am against us being under UNESCO. Who signed it in our name, anyway? Now they expect money from it [...] It is dividing people, it's what brought us against one another. How can you explain UNESCO to a half-literate man? They don't know what to expect now, they think a bunch of people will come here, they are afraid of that [...] We have no use for it, it is destroying the old bell-ringers, who are disappearing as it is. There will be war with the Halubje bell-ringers too [...] They should all just leave us alone; we don't need that. We would gladly un-inscribe ourselves. It's not ours anymore [...] Now that it is protected, it is everyone's. Globalised.¹⁰

I did not have many arguments to dispute his doubts and statements, because I shared his opinion to a certain degree. Moreover, his words partly reflect the views of many anthropologists and ethnologists dealing with negative effects and aspects of UNESCO's cultural policy relating to intangible cultural heritage.

After my explanation had been printed in the newspaper, tensions among the western bell-ringers subsided, but the topic re-emerged several months later in a meeting where I was invited to talk to representatives of the majority of bell-ringer groups inscribed on the List. To the repeatedly asked question, 'Why does anyone have to protect us? The people from Paris?', I answered that it is not a matter of protection, but rather of safeguarding, recognition, and the possibility of being more visible, that no one would protect them against their will, and that probably nothing overly dramatic would happen. I pointed out that this status enabled them to apply for national and international financial support for organising exhibitions, printing materials and books, making films, or designing programmes as needed, and that this would not necessarily disturb their usual Carnival practices. Some of the bell-ringers were positive about it and it seemed that their number has increased over time:

It's an honour. We should know how to make use of it. People see you differently — they see that you are worth something. It is not like — you've come up with something and now you go around doing mischief. Now we are regarded as culture.¹¹

¹⁰ Interview with bell-ringer A. J. from Mučići, 15 April 2010.

¹¹ Interview with bell-ringer D. M. from Halubje, 27 February 2010.



Fig. 3. Halubje bell-ringers known for their impressive animal masks, 23 January 2010.
Photo by Lidija Nikočević

The Carnival practices of groups gain a new, serious significance in their respective local communities when inscribed on the UNESCO list. This is no laughing matter. In the words of a member of the women's Carnival group that used to mask themselves as caricatures of bell-ringers, making fun of their virile appearance,

*We didn't mask as bell-ringers this year; we thought about it but not everyone was in favour, so we didn't. We can't joke about it; we don't want to, and we can't, especially now they are in the UNESCO list. The criteria are different now; they are protected.*¹²

This surely reduces the potential number of different creative interpretations — one doesn't joke about such a serious thing as heritage.

The form and content of the bell-ringers' Carnival practices has, for a number of years, shown a tendency to codify, standardise, and 're-traditionalise'. Many rules that regulate this custom are much stricter today than in the past. For example, all the participants within a group

¹² Interview with S. M., a girl from the female Carnival group Kunpanija z Halubja from Viškovo, 8 April 2010.

must have exactly the same headgear and other equipment, whereas earlier rules were not so inflexible. Obviously, this is not the result solely of new rules, but of other processes as well, such as a perceived need for recognisable features by which to delineate individual groups, used for identification among themselves.

It is well-known that local culture is frequently converted into economic capital, useful for regional and national representation, particularly by the tourism industry. When it comes to living traditions, these spheres emphasise the performative, public aspects of cultural phenomena, instead of their private and intimate meanings. The bell-ringers' saying, 'Carnival is for poor men and drunkards', suggests an attitude that the practice should stay on the margins, self-contained, and away from strangers, which is obviously no longer the case.

