

TAŤÁNA SOUČKOVÁ

**Ukrainians in Slovakia: Outlining the Reflection on Ethnic Identity and Autostereotypisation of the Ukrainian Minority**

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# **Ukrainians in Slovakia: Outlining the Reflection on Ethnic Identity and Autostereotypisation of the Ukrainian Minority**

TAŤÁNA SOUČKOVÁ

Department of Historical Sciences and Central European Studies,  
University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava, Slovak Republic  
*tatana.souckova@ucm.sk*

## **ABSTRACT**

The paper is based on the conclusions of ethnological research of Ukrainian minority carried out by the author on the territory of Slovakia between 2014 and 2016. Its main objective was the reflection of ethnic stereotypes of the Ukrainian minority towards the Slovak majority. An unavoidable element in research on stereotyping and reflection of "national character" was also an analysis of ethnic identity of the members of the minority group. How do they perceive themselves, what does it personally mean to them to be a Ukrainian and what practically fulfills an abstract category of "being Ukrainian". The author briefly summarizes key theoretical objectives of the concept of ethnic identity and then analyses its reflection within the Ukrainians in Slovakia with regard to its main characteristics. Ukrainian autostereotypisation in the broader context of Ukrainian-Russian relationship is also examined.

**KEY WORDS:** Ukrainian minority, Slovakia, ethnic identity, autosterotypes, symbolic ethnicity

## **Introduction**

Ukrainian minority represents a significant community in ethnic structure of Slovakia. The issue of ethnic self-identification and self-reflection of its members is connected with a whole

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range of topics, among which dominates the internal division of the minority into the Ukrainian and the Rusyn part. Another important factor influencing the current state of the minority is a new economic migration wave which is determined by seeking better economic and social conditions for life. New migration is often intertwined with the conflict in the eastern Ukraine, the loss of the Crimean Peninsula and overall bad economic and political situation of the country.

The following text is based on the conclusions of ethnological research carried out by the author in the territory of Slovakia between 2014 and 2016.<sup>1</sup> Its main objective was the reflection of ethnic stereotypes of the Ukrainian minority towards the Slovak majority. An unavoidable element in research on stereotyping and reflection of "national character" is an analysis of ethnic identity of the members of the minority group - how do they perceive themselves, what does it personally mean to them to be a Ukrainian and what practically fulfills an abstract category of "being Ukrainian".

Without the ambition to cover such a comprehensive topic in its entirety, we have come to the conclusion that, despite the inherent fragmentation of the members of the minority due to the diversity of their nature, socio-economic origin and differences in viewing the global cultural and political situation, it is possible for Ukrainians in Slovakia to follow some common tendencies and attitudes.

### **Research Methodology**

Ethnological research of the Ukrainian minority was designed as qualitative and based on face-to-face structured and semi-structured interviews. Non-formal questioning was also used, especially when the informant was familiar with the research goal, but for various reasons it appeared to be impossible to stick to the intended structure of the interview. Frequently this happened with the respondents who were not used to interacting with scientific research environment and some topics gave them an impression of confusion or not understanding the overall purpose of the interview. Moreover, the technique of an informal conversation was crucial as the author was in a position of an outsider within the Ukrainian

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<sup>1</sup> The research on Ukrainian ethnic stereotypes was originally carried out in the Slovak Republic and simultaneously in the Czech Republic as it had been designed as a comparison of the two potentially similar, yet different social backgrounds. Presented conclusions include only the data relevant for the Slovak part of the survey.

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community. Most often a combination of both types of interview was used depending on the particular communication situations and the capabilities of the respondents.

Due to the nature of the studied issue a number of refinements of the qualitative research method were required during the survey. A methodological alternative linking the qualitative method with the quantitative method was used in a form of a questionnaire survey. In scientific terminology this type of research is referred to as a complementary combination of qualitative and quantitative survey – a mixed research (HENDL 2016:56-59). In this way it was possible to reach out to more respondents, as there were informants who, for various reasons, were unwilling to engage in closer cooperation and contact with the researcher. However, they were able to contribute at least by filling in the questionnaires.

Basing on the framework defined in mixed research characteristics, the questionnaires have brought us relevant and valuable information. Questions in the questionnaire were designed as open in order to receive free associations of the respondents. The interviews and the findings of the questionnaires were evaluated separately, they were summarized only in the presentation of the overall results of the original research.

During the research the author repeatedly participated in the cultural events of the Ukrainian minority, where she applied a method of participant and non-participant observation. The author is a graduate of the academic specialization Ukrainian Language and Literature (Masaryk University in Brno, the Czech Republic), which enabled her to fully comprehend various customs and folk traditions presented at events.

Nevertheless, the research topic requires a lot of specific information that cannot be captured solely by a mere observation method and if so, it is only to a small extent. For this reason, the principle of selective observation focusing on certain "examples and evidence for types of behavior and processes" had been applied (HENDL 2016:199).

Qualitative research was carried out in Bratislava, Trnava, Košice, Prešov and Svidník. A sample of respondents was constituted from Ukrainian citizens permanently residing in the Slovak Republic. The basic criterion for participation in the survey was the ethnic self-identification of respondents as Ukrainians as well as claiming Ukrainian nationality.

Eight in-depth interviews were conducted and eleven completed questionnaires were collected. Three questionnaires had been filled in by the respondents, who subsequently participated also in the face-to-face structured and semi-structured interviews. The age range of respondents was from 18 to 77 years. The occupation of informants varied from college students, manual workers, administrative workers or medical staff members to people working in media, academic sphere and art. As for the origin the overall composition of the

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respondents was unbalanced in favor of the migrant component with most of the informants belonging to the older or the modern wave of migration. Only two respondents came from a family of autochthonous Ukrainians of northeastern Slovakia.<sup>2</sup>

Our participants did not have contacts based on organized migrant networks, although some of the respondents shared mutual friendly or working relationships. We had anticipated the Ukrainian minority to be internally heterogeneous. It has been split into subgroups depending on the form of residence, occupation and socio-economic conditions of their members and in particular on the willingness to publicly demonstrate or together experience their ethnic identity (SZALÓ 2007:114). Therefore, we decided not to include a methodological aspect which is nowadays widely discussed – the transnationalism, more precisely the concept of transnational migration (SZALÓ 2007). We believe that applying of the concept should be based on logically predefined research objectives. Knowing that most of our respondents do not necessarily maintain parallel life in both Slovakia and Ukraine (see for example HAMAR-SZALÓ 2007),<sup>3</sup> except natural, and predominantly online, contacts with their families or friends, we regarded the transnational approach as not suitable for our research. We would not be able to deliver solid evidence for at least basic generalization concerning the transnational aspect of our respondents' reflection of their Ukrainian ethnic identity. Our starting point was the reflection of minority ethnic identity in Slovak milieu, but most importantly the ethnic stereotypization and its manifestation. For the sake of the coherence of the final research output we have decided not to split the research objectives into too many concepts and subtopics. However, we perceive this concept to be highly inspirational. It should be applied with the next reinterpreting of the collected data, this time solely in the light of building and mainting the transnational Ukrainian migrant identity within Slovakia.

### **Ethnicity and Ethnic Identity**

Ethnicity is one of the terms which has been outlined by a number of definitions and theoretical characterizations in the second half of the 20th century. Constructivism became the main conceptual framework for the characterization of ethnicity especially from the 1960s

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<sup>2</sup> One respondent was interviewed, the other one filled in a questionnaire.

<sup>3</sup> Most of our respondents, however, do keep in touch with their homeland, but these are rather somehow natural relationships with their friends or family, which are not conditioned or motivated by particular need (e. g. having left children in Ukraine, a remittance etc.).

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and the 1970s (BOTÍK 2007:9). Contemporary concept of ethnicity is briefly summarized by Petra Košťálová, who suggests that there is also an idea of the concept of ethnicity as a phenomenon which may include both instrumentalist and functionalist elements. According to her words, ethnicity can be understood as "a manifestation of belonging to a particular ethnic group, which de facto precedes the formation of the nation and which is characterized by objectively determined factors" – the primordial aspect (KOŠŤÁLOVÁ 2012:31-32).

Ethnicity is a very broad concept, generally defined as "cultural practices and opinions of a certain group of people which distinguish them from others" (GIDDENS 1999:228). Boundaries of ethnicity are very variable and flexible to the extent that in theoretical approaches to its definition there is currently a whole range of concepts starting with the emphasis on the importance of ethnicity in modern society to its more general characterization as one of the manifestations of collective identity (ŠATAVA 2009:16-17). Gabriela Kiliánová also adopts the broadest possible framework for the definition of ethnicity. She has come to the conclusion that ethnicity "can only be defined as a feeling by which one group of people distinguishes itself from another group. This feeling can often be difficult to explain, diffused and unclear both from the point of view of members and non-members of the group, hence from the perspective of emic and etic" (KILIÁNOVÁ 1998:21).

It can be concluded that ethnicity is a complex phenomenon and has many different forms. Thomas Hylland Eriksen in his classical work *Ethnicity and Nationalism* also avoids an unequivocal definition of ethnicity. Instead he analyzes the possible social contexts in which ethnicity is applied as the main principle of intergroup relations (ERIKSEN 2012:34-35). In Eriksen's words "we express the idea that groups and identities evolve in mutual contact rather than in isolation" (ERIKSEN 2012:34). He follows the concept of Fredrik Barth, who dealt with exploring social boundaries within ethnic groups. Barth stated that creating and maintaining boundaries between groups is an incentive to maintain ethnic identity and the uniqueness of a given group (BARTH 1969:15). Basic principles of ethnicity thus include the definition of "us" and "them". In the case of complementarity of relationships, where one ethnic group seeks to achieve an equal relationship (typically with ethnic minorities), the categorization is modified to "us" and "you" (ERIKSEN 2012:59).

In examining a particular aspect of interethnic relations, such as ethnic stereotypes, it is important to define the issue of ethnicity in the context of all its social, cultural and historical contexts. As for the Slovak majority, ethnicity can be relatively precisely delineated since it

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has relatively clearly defined ethnic boundaries.<sup>4</sup> However, while defining the Ukrainian ethnic group, it is necessary to take into account the complicated ethnic composition of the population of Ukrainians who constitute an ethnic minority in the Slovak Republic. Another fundamental element is the factor of subjective definition of ethnicity as a "variable phenomenon of the gradual constitution of the consciousness of belonging to a group" (KOŠŤÁLOVÁ 2012:30), including regional, religious and linguistic specificities that can be very diverse for the Ukrainians.<sup>5</sup> The basis for the understanding of ethnicity is thus not only the declaration of belonging to the Ukrainian ethnic group regardless of the question of a mother language as the language is not and cannot be a determining factor of ethnicity. A more important aspect is the ethnic identity that we believe to be a conscious subjective experience of ethnicity (KILIÁNOVÁ 1998:21). It is "a concept to a certain extent similar to the term identity" – it represents the perception of own ethnic identity; it is a way of self-presentation and ethnic self-classification" (KOŠŤÁLOVÁ 2012:28).

As part of the academic debate on ethnicity, the term "ethnic consciousness", which had been suggested by Michal Kaľavský, should also be mentioned. According to Kaľavský, ethnic consciousness is a sense of the group's originality, which includes "the common historical memory of the ethnic community, a set of common values of the ethnic community, ethnonym and a set of collective community aspirations" (KAĽAVSKÝ 2004:13). Ethnic consciousness, as characterized by Kaľavský, is conditioned, among other things, by a "set of collective aspirations of the community" (KAĽAVSKÝ 2004:13). In the Slovak milieu, however, it is unavoidable to take into account the dual nature of the Ukrainian minority – its autochthonous component and the Ukrainians who form the diaspora. As empirical findings show, it is not always possible to talk about sharing common aspirations or defining common goals. The interests and future headings of the new and constantly arriving migrants

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<sup>4</sup> Clearly defined boundaries are in the context of our research understood conditionally. We are aware of the fact that Slovak society is not internally homogeneous. In spite of that the way members of the Ukrainian minority perceive the Slovaks makes it possible to see the Slovaks as a relatively coherent community with clearly recognizable characteristics. This type of an emic approach has its own specific rules, which are particularly analyzed by folk sociology or ethnic (psychological) essentialization. Such research is the domain of cognitive psychology and cognitive anthropology. For more details see KANOVSKÝ 2009a:9-34; KANOVSKÝ 2009b:345-368.

On the topic of development of the process of understanding ethnicity and ethnic boundaries see ŠATAVA 2009:10-30.

<sup>5</sup> On the issue of ethnicity and issues of ethnic identity on the example of the Czechs living abroad see BROUČEK 2011:52-56.

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are often diametrically different from the Ukrainians who were born and have been living in the territory of today's Slovakia (autochthonous Rusyns-Ukrainians).

Therefore, we perceive the concept of ethnic identity as a more appropriate tool for describing experiencing or declaring ethnicity, since ethnic identity can represent a purely individual phenomenon. At the same time, resulting from an empirical survey, it can also have many overlaps towards collective experience and evaluation of the forms of demonstration of ethnic identity of others.

Ján Botík argues, that ethnic identity is "used as a theoretical category for creating an individual or group/collective self-image" (BOTÍK 2007:9). This aspect is particularly important in our research for the purpose of characterizing ethnic identity of the Ukrainians. Boundaries of collective awareness of the group's ethnic identity provide a platform for forming mental representations of characteristics and significant features of other ethnic groups. These limits subsequently create a space for mutual confrontation of the members of the studied ethnic minority group. The Ukrainians appear to be an ethnic group adjusting to the majority yet necessitating the creation of a space for declaring their own ethnic identity in confrontation with the ethnic identity of the majority. However, in a number of specific cultural and historical aspects, particular members of the group can seem similar or even identical to the Slovaks, which is particularly the case of some of the Rusyns-Ukrainians of northeastern Slovakia.

In accordance with G. Kiliánová we believe that ethnic identity is a constructed identity and represents a consciously experienced process of self-reflection and reflection of one's own relation to the ethnic group, whether it is to itself or to a group of "others" (KILIÁNOVÁ 1998:22).

For the sake of completeness, it is also necessary to point out the view of ethnic identity by the prism of cognitive anthropology formulated by Martin Kanovský, which suggests that the ethnic identity is "necessarily a combination of particular universal, innate psychological qualities and a socio-historical-political construction" (KANOVSKÝ 2009a:9).

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### **Ukrainians in Slovakia: Rusyns and Ukrainians**

Within the scope of Slovak scientific literature focused on the issue of minorities, which means including the treatise on the Rusyns and Ukrainians or Rusyns-Ukrainians,<sup>6</sup> in most cases there can be found a resigned conclusion stating that the minority is now divided into two irreconcilable branches – Rusyn and Ukrainian. More specifically, on one hand there is a group promoting autonomy of the Rusyn ethnic group and its independence (linguistic, cultural, ethnic and historical) on the Ukrainian nation and on the other hand stands a pro-Ukrainian opposition, which emphasizes the common origins of the Rusyns and Ukrainians and views them as one ethnic group with the same roots and ethnic background.

Disputes over whether it is one and identical ethnic group or whether the Rusyns have gone through a different ethnogenesis and thus they are not part of the Ukrainian nation have been filling and still are filling pages of scholarly monographs and periodicals as well as numerous conference proceedings. Recently the revival of Rusyn culture has been highly topical, at least for those who actively claim the Rusyn nationality. This fact has been strongly supported by official recognising of the Rusyn language as a one of the minority languages in the Slovak Republic since 1995 (PLÍŠKOVÁ 2004:114). In eastern Slovakia, especially in Prešov and Košice, several Rusyn institutions are actively working and there are folk ensembles regularly performing. Magazines, newsletters and books are being published, conferences are being held, moreover there is even a radio broadcast in the Rusyn language. However, it is important to stress, that there are also Ukrainian cultural associations and artistic ensembles, including the Ukrainian radio broadcast as well. Both the Rusyn and the Ukrainian associations operate simultaneously.

From the historical point of view the representatives of the Rusyns point out mainly the violent Ukrainianization during the totalitarian period, accentuating the denial of the right to Rusyn self-determination along with marginalization of the Rusyn language. This is subsequently supposed to have led to a process of strengthening the Rusyn ethnic self-identification. In 1991, 13 281 people declared the Ukrainian nationality and 17 197 people claimed the Rusyn nationality (SOPOLIGA 2006:21). The supporters of the Ukrainian nationality see the Rusyn ethnic revival as a very sensitive matter that ultimately weakens

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<sup>6</sup> The "Rusyns-Ukrainians" is a compromise term, which is not accepted by all minority representatives, but is widely used in current Slovak scholarly publications. By the pro-Rusyn movement the Rusyns are viewed as entirely independent ethnic group including the ethnonym, others claim the ethnonym Rusyn to be older, vernacular ethnonym for today's Ukrainians.



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the already fragmented minority and leads to an even faster and more intensive assimilation with the majority Slovak population. The trend of a gradual integration is visible in the censuses. Two decades after the first post-revolutionary census (2011) the number of citizens proclaiming the Ukrainian nationality dropped to 7 430. On the contrary the number of people declaring the Rusyn nationality increased to 33 482.<sup>7</sup>

Situation between the Rusyns and the Ukrainians in Slovakia is very complex and non-transparent. It is influenced by partial political and economic interests. Nevertheless, the scholars across the academic spectrum agree on the fact that for the Rusyns and Ukrainians/Rusyns-Ukrainians and their ordinary daily lives these issues represent rather abstract and not crucially important matter (PODOBA 2009:573; MUŠINKA 2005:203-207). In other words, academic disputes or debates have little to do with a real and practical life. Members of the minority often call themselves Rusyns or Rusnaks, which is by no means referring to the expression of internal agreement with the idea of the revival of the Rusyn ethnicity. They simply and naturally use the ethnonym which they have been using for years not regarding to its current political connotations.

As mentioned above, it is also necessary to emphasize that many cultural activities of both groups are parallel and often overlap completely. It is the logical consequence of the common roots which are most clearly evident in the folklore. As stated by Mikuláš Mušinka, folklore unifies its bearers but also the scholars with otherwise contradictory views. Mušinka in his essay on the issue of the Rusyns-Ukrainians suggests a conciliatory opinion based on the interest in folk traditions research as well as in passing on these traditions to future generations. He argues that it is the content and form of the traditions which is decisive for the people who maintain and develop them, not the fact the "these traditions will be considered Rusyn, Rusyn-Ukrainian or Ukrainian" (MUŠINKA 2005:207).

Given the current situation, there is a little chance that the emphasis on common things instead of those that divides the Rusyns-Ukrainian in northeastern Slovakia will represent sufficient motivation to calm the disputes which have been lasting for decades.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://census2011.statistics.sk/tabulky.html> [cit. 2018-01-29].

### **Ukrainian minority in Slovakia as a whole**

Besides the Rusyn-Ukrainians as autochthonous inhabitants of Slovakia there is another issue connected with Ukrainian minority, which has so far not been adequately analyzed in Slovak ethnological, sociological and demographic discourse. It is the modern migration wave from Ukraine. One reason for relative overlooking of the matter is that the Ukrainians are not perceived as distinctly and culturally different in Slovakia. They are seen as "domestic" because of their strong position on the ethnic map of Slovakia thanks to the autochthonous part of the ethnic group. Modern migration surveys accentuate other nationalities coming to Slovakia and although the Ukrainians are not represented among them, we can rely on their general knowledge that applies to all migrants from countries outside the European Union (GALLOVÁ KRIGLEROVÁ – KADLEČÍKOVÁ – LAJČÁKOVÁ 2009; FILADELFIOVÁ – GYARFÁŠOVÁ – HLINČÍKOVÁ – SEKULOVÁ 2010). Among research obstacles concerning the Ukrainians belongs also the unclear situation within the minority as well as the low number of people of Ukrainian nationality coming to Slovakia. However, as current surveys show, Slovakia is becoming an increasingly popular destination for Ukrainians.

In the Slovak Republic the labor and economic migration has been developing since the 90's pointing out that in the year 2015 10 000 stays were granted to citizens of Ukraine. Thus, they have ranked among the largest group of migrants from third countries in the Slovak territory. The trend of the arrival of economic migrants, but also for example the students, is rising despite a number of administrative problems. Authors of the publication on current Slovak migrants talk about the need for legislative adjustments and simplification of the process of legal and socio-economic integration of migrants (KRIGLEROVÁ – KADLEČÍKOVÁ – LAJČÁKOVÁ 2009:48-49).

### **New Ukrainian migration wave**

As a part of our research we focused largely on the Ukrainians who belong to the modern and current wave of migration. The only interconnection it has with the autochthonous Rusyn-Ukrainians is their ethnonym "the Ukrainians". The fact that current Ukrainian diaspora is being formed in Slovakia is an interesting starting point for further research, since it seems to lack deeper links to Rusyns-Ukrainian from the northeast of the country, but at the same time is increasingly active in public cultural life. This modern Ukrainian migration represents a kind of bridging of the issue of ethnic identification between Rusyns-Ukrainians and opens up new perspectives of the Ukrainian national minority as a whole. In many cases

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its members come from the regions of central, southern or eastern Ukraine and they are not so burdened with the issue of Rusyn versus Ukrainian ethnic self-identification. This also brings new challenges such as intense communication about potential problems or practical obstacles to life in Slovakia which are recently being largely shared and discussed on social networks. Modern digital communication is becoming an increasingly important tool for organizing the lives of the migrant community.

Members of the diaspora and the representatives of modern migration most intensively operate in the lucrative region of Bratislava. The second largest region with the highest number of employed people coming from Ukraine is the Košice Region.<sup>8</sup> Living in Bratislava is favourable for its geographical location in the vicinity of Vienna and the border with the Czech Republic. The Ukrainians are also present in other Slovak towns, albeit in smaller numbers. Some of our respondents have been living in Košice or Prešov for a long time. They have chosen to live in these cities because of various personal reasons or job offers. It has not been a targeted effort to stay in a place with a higher concentration of "compatriots", as for the autochthonous part of the community living there. Few Ukrainian artists also live in Trnava and its surroundings or in Považská Bystrica and other locations.

As some of our respondents have confirmed, various stereotypes have developed in Slovakia, not unlike those that are also evident in the Czech or Polish environment. It is particularly the image of the Ukrainians as "mafia men or women seeking a rich husband", or people who take the jobs from Slovaks, smuggle goods and are involved in the illegal drug trade.

An important breakthrough in the life of Ukrainian migration was the conflict in Ukraine. A need to actively raise awareness about Ukrainian culture and to draw attention to the need to support Ukraine as an independent and united country has led to founding new civic migration initiatives in the Slovak Republic. The most significant of them works in Bratislava: Ukraine – Slovakia – SOS has become a respected volunteer organization within a relatively short period of time (during the past four years).<sup>9</sup> Its members have been organizing charity collections for local residents and Ukrainian soldiers. Over the time its activities have been intertwined with the musical drama ensemble Shevchenkovci.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> [http://cvek.sk/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/integracia\\_migrantov\\_2.pdf](http://cvek.sk/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/integracia_migrantov_2.pdf) [cit. 2018-01-30].

<sup>9</sup> <http://ukraine-slovakia-sos.org/> [cit. 2018-01-30].

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/%C5%A0ev%C4%8Denkovci-Hudobno-dramatick%C3%BD-s%C3%BAbor-Tarasa-%C5%A0ev%C4%8Denka-123551004375251/?fref=ts>  
(official social network profile).

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Furthermore particularly the female members of the initiative have made considerable efforts to establish the Ukrainian language course for children who attend Slovak schools or are from Russian-speaking families although their parents are of Ukrainian nationality (but do not actively use the Ukrainian language).

It has to be noticed that despite these tendencies the modern Ukrainian community in large cities is not homogeneous. Many Ukrainian citizens prefer an inconspicuous life without expressing their ethnicity or participating in Ukrainian cultural activities or other reverence gatherings for the victims of the war.

### **Ethnic identity of the Ukrainians in Slovakia**

National and ethnic symbolism of the Ukrainian minority in Slovakia is formed by the consciousness of belonging to Ukraine, which, as an independent country, is still undergoing a complex process of building and consolidating its own ethnic consciousness. Despite complexity of the problems of interpretation of Ukrainian history some elements can be defined combining both aspects of the myth of common historical origins, which is usually associated with the Slavic population of Kyivan Rus and the phenomenon of the Cossacks in the early modern period.

The most prominent cultural personality for the Ukrainians had become the writer and painter Taras Shevchenko (1814-1861), the founder of modern Ukrainian literature. Modern history is commemorated in particular by the tragic famine ("holodomor") that broke out in Ukraine in 1932-1933 in the context of the violent Soviet collectivization of the land. Part of the Ukrainian society believes that the famine was a planned Russian genocide of the Ukrainian nation (KOROSTELINA 2014:87, 144).<sup>11</sup>

An important element of the ethnic self-identification of Ukrainians is above all a set of cultural codes based on the East Slavonic heritage of the Kyivan Rus, the Orthodox Church

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<sup>11</sup> In a comprehensive analysis of the Ukrainian national narrative, Karina V. Korostelina states that Ukrainian ethnic identity is developed and shaped in a constant confrontation with Russian national identity and Russian culture. Korostelina's research took place prior to the outbreak of the Donbass conflict and the loss of the Crimea, but its conclusions are fully consistent with the data we obtained from our informants after 2014. Korostelina describes the difficult definition of the Ukrainian in opposition to the Russian, which is far from valid for the whole spectrum of Ukrainian society. Particularly complicated is the case for Russian-speaking Ukrainians, who perceive nationalist tendencies in the expression of Ukrainian as a unity of language, culture and shared pro-European

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and the following moral values and attitudes. Karina V. Korostelina's research confirms that to a large extent the key paradigm of Ukrainian culture is based on delimitating itself from the Russian culture. Within this axiological opposition the Ukrainians regard themselves as a peace-loving nation with an independent and democratically manifested mentality. However, it has always been threatened and attacked by aggressive, imperial and authoritative Russian predominance (KOROSTELINA 2014:146-149).

The Ukrainians recognize a number of elements of folk material and spiritual culture, even in the form of colours, as ethnic symbols. The essential colours include yellow and blue representing the colours of the flag of Ukraine symbolizing yellow fields and the blue sky above them. It also includes national dishes, such as "borsch" or "varenky", as well as folk clothing elements such as "vyshyvanka", a national costume shirt decorated with typical embroidery. Ukrainians perceive various ethnic symbols as very important - from musical folklore, botanical elements (viburnum, poplar tree) to famous literary works. Therefore, the Ukrainians in Slovakia choose a similar repertoire of ethnic symbols as in Ukraine. A separate chapter is represented by the sphere of personal experience of interpersonal relationships, sharing values and attitudes. This highly abstract area is very important for Ukrainians as it delimitates symbolic differences from the Slovak society. Nevertheless, in the case of material and spiritual culture, careful differentiation is necessary due to the diversity of the ethnic composition of the Ukrainian population and thus different forms of ethnic identity drawing on diverse symbols that do not necessarily have to be universal for the whole country.

Generally speaking, ethnic identity which we understand as a subjective perception of "being Ukrainian" is usually clearly declared by the informants as a feeling of internal interconnection with the Ukrainian country, mentality, culture and in some cases very intensely also with the Ukrainian language. Our findings and the overall consistency and relevance of the gained narratives enable us to observe that Ukrainians, when asked about

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values as "aggressive patriotism" (KOROSTELINA 2014:214-224). The author, in her extensive analysis, points to a whole range of axiological opposition, which according to the Ukrainians divide these two nations. From an emic Ukrainian opinion, and it is necessary to point out that the Russian view of Korostelina's research is not included, the Ukrainians are the victims, while the Russians are characterized as aggressors. Ukrainians tend to be viewed as a pro-European, modern and democratically-minded society, while the Russians are characterized by imperial ambitions and are more like the Asians. Last but not least, the Ukrainians are free-minded and strive to live in a free country. On the contrary the Russians are characterized as a nation easily manipulated by a strong leader, inclined towards totalitarianism, autocracy and oppression both internal and external (KOROSTELINA 2014:146, 185).

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ethnic identity and the feeling of "being Ukrainian", usually operate with the division of their nation into sub-units due to the particular geographic areas. The differences between perception, reflection, experience, and eventually the public declaration of their ethnic identity is predominantly given by their place of origin in Ukraine. It also determines their regarding of the Slovak Republic and its society.

The basis of the territorial division is the axis formed by the Dnieper River which divides the country into the western and eastern part but the actual internal division of Ukraine is much more diverse.<sup>12</sup> From the point of view of declaring one's identity, there is a strong emphasis on the Zakarpattia origin, which has been significantly stressed by its bearers compared to the rest of Ukraine. The informants from the Zakarpattia region have reflected themselves somewhat ethnically specific and different from people from other parts of Ukraine. Reciprocally it has been recognised by the Ukrainians from other regions who spoke about certain specificity of Zakarpattia. In Slovakia this feature is enhanced by the fact that Zakarpattia lies on the Ukrainian-Slovak border which implies the natural proximity given by the common Carpathian culture, including the vernacular language dialects.

Zakarpattia is known to the inhabitants of other regions of Ukraine as the most western, and also probably the most distant part of the country. This is due to the mountainous geographical profile and the peculiarity of the local population. It is also necessary to mention the different historical development of the region that had been part of the Kingdom of Hungary and for centuries it had been outside the control of the powerful states influencing the geo-political situation of Ukraine (Poland, Russia, Austria). Ukrainians from other regions often have only a very superficial awareness of the Rusyn affairs and specifics of the region, but generally reflect the Zakarpattia as an area with an incomprehensible dialect. The differences between the Zakarpattia population, which is sometimes referred to by other

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<sup>12</sup> Markéta Bezoušková, who follows the concept of cultural areas according to Václav Soukup (BEZOUŠKOVÁ 2012:67-77) dealt with the question of ethnic identification of Ukrainians coming from the West and the East in her study on the mutual reflection of these two groups of Ukrainian migrants in Prague. Bezoušková draws a brief conclusion which focuses primarily on West-East or East-West discourse where there is a difference between the two groups of inhabitants but none of them perceives any differences as confrontational, apart for some exceptions. As Bezoušková states, the topic of internal division by the place of origin plays an important role in the ethnic identification of Ukrainians. Our research has also shown that this aspect plays an important role not only in the reflection of the Ukrainian self, but also of the others. We are trying to take into account the emic Ukrainian perspective, which particularly resonates with the accent on the distinctive character of the Zakarpattia region and its inhabitants.

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informants without further specifying as a part of western Ukraine, are also apparent in terms of people living in the central, eastern or southeastern parts of the country.

This is mainly related to the afore-mentioned division of the country to the west and east. This classification is based on the historical structure of the Ukrainian countries but has remained in a generalized form to this day. It is most likely to be heard about western Ukraine as the one which has preserved the Ukrainian traditions, language and national pride and is keeping them alive. The inhabitants of western Ukraine thus perceive themselves to be closer to European than to the Russian sphere of cultural and political influence. Some people of the central and eastern regions confront themselves with the definition of "being Ukrainian" as such and deal with its actual semantic as well as practical essence. However, this inner coping with self-identification does not necessarily imply supporting Russia on its political journey; it is mainly the confusion of having to choose between Ukrainian and Russian (language, family background, social milieu) which can be difficult to make.

For the most part the territory of eastern Ukraine is constituted from important industrial area where predominantly Russian is spoken. Formerly the "Soviet culture" has been much more entrenched here. This abstract concept was constantly used by the informants, even those from the east. In eastern Ukraine, the Soviet heritage is firmly embedded in collective human memory. Through this prism is commonly perceived the internal division of the whole country, into two halves – taking into account many different subregions.

In a given cultural and geographical context, it must be emphasized once again that Russian as a mother tongue does not in any way mean pro-Russian sympathy or national attachment. It does not mean that in the east of the country there would not be any living and publicly actively shared idea of being essentially Ukrainian, along with displaying patriotism and pride of Ukrainian origin. There definitely is.

**Internal inhomogeneity of the community as an aspect of Ukrainian ethnic identity**

Low cohesiveness within the groups of Ukrainians living abroad has often been referred to by informants as one of the typical features of the Ukrainian migrants. This entails the issue of Ukrainian self-image and autostereotype in general, but in order to understand the functioning of the Ukrainian minority in Slovakia it is important to define it as one of the constitutive elements of migrant community's collective identity. Its overall internal

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inhomogeneity and fragmentation is caused by what the Ukrainians themselves describe as "disunity".

Almost during all the interviews we have made, we were warned that the attitudes of Ukrainians living abroad are diametrically different from the opinions we would have heard directly in Ukraine. The reason for this difference is the fact that people who have decided to leave Ukraine for whatever reason perceive themselves as more determined, more progressive and free-minded. This is usually also associated with adopting strongly individual approach within the strategy they take in integrating into mainstream society. For many Ukrainians the only unifying element of the community, regardless of which part of the country the person comes from, is the Orthodox or Greek-Catholic temples. However, many Ukrainians visit them only at the time of important church holidays or on the occasion of weddings, baptisms or funerals.

Repeatedly there have occurred opinions confirming the existence of many closed communities of Ukrainians whose members speak only Ukrainian or Russian, not wanting to integrate in any way and unwilling to communicate openly even with other Ukrainians. In the words of the respondents, in the context of the current migrant community the principle applies that the Ukrainians overlook their compatriots, since they very often feel ashamed of them. Furthermore, they very negatively perceive the low support of the Ukrainian embassy in Slovakia.

The causes for not reaching to other Ukrainians are partly in the stereotypical view of the Ukrainians by the majority, when they are frequently being regarded as second-class economic migrants coming from the underdeveloped country. This also has an effect on the Ukrainians themselves. They can reluctantly communicate with others in order not to be negatively labelled. There are also examples when the Ukrainians share a negative view of the Slovak majority members concerning the Ukrainians and after personal negative experiences with communication with the compatriots, they are also somewhat ashamed for them. It should be noted that although this situation has begun to change slowly even in the course of our research and is likely to change into the future, the community remains fragmented and is generally rather small.

General piece of knowledge, which once again relates to experiencing the Ukrainian identity in connection with the place of origin in Ukraine, is a phenomenon that proved to be problematic with the outbreak of a war in the Donbass region. This tragic situation, in addition to fatal material impacts and losses on human lives, is serious in terms of the division of Ukrainian society both in Ukraine and outside Ukraine. The informants we had interviewed were united in the perception of the conflict as a national disaster, but individual



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views differed on issues related to its causes. The most prominent issue is the pro-Ukrainian versus pro-Russian orientation of Ukrainians, especially among those who are divided between their native language, which is often Russian, and Ukrainian, that is being increasingly promoted as a symbol of Ukrainian national identity.

Respondents who come from the Russian-speaking environment had in some cases the need to accentuate that they are actively claiming their Ukrainian identity in order to not to become suspected from extremely nationally-oriented compatriots, which might be prone to picture them as supporters of Russian military aggression. The contradictions of opinion that either had not existed before the outbreak of war or had not played a significant role in interpersonal relationships (which is usually expressed by the attitude stating that Ukrainians are one nation regardless of language as they commonly understand each other and make friends across the country) have obviously transferred to the functioning of the ethnic minority, its internal coherence and public presentation.

Speaking about opinions, the autochthonous Ukrainians of Slovakia are as divided as the members of the migrant diaspora community. Among the older generation of Ukrainian respondents, who have been living and working in Slovakia for several decades, there were strong voices talking about the Slovak majority society as helping with their indifferent attitude to even more intense fragmentation of an already inhomogenous minority.

### **Symbols of Ukrainian ethnic identity**

According to the ethnosymbolic concept developed by Anthony D. Smith, a set of certain myths, symbols, values, memories, and rituals is the basis of ethnicity manifestation (SMITH 2009:24-25). The set of attributes of the material and spiritual culture of the nation is very diverse and wide in the case of the Ukrainians. In Ukrainian society, great emphasis is placed on moral values and specific features of a national character, which are naturally perceived as unique by Ukrainians and which could be put into the category of abstract symbolism.

In the interviews on this question with the respondents, the feeling of belonging to Ukraine in the sense of it as a native land with specific culture and traditions has been most commonly stressed. Such feeling has not weakened even after long years spent in emigration. Other typical Ukrainian symbols regularly used during meetings of Ukrainians outside their

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native country do not differ from those commonly displayed during holidays or various festive occasions directly in Ukraine.

The most important symbols include the flag of Ukraine, which is always on display when a specific event is taken, or the participants bring it with them and at least keep it in their hands. Together with the flag, there is often a coat of arms, the so-called "tryzub" (trident).<sup>13</sup> In connection with the coat of arms of Ukraine, its decoration is usually a "rushnyk", which is an embroidered ritual cloth of rectangular shape and it represents a typical part of the Eastern Slavic ceremonial traditions. From the garments it is primarily a "vyshyvanka" represented by a white or black shirt embroidered with traditional ornaments worn by both women and men. Women also add other parts of the national costume which are usually already very modernized. Girls and women often braid their hair and they add at least a symbolic floral headband. T-shirts with different national motifs and inscriptions dressed by women, men and children are also very popular today.

A crucial element of Ukrainian gatherings is food. Emphasis is put on tasty home-made food which is associated with hospitality and generosity. Features such as "hospitality along with offering the guests the best what we have" is expressed by the Ukrainians through meals and drinks, representing a self-portrayed view of Ukrainians as an open society that accepts without prejudices anybody who comes with the willingness to get to know Ukraine and Ukrainians. The most significant meal is Ukrainian borsch, which, especially as Ukrainian women like to emphasize, is a purely Ukrainian soup, not Russian, as the Slovaks often think.<sup>14</sup>

An integral part of celebrations that are usually held in Slovakia on the occasion of important holidays or events from recent history, such as the announcement of the Day of Independence of Ukraine (August 24th), is a musical production that represents strong relationship of the Ukrainians to songs and singing. The repertoire consists of national folk songs coming from across regions which eventually can be sung by anybody who feels like singing along with others.

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<sup>13</sup> The form of the current coat of arms of Ukraine comes from its early medieval pre-figure, when the tryzub was the emblem of the Rurikid princes of Kyievan Rus.

<sup>14</sup> On the topic of borsch and its place among the Ukrainian national symbols in confrontation with the general attitude of the majority that associates borsch with the Russian cuisine see SOUČKOVÁ 2015:76-79.

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It is no exception that in the occasion of the proclamation of independence of Ukraine, the commemoration of the birth or the death of the famous personality<sup>15</sup> or nowadays during the majority organized gatherings, including discussions and movie nights, the national anthem is sung. Especially after the events of the spring of 2014 when the conflict in the east of Ukraine has fully exploded, the events organized by the Ukrainians has had a very strong emotional character and the common singing of the anthem has turned into a manifestation and a symbol itself.

All the above-mentioned attributes of Ukrainian culture from the flag through the books of important authors to the various small items with folklore themes the Ukrainians keep also in their homes. Additionally, for people belonging to the church there can be icons or other different decorations with religious motives that have been brought from Ukraine. The extent of their use is directly dependent on individual preferences.

The last years since the outbreak of fighting in the east of the country have initiated the gradual development of so far unknown symbolic trends. Expressing opinions about the circumstances of the conflict as well as the sad remarks of bloody protests in Kiev have become a leitmotif of Ukrainian encounters and an impulse for the public protests and emotional debates on the internet. New symbols have begun to emerge and have expanded the variety of commemorated events from Ukrainian history, albeit quite recent. These include "Maidan", a place where resistance against the ruling régime had been concentrated. However, "Maidan" has not become a universally accepted symbol among the Ukrainian society, nor even within our sample of respondents, in the sense of its unconditional acceptance. "Maidan" has become a concept that has contributed to the division of the Ukrainian society, including the diaspora. Consent or disagreement with "Maidan" is a burning topic that leads to the polarization of the Ukrainians and many of them discourage from the public support of Ukrainian thoughts outside their motherland. In connection with the events of "Maidan" a new phenomenon has emerged concerning language. It is the language which is becoming more and more important, at least in the public appearance of the Ukrainians as one of the vital and promoted symbols of Ukraine.

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<sup>15</sup> The Ukrainians commemorate especially the writer Taras Shevchenko. At the time of our research, we had the opportunity to be present at two commemorative evenings devoted directly to Taras Shevchenko.

### **Symbolic ethnicity and its manifestations among members of the Ukrainian minority**

A number of members of the Ukrainian diaspora in the Slovak Republic, including the autochthonous Ukrainian population of northeastern Slovakia, stand in everyday life before deciding whether and how they want to demonstrate their Ukrainian nationality, or in which way they are going to display their different ethnicity. In line with our findings, based on the narratives of our informants describing the strategies of rapid integration, we have come to the conclusion that the Ukrainians actively demonstrating their ethnicity in a majority society, or in some Slovak cases a long-term life among the majority, do so on the basis of a conscious and voluntary decision. It is not obligatory for all the members of the minority. From a theoretical point of view, we follow the principle of symbolic ethnicity according to Herbert J. Gans (1979),<sup>16</sup> who argued that people from the minority environment feel the need to publicly declare their ethnicity in different forms. They choose to make their ethnicity "visible" if it otherwise would not be obvious at a first glance.

Emphasis on Ukrainian roots and public acceptance of Ukrainian ethnicity is particularly relevant for migrant children, people who have only one parent from Ukraine and who live permanently in Slovakia, autochthonous (often bilingual) Ukrainians in northeastern Slovakia, but also for Russian-speaking citizens of Ukraine who in this way show the majority that they do not come from the Russian Federation and that they do not belong to the Russian cultural tradition.

We understand the Ukrainian symbolic ethnicity in a wider context as a form of anonymity, which is the conscious choice of a particular individual. The starting point of our consideration is the fact that Ukrainian citizens do not distinguish themselves from majority society and if they belong to those members of the community who have mastered the Slovak language at a high level, their nationality can be guessed only from their name (sometimes

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<sup>16</sup> Symbolic ethnicity is seemingly similar to the term "ethnosymbolism," but it is a different concept which, based on research into the social manifestation of the ethnic identity of minority members, has been elaborated in Herbert J. Gans's study of *Symbolic Ethnicity: the future of ethnic groups and cultures in America* (GANS 1979). It is an analysis of research among migrants in a diachronic perspective, when the subject of the study became the social phenomenon of situational ethnicity, respectively its public demonstration. In this context Gans speaks of "visibility of ethnicity" meaning simply a public presentation of specific ethnicity, a kind of return to the roots, and a proud declaration of the ancestors' origin. Symbolic ethnicity is an interesting concept especially because it accurately describes an important aspect of ethnic identity, which is its situational nature. In other words, it is a deliberate suppression or, on the contrary, an emphasis, one's own ethnic identity depending on a particular situation or social discourse.

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only surname). For Ukrainians who have a distinct accent when speaking, the imperfect mastery of language is a clear distinctive feature, but not always are the Slovaks able to identify that the individual is from Ukraine. Confusion usually occurs with Russian-speaking Ukrainians who are mistaken for the Russians.

The informants we have interviewed, as well as most other Ukrainians who actively participate in expatriote gatherings, manifest their ethnicity through the national symbols described above. For the majority of respondents the manifestation of Ukrainian ethnicity is a matter of situational ethnicity, it is not an integral part their daily rituals and every day life. Simply said, Ukrainians emphasize their "Ukrainian side" when they feel the inner need or urge to do so and, furthermore, they are willing publicly share it with others.

It has to be added that some respondents have suggested that the Ukrainian nationality, or Ukrainian citizenship, can be the trigger for discriminatory behavior by the majority. This, of course, does not necessarily lead to the concealment of the Ukrainian nationality. The feeling of discrimination is a very subjective matter and, as confirmed by our informants, it usually applies only to a particular situation, experience or negative experience. Respondents who have encountered some form of discriminatory behavior do not characterize it as a systematic phenomenon rather speaking of the occasional presumptive attitudes of the majority.

The counterpart of symbolic ethnicity is the effort not to deviate and not to unnecessarily accentuate ethnic identity. There is a number of reasons for such behavior. Primarily the lack of interest in devoting time to minority's activities, then the personal effort to assimilate as quickly as possible to the majority society and sometimes even the fear of being publicly in the eye, for example when expressing political attitude. According to our findings, as we have already mentioned in the context of the new challenges for Ukrainian migration, Ukrainian public activities have since the years 2013 and 2014 been focused on the subject of war, military aggression, the loss of the Crimea and, above all, the delimitation against the Russian Federation. It should be noted that the clash with "brotherly" Russia, as the Ukrainians frequently call it, is at the moment the most resonant and painfully experienced topic.

### **Language and Ukrainian ethnic identity**

In connection with the symbolism of the ethnic identity of the Ukrainians our research proved that the issue of language is rather problematic. According to generally accepted modern

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ethnological theories, language is not, and cannot, be a sign of ethnicity. This thesis was definitely proved in our research as we interviewed Ukrainians both speaking Ukrainian and Russian. However, at the same time, during the interviews has become evident that language is a kind of symbol of "being Ukrainian" or more precisely "being true Ukrainian". This element inevitably brings a number of obstacles, exceptions, sometimes contradictions and, in extreme cases, disruption of interpersonal relations caused by language orientation – whether Ukrainian or Russian. Language has become an apple of discord, or, on the contrary, it has started to represent absolute tolerance in attitudes to the nature of Ukrainian ethnicity. Russian speaking informants accentuated the inner experience of their own ethnic self-identification, which is based on a sense of belonging to Ukrainian culture regardless of the mother tongue.

The issue of bilingualism of Ukrainian society and the current complicated situation in Ukraine, which is often associated with a language, is a separate subject that deserves a special analysis. We will try to outline at least the main tendencies in the language perception that we have gained from the informants and which points to the changing status of language in relation to Ukrainian ethnic identity. It is a phenomenon so significant that it goes beyond the boundaries of Ukraine, as evidenced by respondents who spoke about their experiences from the life within the Ukrainian community.

First and foremost, there is a feeling of disillusionment and disappointment that language is becoming an imaginary wall amongst some Ukrainians despite the fact that most informants claim that they do not perceive language as a crucial problem in their day-to-day interpersonal interactions and they also do not confuse language with political orientation. People from Russian-speaking areas declare they understand Ukrainian without any difficulty and have friends who communicate with them exclusively in Ukrainian, but they do not use Ukrainian themselves actively. In the context of the diaspora, and with the tendencies to promote language as the constitutive symbol of Ukrainian nationality, the number of cases has increased when Russian-speaking Ukrainians express the need to communicate in Ukrainian in order to declare that, despite their native language being Russian, they respect the Ukrainian language as the only official language and thus they identify with the unity of all the Ukrainians. We do not believe that disputes about the language matter are a mass issue among the Ukrainians, but there definitely are cases, when interpersonal relations can be negatively affected.

From the experience and knowledge obtained during the field research, participant and non-participant observations and interviews, Ukrainian language is an example of a new, or more precisely, intensively emerging and publicly presented symbol of Ukrainian ethnic identity.

Nevertheless, the actual ethnic identity, which is purely personal and privately practiced among members of the diaspora, remains rather independent on the language used, though, as it is evident from information we have gained from the respondents, there are exceptions.

### **Ukrainians in their own self-reflection: describing ethnic autostereotype**

National stereotypes are defined within the framework of intercultural psychology as serving to "all members of society as a common value system of relationships, allowing the construction of the inner and outer world, strengthening the sense of solidarity of the members of society as well as the distinction: "our" society is different. They are used to demonstrate loyalty to own nation and justify building the role of the "scapegoat" in times of crisis. In conflict periods stereotypical signs are changed into strongly negatively colored images" (PRŮCHA 2007:116).

Basis of the closer characteristics of ethnic stereotypes lies in the contradiction of "us" and "them" and elementary division of stereotypes corresponds to the mutual correlation of two scopes. The first one, an autostereotype (self-image) represents the notion of "us". It is a summary of ideas and assessment opinions about ourselves and our group. Heterostereotype (image of others) is a set of ideas about "them", the others, other groups of inhabitants or other social categories.

Ethnic autostereotypes, as ideas of people's own ethnicity and its characteristics, are constructed in the process of comparing oneself with others implying that "every negative heterostereotype is simultaneously thought to be a positive autostereotype" (UHLÍKOVÁ 2001:50). At the same time ethnic stereotypes are understood in E. Krekovičová's interpretation to be a cognitive and procedural phenomenon, which can be characterized both by stability in time and by dynamic changes (KREKOVIČOVÁ 2005:8). Stereotypes, both ethnic and any other, are dynamic. Krekovičová argues that the process of their emergence can be very rapid, but once they are accepted by the community they tend to persist for a long time (KILIÁNOVÁ – KOWALSKÁ – KREKOVIČOVÁ 2009:475, footnote 412).

This indicates other important characteristics of stereotypes. On the one hand, there is a fast rise and an expansion of stereotypical ideas and opinions, on the other hand they tend to be rigid, immutable and irrefutable. Significant changes may occur in the context of a certain

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major turning point, such as war conflict, economic crisis or personal experience (both positive and negative) of an individual (KOŠŤÁLOVÁ 2012:48).

The term "autostereotype" was mentioned in the context of the non-scientific term "national character" (RÁKOS 2001:10), which is not officially established in the academic vocabulary.<sup>17</sup> However, in terms of access to respondents, it better describes the essence of the subject under consideration. As stated by Petr Rákos, any theory of national character is confirmed in confrontation with another national character (RÁKOS 2001:67), which we demonstrated in the case of a mutual relationship between the Ukrainians and the Russians, respectively the Ukrainian reflection of this relationship and its impact on the self-image of the Ukrainian nation. When communicating with our informants, the concept of autostereotype proved to be difficult to use because most informants did not understand the content behind it, so it was necessary to approach the issue with various descriptive formulations such as "nationality", "mentality" or "typical characteristics, features of the character", which eventually led to desired reactions.

The characteristics of autostereotypes in our interviews usually overlapped with ethnic self-reflection and self-identification. If possible, we tried to lead the respondents to firstly try to define what does it mean "to be Ukrainian" for them and how they are subjectively experiencing their own ethnic identity. Subsequently we switched to what according to their opinions "being or feeling Ukrainian" represents and what is generally typical for the Ukrainians. In practice, however, it has clearly been shown that the elements of ethnic self-identification, such as local patriotism, the language question, or the strongly reflected need to define themselves against Russian ethnicity, are organically interlinked and intertwined. In some cases, as we have outlined in the reflection of the Russians and Russia, Ukrainian autostereotypes are often determined by what the Ukrainians do not feel to be – politically passive, non-free, manipulable or lazy.

The construction of the concept of Ukrainian "us" in the interviews is often related to defining the Russian "them". The topic of Russia, the Russians and their role in the current war conflict in Ukraine, undoubtedly leads to a strongly negative experience of the relationship with the Russians. For many Ukrainians is this relationship going through the crisis and leads them to confusion. It seems to be particularly significant with the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine who feels different from the Russians. However, the common language is a strong

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<sup>17</sup> Anthony D. Smith states, using inverted commas, that "The nation must have a distinctive identity, a definite 'national character'" (Smith 2009:189).



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mental bond. For many Russian speaking Ukrainians is the Ukrainian language de facto a foreign language.

The key paradigm of the Ukrainian-Russian opposition is the perspective stating "what is in our eyes Russians" equals what "we, Ukrainians, are definitely not". From this point of view, the Ukrainians regard themselves as broadminded, open, democratic and aspiring to live in a democratic regime. Ukrainians feel competent to decide about their fate, while the Russians, according to their opinions, need to feel the power of one authority (president, formerly tsar), tend to live in totalitarianism and accept imperial tendencies. In addition the Russians are said to be lazy while the Ukrainians are hardworking and diligent. One of the fundamental parts of the texts describing the current Ukrainian-Russian relations from Karina V. Korostelina tracked binational axiological opposition in the Ukraine – Russian context directly in Ukraine. We fully agree with its conclusions, and we believe that the defining of "Ukrainian" in opposition to "Russian" continues to be a major problem for the Ukrainians in Ukraine as well as abroad. It is identical both for a group that supports the utter difference of Ukrainians from the Russians as for the group holding the point of view of the Ukrainian-Russian similarity and their specific kind of "unity" (historical, cultural, religious). When questioning the typical features of Ukrainians, regardless of the Russian element in the interviews obtained, we can say that Ukrainians regard themselves especially as very hospitable, even in a metaphorical sense – they feel they accept anyone with open arms and are always willing to help. Some respondents spoke nearly about altruism.

From the negative aspects the inconsistency and incoherence which, according to some, are reflected in the current crisis in Ukraine, are significant, but more obvious are with Ukrainians living abroad. People who are living and working long-term in the Slovak Republic talk about mutual dismissiveness and generally about poor communication and mistrust. For newcomers, deliberate detachment represents an adaptation strategy in new conditions, especially for those who are planning to remain in the country for a long time or permanently. After a time when they are sure of their position in the majority, they slowly start to get back to their old Ukrainian friends or they are not afraid to get acquainted with the new ones. The general incoherence is also reflected in the Slovak Ukrainian minority, where the links and contacts between the autochthonous Ukrainians in northeastern Slovakia are influenced by the fragmentation of the community into the Rusyn and Ukrainian parts. Moreover, there is an overall intensive process of assimilation going on causing difficult search for a joint approach of individual compatriots from different parts of Slovakia in order to work altogether.

## Conclusion

Our text is based on the conclusions of qualitative field research among members of the ethnic minority of the Ukrainians in Slovakia and it is an attempt to outline selected trends that have been recently reflected in experiencing and declaring of their ethnic identity.

There are two main groups in Slovakia into which the minority is divided. It is the autochthonous inhabitants, the Rusyn-Ukrainians, and the migrants who had come to Slovakia in the past as well as those who are still coming. Due to its geographic proximity, relatively good economic conditions and good accessibility, the Slovak Republic is increasingly becoming the target of economic Ukrainian migration.