The realisation of tradition-as-heritage represented a challenge for one of the most important local traditional practices — collective negotiation and conflict resolution within the community. Outsider perspectives of community are often idealised, as Dorothy Noyes clearly observed in her Catalan examples where there were elements of urban romanticism in which communities are often perceived as solitary and economically indifferent, while internal relationships and power balances are overlooked.¹³ Cultural bureaucracies that are not a part of local communities impose themselves on the process of evaluation and interpretation of living traditions. Outside observers know little of local realities and their activities, which often results in intervention in the form of commercialisation, corruption and control — intervention because something must be done with the tradition to demonstrate activity and safeguarding, which in turn implies that tradition cannot continue without 'management' (which is also a condition for inscription on the UNESCO list). In this way, the establishment of a bureaucratic mechanism perpetuates itself through the commercialisation of cultural phenomena, and the process easily leads to the development of individual interest and a concentration of power.

And yet, bureaucrats are only one of the interest groups desiring to use bell-ringers' traditions for their own purposes. In the socialist period during which Croatia and five other republics existed within the

¹³ Dorothy Noyes, 'In the Blood: Performance and Identity in the Catalan Transition to Democracy', *Narodna Umjetnost [Croatian Journal of Ethnology and Folklore Research]*, 40 (2003), 65–80.

framework of Yugoslavia, folklore ensembles were very popular and local associations aimed to inspire city youth with folk culture. Many songs and dances, along with some customs and rituals, were performed on stage. In the 1960s, the state folklore ensemble Lado even staged a short bell-ringers' programme that was soon forgotten. That culture was anonymous and decontextualized; virtually no one was thinking critically about cultural appropriation, or the ramifications of interpreting someone else's cultural traditions. Folklore ensembles are still popular in the area and some of them perform Croatian traditions all over the world.

The broadening of our understanding of folklore to include ideas of intangible culture or intangible cultural heritage has accentuated and included the bearers and holders of particular traditions. They are empowered within this new approach, as it became clear that a conscious, self-aware, and proud community is a prerequisite for the successful survival of a living cultural tradition.

In January 2020, these two ways of understanding and approaching folk culture clashed. For the International Green Week in Berlin (an international exhibition of food, agriculture and gardening industries), the Croatian Ministry of Agriculture decided to send bell-ringers as a special attraction. When they contacted bell-ringers from Halubje and from Brđud, they asked them to send a couple of men each to Berlin. The bell-ringers replied that they are a group and cannot be reduced to just one or two pairs since they cannot perform and show the ritual in that way; like a sports team, one or two members are not enough. The organiser did not contact them again but instead invited a 'folklore ensemble' and asked them to provide four men who would act as bell-ringers. The Ivan Goran Kovačić ensemble was able to find and put together costumes and went to Berlin. The event was reported in the media and the bell-men were extremely offended, furious, and embittered. They engaged an attorney to defend their rights. The case got a lot of attention in the media, while ethnographers, folklorists, and anthropologists organised a panel discussion on the rights of communities over their own cultural traditions. The secretary of the Kovačić ensemble said that if it was forbidden to show intangible cultural heritage on stage they would have to disband, since every single tradition has a corresponding source group or carrier. Some ethnographers contended that it is not the same as a song that is known in a vast number of communities and could be understood without much contextualisa-

tion, as opposed to a bell-ringers' ritual that should be contextualised and that loses its sense when staged in an extremely reduced way. The representative of the ensemble disagreed, claiming that every song has its context too, and that Croatian cultural heritage — especially that on UNESCO's list — is for everyone in Croatia and around the world.

The discussion stopped at the stage of identifying and outlining various attitudes and views of the participants, but it is expected to continue. Hopefully it will, because many questions remain open, among them the extent to which it is beneficial to follow the UNESCO paradigm for intangible culture. Even though evaluation of intangible cultural heritage through UNESCO's framework has already been imposed, to what extent it is possible to rule it out or ignore it? What rights do holders have over their living traditions? Can and should they control what is happening in the wider world with something that is very intimate, that they regard as their own? Is it better for some traditions to remain 'marginal' and less visible, or even to cease? These are complex issues demanding thoughtful answers, answers that will shape future policies regarding intangible culture that will shape the lives of generations to come.

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