The first topic to be analyzed was the ethnic identification of the Ukrainians in relation to the region from which they come from. The subjective axis of the west-east of the country, which stems from historical and political developments, is evident. However, it is rather typical that for Ukrainians living in the Slovak Republic the differences between their geographical origins are gradually being suppressed. Most notably, our respondents declared the opposition of Zakarpattia and the rest of Ukraine. For the migrants from Zakarpattia region, this is due to the mental perception of the common Ukrainian-Slovak border. People coming from this area naturally feel being closer to Slovakia and reflect themselves as the westernmost outpost of Ukraine, especially in terms of cultural and mental settings.

The second topic was the inconsistency of the Ukrainian minority and its internal incoherence. Of the many factors that are the cause of this situation, we mentioned the effort of a large majority of newly arrived Ukrainians to merge quickly with the majority Slovak society, which some respondents identified as a typical general characteristics of Ukrainians. Other factors include the lack of interest, since many working people do not have time for joint activities and do not show the need to actively engage in the life of the diaspora.

In the last part we focused on the symbols connected with the declaration of ethnic identity in the majority milieu, which can be divided into a material and non-material sphere. Based on our field observations we suggest that many publicly active Ukrainians manifest their Ukrainian ethnicity in a style consistent with the principle of symbolic ethnicity described by H. J. Gans. Ethnic identification of the Ukrainians and the declaration of "being Ukrainian" is, in our opinion, often situational including the use of Ukrainian or Russian language. The language that was previously a minority issue within the Ukrainian minority is becoming an

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important topic and is coming to life as a rediscovered symbol of Ukrainian national identity, both in Ukraine and among Ukrainians living beyond the borders of the country.

When describing the Ukrainian-Russian relations, we have followed the findings of Karina V. Korostelina's empirical qualitative research on axiological opposition in Ukrainian-Russian context. We fully agree with its conclusions and we believe that the definition of "Ukrainian" and "Russian" continues to be a major problem as the conflict in the east of Ukraine is still in progress.

Ukrainians in their own reflection tend to stress the peaceful, free-minded, hospitable nature of their "national mentality". They see themselves as people devoted to helping others, with a strong sense of humanism. Important aspect which has been repeatedly emphasized by the respondents is striving for living in truly democratic system with no totalitarian reminiscences. As for the migrant community in Slovakia, the informants have accentuated its inner inhomogeneity and general unwillingness (or fear) of compatriots to communicate more intensively. From the negative characteristics have the Ukrainians distinguished indifference and sometimes bad manners of behaviour.

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# Once We Were Shepherds: Górale Ethnic Identity in Celebrations Revived and Reinterpreted

PAWEL SENDYKA

Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology,  
Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland  
[pawel.sendyka@uj.edu.pl](mailto:pawel.sendyka@uj.edu.pl)

## ABSTRACT

The *Górale* of the Polish highlands are seen as a people apart from the rest of Poles. They are afforded this special status through the romanticisation as Poland's very own "noble savages" by the writers and travellers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This was the time of Poland's search for nationhood (when its territory was occupied by Russia, Prussia and Austria). The *Górale* have always been described, even in those early accounts, as pastoralists.

During the season, when the sheep went up to the alpine pastures, the villages were almost deserted. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century the pastoral system dissolution took place starting with the establishment of national parks after the Second World War. Further unfavourable developments decimated what was left of it since the late 1980s. As a result of the dissolution of the pastoral system the *Górale* chose to amplify their internal unity by strengthening the ethnic identity. The revival of pastoralism as it currently presents itself today, may be seen as yet another rallying call around *Górale* identity. It is a come back to the pastoralist "core" of the highland culture, while changing and re-inventing the tradition to suit new economic, social and political circumstances.

In the Polish pastoralist tradition there have always been two seminal community events which bracketed the winter season. There was the autumn event of "Redyk Jesienny" when the sheep brought back from the summer alpine pastures were given back to their owners and there was also a spring event of "Mieszanie Owiec" which literally means the Mixing of Sheep. Historically, they were very important events of the pastoral calendar, while the pastoral system itself has been crucial fixture and backbone of the social system of the *Górale* people. The paper examines how these traditions changed from old ethnographic

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descriptions and how they are being re-invented in the context of reaffirming the *Górale* identity today.

**KEY WORDS:** *Górale*, pastoral culture, ethnic identity, re-inventing tradition, celebrations

## Introduction

This paper will examine the celebrations of *redyk* and *mieszanie owiec* (literally the “mixing of the sheep”) as (re)affirmations of the *Górale* ethnic identity. While these two pastoral celebrations have already been (re)created to such a degree that they can readily be described by Hobsbawn’s term as an “invented tradition”, special attention will be paid to a third, new celebration, which is, without irony, called “tradition” by its organisers and participants. During *Święto Bacowskie* (The Day of the *Bacas*) in Ludźmierz the sheep are symbolically blessed and “mixed” as if by proxy, for the entire Carpathians. It is an example of what Frederic Barth described as political innovation concerned with the codification of idioms: “the selection of signals for identity and the assertion of value of these cultural diacritics, and the suppression or denial of relevance of other differentiae” (BARTH 1969:35). The paper will examine in some detail those elements of the *Górale* identity which the aforementioned celebrations bring to the fore with special attention being paid to The Day of the *Bacas* because of its purely invented origin. As Barth points out, what is being suppressed or denied importance is as important as what is being brought to the fore. Therefore, some of those “other differentiae” that are being suppressed or denied will be discussed later on in the paper.

The justification and glorification of the *Górale* identity has been facilitated in Poland for historical reasons which this paper will examine in some detail. As a result, the mainstream Polish culture did not seek to subjugate or impose on the *Górale* culture, but to draw from it. During the period of occupation (by neighbouring states of Russia, Prussia and Austria) and oppression, the culture of the Polish highlanders became glorified as a hidden away gem of Polish national qualities and values. Because of this glorification, the case of Polish *Górale* is also in an interesting juxtaposition to the classic literature on the subject of ethnic identity which frequently draws from the colonial examples (including Barth 1969). Following their “discovery”, the mainstream Polish culture did not try to impose on the highlanders their rules or values, but sought its own salvation and resurrection, to use the romantic language of the era, by trying to adapt the values of Poland’s very own “noble savages”.

Polish highlanders – *Górale* – lived in splendid geographical isolation and their characteristic traits were treated by many as some basic Polish, unpolluted, features. The highlands were thus treated as an ark of sorts in which the original (and best) Polish qualities survived to the modern times. Now, they could be used as a foundation for the future, re-born, nation. It all started when *Górale* were first described by the travellers in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, at a time

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when Poland did not exist as a state, its entire territory being occupied by three neighbouring powers. It laid a foundation not just for the nation, but also for the special treatment of the *Górale* within that nation. In a way, the colonial story was reversed here, the *Górale* culture was found superior (or rather a superior “raw material” for the intellectuals to work with) to that of the lowlands.

### Mixing of the Sheep

At the beginning of May in 2015, the pastoral season in Ochotnica Górna started with a festive celebration of *mieszanie owiec* (“mixing of the sheep”). It began with a mass in a small chapel in the hamlet of Jamne (of the village of Ochotnica), next to a creek that goes deep into the Gorce Mountains (they lie just north of the Tatras, belonging to the broadly defined Podhale). There was a band, playing the local Highland music. They were dressed in their traditional, festive clothes that are iconic in Polish popular culture. After the mass, the priest, the *baca* (head shepherd) Jasiiek, the sheep owners and villagers all walked from the chapel to the field across the road where, on fresh spring grass, a *koszar* – the wooden enclosure with the sheep – awaited. The priest and the *baca* walked together into the enclosure and took their hats off. The priest then thanked God for the mountains and the woods and the pastures on which these sheep graze until they are full and asked for them to be kept safe from danger and sickness in the forthcoming season. He then dipped a fir branch in a wooden bucket which *baca* Jasiiek was holding and sprayed holy water on the herd. *Baca* Jasiiek then took the fir branch from him and kept spraying the sheep with holy water while moving clockwise within the enclosure. He did this three times, circling with the sheep around a freshly cut fir tree stuck in the middle, as is the tradition. He then took burning incense made of herbs from the priest and circled the *koszar* with it three times letting the smoke waft through the herd. He did the same with a smoking *huba* (a type of mushroom that grows on dead and dying trees), known for its strong magical powers.

Everything was very traditional, except perhaps for the fact that it was not traditional at all. *Baca* Jasiiek explained the most important departure from tradition:

*“I was the one to introduce the priest into it, because I don't feel myself a strong enough magician so that I would be able to do magic myself and so on... or to pray in a way that there would be strength in it. And such strength, in our times... I believe in God... is with the priest who has faith, and he is there to guide these people and set out certain things.”*



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**Figure 1:** Baca Jasiak with the sheep during the 2015 Mixing of the Sheep celebration. Photo: author

Historically, *Mieszanie Owiec* was an important event during which the head shepherd, or the *baca* had to use his magical knowledge to ensure that the big herd made up of sheep from the individual owners would keep together as one and produce enough milk to make their summer venture profitable. To do that he used magic spells and performed rituals taught by his predecessors. Today, the magical business of the *bacas* is increasingly replaced by the priests' prayers. It is already a significant modification of tradition as historically priests and *bacas* were frequently in opposition.

### **The Beginnings (and the Magical Beginnings)**

The word *Górale* derives from the Polish word *góra*, which means the mountain. As one of the *Górale* and Podhale creation stories goes, God created the world in seven days and then went on to make different lands. When he was about to make Podhale, a curious angel appeared and asked to be allowed to make this new land. While God moved elsewhere, the angel piled on rocks upon rocks to make the future land closer to the sun so it would be warm and fertile. But before long, a massive rain washed away the soil, leaving behind a barren wasteland. When God saw the result, he was horrified. The angel offered to fix this mistake

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by creating people who would make the best of this landscape, but God was too angry and chased him away.

*“And then God himself thought up the Góral: of towering built, fast, with legs as of steel, with sharp eyes as of an eagle, of clever, entrepreneurial, mind, and of great perseverance, energy and smarts – so that he would be able to succeed in making a living on this poor angelic land”* (ORKAN 1970:48).

Folktales such as this one have been told and retold in the highland villages many times, but what makes this version interesting is the fact that it has made its way into mainstream culture. The version quoted above comes from the 1970 edition of Polish folk tales for children (KOSTYRKO 1970) even though it is much earlier in origin, written down by Władysław Orkan a *Góral* writer and intellectual who died in 1930.

This fanciful origin story aside, the sheep and the practice of transhumant pastoralism were brought to Poland by Wallachian shepherds towards the end of the Middle Ages. Thought to have first originated in the Balkans, the exact reasons for the mass migrations of the era are a matter of conjecture. Possible causes were the turbulent events of 14<sup>th</sup> century: Turkish expansion (JAWOR 1997:53), power struggles between nobles in Wallachia and Moldavia (JAWOR 2014:26) and a need for new pastures as a result of the population growth (DOBROWOLSKI 1970:90). There are indications that this influx of people was at least in part sponsored and supported by the Polish state that sought, at the time, to make the mountains both productive and strengthened militarily. There are surviving letters of the ruler of Moldavia to the Polish king, which repeatedly called on him to put an end to recruiters coming to Moldavian villages and promising people more freedom and financial incentives should they decide to move and settle in Poland (JAWOR 2000:31).

The recruiters were looking for new settlers that needed to have special skills to survive. This is because in the mountains and other difficult terrains, agricultural settlements had failed before because of poor soil quality. After the initial tax-free periods, these settlements were unable to support themselves and to pay their obligations (JAWOR 2014:26). The Polish state introduced a novel legislation to cater to the new Wallachian arrivals who settled, under this new law. The previous agricultural settlements, the co-called “German Law” (or *Ius Teutonicum* in Latin) was applied. It stipulated the rights and responsibilities of the settlers and the landowners; the settlers commonly paying rent in grain and/or money, as well as performing corvee labour for the land owners.

The new “Wallachian Law” (or *Ius Valachicum* in Latin) was different: corvee labour was very limited or completely abolished and the rent could be paid in pastoral products: sheep, fleece, wool and cheese. The settlers had more personal freedom, being allowed to leave the settlement without the landowner's permission. The Wallachians brought with them the sheep

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and the pastoral know-how which made the mountains economically profitable for the local landowners and the Polish state. They were also skilled artisans in carpentry, leather-work and blacksmithing. It was their ability to mix the proportions of pastoralism, small-time agriculture, and craftsmanship in a way best suited to local conditions that made them successful over large areas (JAWOR 2014:27). In time, as the Wallachians enmeshed with the local population, the meaning of the word Wallachian (or *Vlach*) was changing over time (and space). It included, amongst other meanings, anyone who would be living in the settlements under the new law. Grzegorz Jawor argued that while the structure of the *Ius Valachicum* came from the *Ius Teutonicum*, its substance was foreign in origin; that it was not so much of an adjustment of the law, rather a whole new paradigm. For people who would be signing up for such a settlement, it would mean breaking off with the past experience as agriculturalists and embarking on a whole new way of doing animal husbandry, and a change in lifestyle that went with an acceptance of a new set of values, often contradictory to those lived by so far (JAWOR 2000:27-28).

Pastoralism became *the* way to make a living in the mountains, for centuries. Yet, the initial encounters were not all auspicious. In 1406 the Wallachians burned down the city of Stary Sącz, committing many acts of pillage and murder. The chronicler relaying these events attributes to them such characteristics as violence and barbaric manners, he also calls them *schismatics*. This is because the Wallachians were not only Orthodox, but their “Wallachian faith” differed from Orthodoxy by a special worship of Saint Dymitr. Their oaths, as recorded in court proceedings, ended with the phrase of “so help me God and Saint Dymitr” (*Ita me Deus adiuvet et s. Dmytr* in Latin) (JAWOR 2000:19, 24). The Wallachians also gained a bad reputation as horse and sheep thieves. The old court records show that they were also accused of a variety of other transgressions: producing and distributing fake coins, beatings and other types of bodily harm, rape, arson and acting in cahoots with the highwaymen. This dubious reputation coupled with a different way of life and a different faith was causing a great mistrust of the locals. There would be panic and protests at a mere suggestion of a possible Wallachian settlement. In 1516 a local castellan had to assuage the fears of the Church officials in Kraków that the planned settlement in the woods behind Myślenice was to be settled with Christians and not Wallachians and it was to suppress the attacks by the latter (JAWOR 2000:164). This bad reputation persisted over the years (and centuries). It is important to bear in mind that the shepherds come from that Wallachian legacy of real and perceived violence, lawlessness and *schismatism*.

However, there was one enduring piece of the Wallachian heritage that remained firmly in place for hundreds of years: the pastoral system. Not much has changed in the recorded accounts when the *Górale* were first “discovered” in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the ethnographic descriptions of the 1960s, when the anthropological interest in the pastoral *Górale* ways started to wane.

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This Wallachian-inherited pastoral system formed the backbone of making the living in the mountains for centuries and it is important to note that although the sheep belonged to individuals, sheep herding was a collective endeavour. The success of the yearly venture required the cooperation of a head shepherd ( *Baca*), who gathered the sheep from many owners ( *gazdowie*) and guaranteed their well-being with his reputation. In the event of one of the owners missing a sheep at the end of the season, the  *Baca* compensated him with one of his own. The  *gazdowie* and the shepherds ( *juhasi*) were paid in cheese. The amount on the cheese paid out to the owners depended on the milk yield of the sheep which was measured at the beginning of the season (for an in-depth description of the pastoral system see KOPCZYŃSKA-JAWORSKA 1958, 1969, 1981). The amount of the milk produced by the sheep was measured one week after the sheep had reached their summer pasture. This was to prevent “cheating” by  *gazdowie*, who could feed their sheep grain or try other tricks to temporarily increase the milk yield, before releasing the sheep to the  *Baca*. This would result in them being paid more throughout the season.  *Mirowanie* was therefore a very important event. Sheep cheese, which was then fermented and salted to form  *bryndza*, was a very important food source for the  *Górale* during the winter months. One must bear in mind that the soil of the Podhale was infertile with meagre crop yields. The previous, purely agricultural settlements had failed there. The pastoral enterprise and the sheep cheese were therefore essential to the community’s long-term survival. Since the obligations between the  *Baca* and the  *gazdowie* are now settled with money (which usually comes in form of an EU subsidy) and the sheep cheese is no longer necessary for survival, is no longer practiced today.

### **Górale Ethnic Identity and Its Origins**

Nowadays, when it comes to an objective analysis of what makes the  *Górale* an ethnic group, the supporting body of evidence available is rather scant: their origins, language and religion, in and of themselves, do not amount to much.

The local dialect is a variation of standard Polish while their religion is Roman Catholic like the rest of Poland (whereas the legendary Wallachians were a rather exotic shade of Orthodox, one of the much suppressed ‘differentiae’). However, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Poles were in search of their national identity and, given their peculiar stateless situation, they wanted to establish their rightful place on the map of Europe.

When the  *Górale* were ‘discovered’ and described by travellers in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the culture of Poland’s very own ‘noble savages’ (who lived in splendid geographical isolation) became ideal material in order to promote the nation-state. The highlands were treated as an ark of sorts in which the original (and best) Polish qualities survived into modern times.

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The *Górale* were used as a building block for the future re-birth of the Polish nation. This great awe of all things *Górale*, such as their physical toughness, folk wisdom and intelligence, continued to be discussed in travel descriptions and laid the foundation for not just the nation, but also for the special treatment of the *Górale* by the rest of the Polish population, hence the position of the *Górale* in Polish culture is a privileged one. This special relationship between the lowlanders and the highlanders continues in many ways to this day, as there tends to be a special, unspoken covenant between the *Górale* and the rest of the Polish people, which has put the *Górale* and *Górale* culture on a pedestal and thus helped to keep it separate and distinct from the rest of Poland.



**Figure 2:** The traditional highland clothes are an important part to the pastoral revival celebrations and festivals. Source: [www.redykkarpacki.pl](http://www.redykkarpacki.pl)

This special *Górale* status can afford them some advantages as long as they act (or dress) the ‘*Górale* way’. As one shepherd and pastoral activist, *baca* Krzysztof, stated:

*“When we go to see the minister for example, or to take care of some official business, we dress in Górale clothes. If we go to some important conference or discussion, we dress the Górale way. If the meeting is less important than I take just a shirt and a hat.”*

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*Górale* identity, from the very first travel accounts, were very closely linked with pastoralism. The spring time and the accompanying celebrations, when the sheep were being taken up to the high alpine pastures, made a special impression on the Romantic era writers and travellers:

*"It is in those last days of May that the pastoral trek of the Górale begins and flows into the deep Tatras and the surrounding country. This beautiful movement underscores further the budding young life of nature"* (GOSZCZYŃSKI 1853:143).

The sights and sounds of that trek, the sheep bells, the creaking of the carts, the seeming connection of the "pastoral trek" to the cycle of nature, affected this young poet and many others who followed him. Pastoralism was at the core of that connection, which all that, it shaped the *Górale* physically (as they are tough, strong and fast to withstand the elements), intellectually (since they are smart for they had to face nature's adversity) and also spiritually:

*"This steady pastoral life, divorced from the rest of the world, is very well liked by the Górale. And there is no arguing, that when the weather is good, in the nature full of incredible vistas, it has an unspeakable appeal, well understood by Górale. This wondering around with sheep on the steep crags with all its dangers, requires a strongly built body, and a daring, enterprising spirit. This is truly a poetic side of the life of the Górale"* (ZEJSZNER 1845:12).

Indeed, the link between the *Górale* culture and pastoralism was very strong. The life of the highland communities was built around the important dates of the pastoral calendar which stretched from the spring *mieszanie* to the autumn *redyk*. During the summer season there were many other celebrations and festivals taking place in the *hale* (alpine pastures), as songs were sung and dances were danced. Many of those customs and songs then remained petrified in the form of folklore and music. However, as the pastoral economy went into a decline after the Second World War and then again in the 1990s, there was a growing disconnect between what was performed on stages and what the actual everyday experience of life had become. As one of the activists and practitioners of the revived pastoralism, *baca* Krzysztof, explains:

*"The source of Górale culture is the traditional sheep economy. If this is cut off, all that will remain, I say, will be an open-air museum, with dressed up fakers."*

*Baca* Krzysztof was first a musician in one of the local folklore bands before deciding to become a head shepherd. He felt that re-creating the sheep-related celebrations and rituals without sheep created a disconnect from what he feels is the 'source' of *Górale* culture. Given the amount of soul-searching and conscious reflection that goes into the current effort to revive the pastoralist culture, there are a number of *bacas* for whom pastoralism is still a way of life handed to them by their fathers. While I have met many of them during my fieldwork, the *bacas* are a small group. There are only around 40 of the *bacas* officially qualified to make the iconic, PDO (Protected Designation of Origin) certified, *oscypek* cheese in the

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whole of Poland (IJHARS Kraków 2015). But some of the most vocal, publicly and medially active members of that small community are the ones who, like *baca* Krzysztof, came to this profession from other walks of life. They see pastoralism as more than just a way to make a living. They treat it as their mission, to bring back that, which was once fundamental to the *Górale* way of life.



**Figure 3:** *Being a juhas is still, a tough 24 hour job. A juhas with his flock and dogs.* Photo: author

Since the popularity of the *Górale* image in Polish popular culture is still very strong, the image has been used by the advertising industry to promote a variety of items: margarine, milk, sauces, medicines, paints, blankets and linen and even cars and their parts. But the most problematic product is, of course, alcohol. The use of the *Górale* image by advertisers is what Kazimierz Sikora calls a ‘cultural appropriation of national symbols for the purposes of economic activity, marketing and increasingly ruthless competition for customers’ (SIKORA 2007:417). The male *Góral* portrayed in the Harnaś brand of beer (just one of many such ‘highland’ beers on the market) has all the qualities listed by Orkan in the Legend of Podhale. He has a towering build, with superhuman strength and agility. The entrepreneurial mind is, somewhat problematically, being fuelled by alcohol. The image of the male *Góral* is used because of its overwhelming, culturally conditioned, positive connotations. These positive

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connotations also help encourage public appeal in favour of the pastoralist revival. Although one has to wonder if the current use and overuse of the image by the advertising industry will eventually tarnish these positive perceptions, which is a matter of concern for the region's intellectuals. Furthermore, modern times have brought such changes to the peasant way of life that most rural regional cultures have by and large disintegrated, with the *Górale* as an exception. Their culture has not only survived but thrived, thanks to the combination of historical events described above. Whether the *Górale* will be able to maintain their difference is up for debate. In this paper, I argue that the pastoralist revival is a way of re-asserting their separateness by re-claiming the *Górale* image from others through modifying their identity completely from how it was portrayed after the Second World War.

### Disconnecting from “the Source” after the Second World War

After the Second World War, the establishment of the Tatra National Park gradually put an end to pastoralism in the Tatras. This directly affected the economic system of the highland life, but also, and perhaps equally or more importantly, the social system based on pastoralism. Melcher Extromer (1987:20) asserts that the pastoral socio-economic system existed independently, parallel to the official system (EXTROMER 1987:20). The post war era coincided with the establishment of the new communist regime in Poland. Many felt that this assault on the existing social structure was a deliberate attempt to dismantle it (MISZTAL 1996). In any case, it was a deadly blow. Yet, as James Clifford points out that:

*“Groups negotiating their identity in contexts of domination and exchange persist, patch themselves together in ways different from a living organism. A community, unlike a body, can lose a central “organ” and not die. All the critical elements of identity are in specific conditions replaceable: language, land, blood, leadership, religion. Recognized, viable tribes exist in which any one or even most of these elements are missing, replaced, or largely transformed”* (CLIFFORD 1988:338).

In this case, the central organ was the pastoralist system which provided a framework of organisation that was of paramount importance to the unity of the *Górale* communities. The system provided not only an economic basis for the well-being of its society, but also was a backbone around which the social life of the *Górale* was organized. During the pastoral season, the villages were depopulated, because everyone was up on the alpine pastures with the sheep (and goats, cows and oxen). It was also a time of festivities and merry-making, singing, dancing and a time when suitable marriages were arranged – Extromer reports how the informants in the villages spoke with great regret about these times (EXTROMER 1987:21). Indeed, the nostalgia for this by-gone era is still alive today, thirty years on from Extromer's fieldwork. Frequently, the families who used to graze the *hale* (alpine pastures)



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in the Tatras still go there once a year (with the blessing of the Tatra National Park) and spend time merry-making and telling their children and grandchildren stories about their forefathers' way of life. *Tygodnik Podhalański*, the local newspaper, reports on these nostalgic events every year.

The pastoral system was also independent of that of the Polish state, as it provided a different set of goals and career paths within the *Górale* community. While in other parts of Poland, children might engage in universal dreams of becoming a fireman, policemen, an engineer or a teacher, the young *Górale* boys aspired to be a *juhas* and then a *baca*. This was also a "career path" which also promised financial security, as illustrated by the all adage "*kto ma owce ten ma co chce*" which literally translates to "he who has sheep, can have everything". Indeed, the jobs of *baca* and *juhas* had very high social standing. This past respectability and prosperity is reflected in the biographies of people who were still *juhasi* in the 1980s. *Baca* Antek from Podhale, for example, told me how, as a young man, he worked as a *juhas* for three years. His earnings allowed him to buy a few hectares of land, build a house and get married. But later on, working as a *juhas* for three seasons could not provide anyone with a foundation for life. Being a shepherd was no longer as lucrative, nor was it perceived as a desirable occupation for a young man. The professions of *baca* and *juhas* lost their standing in the turbulent 1990s and only in 2010 have they been re-entered into the official jobs register (DROST 2010). That said, they still have a long way to go to garner the respectability they once had.

The effect on the *Górale* after the post war shock to the pastoralist system was studied in depth by Extromer. Losing its connection to the "source" the *Górale* society tried to defend itself by amplifying the internal unity through defining themselves as an ethnic group founded on what he called "(fictitious?) *Górale* ethnicity". Based on the fieldwork conducted in 1981 and 1984, Extromer concluded that what happened after the Second World War in the Tatras effectively amounted to the dissolution of the pastoral system. To consider this event as only economically conditioned would be, he concluded, "a vulgarisation". It was, he argued "a threat to the social structure, anchored in the ideological superstructure that is most strongly experienced" (EXTROMER 1987:21). The adaptation of the pastoral society to the new mode of production offered might, as the colonial examples have shown, lead to peripheralization of the society, with the economic and social degeneration to follow. The society could try to construct a new economic base to ensure its continued existence, but it may also try to keep the social structure by consciously trying to amplify the internal unity. The way the *Górale* society dealt with it, Extromer argued, was to strengthen ethnic identity by identifying itself as an ethnic group founded on what he believed to be largely tenuous *Górale* identity. Extromer studied marriage and inheritance patterns and concluded that the *Górale* strove to keep the land – with which they identified themselves – within the group. Marrying an outsider from the city or even from another village in the region was frowned

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upon (EXTROMER 1987:23). What supported this move economically was the widespread economic migration to the United States, where money earned there during two years of hard work amounted to a fortune back home. It was an economic basis for making the *Górale* society feasible again which allowed it to maintain the social structure funded on the pastoral system with its old patters of inheritance and marriage. Ethnic identification also legitimised this way of life (EXTROMER 1987:25). However, within this rearranged value system, those wanting to pursue higher education found that they had no place within the socioeconomic structure of the villages and had to look for jobs elsewhere (EXTROMER 1987:26). While nowadays, those with higher education are at a forefront of this renewed push to reconnect *Górale* culture with its pastoralist core.

This is an important change taking place, because up until now, while the *Górale* culture had its privileged position in the general Polish culture, the *Górale* themselves were not its gatekeepers and custodians. It was the learned ethnographers and ethno-musicologists who stood on guard and decreed what was and what was not *Górale* culture. They were the ones who made decisions on which works of local art were museum-worthy and which bands played the true *Górale* music. Janusz Barański describes a situation in which a young member of a folklore group almost cried when he realised, after the fact, that during a stage performance of the “traditional” *Górale* wedding, he missed an important invocation and was certain that the juror had noticed it (BARAŃSKI 2013:41). These specialists took on a role that the old people “who remembered how these things were done” once had in the community. Barański refers to this as a home (as opposed to foreign) colonisation effort (BARAŃSKI 2013:44). This fault line separates the centre, (the city) from the periphery, (the village). Or in more frank terms it separates the elites from the riff-raff where the members of the elite stand guard over “traditional” rural values at the expense of peripheral interference.

But even in the 1980s when Extromer studied the effects of the post-war dissolution of the pastoral system, events occurred that ensured the survival of its remnants. By the late 1980s it became apparent that, without sheep, the high mountain pastures would revert to forest with a significant loss of local biodiversity, as well as the deterioration of the landscape (SKAWIŃSKI 2014:9). The argument of cultural loss was also raised. As a compromise, in 1981 a bill was passed that allowed for the “cultural grazing of sheep and cows” in the Tatra National Park thus acknowledging not only pastoralism's environmental benefits, but also its cultural importance for the people of the region (CIURZYCKI 2003:81-82). As the name suggests “cultural grazing” has a cultural component. Apart from setting limitations on the number and type of livestock shepherds may graze, it requires them to use traditional utensils for making cheese, as well as to dress in traditional costume and speak in local dialect for the benefit of the park's visitors.

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The fall of the communist system in 1989 marked a period of yet another radical change for Polish pastoralists. I call it the second and final dissolution of the pastoral system which survived beyond the Tatras. With the end of the centrally planned economy, state dairies no longer acted as the main buyers of their output, forcing shepherds to find a new, private clientele. Furthermore, in 1990 the world wool prices halved due to Australian wool producers' ill-conceived reserve price strategies. Sheep numbers fell from around 4 million in 1980s (GORZELAK 2010) to 250 000 in the new millennium (Eurostat n.d.) with only a gradual decline in later years. There were 227 000 sheep in 2015 (Główny Urząd Statystyczny 2015:3). With the number of sheep sharply dropping, so too did the number of pastoralists. Since then, Poland joined the European Union with its system of subsidies which changed the social and economic landscape of pastoralism. It also provided additional money for cultural and environmental measures of which pastoralism could become a part by getting involved in programs, such as Owca Plus (Sheep Plus) in Silesia. These efforts have brought about a renewed interest in pastoralism and a (re)invention of old customs. Frequently, the Wallachian origins are being played up, which is something new and unique to these new efforts. It was not something that the highlanders, especially of Podhale identified with. But since this Wallachian heritage has no heirs, as the Wallachians have dissolved into the local populations (see KOCÓJ 2015 for a discussion), it is readily appropriated to form a pan-Carpathian pastoral link. As part of that selective revival effort, as Barth pointed out, “a great amount of attention may be paid to revival of select traditional culture traits and to the establishment of historical traditions to justify and glorify the idioms and the identity” (BARTH 1969:35).

### Conclusions

As Barth points out, maintaining ethnic identity depends on the existence of another ethnic identity. In the case of the Polish highlanders, part of the boundary maintaining mechanism was that unspoken covenant between the rest of Poland and the *Górale* people whose culture was treated as the building blocks for the 19<sup>th</sup> century establishment of the Polish nation. This usefulness is part of the reason why this boundary remained stable over the years. Interestingly, unlike in the colonial examples, the “prized goals” were not “outside the field organized by minority’s culture and categories” (BARTH 1969:31). The source of the highland culture, the old pastoral system used to provide those for the *Górale*. The system was so robust that, for a while, it functioned parallel to that of the state. It was only when it was dismantled after the Second World War that the *Górale* had to find different ways to avoid becoming marginalised socially and economically. They did this by defining themselves as an ethnic group, founded on the *Górale* ethnicity.

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Today, after what I called the second and final dissolution of the pastoral system (the shock of the late 1980s and early 1990s), the *Górale* ethnicity and identity are being played up again. These efforts are visible in the celebration new and revived around the source of the highland culture – the traditional sheep economy.

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# 'Jakeš's Children'. Media Portrayal of Namibian Child Refugees in Slovakia<sup>1</sup>

MARTINA JAKUBCOVÁ

Department of Sociology, Andragogy and Cultural Anthropology,  
Palacký University in Olomouc, Czech Republic  
*[jakubcovaa.martina@gmail.com](mailto:jakubcovaa.martina@gmail.com)*

## ABSTRACT

The paper provides an insight into 'Slovak group' of Namibian children taken to Czechoslovakia. As a form of a communist solidarity help to the country fighting for its freedom, the children were raised and educated in newly established boarding school in Považská Bystrica from September 1989. Their stay, and particularly their sudden unexpected repatriation in 1991, raised questions not only among general public, but also in print media of those days. The article therefore discusses the media portrayal of the Slovak group of Namibian children with a special accent on the shifts in media interpretations in time. The overall research combines a biographical and historical design with the use of the qualitative analysis of print media outputs.

**KEY WORDS:** qualitative content analysis, exiled children, Namibia, media analysis, post-socialist media

## Introduction

As a manifestation of international solidarity of socialist states towards countries oppressed by colonial regimes, 120 Namibian child war refugees were granted custody by Czechoslovakia<sup>2</sup> between years 1985-1989. The first group of Namibian children (i.e. 56 of these accompanied by seven tutors) was received by the Czechoslovak government in November 1985 and since that time stayed in village Bartošovice (Czech Socialist Republic).

The second group, of total 64 child war refugees, was received in September 1989 in the Slovak Socialist Republic. They were accompanied by four Namibian tutors and, after getting off the plane in Bratislava, subsequently transported north to the city Považská Bystrica. At its outskirts, there was a newly established facility for their accommodation, upbringing and education – the primary boarding school, located in state hotel and restaurant property – Motel FIM. The group was the last one out of several others, consisting of exiled Namibian children, sent to safety abroad due to the war of independence. Apart from both parts of Czechoslovakia, they were also relocated to Cuba since 1978 (GLEIJESES 2013:91) and German Democratic republic since 1979 (SCHMITT et al. 2014:243).

This paper presents a part of my overall current research – it aims to provide an analysis of print media coverage on the stay of the group in Slovakia, also emically referred to as Jakeš's children.<sup>3</sup> These were supposed to receive primary and secondary education, and after finishing those meant to return to Namibia. However due to the changes in political situation in both countries,<sup>4</sup> they were repatriated already in 1991 and, together with the exiled children living in Bohemia, they flew back there. The larger objective of the current research is therefore to reconstruct the children's stay in Považská Bystrica and set it into a wider social and historic-political context.<sup>5</sup> Media analysis, when detailed, can firstly serve as a data triangulation for overall research. Secondly, since it is possible to consider the media discourse as a part of societal one, the construction of media portrait can fruitfully contribute to the reconstruction of historiography of the group of Namibian children in Slovakia. Apart

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<sup>2</sup> The former state Czechoslovakia was divided in two parts: the Czech Socialist Republic and the Slovak Socialist Republic by the Constitutional Law of Federation of 28 October 1968, which went into effect on 1 January 1969.

<sup>3</sup> Miloš Jakeš was the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in years 1987-1989. The use of his surname as a connotation to the children was based on presumption of his responsibility for their stay.

<sup>4</sup> Namibia gained independence in 1991 and the communist regime in Czechoslovakia collapsed as a result of Velvet Revolution of 1989.

<sup>5</sup> In order to achieve that, several data sources are involved, such as archives (on regional, national and former federal level), narrative biographies (of "children" themselves, their Slovak care givers, teachers and temporary foster families), personal documents (e.g. personal correspondence and photographs) and print media (newspapers distributed on daily, weekly and bi-weekly basis). The planned outcome of my field research is to produce a coherent chapter in prepared comprehensive publication on the Namibian child war refugees transferred to Czechoslovakia and raised there in years 1985-1991. Guidance is provided by Kateřina Mildnerová PhD. whom is also the primary author of the writing mentioned.



from that, the media analysis may provide information about receivers of the construction, i.e. the contemporary Czechoslovak society.

### **Theoretical background**

When considering reality to be a social construction, it is necessary to view media as institutions – human products experienced as possessing a reality of their own, seemingly independent from the individuals that actually embody them. They imply the control of human behaviour by setting up a pattern of the conduct (BERGER – LUCKMANN 1991:72-76). Based on the etymological origin of the word *media* in Latin (meaning *in between* or *the centre*, something *central*) we can consider media to be an agent whose primary role is to mediate communication as “*a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed*” (CAREY 2009:19). Mediation, as a course of action consists (among others) of information gathering, their processing and distribution by the formal organisations. Above all that, it is necessary to understand, that the mediation itself is basically a course of interpretative action, therefore not only the content itself is of importance, but so is the source (JIRÁK – KÖPPLOVÁ 2007:41-43). The source is a part of objective reality<sup>6</sup> as well as its creator. The ability to co-create reality (and conduct human behaviour in the meantime) lies in formation of discourse, i.e. “*practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak*” (FOUCAULT 1972:49).

Producing discourse by theme selection can be equalled to agenda setting<sup>7</sup> on two levels. The first level of influencing the audience is based on transmission of object's importance, onto which comes another level – emitting the attributes of its salience. The result is not only something to think about, but also the way how to think about. Agenda setting therefore merges with the framing on both levels – presentation as well as the attributes (McCOMBS – GHANEM 2001:67), and combination of these can be considered to be a social control factor. The distribution of re-presentation of 'objective reality' is media's final step in its

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<sup>6</sup> Berger and Luckmann (1991) find the subjective reality as a part of the objective one, while the relationship between them is dialectical and in a constant search of symmetry. The conversation (i.e. direct or symbolic human interaction) serves a crucial role in its maintenance, re-evaluation or reconstruction (BERGER – LUCKMANN 1991:153-172).

<sup>7</sup> „Agenda setting is a theory about the transfer of salience from the mass media's pictures of the world to those in our heads“ (McCOMBS – GHANEM 2001:67).

installation.<sup>8</sup>

Minor though necessary detail one keeps forgetting about is that the institutions were created by humans and humans simultaneously do embody them. Humans are also part of certain society in a way that they not only create it, but in the meantime are created by it. When it is possible to observe a relationship between a man and a society as a dialectical process, then so is the relationship between society and media. Following this stream of thoughts, one has to find the notions of institutional agenda setting, ideology assertion and thought navigation as important to consider, though at the same the notions are also bit oversimplifying, especially when considering the complexity of reality. I find it important to comprise that it is essentially the society (which we are vital part of) that is doing so, or to put it more precisely, it's certain part. In order to eliminate unnecessary overgeneralisations, it may be worth specifying.

In correspondence to what is stated above it is crucial to conceptualise the journalist's role as well as slightly rethink the notion of audience. In case we equal the latter one to only a passive recipient of presented content, we are at fault by not only its homogenisation, but also by denying its members' autonomy and power of agency. The active audience conception, as an opposing theory, assumes that the receivers are not only able to select out of variety of sources and contents available, but also to interpret the obtained information based on their own experiences or individual predispositions (HALL 1980; MORLEY 1992; LIEBES – KATZ 1995). Nonetheless, there are two problematic aspects interconnected, firstly the wide range of possible conceptualisation of the activity itself (BIOCCA 1988). Secondly, the variety of possible interpretations of mediated statements is also disputable, especially when dealing with newspapers. Contents of these can be referred to as closed texts due to the author's latent recommendation how the readers should grasp it (ECO 1979; MILLER – PHILO 2001; McQUAIL 2010). Eventually it is therefore possible to conceive the audience as more or less heterogeneous unit, which interprets about the presented content in a variety of ways based on its experiences and abilities. However, when given a uniform media message, notwithstanding what their responses are, the interpretation remains (more or less) uniform as well.

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<sup>8</sup> According to Donohue et al. „the control of knowledge is central to development and maintenance of power“ (DONOHUE et al. 1973:652). From this point of view, it is possible to find communication of any type as containing the control factor, more or less latent. In their paper they emphasize not whether, but how and in what part of the communication process the control is applied and with what effects on social system.

The journalists can be therefore considered to be not only the interpretation suppliers, or information mediators, but also objective members of the media institution. They are its embodiment; its norms and practises are internalized within them. Apart from these, they can be assumed to be also vital part of the initial society, whose (as well as for which) spokesmen they are. Due to the fact that the analysed data are basically articles (among others) from regional and local print media, it would be wrong to without any consideration exclude the authors from being an integral part of the society. On the other hand, this does not eliminate possibility of external influence or power exercised. Their role is therefore grounded within specific time and space. As for the spatiality, one can presume societal factors to be of a strong impact on the role self-awareness (ZHU et al. 1997; VAN DALEN et al. 2012).

As for the temporality, an important aspect coming to the overall image is the fact, that vast majority of data comes from the period of transition caused by the Velvet Revolution of 1989. Due to the specific time setting, the Janowitz's model of journalist roles *gatekeeper vs. advocate* (1975) is valid only temporarily and has to be reconsidered. In the remaining time range (i.e. in the period after the Velvet Revolution), the *civic/public journalism* perspective can be applied (ROSEN, 1999:22-23) however this one itself does not prevent gatekeeping<sup>9</sup> in the process of mediation.

## Methodology

Out of 25 articles gathered, the final sample contained 20 of these. The selection was based on two criteria: 1) the article was published while the Namibian group was still present in the facility of the boarding school or shortly after their departure, 2) the source can be classified as a universal journal (TUŠER 1999:25), i.e. newspaper distributed on the national or regional level.

The articles' size varied from 65 to 1500 words, they were subsequently manually transcribed for further analysis conduction.<sup>10</sup> In order to provide a detailed construction of the media

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<sup>9</sup> The term gatekeeping refers to a process, by which from the large amount of information available only a part is eventually distributed to the audience. The selection may be guided (or enforced) by several agents, e.g. the journalists themselves, the workplace, audiences, third parties etc. (McQUAIL 2010).

<sup>10</sup> The articles were identified in newspapers distributed on regional (Obzor, Smer) and national level (Pravda, Národná obroda, Slovenský denník, Sloboda, Smena, Zmena). Four articles were impossible to identify of their source, however due to the use of Slovak language and evident ties to case *in situ* it is possible to enhance them as well.

portrayal of the Namibian group staying in Slovakia, there was a need for systematic description of the selected aspects, i.e. the parts of construction. I was aware of the necessity to identify and interpret the latent meaning hidden in the available content. Based on these demands I decided to conduct qualitative content analysis.<sup>11</sup>

This procedure involves sequence of steps, such as formulation of the research question and material selection followed by building the coding frame which generally contains several *dimensions* (= main categories). The frame itself (i.e. the construction of children's mediated image) comprised of the *main categories* (visualized as *layers*) – these were identified in order to produce a complex and detailed interpretation in a wider context. The assumed structure of the portrayal contained two dimensions, the *group's portrayal* and the *purpose of the stay*. After deciding on the frame and main categories, I began the coding process during which the units of transcribed text were assigned inductive codes. When this was done, the categories were merged altogether according to the main one they fit.

From this stage of coding I moved onto a conceptual one analysing emerging latent content, including less explicit notions. All the material was re-read and preliminary assumptions taken. Then another reading had to be done, in order to double-check the articles for approval or denial of those.

## Results of the research

The coding not only reduced gathered data for the second time, but also conceptualized the dimensions in a way that it highlighted two following aspects, and a need for reconsideration of the originally designed construction:

### *Gradual linear shift of media discourses re-occurring as a matter of transformation in contemporary society*

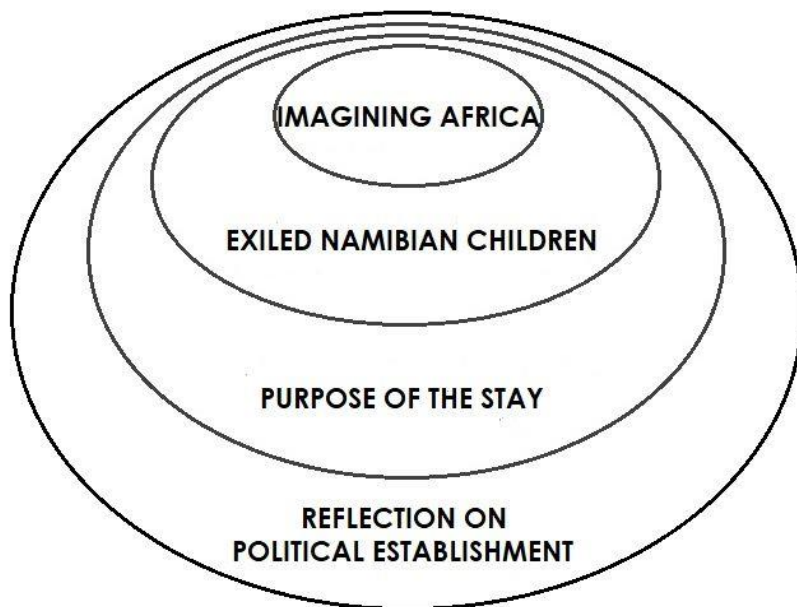
Based on spotting the fluid continuous change after the event of Velvet Revolution on November 17<sup>th</sup> 1989, it became possible to roughly divide the analysed period into three short time segments (this division is just analytic and cannot be estimated to be something fixed

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<sup>11</sup> Qualitative content analysis can be defined as a detailed and systematic approach to analysis and interpretation of data of textual nature. It aims to identify their manifest as well as latent meanings (LUNE – BERG 2017; NEUMAN 2014; SCHREIER 2012). Its gradual development started as a matter of Kracauer's critique of the established quantitative content analysis in 1950's. The main assumption of such action was need for reconsideration of the "obvious verbalized meaning"(SCHREIER 2012:13).

due to the fact that overall transformation is a linear process). The first one, starting from the arrival of the group in September 1989 and finishing by the end of the same year, exhibits the socialist rhetoric. In general, this segment seems to be unaffected by the event of the Velvet Revolution – the transformation of political regime is openly reflected in the second one, dated according to contents gathered from March 1990 until March 1991.

In this sub-period, it is possible to notice not only the shift in rhetoric, but also manifest attempts to reflect upon and eventually come to terms with past and former political regime. The third time segment contains data from July to October 1991. It focuses primarily on the departure of the group, whereas the political events serve as a specific framing background.



**Figure 1:** *The revised structure of construction.* Source: author 2018

***The static centre of the construction as a result of historically formed knowledge***

Despite the manifest shift in political discourse, the central part of the construction of the portrayal of Namibian children remained the same throughout the period under analysis. This might be interpreted as relatively consciously shared worldview of African continent (and its

inhabitants) by Slovak society, which is reproduced and transferred over generations.

On the one hand, these highlighted aspects demonstrated that construction itself is simultaneously a product as well as a process, therefore not hundred percent stable, rather of fluid nature. On the other hand, since the attempt of the paper is still to provide a complex media portrayal, it is necessary to enhance the original dimensions by incorporating not only the manifest static centre (as mentioned in bullet 2), but also the latent layer named as *the reflection on political establishment*. This category emerged out of data and its significance for understanding the society in transformation had to be recognized. The adjusted construction structure eventually could be visualized as seen on Figure 1.

In-depth analysis of articles was then followed by interpretation of meanings inside following categories:

### ***Imagining Africa***

The unchanging notion of *Africa as a homogenous entity* is flowing throughout the entire media content (e.g. cit. 1, 2). The simplification of the diverse geographical and cultural location up to these days serves as a valid demonstration of the dominant representation of Africa in Western (media) discourses (IŽÁK 2016:27). The roots of this discourse can be traced back to the Victorian era, when the metaphor “Dark continent” first appears in Henry M. Stanley’s treatise of 1878. The label “Dark”, referring not only to the blackness of the skin of East Africans Stanley observed, but mainly to the spiritual and mental inferiority of Africans, was then taken up by other travellers and missionaries. Another parallel is also to being of contrast nature to the (in 19<sup>th</sup> century quite recent) period of Enlightenment (JAROSZ 1992). The dominant European reasoning then was based on premises of reassessing the government system as well as individual (and societal) way of thinking. Onto this one, the shared idea of constant scientific and technological progress was present. The encounter with different cultures thus led to interpreting these as underdeveloped, hence primitive.<sup>12</sup> This perception was strongly influenced by the general intellectual climate of the periods of Enlightenment and later Victorian era promoting the myth of European superiority

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<sup>12</sup> This etic optics was also adopted in the territory of Czechia and Slovakia due to the distribution of these information in Europe from Western (European) travellers. For those (as well as the audience), it was nothing uncommon to build up images of the whole continent and its inhabitants based on knowledge of only a small portion of it. On one hand, such generalization combined with etic perspective led to alleged superiority. On the other hand this superiority did not legitimised colonialism what was already reflected in Slovak print media since 19<sup>th</sup> century (PAWLIKOVÁ-VILHANOVÁ 1987, 1991).

and ethos of civilisation (MILDNEROVÁ 2016:180). The backwardness though relates to idealisation and exotization when Africans were imagined as untamed people inhabiting wild continent, with their lives interconnected to untouched nature. As such, they provide an absolute contrast to us; cultivated Europeans living in advanced society (cit. 4, 5).

The exotism thus serves as a reassurance of our superiority. Following extracts therefore present the incorporation of mentioned stereotypes into the medial construction of otherness.

Citation 1: *...children coming from hot Africa...*<sup>13</sup>

Citation 2: *...to achieve the primary education [in Slovakia] and to teach them all habits of social life which was impossible to enhance in their country of origin.*<sup>14</sup>

Citation 3: *They found toys under the Christmas tree and they had no idea how to play with them up to now, and girls wrap their dolls into small blankets and tie them to their backs, as do their mothers in Namibia.*<sup>15</sup>

Citation 4: *...but also the rest of the children present that although they wear European clothes and speak lovely Slovak language, they still possess the gift of motion typical for black race.*<sup>16</sup>

Citation 5: *...we are responsible for whom we tame.*<sup>17</sup>

The metaphor of “Dark continent” can be also associated to concept of Africa as a space full of danger and ambush permanently awaiting for its victim. No matter whether the untamed nature is involved (such as wild predators) or the space itself is categorised to be the location of violence, armed conflicts and therefore politically instable (as presented via citations 6 and 7). Michira states in his paper that despite these negative media representations one has to realise that Africa is not only about dangerous animals, bloody wars of opposing “tribes”, dictators and epidemics; and above that, these mediated images (and many others) do not relate to Africa exclusively (MICHIRA 2002).

Citation 6: *Gunshots and echoes from hand grenades were replaced by a monotonous melody*

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<sup>13</sup> Smer 20.9. 1989.

<sup>14</sup> Smer 20.9. 1989.

<sup>15</sup> Práca 27.12. 1989.

<sup>16</sup> Source unidentified though based on its content it is evidently written shortly after the group's departure.

<sup>17</sup> Národná obroda 3.7. 1991.

*coming from cars on the exit road to Trenčín.*<sup>18</sup>

Citation 7: *An European might find Africa too adventurous or exotic, though this does not apply to an African, who can expect violent death everywhere. We shout at each other while they stab each other. We slap each other, but they go for submachine gun.*<sup>19</sup>

### ***The representation of exiled Namibian children in media content***

The central part of media construction is reflected in prevailing description of the children. The idealisation of the *noble savage* dwells in over-generalising depiction of their physical attributes and in the context of specific activities. The typical traits of Africans as such are for example their easy-going attitude and motoric skills (cit. 11, 12). The important factor while receiving the offered media portrayal is our social perception, which follows certain guidelines. Relying on indirect clues we ascribe specific set of attributes to other people and under the impression of these we shape attitude towards them. In this case, the first element in the process is the childish physical appearance and what we associate with the idea of childhood, i.e. innocence and urgent need for protection and guidance (cit. 9, 10). Adult responsiveness towards (especially young) children is an implicit mechanism of the brain physiology (SENESE et al. 2013), and this is reflected not only in our emotional reactions, but also in stance we take and demonstrate. In case the stimuli are visual (e.g. the article includes photographs), our response of child – protection association is faster (cit. 8). The stereotype itself is generalizable and practically culturally universal (ZEBROWITZ et al. 2012). There is doubt that Western media participate on its maintenance, e.g. through its representations of children as victims (PARKER et al. 2001; KUNKEL – SMITH 1999).

Citation 8: *...John takes my hand and we walk on the creaking snow. By winking at my face he is signaling that he likes me.*<sup>20</sup>

Citation 9: *At no cost they [the children] did not want to turn off the lights. They are also stressed by the noise of planes. Lots of them have sadness in their eyes even when playing.*<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Pravda 25.9. 1989.

<sup>19</sup> Source unidentified though based on its content it is evidently written before the group's departure.

<sup>20</sup> Práca 27.12. 1989.

<sup>21</sup> Pravda 25.9. 1989.



Citation 10: *Beautiful, helpless and abandoned black children.*<sup>22</sup>

Citation 11: *They reveal joy more spontaneously than our children. They are also very sport gifted. What our children train for month, black children dance at once.*<sup>23</sup>

Citation 12: *...they found an empty bucket that suddenly made sound as authentic African drums. The real show started – they don't need more than their hands, legs and voice. Whole body is dancing and so a soul.*<sup>24</sup>

The second clue is our perception of the situation – we are aware that the children suffered in SWAPO refugee camps during the struggle for independence of Namibia, and that they were transferred to Czechoslovakia in order to be raised and educated there. The information certainly lacks specific details, nonetheless it does not matter. We are reassured that how we perceive the continent of Africa to be, proves right again (as seen on cit. 14 and 15).

Citation 13: *On request of UN and International Red Cross, Czechoslovakia granted custody [...] over the group of 64 children and 4 tutors. [...] The children are orphans of deceased SWAPO fighters, an organization trying to defeat colonial establishment and set the people's rule in Namibia.*<sup>25</sup>

Citation 14: *In Slovakia we protect the helpless ones from the violence of the South Africa directed towards Namibia.*<sup>26</sup>

Combination of these two motives leads us to the presented media portrayal within the children category, which is following: *the children from unstable African country we have to take care of.* Czechoslovakia's position of the saviour corresponds not only with the central stereotype of European paternalism towards Africa (i.e. Africa is not peaceful because its people think in a whole different way than peaceful Europeans, see cit. 14, 15), but also with the contemporary agenda of geopolitical world division. Within the latter, the capitalist bloc was assigned collective fault of colonisation of African continent while the socialist bloc was seen as supporting various national liberation movements. In the second time segment, based on the social, political and economic transformations started by the Velvet revolution, the reconsideration of the former regime and attempts to come up to reconciliation with the past occur. At the same time, the journalist practise is under revision as well. Not only they were

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<sup>22</sup> Práca 27.12. 1989.

<sup>23</sup> Sloboda 19.5. 1990.

<sup>24</sup> Práca 21.9. 1991.

<sup>25</sup> Obzor 21.9. 1989.

<sup>26</sup> Práca 27.12. 1989.

no longer viewed as means of control and propaganda (GULYÁS 2001:74), they are also freed from institutional censorship.<sup>27</sup> This change is reflected in the transformation of journalists' role in society; they were no longer viewed as passive bridge of information between points A and B, they became active information gatherers and hunters.<sup>28</sup> The verbalisation of the category changes in a slight but important way, such as the portrayal is accompanied with the notion of *but...* It is not sure whether the reinvention of the role of journalist in society led to the explicit increase in them being interested in the case (though I cannot deny it). What can be certainly assumed is that the range of questions to be answered was getting wider, and those were not only asked by the journalist, but also by the local community or larger society (such as cit. 15 and 16). The raised questions concerned the issues of financing the facility where the children stayed, the process of their education and of course, the purpose of their stay. This specific question comes to the light, especially since Namibia already gained the independence in 1991. Also the status of children was revised in the media content – shortly after their arrival, the group is no longer presented as a collective of orphans. The information about one of the Namibian care givers, about her party and military engagements, was also added. What we can genuinely observe is the transformation not only of society, which becomes more interrogative and open to receive new types of information, but also in journalists' role perceptions. They became *public representatives* (PATTERSON in DONSBACH 2008:2606).

Citation 15: *When the new director arrived and regional national board's personnel started being replaced, it became clear that no one really knew who invited the black children nor who should finance this lovely mission.*<sup>29</sup>

Citation 16: *Where will be the parentless children returned? [...] two years nobody cared about them. What chance to survive do they have when they will be sent back to refugee camps, infection and starvation...*<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> This control institution in Czechoslovakia was embodied by Federal Office for Press and Information, that ceased to exist on July 31st 1990 by Act No. 166/1990 Sb. act cancellation No. 180/1980 Sb. about establishment of Federal Office for Press and Information

<sup>28</sup> Transformation of media role in society was reflected also in discussions about ensuring their autonomy from agenda from third parties (see WYKA 2008). Nonetheless I have to add to this matter that the discussions are not over yet.

<sup>29</sup> Smena 21.3. 1990.

<sup>30</sup> Národná obroda 3.7. 1991.

***Purpose of the stay***

As the primarily presented information about the group was being revised, so is the mediated category of the purpose of their stay. During the first months, the manifest message in the contents is verbalised via catchphrase *international solidarity* (cit. 17, 19). Despite that this simple formulation may nowadays convey an impression of neutrality and being apolitical, when living in a socialist state one used to associate slightly different meaning. The programmatic catchphrase was emitting meaning of international help towards and cooperation with countries under the burden of capitalist aggression (see cit. 19) (SCHMITT et al. 2014:242). This, being part of socialist countries' foreign policy, was an economical and ideological strategy to a large extent shaped by Soviet interests (OPRŠAL et al. 2016:327-328).

Citation 17: *SWAPO's demand is to provide education for children the way only we, living in socialist countries, can do.*<sup>31</sup>

Citation 18: *They [the Portuguese] were not interested in colonization of the hostile country. However, after more than three and a half centuries, it [i.e. Namibia] found itself at the centre of European colonial attempts.*<sup>32</sup>

Citation 19: *On Sunday September 3<sup>rd</sup>, the group of 64 children and 4 tutors from Namibia arrived to our county as a matter of an international help...*<sup>33</sup>

The help was given by various means (such as financial and material aid, assistance in exile etc.) but that was only a small manifest demonstration of the solidarity principle (cit. 18). The strategy involved also certain "mutually convenient" economic cooperation; meaning that inaccessible raw materials and agricultural products (such as phosphates, ores, fruits, cocoa beans etc.) were meant to be imported in exchange for industrial or consumer goods (ZÍDEK – SIEBER 2007). Based on these notions it is possible to suppose some sort of reciprocal relationship, but with regards to the gathered print material only on latent level. Due to the absence of detailed official documents discussing the admission of the group (and elaborate explanation of this action, and its financing), the manifest messages concerning

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<sup>31</sup> Obzor 21.9. 1989.

<sup>32</sup> Práca 27.12. 1989.

<sup>33</sup> Obzor 7.9. 1989.

possible reciprocity remain more speculative than objective (cit. 20, 21).<sup>34</sup>

Citation 20: *African fighters have chosen reliable communist countries and transferred the children to Cuba, GDR and Czechoslovakia. Rumours about loaded dollar check have never been confirmed...*<sup>35</sup>

Citation 21: *The exact content of the deal between SWAPO and leaders of Czechoslovakia can be only a subject of estimations. Rumours about millions in dollars are going around [...] but there are no accessible documents to prove it.*<sup>36</sup>

With regards to reconsideration of the actions of the former regime, the case as such is later on ostentatiously re-presented as directly related to it, i.e. our shared socialist past. It is therefore possible to summarize the shifted content of the analysed category by assigning another description: *foreign policy of former regime*. Whole layer becomes framed by the reflection of shared past. The previous regime is depicted as confusing and chaotic, especially when discussing the responsibility for certain actions. Above that, if the contemporary objective reality (i.e. the stay of the group) is connected to former political regime, subsequent indication has to be considered – in attempts to achieve complete transformation of society and politics, there is no room for children's upbringing and education in the (no longer state) facility (cit. 22).

Citation 22: *The Ministry of education is drowning in financial problems and the black children, to be honest, are perceived as miserable heritage after communist regime.*<sup>37</sup>

### ***Reflection of the political establishment***

The temporality of the group's stay in North West Slovakia can be re-identified (among others) also by post-socialist discourses of facility privatization and funding. Since the very beginning of the media's attention to this issue, it was explicitly mentioned that the upbringing and education were only for a given (though not clear) period of time. The initial length was stated to roughly 10 years, nonetheless in the third time segment that was no longer valid and in a sudden haste there were notions of few days, weeks' time (see cit. 23

<sup>34</sup> Due to the fact that the freedom of press in Czechoslovakia was "discovered" in the period of transition, this newly created media space got loaded with information of various quality and personal agenda (O'NEIL 2013).

<sup>35</sup> Národná obroda 3.7. 1991.

<sup>36</sup> Source unidentified though based on its content it is evidently written before the group's departure.

<sup>37</sup> Národná obroda 3.7. 1991.

and 24, the latter was distributed not even 2 years after the first one, cit. 26).

Citation 23: *As we have already mentioned, during their 10-12 year stay [in Slovakia] they are supposed to receive primary education and learn all the habits of social life that were impossible to enhance in their country of origin....*<sup>38</sup>

Citation 24: *NOTHING IS CLEAR! When will the children leave, who will take them, who will pay for the journey and where to? This does not stand in the way for being on "alert" in their substitute home in Považská Bystrica, meaning the termination of facility and keeping children ready.*<sup>39</sup>

As presented in the last citation, the absence of clear and structured information from any official institution (neither government nor education board) effused insecurity not only among the staff and children, but this feeling also spread among "foster parents". Such a tense situation (cit. 24, 26) is represented in media content, which became continually more and more emotional. The children are depicted as passive objects – traumatized war victims whom people from near or further want to take care of, yet whose fates are questionable. The "foster parents" engagement is reflected in appealing to official institutions for help with matters of their repatriation or clear information at least (cit. 25). The entering emotional motive, of the contents in the second segment, is for reason stated above the feeling of insecurity, however starting from summer 1991 (i.e. during the 3<sup>rd</sup> time segment) it shifts towards frustration (cit. 25, 27).

Citation 25: *Families who decided for adoption or for foster care do fight however don Quichotean fight with bureaucracy.*<sup>40</sup>

Citation 26: *It [the Ministry of Foreign Affairs] demands Namibian side for the financial assistance for their stay [of the children]. The Namibian government reaction arrives quickly – and demands the children back.*<sup>41</sup>

Citation 27: *Here comes the farewell. All involved got used to – children, tutors, their friends taking them home for weekends or holidays. Not only from Považská Bystrica, but also from elsewhere. Some children cried when they found out they were leaving for good. The older ones said, that they went home only for holidays.*<sup>42</sup> These affective framings, reflecting the

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<sup>38</sup> Smer 20.9. 1989.

<sup>39</sup> Národná obroda 3.7. 1991.

<sup>40</sup> Národná obroda 3.7. 1991.

<sup>41</sup> Source unidentified though based on its content it is evidently written before the group's departure.

<sup>42</sup> Slovenský denník 1.10. 1991.

moods in community throughout the stay of the children, lead me to consider the description of this final category. When acknowledging the shift in the journalists' role in society towards the public representative, the emotion representation serves as a form of background to do so. In the first time segment there was no prevalent emotional underpinning identified. This though can be interpreted in two directions: 1) the content was not meant to be subjected to further negotiation, meaning that what was written had been considered to be undisputable truth – emotionless, responseless; 2) there might have been hostile emotions and attitudes from the local community identified, but these were not written about due to self-censorship of the author. These two assumptions can be valid at once, therefore the represented imagined reality could be considered as an ideological tool – a propaganda of happiness and safety under the socialist establishment. The first estimated reflection therefore must be verbalized through such optics, thus in this way: *the state will take care of us all* (cit. 28, 29).

Citation 28: *Everything is ready for the stay of the Namibian children, orphans of deceased freedom fighters.*<sup>43</sup>

Citation 29: *At the beginning there was a telegram about an arrival of the children from hot Africa and within four days it was pretty clear where they would be accommodated, who would take care of them, what they would eat, what they would wear. Well done!*<sup>44</sup>

Identified notions of insecurity lead not only to certain general awareness of the situation in both parts of the former republic, but also to a specific community (or rather “parental”) mobilization. Journalists, as public representatives, cover this issue and not only they represent the voices of parents, they also demand answers and action. The revolution convinced people of their strength and as a consequence, the idea of vague hope got vital, especially after the departure of the group in July 1991 failed. The meta-message of this period in between can be presented as following: *we can help ourselves* (cit. 30, 31).

Citation 30: *We demand the government of Czechoslovakia [...] to stop [children's] repatriation and started immediate action in order to solve out their situation [...] in correspondence to treaties and laws for human rights protection.*<sup>45</sup>

Citation 31: *The initiative of mothers from Považská Bystrica reversed the decision of all institutions, whether ours or from abroad, and the Namibian children who were supposed to*

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<sup>43</sup> Obzor 7.9. 1989.

<sup>44</sup> Smer 20.9. 1989.

<sup>45</sup> Source unidentified though based on its content it is evidently written before the group's departure.

*fly back home remained in Czechoslovakia.*<sup>46</sup> The widespread enthusiasm and optimism among the Czechoslovak citizens after the Velvet revolution created an illusion of everything seeming to be possible (SZTOMPKA 1993:85), but in this specific case very soon proved the opposite was truth. The people's expectations of government's active engagement, in order to meet their demands met legal reality. Swiftly spreading frustration from disillusion replaced the previous feeling insecurity (though still with reflections of agitated hope) and therefore the final narration of the category contains this latent meaning: *the state is unable to help us thus we cannot help ourselves* (cit. 32, 33, 34).

Citation 32: *Adoption? That is supposed to be very complicated. If the child was about to be adopted by a Namibian citizen, that would „take few minutes”. However, the interest in child by a European is legally interpreted as a child trafficking.*<sup>47</sup>

Citation 33: *It is very difficult to communicate with this country [i.e. Namibia] since there is no embassy in Czechoslovakia, only in Brussels. This is definitely not pleasing information for Johnny's Slovak parents who already bought him a bicycle and a skateboard. It is also not satisfactory for other “white“ parents.*<sup>48</sup>

Citation 34: *Unfortunately, these misunderstandings out of love [...] started several human tragedies. One of those can be also a future destiny of small Mweengo and his “almost mother“.*<sup>49</sup>

### **GDR children of Namibia**<sup>50</sup>

The results achieved by conducting qualitative content analysis of print media material correspond to a certain measure with findings from the media analysis of the “GDR children of Namibia”<sup>51</sup> conducted by Niekrenz et al. in 2014. The centre of German team's interest

<sup>46</sup> Národná obroda 14.9. 1991.

<sup>47</sup> Source unidentified though based on its content it is evidently written before the group's departure.

<sup>48</sup> Source unidentified though based on its content it is evidently written before the group's departure.

<sup>49</sup> Národná obroda 14.9. 1991.

<sup>50</sup> GDR is an abbreviation of the German Democratic Republic (1949-1990), also known as East Germany in context of the division of the whole territory of contemporary Germany. The other abbreviation used in the text is FRG – Federal Republic of Germany. In the period of time before the year 1990 it referred strictly to common English denotation of so-called West Germany, while after the re-unification it identified both parts.

<sup>51</sup> The term, referring to the group of Namibian children transported since 1979 to German Democratic Republic, is used in media as well as in academy (NIEKRENZ et al. 2014:95).

was reconstruction of the “*media discourse surrounding the group which were published between 1979 and 2013 in Namibia (also South West Africa) and Germany (also GDR, pre- and post-unification FRG)*” (NIEKRENZ et al. 2014:97). The outcomes of their action coincide with mine on several grounds. However, one crucial fact has to be considered – the children’s departure from German territory was in August 1990. It means that in order to confront the results of Niekrenz et al. I have to take into consideration only the sample before (and around the date of) their departure, moreover, published in Germany exclusively. Above this, between the years 1979 and 1989 there was a moratorium on press information distribution related to the issue of Namibian child war refugees’ stay. Mutual agreement of SED (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands – Socialist Unity Party of Germany) and SWAPO thus led to lack of print material in this period of time (two articles are mentioned being analysed). The restrictions were lifted in May 1989 and this action had consequences that will be mentioned later in these paragraphs.

As for the first period of time in German press releases, the similarities occur while the exoticising representation of children (citation 35a, b), emphasizing their political loyalty (citation 36a, b) and initial referring to them as a collective (citation 37a, b). Lifted restrictions in May 1989 caused not only more media coverage, but also political instrumentalisation of the children’s stay in GDR. The raise of critical voices not only led to unconfirmable speculations, but also to an issue of children belonging “back” to Namibia also from the reasons of former regime’s foreign policy as it was in my case. Citation 35a: *Mother Anna managed to comb the pigtails to all the little pretties however she had no time left for her own hair.*<sup>52</sup>

Citation 35b: *“elaborate hairstyle” consisting of little “antennae.”*<sup>53</sup>

Citation 36a: *When Sam Nujoma was elected to be the president of Namibia, all the children were celebrating – all of them knew his picture when the principal hung these on the walls of classrooms.*<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Práca 21.9. 1991.

<sup>53</sup> Niekrenz et al. identify the source of these statements as a magazine Für Dich – Vol. 22, 1982 (NIEKRENZ et al. 2014:99).

<sup>54</sup> Smena 21.3. 1990.



Citation 36b: *"children cherish the mission of President Sam Nujoma."*<sup>55</sup>

Citation 37a: *We had some troubles to distinguish between them. They seemed all the same.*<sup>56</sup>

Citation 37b: *"It seemed to us as if they all looked the same. We asked ourselves: how on earth are we going to get to grips with this bubbly crowd of children."*<sup>57</sup> When discussing the issue of belonging of the Namibian child war refugees, the findings of the German team were not thoroughly affirmed in my media analysis. I assume that the discrepancy occurred due to the "foster parents" theme – in gathered material from Slovakia, as part of federative republic of Czechoslovakia, this aspect is very obvious. Since the printed announcement of possibility to foster the Namibian children (in daily-published newspaper *Práca* from May 19<sup>th</sup>, 1990), the notion of children's belonging was getting more and more vacillating. The most emotionally intensive moments highlighted in media are those of the groups' departure because of foster parents' attempts to adopt. However, there are no notions of ideas of adoption in the German media analysis whatsoever. Though, possibly due to different time period and life conditions of GDR children it seems understandable. Nevertheless, in case of Slovakia this means that the group was no longer perceived as a collective whose true home was back in Namibia (as was one of the several findings of Niekrenz et al.), but as consisting of individuals whose home it was not supposed to be any longer.

## Conclusion

This paper presented an analysis of media portrayal of Namibian child war refugees' stay in Slovakia and its elaborated interpretation. The abundance of media outputs about the Namibian exile children from Slovakia and Germany makes sharp contrast to the vacuum of media public information concerning the Namibian children in Czechia. The lack of the print media sources about the 'Czech group' can be though considered as correlating with notion of temporal maintaining the secrecy as a matter of political decision.

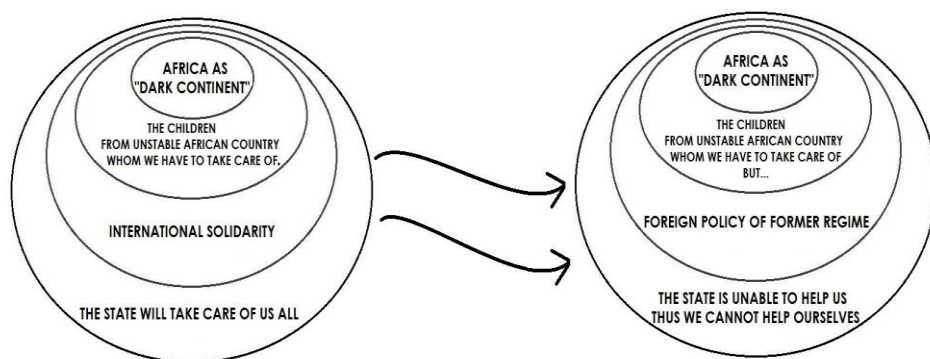
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<sup>55</sup> Niekrenz et al. identify the source of this statement as a magazine *Schweriner Volkszeitung*, 23.12.1983 (NIEKRENTZ et al. 2014:99).

<sup>56</sup> *Sloboda* 19.5. 1990.

<sup>57</sup> Niekrenz et al. identify the source of this statement as a magazine *Für Dich* – Vol. 22, 1982 (NIEKRENTZ et al. 2014:99).

This, in German Democratic Republic, was taken by SWAPO and SED as stated by Niekrenz et al. (NIEKRENTZ et al. 2014:98). It is therefore possible to assume that similar decision was taken also in Czechoslovakia. The confirmation of this assumption however requires further research. In this context, I am convinced that the cooperation among German, Czech and Slovak team of scientists focused on this topic might bring more complex understanding of Namibian children in European exile – not only at the level of their media's representation. The fluid model of medial depiction of the Jakeš's children summarizes the identified manifest and (more or less) latent meanings in each category in a given time range. The visualisation (see Figure 2) presents the initial and final media portrayal.



**Figure 2:** Initial and final construction of media portrayal. Source: author 2018

Due to the fact that the shift in content was rather gradual than sudden, I find it more convenient and convincing to highlight the two versions rather than lose attention in more elaborative structure. The nature of social construction proved to be rather unstable, though, as manifested, some layers presumably take much longer period of time to transform (such as the Imagining Africa category). The media portrayal of the group of Namibian children in Slovakia was constructed within a larger matrix of institutions, practices, norms and beliefs. Based on the data analysis, it is possible to come to conclusion that all these did categorize the children most of all as objects. The frame of the analysis can be therefore accompanied with double summarization, firstly as *children = the saved orphans* (i.e. something that was rescued and being taken care of), and secondly as *children = the victims of political affairs* (i.e. something only minor in a larger picture). The shift can be gradually identified, reminds

a slow-motion echo of the Velvet Revolution. This one caused an uninterrupted chain of events with results visible in the whole society.

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**Guarracha: An Indigenous Inter-Ethnic Peace Building and Conflict Resolution Institution among the People of South Central Ethiopia**

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# ***Guarraacha*: An Indigenous Inter-Ethnic Peace Building and Conflict Resolution Institution among the People of South Central Ethiopia**

LENIN KUTO\* – AYEHU BACHA\*\* – GEMECHU TAYE\*\*\*

\*Department of Oromo Folklore and Language,  
Oromia State University, Ziway, Ethiopia  
*leninkuto@gmail.com*

\*\*Department of Oromo Folklore and Literature,  
Jimma University, Jimma, Ethiopia  
*ayew.bacha@yahoo.com*

\*\*\*Action Aid Ethiopia,  
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia  
*gedatc@gmail.com*

## **ABSTRACT**

This article deals with *Guarraacha* institution, which is very important in inter-ethnic peace building and resolving conflict among people of south-central Ethiopia. This institution was named after the Oromo term '*Guarraacha*' (literally meaning black) to indicate its power in inter-ethnic peace building and conflict resolution. It is one element of Oromo *Gadaa* system which was established time immemorial to sustain peace between Oromo and non-Oromo neighboring ethnic groups. The data for this study was collected through interview, observation and focus group discussions in 2014 and 2015. As revealed by this study, *Guarraacha* institution is a guarantee for sustaining peace among people of south-central Ethiopia by managing conflict over boundary, grazing land, looting of cattle and water points. Overall, the study concluded that *Guarraacha* institution has real significance in inter-ethnic peace-building, sustaining social harmony and inter-ethnic conflict resolution. In *Guarraacha*

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institution, people rebuild lost peace and order of *Waaqa* (God) by performing purification rituals. There is no corruption in *Gurraacha* institution since all activities are undertaken according to *Waaqa*'s law and order. There is no false oath in this institution because such act is believed to have negative consequences. The oath of *Gurraacha* institution which are made during reconciliation process transcend generations. This institution is the model of conflict transformation which is hardly found in today's world. Therefore, using this indigenous institution for future policy formulation in the country as inter-ethnic peace building and conflict resolution model is important for the realization of sustainable peace and development.

**KEY WORDS:** *Gurraacha* institution, peace building, *Gadaa* system, inter-ethnic, conflict transformation, Oromo

## Introduction

Interethnic conflicts have existed since the dawn of humanity and our world is experiencing more conflicts. Results of conflict might include but are not only limited to losses of lives, destruction of property and trauma, all of which are responsible to trigger retribution (ISAJIW 2000). Traditional indigenous societies by their very nature tend to be communal, collective, and more prone to foster an atmosphere of peaceful co-existence (CONETH-MORGAN 2005). The application of traditional customs and values in reconciliation efforts may result in a more communal grassroots involvement and thereby contribute substantially to eradication of the root causes of the conflict and to holistic reconciliation.

Similarly, a traditional approach to peace building is based on the premise that sustained peace and order in society results from the moral authority exerted by the communal group over its members. In pastoral communities, peace building takes the form of elders from two neighboring clans playing an important part in defusing tensions and conflicts, which usually revolve around the control of grazing land or water (FORTES – EVANS-PRITCHARD 1940). The wisdom and experience of the elders is manifested in clear and well-articulated procedures for conflict resolution in which all the parties to the conflict are given the chance to express their views. On the other hand, the elders were vested with cultural authority to act as arbiters and even give judgment on the rights and wrongs of a dispute submitted to them for resolution and then suggest a settlement, although they may have no power of physical coercion by which to enforce them. But often the pressures of culture guarantee obedience.

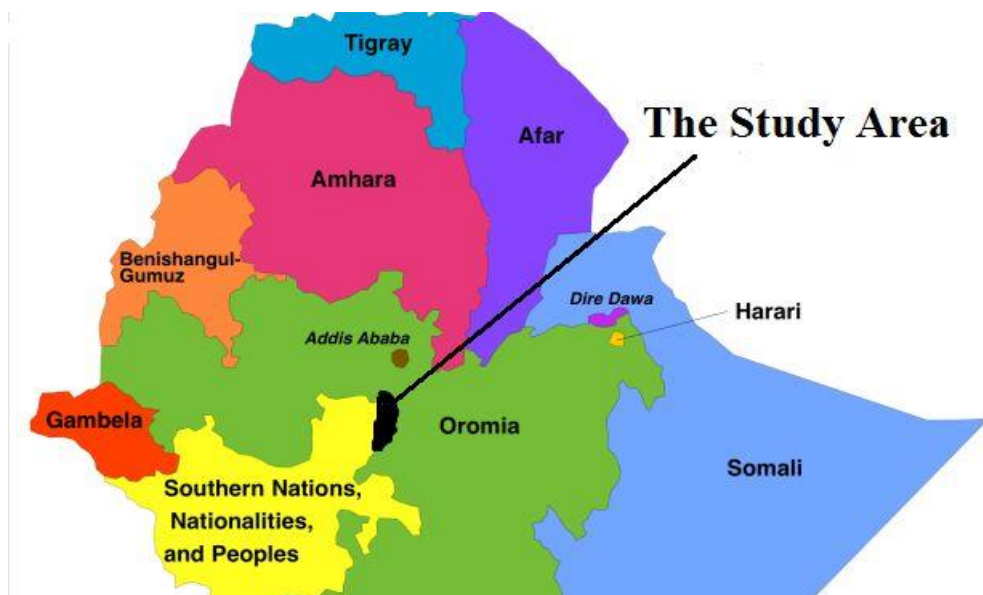
Ethiopia is composed of several ethno-linguistic communities with different histories, languages, and cultures. Despite their diverse historical origins and with several points of



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contacts over the centuries, all of them have coexisted as nations among nations. The origins, direction of movement and modes of integration among ethnic or linguistic communities in the unfolding historical processes in the traditional Ethiopian polities had been a multifaceted voyage that could understand a bit more exactly in its context-specificity (LUBO 2012).



From Ethiopian ethnic groups, Oromo, Mareko, Silte and Meskan people have boundary with each other in south-central Ethiopia. As neighboring people living adjacent to each other for centuries, these ethnic groups had multi-dimensional relationships. The historical relation that these ethnic groups had with each other can be described in terms of hostility and cooperation. The relationship among these ethnic groups has made up a history of conflict, accommodation and integration. They designed *Gurraacha* institution to regulate their interaction and ensure peace and harmony. This institution has time-tested qualities in transforming conflicts in the region and realizing peaceful co-existence. Therefore, this study tries to shed a light on the philosophy behind this institution so that the world can learn from it so as to lessen conflicts which are devastating human lives across the world.

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*Gadaa* system<sup>1</sup> governs all aspects of Oromo life, relations with other communities, and interactions with both social and natural environment. As a result, the Oromo have strengthened the process of ethnic integration with their neighbors. Oromo and their neighbors' relationships were/are shaped by indigenous inter-ethnic conflict resolution institutions which solve problems related with the interrelationships of people of different ethnic origins.

Only two studies are available regarding indigenous peace building institutions between Oromo and non-Oromo ethnic groups or clans. The first one is the work of Tsega which deals with *Michu* (a bond of friendship), *Harma Hodha* (system used to establish a kind of parent-child relationship between the Oromo and other groups) and *luba-baasaa* (mechanism by which the Oromo used to incorporate members of other ethnic groups) and *Meedhicha* institution (an institution which non-Oromo communities were supposed to assume positions of full equality with the Oromo) (TSEGA 2002). The second one is the work of Asebe which focuses on the role of cultural practices as inter-ethnic connectors, especially *Gondoro* and *Wodo* traditions in integrating Guji, Burji and Gedeo ethnic groups in southern Ethiopia (ASEBE 2012).

Tsega's work was limited to Metekkel region of Ethiopia and Asebe's work was restricted to southern part of Ethiopia. Their work did not touch the south-central Ethiopian people in which *Gurraacha* institution is active. Also, they did not discuss *Gurraacha* institution and its role in peace building and conflict resolution.

Lenin highlighted about this institution in his article. He merely pointed out how other non-Arsi clans participate on *Tajoo* ritual to present conflict cases and some types of conflicts resolved by *Gurraacha* institution (LENIN 2016).

As far as the researcher's knowledge is concerned, no deep research has been carried out on *Gurraacha* institution, which is a pillar for sustaining peace among the people of south-central Ethiopia. Therefore, to fill these gaps, this study focuses on the indigenous peace building and conflict resolution institution by focusing on *Gurraacha* among Oromo, Silte, Meskan and Mareko people of south-central Ethiopia.

It is believed that the study of patterns of ethnic conflict management may offer a better

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<sup>1</sup> *Gadaa* system is indigenous Oromo democratic governance system. It is system of generation classes that succeed each other every eight years in assuming political, military, judicial, legislative and ritual responsibilities. (For more detail see ASMAROM 1973, 2000).

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understanding of the complexities and accessible mechanisms to ensure ethnic harmony and peace. This paper is meant to be a contribution towards the ongoing quest for new means of managing ethnic conflicts. This study is also important to unearth the historical relationship between these groups as a means to realize the contemporary relationship. Additionally, it is important to investigate how economic and political changes at local and national levels have shaped the relationship between these ethnic groups, which in turn is helpful to appraise the prospect for future relation between these ethnic groups on the basis of the existing circumstances. On the other hand, the study can really show how the customary principles of conflict resolution play an important role in the ethnic relations and preserved their solidarity. Finally, this study enables the new generation of these ethnic groups to develop the objective of revitalizing the culture of peaceful co-existence and mutual benefit which at the same time enhance the restoration of local methods of inter-ethnic conflict resolution among the groups.

Overall, the research investigated:

- The concept of *Gurraacha* institution,
- Historical overview and kinds of conflicts addressed by *Gurraacha* institution,
- The main actors and participants in *Gurraacha* institution,
- The role of *Gurraacha* institution in peace building and conflict resolution.

### **The Concept of Peace in Oromo: An Overview**

According to Asmarom, among the Oromo, the concept of peace goes beyond the human domain. Peace is a pervasive and sustained concern in moral life. The long blessings that are given daily by Oromo elders are prayers for peace. The theme of peace is everywhere. Thus, the Oromo believe that everything must be at peace for societal well-being (ASMAROM 2000).

Similarly, the concept and practice of peace among the Oromo are based on traditional values and beliefs anchored in the *Gadaa*, the politico-military and ritual system of the Oromo. He further explains that Oromo term *nagaa* literally means peace, but a definition that includes everything that it implies has yet to be given (TENNA 2013). Observations of Oromo ritual and ceremonial activities suggest that peace is the harmony of things or parties involved in certain relations. It is the harmonious relation between the different parts of the human and cosmic orders. For the Oromo, peace is understood as one of the necessities of life. In the

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absence of peace, even the fulfillment of all other basic necessities cannot be adequate for the preservation and development of human life.

Likewise, prayers and blessings are important part of the daily life of every Oromo. In those prayers, the most important word is peace. In every moment of prayer, peace is asked for the community (AGUILAR 1996, cited in TENNA 2013).

Every greeting, prayer, ritual and political and judicial protocol invokes peace. Greetings are inquiries about peace and assertions of peace. Bolstered by notions of equality, reconciliation and redistribution, peace is a foundational social idea that informs the structure and ethics of Oromo institutions, serving both political and spiritual ends (BASSI 2005).

### **Inter-Ethnic Conflicts: An Overview**

Ethnicity, inter-ethnic relations and inter-ethnic conflicts can be looked at through primordialism, instrumentalism and constructivism approach. Primordialists view ethnicity as natural and innate to human identity based on fixed deep primordial attachments to a group or culture. The proponents of primordialist accounts of ethnic conflict argue also that ethnic groups and nationalities exist because there are traditions of belief and action towards primordial objects such as biological features and especially territorial location. Constructivists on other hand view ethnicity not as objectively 'given', but rather as fluid, situationally defined, and strategically manipulated, subjective and rational socio-cultural constructions (BARTH 1969). Barth also attests that the issue of ethnic relations can be better understood if the nature of the relationship is singled out. Ethnically diverse societies carry various degrees of conflict potential. Causes of conflict among these ethnic groups can be explained in terms of economic, political, and social/cultural factors. Inter-ethnic relation can take the form of hostility and conflict.

Sisay portrayed this idea as the following: "in Ethiopia, ethnicity is an enormously complex issue of concern. Inter-ethnic tensions and conflicts over issues of identity, governance, and competition over resources (mainly over grazing land, over cattle, over water points and over cultivable land) are common phenomenon" (SISAY 2007:7).

There is no central theory that describes the *Guarracha* institution in inclusive and conclusive terms. Yet, many features of the conflicts in the area can be analysed from the lens of premordialism. The study also exploits some tenets of constructivism.

In north-eastern Wellega where Oromo live in close proximity with Amhara migrants, the funeral association known as *Qire* is a social support institution which takes on some conflict resolution roles. It is managed by the elders of the community and is involved in the

settlement of interpersonal and other types of disputes arising in the community (ASSEFA 1995).

Guji and Burji formerly resolved conflicts through traditional mechanisms, such as the *Gondoro* and *Wodo* traditions. The decline of these traditions has made conflict resolution more difficult. The *Gondoro* tradition is a mechanism of conflict resolution through a ritual procession between victim(s) and perpetrator(s). During the reconciliation process, both sides brought sacrificial animals (sheep from Burji and cows from Guji) for the ritual. Likewise, the *Wodo* practice was a peaceful exchange of booty (captive men or livestock) (ASEBE, 2012).

Peaceful and even cooperative relations between the Oromo and neighboring ethnic groups, which might be developed into social and cultural integration, are more common. In southern Ethiopia, there are good relations and assimilation between the Oromo and the Hadiya, Sidama and Gurage and so on. Likewise, in Kenya, there were and are significant relationships between the Borana and Garre, Sakuye, Rendille, Pokomo and other groups. Conflicts and warfare have existed throughout human history, and naturally border raids and sometimes violence did occur between these groups (TSEGA 2012:194).

The Oromo have *Gadaa* customary institution to prevent and manage not only conflicts but also all aspects of their life which is concomitantly peace-building foundation with neighboring communities. One of these institutions is *Gurraacha* by which intermarriage, mutual harmony and interdependence between the Oromo, Mareko, Silte and Meskan, is realized.

### **Materials and Methods**

In this study, researchers used interview, observation and focus group discussion. Accordingly, interview was used to understand the participant's point of view rather than making generalization about behavior. Researchers used open-ended questions, some prepared in advance and some rising naturally during the interview. Thus, 12 purposefully selected key informants were interviewed. This includes the Arsi, Jille, Mareko, Meskan, Sodo and Silte elders (two individuals from each group).

Observation was another method which was used in this study. By this method, researchers observed conflict settlement processes organized by the *Gurraacha* institution leaders at Koshe town, the administrative town of the Mareko district. They observed *Gurraacha* institution gathering at this town while they were investigating the case of stolen cattle from Mareko people. The researchers obtained information about this *Gurraacha* gathering from

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Experts of Adami Tulu Culture and Tourism Office. The researchers used language translators to capture the discussions.



**Figure 1:** *Guarracha gathering at Koshe Town.* Source: photo captured by the researchers in February 2015

For the purpose of this research six focus group discussions were arranged. The first two groups were composed of *Guarracha* leaders. The researchers also discussed with two groups composed of Mareko, Silte, Meskan and Sodo at Koshe town and the other two groups at Batu and Maki towns respectively. They discussed about concepts, role of the institution in peace building, relation of ethnic groups, aspects of cooperation, how the institution works, process and procedures and its history with the discussants. Finally, interpretative and descriptive approaches were used to analyse data.

### **The Concept of *Gurraacha* Institution**

*Gurraacha* is an Oromo term literally meaning ‘black’. Conceptually, blackness is a symbol of powerfulness and purity in Oromo worldview. It also symbolizes the mystery of *Waaqa* (God). Oromo use black for something feared and unknown. For instance, *Waaqa gurraacha* (black God), *halkan gurraacha* (black night), *ganna gurraacha* (black summer), *bosona gurraacha* (black forest) and *bishaan gurraacha* (black water) to express the power of black/blackness.

Therefore, *Gurraacha* institution was named to indicate the power of this institution in peace-building and conflict resolution among the people of south-central Ethiopia. *Gurraacha* institution is feared throughout communities of its members. Doing something wrong and standing in front of this institution is believed to be followed by the curse from *Waaqa* (God).

Most of the time, people use the name of *Gurraacha* to settle personal or group conflicts on spot by mentioning the institution saying, ‘please do not touch me for we have oath of *Gurraacha* between us’. No one refuses this lamentation and continues the conflict for *Gurraacha* is respected and feared. If someone harms somebody by refusing it, it is considered as the refusal of *Waaqa*’s (God’s) will who created all living and non-living beings.

The leader of *Gurraacha* institution is known as *Abbaa Gurraachaa*, literally meaning the father of black. People use the saying ‘*Abbaa Gurraachatiin si qabe*’ and ‘*Abbaa Gurraachaa sodaadhu*’, which literally means ‘please I beg you in the name of *Gurraacha* leader’ and ‘please fear *Gurraacha* leader’ respectively. Refusal is unthinkable for something pleaded in the name of *Gurraacha* institution and its leaders.

On the other hand, elders slaughter black animals in *Gurraacha* institution as a sign of oath and purification on reconciliation process. Sacrificing black animals is believed as taking oath for each other in front of *Waaqa*, who is symbolized by blackness. In reconciliation process, they slaughter black animal and break down its backbone and bury all materials like gun, spear and shield which are used at war or conflict time to indicate eradication of retaliation between the conflicting parties.

### **Historical Overview of *Gurraacha* Institution**

According to the elders, Arsi Oromo started making law at *Madda Wolaabuu*, *Odaa Roobaa* which is found in present day Bale zone of Oromia Region. The first law is known as *Seera*

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*Wolaabuu*, the law of *Wolaabuu*. Arsi refers this law everywhere and every time when they make laws and decisions. Thus, the law of *Gurraacha* institution is inherited from *Walaabuu*'s law; it is not a new phenomenon; it is as old as *Gadaa* of Arsi.

The law of *Gurraacha* was also declared at this centre. They declared laws as following:

*“Do not clash with non-Oromo neighbours for there is an oath of Gurraacha between you; if conflicts broke out unintentionally, reconcile with them by sacrificing black bull and breaking its backbone; Gurraacha keeps peace among you and neighbouring societies surrounding you, the one who break this law will be punished by God”* (Focus Group Discussion at Batu town, February 2015).

According to *Gurraacha* leaders, reconciliation by *Gurraacha* institution takes place when a conflict happens between Oromo and non-Oromo neighbouring ethnic groups. The Arsi Oromo also says '*Gurraachi ka Ambaa diinaati*' which means '*Gurraacha* works between Oromo and non-Oromo groups'.

On the other hand, neighbouring ethnic groups used *Gurraacha* institution to demarcate their boundary. The process of demarcating boundary between these neighbouring societies was as follows.

*Gurraacha* and *Gadaa* leaders and representatives of neighbouring communities were available. *Gurraacha* and *Gadaa* leaders first started digging the land to indicate legality of the demarcation. While demarcating the boundary, they sacrificed black bull and broke its backbone as symbol of oath among them. They also erected a big stone to indicate the boundary and to avoid contention over land in the future. They dug the ground by a material known as *Waraana qotaa* (digging material which has two apexes). They also entombed soil by material known as *wantee gombittii* (a conical shield) which is sometimes called *wantee kakuu* (shield of oath). Entombing and digging soil by hand is unethical in boundary demarcation process because this material was declared to serve this purpose on declaration of laws at *Wolaabu* (H/AHMED at Batu; Focus Group Discussion at Koshe town).

Moreover, they exchanged each other *Itillee* (cowhide used as a sleeping mat), *Okolee* (cultural milking bucket), *gaadii* (milking strap), and spear to show their integration and unity. Additionally, they exchanged their children and breastfed them to show their unity and quest for peace.

According to H/AHMED, they said the following prayer with *Gurraacha* and *Gadaa* leaders as a form of oath while performing the above ritual.



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<b>Afaan Oromo Version</b>	<b>English Version</b>
<p>Ciini kun cidha Gurraachaati Gurraachi buyyaa Waaqaati Adharraa Itilleen teenna takka</p>	<p>This is a ritual of Gurraacha Gurraacha is the oath of God Our sleeping mat is common from todays on</p>
<p>Walitti dhufnu wal bulchina</p>	<p>We host each other when we come to each other</p>
<p>Manni kee mana kiyya</p>	<p>Your home is my home</p>
<p>Manni kiyya mana keeti</p>	<p>My home is your home</p>
<p>Okoleen kee kiyya</p>	<p>Your milking container is mine too</p>
<p>Okoleen kiyya keeti</p>	<p>My milking container is yours' too</p>
<p>Gaadiin kee kiyya</p>	<p>Your milking strap is mine too</p>
<p>Gaadiin kiyya keeti</p>	<p>My milking strap is yours' too</p>
<p>Finni kee finna kiyya</p>	<p>Your child is my child</p>
<p>Finni kiyya finna keeti</p>	<p>My child is your child</p>
<p>Malkaan kee malkaa kiyya</p>	<p>Your river is my river</p>
<p>Malkaan kiyya malkaa keeti</p>	<p>My river is your river</p>
<p>Karaan kiyya karaa keeti</p>	<p>My road is your road</p>
<p>Karaan kee karaa kiyya</p>	<p>Your road is my road</p>
<p>Dheedni kee dheeda kiyya</p>	<p>Your grazing land is my grazing land</p>
<p>Dheedni kiyya dheeda keeti</p>	<p>My grazing land is your grazing land</p>
<p>Diinni kiyya diina keeti</p>	<p>My enemy is your enemy</p>
<p>Diinni kee diina kiyya</p>	<p>Your enemy is my enemy</p>
<p>Rakkadhu sitti dheessa</p>	<p>I escape to you in time of difficulties</p>
<p>Rakkattu natti dheessi</p>	<p>You escape to me at time of difficulties</p>
<p>Daangaa kana Waaqatu buuse</p>	<p>This boundary is demarcated by God</p>
<p>Daangaa kana buyyaa Gurraachaattu buuse</p>	<p>This boundary is demarcated by oath of Gurraacha</p>
<p>Kana Waaqatu jedhe</p>	<p>This is the word God</p>
<p>Kana Waatatu jedhe</p>	<p>And declared by elders</p>
<p>Buyyaa Waaqaa kana ka diige</p>	<p>Anyone who bent this God's Oath</p>
<p>Xiyiitiin isaa bishaan haa ta'u</p>	<p>Let his/her bullets changed to water</p>
<p>Sibiilli isaa bishaan haa ta'u</p>	<p>Let his/her spears changed to water</p>
<p>Wonteen isaa erbee haa ta'u</p>	<p>Let his/her shields become leather</p>
<p>Fardi isaa harree haa ta'u</p>	<p>Let his/her horses become donkey</p>
<p>Waaqan abaaramee Waatanis abaarama</p>	<p>He/she will be cursed by God and elders</p>
<p>Tun toltu! Haa qabattu</p>	<p>This is good! Let it be pertained</p>

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After this declaration, the involved groups consider each other as people of one origin. A person who breaks this oath cannot succeed; *Waaqa* harm him immediately following his action.

After a long time of this demarcation, Menelik subjugated the southern nationalities adjacent to Arsi Oromo. He tried to antagonize bordering societies to subjugate Arsi by war. Menelik invaded Arsi after six battle of failure. Menelik war caused a lot of destruction and loss of life especially from Arsi side. In response to this, Arsi *Gadaa* declared war against Menelik sponsored groups and defended itself successfully for the first time.

Arsi Oromo describe about the evilness of Abyssinian in general and Menelik in particular as following, “*Mililik falfaltutu nutti dhufee utubaa dharaa ka hin buqqaane nu jidduu dhaabee haga adhaa ollaa waliin nagayaan buluu nu wallaalchise, haganumaa wanti dandamneef daddafnee gurraacha itti falanne*” (Focus Group Discussion at Batu and Meki town). This extract is to mean, “Menelik who was witchcraft came to us and erected deep-rooted untruth pole between us; we could NOT live with our neighbours peacefully until now; we adapted to its hectic action by sacrificing black bull”.

### The Main Actors and Participants in *Gurraacha* Institution

In *Gurraacha* institution, everybody has a role. Women bring oath materials, *okolee* (milk container), *heexoo*<sup>2</sup>, *daadhii* (honey mead), *gaadii* (milking strap) and children to the reconciliation ritual. They also spray *heexoo* and *daadhii* to symbolize chasing bitterness and bringing the pleasantness among the people on reconciliation. They also facilitate the ritual by preparing different kind of feasts. Moreover, they ululate while peace is nurtured and absolution is made.

*Gurraacha* and *Gadaa* leaders are also very important actors in *Gurraacha* institution. The institution itself is guided by *Gadaa* laws. Especially, *Gadaa* leaders are important on homicide reconciliation ritual. Most of the time, they need *Gadaa* leaders for praying and blessing purpose in reconciliation rituals.

*Gurraacha* institution has its own leaders who come from all bordering ethnic groups. The

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<sup>2</sup> *Heexoo* (*hagenia abyssinica*) is a highland tree used to clean human abdomen. Especially, it is famous for the tapeworm vermifuge obtained from the female flowers. The seeds of this bitter tree are also used to ward off illness. People drink *heexoo* as preventative medicine once in three months.

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elders of *Gurraacha* institution are also known as *jaarsa nagaan*, elders of peace. Leadership revolves between all members of *Gurraacha* institution. Most of the time, they are elected from bordering clans of these ethnic groups to avail themselves on spot in time of conflicts.

Members of *Gurraacha* institution are multilingual and they know each other's language in most cases. When a person or certain groups who know only one language come to the institution with conflict case, they use a translator. However, this occurs in rare cases because most people from all ethnic group of *Gurraacha* institution know each other's language. In *Gurraacha* institution, it is advantageous to know most languages of the members to be elected as a leader of the institution. For instance, the current *Gurraacha* leader is from Mareko and does know most languages of the members. Therefore, the criteria of selecting elders for *Gurraacha* institution are closeness to the border, knowledge of languages of most member ethnic groups, age and knowledge of physical and human history of the region in addition to being trustworthy to the society, fairness and willingness to serve the people.

Youngsters similarly play an important role in *Gurraacha* institution. They bring the sacrificial animals, oath materials like *wantee gombittii* (conical shield) and *waraana gotaa* (digging material).

On the day of reconciliation by *Gurraacha* institution, all relatives of two conflicting ethnic groups are present. Males and females, children and elders have to come for reunion and to re-establish peace. In general, on reconciliation process by *Gurraacha* institution, all segments of societies participate without any prohibition. Most of the participants come to learn its values from the ritual.

### **The Role of *Gurraacha* Institution in Peace Building and Conflict Resolution**

*Gurraacha* institution plays pivotal role in peace building between Oromo and bordering ethnic groups. *Gurraacha* is peace insurance among people of south-central Ethiopia. It facilitates inter-ethnic community dialogue; it organises and activates ethnic groups in the prevention and management of conflict. It also restores and transforms relations among ethnic groups as part of post-conflict interventions and serves as a vehicle of ethnic relations for peaceful co-existence.

It is an oath and guarantee between Arsi and other ethnic groups. It is a law of peace and boundary which keeps peace of *Waaqa* and integrates humanities. In case of counterfeit issues, slaughtering, piercing the stomach of cattle and breaking the back bone of black cow

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is very painful and sinful in front of *Waaqa*. *Gurraacha* institution is very feared and respected in Oromo and its neighbouring ethnic groups in south-central Ethiopia and people trust the institution which validates the institution.

Someone who refuses *Gurraacha* oath may face different problems from both *Waaqa* and *Gurraacha* institution. According to the member societies of *Gurraacha* institution, taking oath on *Gurraacha* reconciliation is believed as standing in front of *Waaqa*; it is considered as a law of *Waaqa* which has to be respected by all human beings.

These ethnic groups cannot live without each other because they have strong social, historical, geographical, cultural, economic and political ties. These neighbouring people have trade relationship; Oromo sell its cattle at market like Hinseenoo, Buttaajeraa, Qoshee, Gabremaraa and Daalochaa and buy different crops for consumption. Ethnic groups from Southern nations also sell their products in markets like Baatuu, Bulbulaa, Jiddoo, Adaamii Tulluu, Maqii and Abboosaa.

On the other hand, they live in difficult environment which changes from time to time. There is no dependable climate to live a stable life in the area. Therefore, these neighbouring people help each other during the time of drought. They escape to each other from natural hazards. They also migrate to each other in the time of difficulties. For instance, they migrate to each other with their cattle to save their lives. They use each other's market in their life. To realise all these, there must be peace among them. *Gurraacha* institution preserves peace among the members by building and rebuilding it.

*Gurraacha* institution is also very important to handle inter-ethnic homicide cases in the study area. For instance, when somebody kills someone from the member groups of *Gurraacha* institution, the slayer and his relatives have to escape from their village and admit to *Gurraacha* leader to confess. Then *Gurraacha* leader with *Gadaa* leaders goes to slain relatives to announce the killer's clan.

The issue goes to reconciliation step by step by facilitation *Gurraacha* institution and *Gadaa* leaders. On the day of reconciliation, the slayer and all his relatives come to victims' kraal by driving black sheep and bull. After that, the slayer slaughters the sheep and breaks its backbone in two and put them in different directions. Then all participants from both sides pass between the broken backbones of the sheep.

After performing this ritual, they sacrifice black old cow known as *dullacha keeraa* (the cow of peace) as symbol of peace and purification. Before this old cow is sacrificed, two

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conflicting parties touch back of the cow through laid *bullukoo*<sup>3</sup> and say *keer, keer, keer* (peace, peace, peace!) in one sound. After sacrifice, two parties smear each other by the blood of sacrificed cow to indicate reconciliation.

After this sacrifice, the slayer and his relatives come to the slain's house by covering their head to show deep sorrow. Then both parties spray honey mead on each other and slayer's relatives put on cultural blanket on father and mother as well as the slain's uncle and *raada gaalee* (connector heifer) given to the slain's brother. In the next morning, all participants sit in circle and tie their legs by the intestine of sacrificed old cow. This is the final oath on which anyone can complain if there is something wrong/unfair throughout the reconciliation process. Then all participants start eating and drinking feasts.

Starting from the reconciliation day, these two conflicting families become relative to the extent of not marrying each other. They communicate with each other on different rituals including funeral ceremony. These oaths of *Gurraacha* institution which are made during the reconciliation process transcend generations. This institution is the model of conflict transformation which is hardly found in today's world.

*Gurraacha* institution was also established to uphold the commonness of the people in the area. They re-started the institution to build and rebuild the peace that is lost by the strangers to exchange commodities in market and to go through each other's land without any fear. *Gurraacha* institution was also used as a resistance mechanism to the new comers (Abyssinians) and their rule. People of the area resisted the divide and rule policy of *Neftegnas* by organizing themselves under *Gurraacha* institution and shown solidarity of the societies.

When the central government is overthrown in Ethiopia, *Gurraacha* institution revives instantly. Accordingly, it was revitalized during the fall of Menelik, Haile Selassie and Derg regime respectively. *Gurraacha* institution was very important to settle conflict and restore peace among neighbouring societies when central government falls down and societal order becomes questionable. The tyrants escalated the differences among people for their political consumption. Hence people get relief to freely use this institution when governments fall

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<sup>3</sup> A big cultural blanket made from cotton. It is honored and respected cloth in the society. Traditionally this type of cotton blanket is worn by elders on different rituals like marriage, prayer and thanks giving. The man who marries a daughter gives this cultural blanket for the father and mother with other different gifts as symbol of respect. People also provide *bullukoo* to each other on reconciliation ritual as symbol of respect and reunion.

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down.

Some autocrats have been trying to ban this institution to lengthen their ruling time by using the diversity of the people. For instance, Emperor Haile Selassie tried to outlaw the institution because Meskan, Merako and Sodo refused to fight each other by referring the oath of *Gurraacha*. Therefore, *Gurraacha* institution was considered as the resistance mechanism to the successive Ethiopian rulers. Before the coming of Abyssinian invaders, there were no major conflicts among the neighbouring societies since the boundary of all societies is demarcated clearly by the decision of local representatives from all respective societies.

Stealing of cattle is one source of conflict between the members of *Gurraacha* institution societies. Especially, looting cattle at night have been part of their tradition and the symbol of pride when *Gurraacha* was weakened by the rule of Menelik. Some Menelik agents tried to weaken the relationship of bordering societies by initiating a robbing culture among the people. The robbers and thieves in respective societies work together to exchange what they have stolen from their respective societies. For instance, Mareko robbers or thieves bring stolen things to Oromo thieves and vice versa. Thieves from Arsi drive the stolen cattle up to the border of Mareko and hand over to Mareko thieves. *Gurraacha* institution returns the stolen cattle and other things for all the societies have smooth communication. As a result, the institution serves as a local Interpol. In general, this institution builds peace and resolves all kinds of conflicts arising between these societies.

Recently, *Gurraacha* institution was revitalized in 2010 in a new form when robbing became prevalent in these neighbouring societies. The stealing agents started bribing money from people to bring back the stolen cattle which is sometimes equivalent with the cost of the cattle. The elders of these respective societies revitalized the institution to end this and other problems.

## Discussion

Today, indigenous peace-building, conflict resolution and transformation institutions like *Gurraacha* are rare. Up to now, traditional approaches to conflict transformation have not been adequately addressed by scholarly research and political practice. For the most part they are widely ignored, although empirical evidence from relatively successful cases of conflict transformation demonstrates their practical relevance (BOEGE 2006).

The indigenous justice systems administer justice based on customary rules and traditional procedures. The rules and procedures derive their authority from practices and beliefs embedded in the way of life of the community. The indigenous justice systems employ

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restorative and transformative principles. Opportunities for achievement of justice are higher under African indigenous justice systems than with an African state justice system, partly because, the empowerment of victims, offenders and the community is a central principle of African justice (ELECHI 2004). With the same token Aberra clearly states that since the Ethiopian formal justice system was brought in from outside and introduced by way of adopting new codes, the people are not familiar with it. As a result of the imposition of an alien legal system, the customary justice systems and the values and institutions of the majority of the Ethiopian people have been delegitimised and they have been disempowered (ABERRA 2013).

Similarly, according to all informants of this study, *Gurraacha* institution is more effective than government laws. Ethiopian Government justice system focuses on punishing the offender rather than dealing with complicated nature of conflicts that involve groups. The government does not consider the belief and values of people which is very important to bind people together in its decision about the issues. The government focuses only on physical and material destruction in the process of investigation rather than dealing with human beliefs and values to resolve conflicts.

As a system, Ethiopia follows the continental legal system where the laws are in the form of codes. With the adoption of the 1957 Penal Code, the Ethiopian state assumed monopoly over all criminal matters. The subsequent Ethiopian rulers have taken a series of legislative measures to abolish the Indigenous Justice Systems in Ethiopia. The 1960 Ethiopian Civil Code repealed all customary laws (Art. 3347) except for very limited matters. The 1995 Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) Constitution has made a slight departure from the past in giving some room to customary justice systems. Under Articles 34(5) and 78(5) of the constitution, disputes related to personal and family matters can be submitted for customary adjudication. But concerning criminal matters, Ethiopia has continued to pursue the earlier monist and centralist policy (ABERRA 2013).

This study also confirms the notions of Aberra's research. There are frictions between elders of *Gurraacha* institution and local administration. The government suspects the elders and follows them critically. The elders are also forced to report any activity to the local government bodies. They fear to handle some conflict cases especially homicide.

Traditional approaches focus on the psycho-social and spiritual dimension of violent conflicts and their transformation. Indigenous methods of purification and healing, carried out by customary healers, priests and other spiritual authorities are of utmost importance for the mental and spiritual rehabilitation of victims and perpetrators. Specific conflict transformation endeavours are pursued in accordance with customary law, that is the entirety

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of orally transmitted norms and values and practices that govern the everyday life of the community and that are legitimised through supra-human and super natural institutions such as the spirits of the ancestors, the gods or god (BOEGE 2006). Similarly, in *Gurraacha* institution, people rebuild the lost peace and order of *Waaqa* (God) by performing purification rituals. There is no corruption in *Gurraacha* institution because all activities are undertaken according to *Waaqa's* law and order. There is no untruth oath in this institution because if one makes false oath, it is believed that *Waaqa* harms him in short period of time i.e. cattle, families, and crops become unproductive. The oath is taken in front of the people including *Gurraacha* leaders and elder whose power is given to them by *Waaqa*. People's eye is believed to be not good in case of taking untrue oath in front of the multitude.

According to Jenkins, the Afrocentric perspective is more communal where priority is given to the community rather than the individuals involved in criminal dispute (JENKINS 2004). In African indigenous system, the society is characterised by strong ties. Disputes and conflicts are viewed as issues concerning the entire community, which requires that the justice system gives weight to the restoration of social harmony. In the law of *Gurraacha* institution too, crimes are not treated as individual offences. For instance, if an individual from Silte kill Arsi person, it is called *Silxeen Arsii ajjeese*, which means Silte killed Arsi.

The indigenous justice systems are more accessible, flexible, participatory, and relevant; people favour these justice systems. People are loyal to their group, not the state. Legitimacy rests with the leaders of that group, not with the state authorities, and people do not obey the rules of the state, but the rules of their group. Reference to those traditional authorities and institutions will enhance the legitimacy of any measures taken with the goal of conflict transformation and peace-building (BOEGE 2006; ABERRA 2013). Aberra also portrays that research findings in Ethiopia show that indigenous justice systems are characterised by more accessibility to the people (ABERRA 2013). Procedurally, the process in customary justice is participatory, where parties are given a sufficient time of hearing and work their way to the solution.

This study also confirms the above-mentioned notions. *Gurraacha* institution is very close to the societies than government justice system. It also settles conflicts by considering values, history and cultures of people in dispute. Government needs an eyewitness/witness to investigate the reality of conflict cases. The truth is given only for those who can bring an eyewitness/witness; but *Gurraacha* investigates any case relying on people's values and culture without witness and can investigate any case successfully for it is entrenched in the belief system of the communities. Sometimes, governments arrest people blindly without identifying the wrongdoer and civilians when conflicts take place; however, wrongdoers



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sometimes escape from the government completely; no one can escape from *Gurraacha* institution because the institution is well entrenched into the communities and *Gurraacha* institution is believed to be regulated by the law of creator who is omniscient and omnipresent.

It is their holistic worldview and their respect for truth and laws which make the Borana a law-abiding society not afraid of punishment. Among the Borana, what makes both the ruling and the ruled obey and enforce the laws is the free will and commitment of everyone. Every Borana believes the *Gaaddisa* (shade where the elders sit) is a dwelling place of *Waaqa* where only truth is spoken. For the Borana, the worst crime is *soba* (lying) (TENNA 2007; ABERRA 2013). Similarly, according to informants of this study, someone may bring false information when taken to formal court; but there is no fabrication in the process of *Gurraacha* institution. There is saying which goes, '*dubbiin Jaarsi Gurraachaa qabe dubbii Waaqni qabeen qixa*' which means 'the issues taken to elders of *Gurraacha* institution is equal to the issues submitted to God' validate this reality. Sometimes, wrongdoers refuse to confess at a government court; but they admit at *Gurraacha* institution for *Gurraacha* institution has the power to persuade people. People fear *Gurraacha* institution than government court because standing in front of *Gurraacha* institution is considered as standing in front of God.

There are three interrelated concepts in relation to addressing conflicts. These are conflict resolution, conflict management and conflict transformation. The first one assumes that conflict is a temporary incident that can be put to an end; this is not plausible in many cases. Conflict management stresses on productive treatment of differences and lessening of destructions instead of addressing the root causes. Conflict transformation however is concerned with transforming the root causes of conflict. Accordingly, the destructive consequences of a conflict can be modified or transformed so that self-images, relationships, and social structures improve as a result of conflict, instead of being harmed by it. Usually, this involves framing of issues, actions, and other people or groups. Conflict usually transforms perceptions by accentuating the differences between people and positions. Lederach believes that effective conflict transformation can utilize this highlighting of differences in a constructive way and can improve mutual understanding (LEDERACH 2003). From the perspective of conflict transformation, intervention has been successful if each group gains a relatively accurate understanding of the other. In the end, improving understanding is the objective of conflict transformation, in spite of parties differing or even irreconcilable interests, values, and needs. The philosophy vested in *Gurraacha* institution is also this one. Those in feuds become relatives. Causes of disagreements are changed to grounds of cooperation.

## Conclusion

No human community can afford to live in isolation from others. This is because society is fluid and hence there is a higher degree of integration between communities coming into contact with one another. Furthermore, the forces of nature, ecological imbalances, the effects of famines and population movements, natural calamities such as floods and epidemics and other similar factors foster the need for mutual inter-dependence and co-existence between ethnic groups. Empirical data from the field indicate that interactions between the people of south-central Ethiopia were in most cases peaceful. These neighbouring societies have long history of relationships and coexistence. They have strong cultural, economic, social and political relationships. *Gurraacha* is a grass-roots initiative for peace in a sense that it depends on engaging the whole spectrum of all ethnic groups in the region. This mutual co-operation and co-existence became achievable through *Gurraacha* institution from time immemorial. This institution stemmed from *Gadaa* system. This research revealed that the most significant relationship is vested in economic mutual benefits like marketing to each other, migrating to each other in time of drought, giving cattle, food crops in time of need and fighting common enemies together on their land. After the region was invaded by Menelik, *Gurraacha* institution has been fluctuating from time to time. Therefore, the indigenous values in *Gurraacha* institution such as endeavour for tolerance of diversity, respect, equality, and others could be sustainable in contemporary politics if they are encouraged. The institution promotes these values and principles: respecting human rights, inter-ethnic peaceful conflict resolution, mutual assistance, moral obligations, inter-ethnic cohesion and harmony, providing of asylum to inquirers and others which the entire world has been struggling to realize.

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OWARE, GODWIN ADU-AGYEMAN

**Skin Bleaching Narratives: Responses from Women Bleaches and Stakeholders in Ghana (1950-2015)**

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## **Skin Bleaching Narratives: Responses from Women Bleaches and Stakeholders in Ghana (1950s – 2015)**

SAMUEL ADU-GYAMFI\* - RAZAK MOHAMMED GYASI\*\* -  
RICHARD OWARE\*\*\* - GODWIN ADU-AGYEMAN\*\*\*\*

Department of History and Political Studies,  
Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana  
*\*mcyamfi@yahoo.com, \*\*\*richardoware18@gmail.com,  
\*\*\*\*aduagyemangodwin@gmail.com*

\*\*Department of Sociology and Social Policy,  
Lingnan University, Hong Kong  
*razak.mgyasi@gmail.com*

### **ABSTRACT**

Based on a qualitative design and a qualitative analysis of responses from primary informants and secondary sources we present a narrative on the attitudes and perception of the Ghanaian on skin bleaching. Based on retrospective and thematic analyses the authors conclude that there is the need for education and enforcement of laws that protect the consumer from patronizing cosmetics that bleach the skin. The study further highlights the role of institutions that are responsible for legislating, regulating, preventing and educating the general public. It is envisaged that this article shall reinvigorate the need for further research and discourses on skin bleaching in Africa and Ghana in particular. Policy makers and policy implementers should be spurred on to make a difference.

**KEY WORDS:** skin bleaching, women bleachers, stakeholders, Ghana

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## Introduction

Skin bleaching is the intentional alteration of one's natural skin colour to one relatively, if not substantially lighter in colour, through the use of chemical skin lightening agents, either manufactured, homemade or the combination of the two (KONLAN 2016). The history of skin bleaching can be traced to the Elizabethan age of powder and paint but in its current manifestations, skin bleaching is practiced disproportionately within communities of colour (YABA 2011). In its current manifestations, skin bleaching is practiced disproportionately within communities 'of colour' (BLAY 2011). In Africa and Ghana in particular, it is situated within the first wave of independence struggle within the 1950s where bleaching came up as a very important cosmetic practice (BLAY 2011). Specifically, the 2005 Ghana Health Service report estimated that approximately 30% of Ghanaian women and 5% of Ghanaian men were actively bleaching (KONLAN 2016). Contemporary evidence suggests that 50% to 60% of adult Ghanaian women are currently or have at one time or the other actively used bleaching agents (KONLAN 2016). Also, memories of historical overtones of colonization, slavery, discrimination, and better job opportunities, executive positions and chances in beauty (TENAI 2016) seem to have upheld the supremacy of the white skin and this in essence necessitated and continues to enrich the quest for dark skin persons to bleach.

The motivation for skin bleaching is used by cosmetic companies to market their skin bleaching products globally (CHRISTOPHER 2010). Anecdotally, the literature points to several complications or problems associated with skin bleaching. These products contain mercury, hydroquinone, or corticosteroids, which cause health problems. Neurological deficits such as insomnia, irritability, neuropathies and loss of memory; eye problems such as glaucoma and cataracts; and skin problems such as fragile skin, scabies, pitch black pigmentation and colloid milium ochronosis, adrenal insufficiency, kidney damage, Cushing's syndrome, vulval warts, immunosuppression and hypertension have been reported (CHRISTOPHER 2011). Lactating mothers who bleach their skin and who breast-feed their babies transfer mercury to their babies. Bleaching of the skin can delay the diagnosis of leprosy (CHRISTOPHER 2011).

Light skinned individuals historically have had advantages over their dark skinned counterparts in social conditions relating to better job opportunities and higher socioeconomic status in the communities as discussed by Lopez and Ho, in their work, 'Skin Colour' (LOPEZ – HO 2012). Similarly Hunter's work on colourism shares the same proposition (HUNTER 2007). They discuss the colour of the skin and its attractiveness, relating the colour of the skin to self-esteem. Discomfort with one's skin colour is readily evidenced in the worldwide practice of skin bleaching (LOPEZ – HO 2012). They analyze

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the predictors of skin bleaching, relating the act to skin colour, gender, age, socioeconomic status, interpersonal factors, and lack of knowledge, desire for greater perceived attractiveness and marriageability, low self-esteem, self-hate, social factors such as peer pressure and desire to change economic status and the influence of more macro-level forces (westernization/acculturation and the media). Lopez and Ho re-echo the voices of colourism writers on the fact that having a darker skin colour is the most obvious reason for engaging in skin bleaching but may also be used as a way to prevent darker skin colour. Additionally, the desire to bleach one's skin may be related to cross-cultural differences with regard to beauty (LOPEZ – HO 2012). However, they postulated how the methodological difficulties in assessing skin colour.

Blay has argued that much of the discourse on skin bleaching in Ghana has been limited to dermatological studies and opinion-based commentary offered by the popular press. Thus far, the available literature on Ghana does not pay specific attention to the evolution and analysis of the perception and attitude of the people from the colonial period to the twenty-first century (BLAY 2009).

This study therefore highlights the key issues that have shaped the bleaching narrative across the African continent and Ghana in particular. Discussions are captured under the themes colonial, post-colonial and contemporary narratives on skin bleaching in Ghana. The 1970s, 80s and 90s were captured under the post-colonial times while contemporary narratives of the topic under review discussed the impact of media: television, documentaries, movies and music. Institutional actions taken against skin bleaching by the Food and Drugs Authority (FDA) and Ghana Standards Board (GSB) among other authorities were also captured.

In the Ghanaian sense, this will provide a background on which scholars will understand the social demand for light-skinned persons for social engagements. It pays particular attention to interrogation of the perception of the local population and highlights the call for attitudinal change. It also pays attention to the role of established institutions that have oversight responsibility over the use of cosmetic products which have the propensity to create a congenial space for the spread and increase of bleaching.

## **Method**

The social change and institutional theory have been useful for this study. From the former, the idea that men plan consciously and take into accounts not only their success but their

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recognised failures. The latter concerns skepticism about formal stated goals which is the main ends of organisational behaviour, as well as the emphasis which is placed upon the integration of the social system (TWUMASI 2005). This emphasizes the fact that even though institutions serve both to effectively drive change and to shape the nature of change across levels and contexts, they also themselves change in character and potency overtime (TENAI 2016). Our specific institutions include the FDA, Ghana Standard Authority (GSA), media and major actors therein. The human actors within the social change are amply emphasized. Based on these, we teased out from respondents specifically women, how the more resilient aspects of the Ghanaian social structure have affected members of the society's choice for cosmetic products. We gleaned from the narrative parental influence which is normative in most societies and Ghana in particular. Would a daughter bleach because the mother bleaches or would a son bleach because both parents bleach? Would individuals join the community of those who bleach because of the perceived or the extent of prestige the society attaches to it?

It discusses the phenomenon of skin bleaching in Ghana from women's perspective and how social, economic, cultural and political factors have shaped the practice historically. Employing the qualitative method of research, the study featured oral interviews focusing on the semi-structured type of interview. Interviewees selected were 70 bleachers, 3 health officials, 5 cosmetic shop operators/owners 2 personnel from both the (FDA) and the (GSA) making a total of 100 interviewees. The study also explored how structures, including schemes, rules, norms and routines become authoritative guidelines for the behavior of members of the society. For example, have institutions like the (GSA) and the (FDA) have enforced laws to combat the importation and sale of these creams.

The cosmetic shop owners were selected randomly from Accra and Kumasi. These two cities were selected because both have been centers of commercialization and had had a long period of colonial interaction. Also economic activities in Ghana are much concentrated here compared to other place of commerce (Ghana Statistical Service 2010). The two cities had a population of 2.736.287 and 3.007.322 respectively according to the 2010 population and housing census. Bleaching creams which were on sale in these selected shops included *carotone*, *skin light*, *bronze-tone*, *biotone*, *bio claire*, *pro claire* and *movite*. The latter was used as a mixing agent to increase the potent of bleaching. Bleaching creams in Ghana have the mercury content ranging between 0.010 to 0.549 $\mu$ gg-1. These products selected were also mentioned as part of the wide bleaching products used by the bleachers interviewed. Other methods implored to enhance the act included pills and injections. Noted among the former include Oral Light and Egyptian Milk. Tatiomax plus Glucotathione and Prestige Skin 5000



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features the latter (AMPONASH – VOEGBORLO – SEBIAWU 2014).

Bleachers interviewed dwelled in respective places like Osu, James-town, Chorkor, Adum and Amakom. Their age range was between 25-75 years. All these residences are in the Accra and Kumasi Metropolis respectively. They were questioned on their reason for bleaching in order to ascertain whether their reason correlated with socio-economic and political undergirding of skin bleaching in Ghana. They were also questioned on their source of information with regard to these creams and the outcomes included media advertisement on radio and television, newspapers, lay recommendations, billboards among others. Telenovelas programs that featured white/light skinned individuals also factored in the bleachers' desire to have a light skin.

Health officials were interviewed in order to understand their professional views on skin bleaching. This was particularly stemmed from their medical experience. This idea was correlated with bleachers' view of seeking medical attention or not. Health officials selected for the interview were all dermatologists.

The data captured included primary and secondary data. The primary data were essentially archival materials from the Public Records and Archive Administration (PRAAD) in both Accra and Kumasi and oral interviews. These were from articles published in the Spectator newspaper of the period under review. This information provided the idea that dominated bleaching in the immediate post-colonial period. The archival information was corroborated with the interviews conducted with bleachers whose age ranged from 40 to 75 years in order to ascertain the true reflection of the time. We imply however, that the write-up captures the experiences of the interviewees. In this instance, we were observers and so recorded observations and responses in a narrative. The data that was retrieved from these sources were presented thematically and analyzed using the ethnographic technique. Secondary data included articles published in online journals like the British Medical Journal, the Journal of Human Evolution and the Journal of Cultural and African Women Studies among others.

## **Discussions**

### **Narratives from the 1960s to the 1990s**

The narrative concerning the privileges of the light skinned has not and cannot be left out from the skin bleaching discourse. The desire for light skin among Ghanaian women has

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among other things been based on the special privileges given lighter skinned people (mulattos) who emerged in the Ghanaian society upon the mixed-race unions between Europeans and Africans (BLAY 2009). The mulattos became core members of the indigenous Ghanaian society, for they played key roles because of their mixed identity. At the Gold Coast, they were considered as white by the indigenes who witnessed the special education and privileges given to them by their European heritage and families in the castle and special homes in the Elmina township. This is not decoupled from the persistent view of the superiority of the white man in the Ghanaian society within the early periods of colonization and beyond. Also, the influence of the mulattos in the Gold Coast stemmed from their duties which they exercised. These mulattos became merchant princes who traded on the behalf of their white skinned fathers and they included George Blankson, F.C Grant, Thomas Hughes and James Robert Thompson among others. Due to their background, these men were given the opportunity to receive goods directly from London firms on credit, a position a local indigene found it difficult to get. There were also a handful of religious priests (fathers) who had mixed race background. References here can be made to Philip Quacoe and Christian Protten (BUAH 1980). Though the idea of marrying a white lady was strongly opposed by Quacoe's family, the taste for light skin had become dominant in the Gold Coast society later transcending into the 1960s, 70s, 80s and 90s.

Significantly, the mixed-race unions produced a people that were received by both the Europeans and the Africans. Their superiority was partly racial but more so they had had some formal education which the Africans and, for that matter, the indigenous people had not received. It is equally important to advance the argument that the mixed-race unions were preferred because they were partly Europeans and partly Africans. This by inference gave them some racial dominance or superiority; this in essence is also attributable to the colour of their skin. Same would be found in the post-colonial period where there were mixed race unions between Asians and Africans as well as Syrians and Africans. Their off-springs became recognizable because of the colour of their skin. People paid attention to them. If they were women, they had more suitors and vice versa. It can be inferred that this generated a beauty complex in the eyes of the dark skinned women in particular especially within the period under review. Again, the existing literature as well as archival records do not point to indigenous Africans who were fair being preferred by Europeans to serve as missionaries or merchants. The subject of beauty, especially in the case of fair women even among the indigenous population within the period under review has been pronounced - fairness has been associated with beauty and colonization or European presence as well as mixed race unions further accentuated it. It is important to emphasize that the phenomenon of bleaching cuts across the respective communities and ethnicities in Ghana.

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The actual starting point of skin bleaching in Ghana has been credited to prostitutes who were sought after by so-called respectable men. From highly educated to stark illiterates, from grandmothers of fifty and above to adolescents in primary school, from professional (graduates) to unemployed, the one thing that they all have in common is skin bleaching (DORKENOO 1990). Others like Dr. Edmund Delle who spoke on the history of skin bleaching in Ghana in an article published in the *Weekly Spectator*, stated that 'Skin bleaching was first practiced by Ghanaian women soon after the Second World War. This was around the late 1940s, when those who practiced the craft used Asepsa and Neko as skin bleaching soaps' (DORKENOO 1990). The taste for skin bleaching in the post-colonial times led to the adoption of varying methods. These saw the use of soaps and dominantly, the use of skin bleaching creams. The use of bleaching soaps was largely common between 1957 and 1980, however, it began to decline by the end of 1980.

Ghana is the world leader in skin bleaching, having come second to South Africa in the game. Between 1987 and February 1989 when the light skin and half cast advertisement appeared in the paper as authored by Tom Dorkenoo, only four public figures apart from Dr. Delle publicly spoke against the dangers and the disgrace of skin bleaching. These are Lt. General Arnold Quainoo, the General Officer commanding the Ghana Armed forces, Mrs. Selina Taylor, Chairperson of the National Council on Women and Development, Mrs. Esi Sutherland Addy, the Deputy Secretary, Ministry of Education and Culture, Efuwa T. Sutherland, Chairperson of Ghana National Commission on Children and Dr. G. L. Boye, Director at the Mampong Centre for Scientific Research into Plant Medicine. The period seemingly highlights what Dorkenoo refer to as the culture of silence on the skin bleaching issue (DORKENOO 1989).

Based on a retrospective analysis, the responses of interviewees were employed to piece the narrative on the motivation for bleaching under the period under review. In the 1950s, one of the major motivations was fashion. People were thrilled by the fashion of the time as having a light skin. Society discussed people with light skins and appreciated them as compared to those with dark skin. Ante Fowaa, 69 years old, reflected on the discussions of the time:

*Ei! It was the fashion of our time. During funerals and festivals here in Kumasi in the 60's, I remember my mother and her friends bleached and they were the talk of the town especially when they sewed new 'kaba and slit'. It wasn't easy at all. I also wanted to be like my mother but my mother always hid her bleaching soap. She spanked me once when I used it, furiously asking me: 'do you know how much it costs me...you this small girl you want to do what your*

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*elders do! Wait till you grow older and get your own money, then you can also buy and use them....hahahahahaha* (A. Fowaa, personal communication, March 3, 2017).

Ante Fowaa also stressed on the Neko and Aseps soap, mentioned by Dr. Edmond Delle. Another popular substance used was clear-ton which was relatively cheaper than the original clear-ton. Locally referred to as '*clear-ton ase*' this translates as the residue of 'clear-ton'.

Another way in which skin bleaching correlated with fashion was found on the backgrounds of social festive occasions. During these times, various individuals commemorate events to either end a fasting occasion like the Ramadan or to mark the end of the year (Christmas). While preparing for these occasions, people bleach their skin to appear nice during such celebrations. Amelia (68 years) from the Makola Market in the Greater Accra area of Ghana hinted that:

*I came to know and admire fair skin through skin bleaching in my neighborhood while growing up. When Ramadan, Eid-ul-Fitr or Eid-ul-Adha was approaching, it was the time to showcase your beauty as a woman or young girl. It was fashion and although society frowned against bleaching, it was still common* (Amelia, personal communication, March 25, 2017).

The quest for beauty also accentuated the quests for bleaching. This was associated with the love of light skin by the Asante populace in the 80s. Preferences were given to women who had sons or daughters who were light skinned. They attracted some prestige and respect among their peers, especially when they were referred to as *obroni maame*, literally translated as 'mother of a white child.' This called for women to use creams and soaps which were available at affordable prices; to change the nature of their skin from dark to white since society admires the latter. Eno Kumiwaa, an 80 years old Asante woman, indicated that women purchased bleaching products because they were cheap and available everywhere on the market (E. Kumiwaa, personal communication, March 20, 2017).

The desire to foster one's business activity is another factor that may lead to bleaching. Rafiatu, a naturally light skinned 'waakye' seller at Madina, hinted that '*light skin if not for anything is good for my business. The men are attracted by it to buy my food and they make advances at me through that. I have my way of dealing with them but it is certainly good for my business*' (Rafiatu, personal communication, March 24, 2017). This interviewee agrees with Evelyn Nakano Glenn's work on skin bleaching, 'Yearning for Lightness' where beauty is a marketing tool with high demand and profit. Easy accessibility of bleach products is also a motivating factor for bleaching the skin (NAKANO GLENN 2008). The excuse of skin diseases such as acne and hyperpigmentation commonly known as dark spots were also

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reasons given for bleaching the skin by some respondents. Thus, bleach creams are used to treat dark spots, especially acne.

In an interview with Awonye, a Ga fishmonger in Jamestown, Accra, she hinted that women used products that were not necessarily manufactured for bleaching purposes. Bleachers graduated from using soaps and creams to hair relaxing creams. Awonye hinted that:

*It got to a time when women used UB hair relaxer to bleach and it bleached perfectly. It was very strong and could bleach in less than three weeks. Some women also smeared milk on their skin and that one too worked but it made them smell very bad and unpleasant so they stopped. There was also a soap called Robert Soap which was red in colour but in a green box; it was also used during the time' (Awonye, personal communication, March 26, 2017).*

### **Transitions from the 1990s to the New Millennium**

Skin bleaching in Ghana between 1990 and 2000 was not much of a difference than its phenomenal and sharp increase. Between 1990 and 2000, over eleven major articles from the weekly spectator alone were recorded on skin bleaching, as reported by Dorkenoo. All these articles addressed the dangers and effects of skin bleaching on humans. Significantly, in one article written by Jones Sutte, an English expatriate living in Ghana, whose real name was withheld by the weekly spectator for diplomatic reasons, he agreed with Tom Dorkenoo that skin bleaching was bad and encouraged women in Ghana to put a stop to it (DORKENOO 1990). In contemporary times, the desire to bleach is largely associated with factors that necessitated the act in the 1960s and 80s. However, the advertisement of bleaching products by the media and other platforms is gradually on the rise in contemporary times. This has strong ties with the increasing bleaching behaviour among the Ghanaian populace.

Products which are common on the market include pro-claire, carotone, bronze-stone and skin light among others. They contain mercury content ranging from 0.010 to 0.549 $\mu$ g-g-1. The advertisements are usually carried out on television stations and product marketers feature them in popular TV programmes that catch attention of viewers. Also large billboards are mounted along streets depicting light skinned ladies by their sides. Some marketers tend to use movie stars, usually the fair ones, to market their products on these billboards with the aim of attracting customers. In relation to this, several actions have been taken on various levels against the act in Ghana. These are discussed in relation to institutions and societal

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actions including views from musicians, movie actors and medical doctors on the subject matter. These are captured in subsequent paragraphs.

The FDA, formerly known as the Ghana Food and Drugs Board, and the GSA were the first point of contact as far as litigations against skin bleaching in Ghana is concerned. This body is the custodian of the Weights and Measures decree which was a military decree (Law) passed by the National Redemption Council (NRC 1975:326) that seeks to promote the standardization for the improvement of quality of goods, services and sound management practices in industries and public institutions in Ghana. On the issue of cosmetic products in Ghana, Madam Frances, the head of cosmetic testing lab at the GSA noted the process in which a cosmetic product goes through before it is accepted. This is captured in the paragraph below:

*If someone produces a cream, they bring it to us and we do a quality evaluation to know if it meets our standards. The standards for products are not set alone by the Ghana Standards Board. The standard for a product is deliberated on by a committee of stakeholders like manufacturers, who deliberate and come to an agreement that all creams in Ghana would agree to a particular standard and must meet that standard. The sample is brought and tested and if it meets the standard, we send the results to FDA for the product to be registered. So FDA gets to know that product A is registered but with time, they go back to the market and do a market survey, get the product and test again because some clients knowing that they are bringing their products to be tested, bring the best, do the registration and the product is allowed on the market. Because the product is expensive, they find it difficult in doing the right thing. They manufacture the cheap products after the product is approved in order to make their profits (M. Frances, personal communication, March 20, 2017).*

The arguments thus far suggest the efforts of the required institutions to deal with the pressing issues of cosmetic products including bleach creams. However, the narrative points to a people who are equally interested in bleaching to satisfy several interests within their respective communities. Again, for want of profit, the manufacturers or suppliers of these bleach creams have found ingenious ways of sidestepping the rules to satisfy their corporate or organisational interest at the expense of the Ghanaian populace. The dangers associated with this practice has been discussed and highlighted by dermatologists and other research scientists.

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### **Dangers/Hazards of Skin Bleaching in Ghana**

Informants with expert knowledge who reported on creams argued that patients who came to them with skin and other related complications due to bleaching reported on and also showed the use of creams with high dose of hydroquinone, mercury among others. These had caused Erythema, permanent leukoderma, skin irritation, contact dermatitis, pigmented colloid millium, nail pigmentation or discoloration, loss of skin elasticity, impaired wound healing, hypopigmentation of the surrounding normal skin. According to Dr. Jeannette Aryee Boi, the common adverse findings reported by bleachers include kidney damages, skin rashes, skin discoloration, scarring, and reduction in the skin's resistance to bacteria and fungi infections, anxiety, depression, psychosis and peripheral neuropathy among others (J. Aryee Boi, personal communication, March 23, 2017).

Interesting to know, skin bleaching does not have adverse effect on only the bleacher but also on others. In Dr. Aryee Boi's presentation project on skin bleaching, she explains that, *'most mercury in skin lightening products enters the environment in waste water, and may be transformed there into methylmercury, an even more toxic compound, by bacteria. Methylmercury accumulates in fish and thus can enter the human diet. Amounts of mercury used in skin lightening products are less than many other sources of mercury pollution, but eliminating this source would significantly reduce global mercury exposure'* (Aryee Boi, personal communication, March 23, 2017).

### **Institutional Actions against Skin Bleaching in Ghana in Contemporary Times**

Both the FDA and GSA complement each other to ensure that, the Ghanaian market is housed with safe and quality products. However, commenting on the amount of hydroquinone in creams, Madam Frances indicated that only 2% of it is allowed in cosmetic products and even that it should be sold by a pharmacist. Due to low public sensitization and education, cosmetic sellers continue to sell creams with high amount of hydroquinone content even though it has been banned. Per the GSA regulations, cosmetic products with 2% of hydroquinone can only be sold by a pharmacist and with a prescription from a doctor. Madam Frances acknowledges that due to low public education and sensitization, people do not know about the decisions and regulations which have been put out by the GSA concerning cosmetic products. Manufacturers who are profit motivated go contrary to the regulations set by these institutions making the work of the GSA and FDA difficult. She further indicated that, though the use of

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hydroquinone has been limited, manufacturers now use kojic acid; a mimic of hydroquinone which still bleaches the skin.

Despite the efforts of the GSA and FDA at regulating cosmetic products in Ghana, a lot of challenges limit them in carrying out their work effectively. Madam Frances makes mention of consumer interest and patronage of these bleach creams. This, they have no regulation over since the consumer chooses to go for the bleach creams. In another interview with Mr. Emmanuel Nkrumah of the cosmetics department of the FDA, indicated that *'entry points of some of the bleach creams are not properly manned. Also, inadequate public education and sensitization, lack of collaboration between stakeholders and their institution as well as limited resources for effective work are some challenges'* (Nkrumah, personal communication, March 25, 2017). Notwithstanding, these two institutions since their inception have strived to regulate and control the influx of skin bleaching creams in the country but it is obvious that they have not been able to achieve much at combating skin bleaching cosmetics on the Ghanaian market. There is still evidence of the increase and growth in the skin bleaching phenomenon in the country with new methods of achieving a light skin as well as more and more bleaching cosmetic products on the Ghanaian market. This has resulted in increased skin bleaching and damage.

Currently, the FDA is alarmed by parents bleaching the skin of their children. Mr. Nkrumah noted that, though some parents unconsciously bleach the skin of their children, others do it on purpose (ADDO 2018). This purpose is correlated with that of the argument raised by Eno Kumiwaa that parents who have light skinned children get public prestige in terms like *Obroni Maame*. This act proves dangerous to the health of children especially future health repercussions like skin cancer and liver problems.

In an article published by the Ghana News Agency (GNA), the FDA expressed much anxiety about the emergence of the use of pills and tablets among other drugs used for bleaching. An interview with Mr. Nkrumah by the news team revealed that, *'doctors are also worried about this new "craze" among some of the citizenry to swallow cosmetic pills and tablets in the name of getting an even or all-round form of bleaching'* Mr. Nkrumah highlighted the fact that, this recent act results from the Ghanaian populace learning blindly from other cultures and has negatively affected the black skin. These pills and tablets stop the production of melanin which protects the black skin from direct contact with the sun (GNA 2018). Infirmities associated with its use include body odour, liver, kidney problems among others (SIABI-MENSAH 2018). Samples of these pills common on the Ghanaian market include Oral Light, Gluta C, Organic White, L-Glutathione, Marevaz, La Mer, Anal bleach Gel,



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Egyptian Milk or Kamana among others. The prices for these products range between two hundred and eighty Ghana cedis and six hundred and fifty Ghana cedis (NUHU BILA 2016).

In relation to the use of pills is that of injection of drugs into the body. Both are used jointly to bleach effectively. These drugs are modified and contain high amount of bleaching components like hydroquinone and mercury which are injected directly into the blood stream. In an interview with Akesse, a news reporter for the Daily Graphic in Ghana, Mrs Emma Yankey; cosmetologist at 2nd Hair Salon and Beauty Clinic indicated what happens when the drug is injected into the body:

*Once it is injected into the body, it enters the bloodstream then the blood circulates it all over the system. Most of the creams and soaps take many weeks or months to achieve results but the injections and pills act faster. So you can inject today and in less than a week, you would start seeing some changes on your skin (AKESSE 2014).*

Injection products on the Ghanaian market include Tatiomax plus Glucotathione, Tatio Active Glutathione, Veniscy Prestige Skin 5000, Bio Rare Complexion 8 among others. Consumers spend up to 3000 Ghana cedis to obtain both pills and injections (SIABI-MENSAH 2018).

### **The Role of the Media and Celebrities**

More recently, taking a close look at the perceptions and attitude of skin bleaching in contemporary Ghana, a lot of participation has been put into speaking and advocating against skin bleaching. Media houses such as TV3, GTV amongst others through their interviews with health professionals and even skin bleachers are creating a consciousness on the adverse effects of skin bleaching in Ghana.

Documentaries by various individuals, groups and interested stakeholders have been run on skin bleaching to create awareness. Movie production houses are beginning to write scripts and act them to discourage the practice. A movie entitled Black Barbie written and directed by Comfort Arthur who was a one-time skin bleacher has also educated the public on the dangers of skin bleaching. Campaigns on skin bleaching by some prominent Ghanaians such as Ama K. Abebrese and Nana Ama McBrown who are actresses, Paulina Oduro, a veteran musician and Hamamat Monita, a model through their campaign have addressed skin bleaching and its dangers, advocating for a stop in bleaching. Ace television shows such as the Delay show have also made good efforts at knowing why some people bleach. One such

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interview on the show was the interview with Nasara, who won the Ghana's Most Beautiful pageant in 2009, and has taken to bleaching her skin. Health programmes have also been aired to address skin bleaching and its effects and to educate the Ghanaian populace on its dangers.

### **The Role of Musicians (The Okuntakinte Narrative)**

Some musicians have done exclusive pieces of lyrical education on skin bleaching. One of such musicians is Okuntakinte, a young musician who finds the practice dangerous enough and deems fit to address through his music in a song he calls Melanin Girls. This breakthrough single of the British-Ghanaian artist Okuntakinte received critical attention for its appraisal of dark skinned girls. The song contributed to the banning of bleaching products in Ghana. The Hook after the first verse of the song reads:

*These melanin girls, melanin girls, melanin girls, (hey yeah)*

*These melanin girls, melanin girls*

*Hide your diamonds, hide your pearls*

*Melanin girls, melanin girls, melanin girls, (yes, please)*

*The bitter taste of chocolate I saw it first*

*Melanin girls, melanin girls, (yeah)*

Iwan, a dancehall artist from the Ashaiman area of Ghana also put out a song titled Stop the Skin Bleaching to join the campaign to stem the tide of skin bleaching in Ghana. A section of the lyrics of the song reads:

*Wa bleach, a bleach, a bleach, babiaa babiaa*

*You have a white face, yellow hands, black legs, are you a chameleon?*

*It is a disgrace to hate your race and bleach your face.*

Another known hiplife artist in Ghana; Sarkodie in his song Choices also highlighted the issue of skin bleaching in Ghana. A section of the song stated:

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*Nku no Clairtone fra, Nope?*

*Nti Kokoo no ye by chance, Yup?*

It is imperative to appreciate the fact that these musicians who are within the youthful population of Ghana have found their voice in dealing with the subject matter of bleaching. This notwithstanding, there seem to be a gap in a more organised persistent social and academic discourse that would seek to address the bleaching menace. Suffice to state however, the owners of capital who continue to produce these bleach creams have found a people whose desire for the light-skin has overpowered their moral and intellectual consciousness.

### **Conclusion**

The notion of racial supremacy and white colour, colonization, enslavement among other things is replete in the literature. These are known to project the skin bleaching lifestyle. This particular study has further highlighted the question of benefits denied by the cosmetic industrial complex that seek to make profit out of the effacement or bleaching of the skin of others. The existing literature for instance points to hawking-down of these bleaching products to urban south- African women in particular both educated (lettered) and uneducated (unlettered). Again, the beauty discourse as found in this particular research dominates the literature on skin bleaching. This is accentuated by the celebrity discourse on skin lightening. This study has shown that Ghana is not an exception.

This particular study for instance, has confirmed studies (BLAY 2009; CHARLES 2009; FORKUO 2009; HUNTER 2011) which have reported reasons for bleaching to include efforts to attract a spouse, attain a better job, maximizing of profits during sales or trade through skin lightening among other things. Again, this study has highlighted a long degree of public campaigns by individuals, celebrities, public health experts and government agencies like the FDA and GSA in attempting to stem the tide of bleaching in Ghana.

The above notwithstanding, this study has highlighted a lot of critical issues. These skin bleaching narratives from the people of Ghana highlighted the social acceptance, prestige, complex among other things as major drivers for the persistent interest in skin bleaching. These narratives have been conveyed through the oral, print and electronic media. The

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subject matter of colour shall continue to remain within the philosophical, the psychological and the physiological realm. Its discussion, especially concerning the depletion of it shall persist in the Ghanaian social discourse even in the foreseeable future.

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## Food Festivals and Expectations of Local Development in Northern Italy

MICHELE FILIPPO FONTEFRANCESCO

Department of Gastronomic Sciences,  
University of Gastronomic Sciences, Pollenzo, Italy  
*m.fontefrancesco@unisg.it*

### ABSTRACT

This essay offers an ethnographic analysis of the role of food in modern Italian food festivals. Starting from the ethnographic case of Borgonovo, a rural town in Southern Piedmont, and its festival, it highlights the nonlinear role played by food in the festivals and points out that gastronomic festivals should be read as a local response of rural, and marginal communities to the phenomenon of their social marginalization.

**KEY WORDS:** Italy, food, local development, tourism, ethnography

### Introduction

Beer Festival, Pumpkin Festival, Buffalo Festival, Fiazein Festival, Cheese Focaccia and Trofie pasta with Pesto sauce Festival, Donkey Agnolotti stuffed pasta, Gnocchi pasta Festival... and the list goes on to complete a long column in the upcoming events section of the local newspapers. During the last years, the ritual calendar of a typical weekend in the province of Alessandria, in the north-western part of Italy, consists of this sort of frenetic list stuffed with gastronomic events. By looking at the many newspaper and billboard advertisements of the local cities and towns, it is possible to recognize the outline of a gastronomic landscape, a foodscape, drawn by the names of many small villages recognizable thanks to food products and preparations which are both traditional and modern. The case of the Piedmont region is a good example to understand the nationally-wide cultural

phenomenon which is characterizing the whole Italian country. This phenomenon puts Italy in a more general framework, shared by all the Western countries, where the gastronomic proposal, in particular the one of the festivals, has become crucial in the development of the local tourism (SILKES – CAI – LEHTO 2013). Italian food festivals are surely various: they include festivals with an ancient history, in which the food proposal is the result of a philological research, and festivals where food is neither from the territory nor is rooted in the folk tradition, but resulting from a research for an exotic, bombastic and extemporization proposal conducted by local private or public actors. As a whole, if we take into accounts these events in a wide framework related to the dietary habits of the Italians and its transformations (DI FRANCESCO 2015), they tell us about a change in the many local communities of the country, the many “little Italies” (cfr. BORGHI 2017), which are looking for fame, cultural and social recognition otherwise impossible without their food festival proposal. This essay studies the phenomenon by analysing the forms of the contemporary ritual in order to discuss the role that food plays in these events.

The essay begins presenting the research conducted since 2006 in the Piedmont region and its methodologies. It introduces the contemporary food festivals through the ethnographic case of Borgonovo, a rural town in Southern Piedmont, and its festival. The analysis highlights the constituent anthropological elements of the contemporary food festivals and the role of food plays in them. The research points out gastronomic festivals should be read as a local response to the phenomenon of marginalization which makes the rural villages experience (FONTEFRANCESCO 2015a) playing the role of a crucial bridge element suited to consolidate the link between the towns and the more interior rural communities of Italy.

### **The Research**

Italian food and cuisine are internationally well-known and made Italy the world's main destination for food tourism in 2018 (GARIBALDI 2018). Differently from other European countries, such as France, Spain or more recently Denmark, the fame of Italian cuisine does not derive by the success of specific gastronomic movements, such as Nouvelle Cuisine, Molecular cuisine, or the New Nordic Cuisine. Rather, it is linked with the discovery and promotion of the regional, popular cuisines (CAPATTI – MONTANARI 2003: 41-98). The most famous example is the Mediterranean diet that has popularized the main traits of Naples' peasant cooking tradition since the 1950s (MORO 2014). Local, environmental and cultural embeddedness is the main distinguishing trait of the culinary Italian tradition. Its richness in foods, preparations and styles derives from its diverse landscape and the fragmented political



history of the country (CAPATTI – MONTANARI 2003; PARASECOLI 2004). In particular, the prolonged political control of the Italian territory by other foreign countries deeply influenced the development of Italian regional cuisines (HELSSTOSKY 2004). This peculiar history made the peninsula a fundamental place of cultural and gastronomic hybridization; a creative milieu whose products are the subjects of a growing international demand. The demand focuses on specific products that, not only in all Western markets, dominate specific sectors, such as pasta, salami, cheese and wine (CAMILLO – KIM – MOREOC – RYAND 2010; GIRARDELLI 2004). These products are or originate as local delicatessens, deeply embedded into specific geographic areas of the country. Thus, to understand Italian food and food culture requires to look at the local dimension of the communities (CAPATTI – MONTANARI 2003; NIOLA 2009). While cities such as Rome and Milan are innovative centers for what concerns the development of new forms of food (industrial) production, distribution, and consumption, it is mostly the semi-urban and rural areas that play a key role for food rediscovery. Cases, such as the recognition of Alba as one of the UNESCO World's Creative Cities for its gastronomy or the recognition of Mediterranean diet as UNESCO World's Heritage (MORO 2014), as well as the international success of the Slow Food Movement (PETRINI 2007; INGERSOLL 2011), confirm the relevance the rural space holds for Italian cuisine.

The food products that are mostly subject of international visibility and interest originated from rural gastronomy in which they were mostly special food for festive occasions (GRIMALDI 2012: 23-42). While peasant culture has been deeply affected by the twentieth-century social and economic transformation of the country, which left those communities facing the effect of an increasing marginalization, the products maintained their relevance becoming the center of specific initiatives of promotion (GRASSENI 201); the most common of which is the organization of food festivals. The festivals are a common folklore institution present across all the Western countries, and deeply rooted into traditional agricultural economic and social activities being the ideal successors of the medieval and modern seasonal markets and the harvest festivals (DI FRANCESCO 2013). In festivals, Howell Ciancimino points out, food is a fundamental element of rituality, reinforcing the social cohesion of the community and contributing in creating the very spatiality of the event (HOWELL CIANCIMINO 2018). Moreover, Di Francesco shows that in modern ceremonies, food turns into a commodity marketed in a touristic perspective (DI FRANCESCO 2013). Overall, thus, rural food festivals are not just simple folklore institutions but geological windows through which to study the dynamic relationship between local community, food, tourism, and the wide world. Food appears at the center of this complex network. However, the social and cultural outline of its role appears not to be clearly

defined by the ongoing academic debate.

This paper intends to offer a contribution in this direction, ethnographically sketching the multidimensional and nonlinear (cfr. DE LANDA 1997) role of food in present Italian food festivals. In so doing, it draws from an ethnographic research begun in 2005 and focused on the studies of the historical and folkloric origins of gastronomic festivals in northwest territory of Italy and, particularly, in Piedmont. The research moved from a first focus on the grape harvest festivals of the region and, specifically, an ethnographic study of the Grape Festival of Lu, in 2005-2006 (FONTEFRANCESCO 2014). From this first study the research expanded and encompassed the wider area of south-eastern part of Piedmont, being involved in two projects promoted by the University of Gastronomic Sciences: the *Atlante delle Feste Popolari del Piemonte* (Atlas of Popular Festivals of Piedmont) (GRIMALDI – PORPORATO 2015), a database that documents more than one thousand and hundred celebrations in the region; and the *Granaries of Memory* (GRIMALDI – PORPORATO 2011), a digital collection of memories about the Italian and foreign gastronomic knowledge through the stories of the life of farmers, local producers, entrepreneurs, workers, defining a complex and articulated social portrayal of our contemporary reality.

The research was conducted following a composed methodology aimed at mapping, surveying and then exploring the social phenomenon of gastronomic festivals. Fig. 1 summarised it.

First, the festivals were identified through a review of media and literature sources. The main aim of this first action was to identify the present scale and extension of the phenomenon in the Province of Alessandria. I looked at the past ten years (2008-2017), considering the festivals reported in the news, in review articles, and advertisements. The research focused mostly on online newspapers and the folkloric literature. Based also on the data provided by the *Atlante delle Feste Popolari del Piemonte*, the phenomenon was mapped, highlighting the consistency of the phenomenon, across the province of which the introduction offered a sample. Similarly to what happened in other parts of the region (FASSIO 2009), the research highlighted a proliferation of gastronomic festivals, less and less linked to the times and the rites of the local farmers' calendar, but increasingly targeted to create on the one hand a tool of social cohesion as a reaction to the progressive depopulation of rural villages, on the other to provide a new way to promote the territory (FONTEFRANCESCO 2015b).

The research continued in an ethnographic perspective, conducting observation in thirty festivals across the province. The observation was conducted in the days when the festivals were held, conducting short, semi-structured interviews with the organizers and the participants. The interviews focused on the exploration of the motivations that drive the

participation to the events. During the observation, material documentation such as flyers, leaflets, etc., was collected.

In selected locations, among which was Borgonovo, the ethnographic research was furthered and extended in order to include also the observation of the preparation of the event and its aftermath. The research included also archival research, in order to study the historical development of the rituals, and extended interviews with the organizers. Collecting data through food-centred interviews with the organizers of the festivals, the research has envisaged how today the connection between gastronomic proposal and territory works. The narrations have allowed me to investigate not only the origins or motivations that lead to the organization of these contemporary rites but also the cosmos of affectivity and meanings that define the human, gastronomic and natural landscape, which is the environment of the community.

In other occasions, I have already had the opportunity to explain part of the research results. As the current imaginary trend is to consider them as originating in a historical horizon biased between a distant Middle Ages and the irrefutable topicality, I have emphasized the fascist period as the main point for experimentation. In that period, throughout the national territory and, particularly, in rural areas, ceremonial forms appeared for the first time to totally bind the topic of local agricultural and economic development to the organization of the village fair, considered as moments of promotion for short or long-distance tourism (FONTEFRANCESCO 2014). Herein, in order to deepen the connection between the festival proposal and the perception of marginalization, I am going to introduce this topic presenting an example of these manifestations, the case study of Borgonovo through the ethnographic tale which is narrated in the present tense, typical of the narrative genre (VAN MAANEN 2011: 45-72).

The name of the village – part of the Piedmont's province of Alessandria – was replaced by a fictitious one to guarantee the festival organizers' confidentiality and anonymity; it is here considered as an arbitrary location (CANDEA 2007), a localized community to be the object of ethnographic research aimed at the identification of the fundamental characteristics defining, on the one hand, the system of the festival and on the other hand its anthropological meaning.

### **Borgonovo Festival**

Summer 2015. For the first time a food festival is organized in Borgonovo. The initiative is born as an answer to the impulse given by the new local government (elected the year before) and by the commitment of the local Proloco, a local grass-roots association that aims to promote the place.

The aim of the festival, according to the organizers, is to promote the little village by involving local community in the organization of a unique summer event based on a gastronomic proposal. Therefore, the festival is born with a clear social purpose by setting the festive experience as a fundamental piece in a broader strategy useful for the community and aimed at facing one of the more pressing problems pointed out by the local community. One of the residents, a woman owner of an economic activity, has so explained: “Borgonovo is becoming depopulated. [...] It has become the outskirts of the city [...] a desert. We must do something, mustn't we?”

The food festival takes place at the beginning of August, because this is a period of holiday for most of the people who interrupt the productive activity and can come back to the native village to spend their holiday. Indeed, in the year Borgonovo is now mostly populated by commuters or pensioners: the community is reduced to a few tens of people, mainly elder ones, who meet at the bar, in the parish, or at a friends' house. During the summer, instead, especially from the end of July to the beginning of August, the village revitalizes, being populated by many families from the village whose second house is there. Therefore, August is the period in which many inhabitants who emigrated in the last fifty years from rural locations to towns and cities in northern Italy come back to the area. As a consequence, the food festival aims at involving not only these seasonal inhabitants but also the entire village in the time of its maximum vitality; in fact, the programme is enriched in a period of the year otherwise very poor so as it was traditionally in the ritual rural calendar of Borgonovo before the great migration of the second half of the twentieth century.

The Proloco organizes the event taking inspiration from the other communities of the area and from the success met by the other festivals. Because the gastronomic element appears to be a great way of attracting the attention of the audience, the association has decided to propose a gastronomic festival too. They have proposed a manifestation which covers the entire weekend: a marquee tent, kitchens and tables were set up; the menu proposed was an expression of a substantial culinary mix that has local dishes with evident gastronomic heterotopies. By using black ink on yellow phosphorescent paper, the culinary mix of the “Sagra di Borgonovo” (Borgonovo food festival) is presented: agnolotti stuffed pasta, polenta, risotto, mixed fried fish, grilled meat, wine of the territory. Foucault defined

heterotopies as those “spaces which in some way are in agreement with all the others and that, however, contradict all the other places” (FOUCAULT 1998:310). The offered menu is in a sense an odd proposal; it seems to be contradictory if we think about taste and food, but it responds to a fundamental trait of economic and local agricultural history. Borgonovo is situated on a plain, a few kilometres from the hills. Viticulture has disappeared for a long time in favour of a massive cereal growing. Actually, in the seventies, Borgonovo has been one of the many villages that made the province of Alessandria a “granary of Italy” because of the excellence of its territory considering the quantity and the quality of cereal production (BELTRAME – BRAY– CRAVERO – MARCHESE 1981:127-140; ROCCA 1992:79-80). However, in the new millennium wheat and other cereals have lost profitability and, consequently, their space, so new horticultural cultivations have begun to cover the plain. The community has started to question the experience of cereal cultivation, searching a pristine typicality and originality, able to make this village original in the territory; but this research has not given solid answers to the local community. Wheat, actually, does not appear to be a means capable of communicating and valorising the reality of Borgonovo since, as one of the organizers, a farmer in his seventies, states: “We can’t just do the bread festival? What sense would have? We do not even have a bakery here...” The heterotopic menu, therefore, tells us about this social, cultural and economic history; a new ludic function of tradition that is expressed thanks to the gastronomic element, creating a way to project into the future. Indeed, because of the difficulty to identify a unique gastronomic element, typical of the territory and, as a consequence, able to characterize the food festival, the organizers have decided to copy partially the menus of the festivals of the neighbouring villages, but also to invite the Proloco associations of neighbouring towns to submit their specialities, thus proposing a smaller edition of the famous Asti’s “Festival of the Festivals”, an event that has involved over 40 Proloco groups of the nearby Province of Asti since 1974. To complete the programme, the Proloco di Borgonovo has included a rock concert for younger audience and a dance evening of ballroom dancing for the more mature audience. Even the choice of music has been made following the settled example of the other villages.

The community of Borgonovo and the audience coming from the near villages and towns have appreciated the food festival, even if it is not particularly innovative. Several hundred people have attended the event, some of them because of the novelty, while others for the possibility to visit a town that for the first time has been advertised. The panorama of the event has been characterized by several things: the conspicuous presence of families and friends sit at the tables to eat or waiting in front of the marquee tent where food is prepared, the unpretentious service which is typical of food festivals, the smells of food preparations, agnolotti and chopping boards of cheese, polenta and fried fish, tiramisù and wild boar stew,

all wet with red or white wine, cola and sparkling wine: a babel of men and food representing the feeling to the abundance of the festival, poetically described by the verses of the Alessandria poet Giovanni Rapetti: “ra fim 'd cudghein and còj vian the èua rev pit pulèinta 'nsima dl'ass suta who tuca”<sup>1</sup> (RAPETTI 2016:38).

The following days the organizers have commented positively, even though they are not sure that there will be other editions of the event because of the necessity to be supported by other associations of the neighbouring villages. Overall, they have reinforced their “awareness that to relaunch our villages, food is essential” as explained by one of the members of the organizing committee. This statement, however, is not shared by the audience: some interviewed citizens, who have come for the first time to the village for the event, have mainly reminded the pleasantness of the occasion and the annoyance of mosquitos, while they have just had a faint memory of Borgonovo and its community.

### **The ingredients of the festival**

If considered in the frame of an ethnographic research, Borgonovo history delineates one of the many Piedmont's gastronomic festivals which the scientific anthropological community has dealt with (e.g. BONATO 2006; BRAVO 2005; RENZO 2005; FASSIO 2009; GRIMALDI 2012). Many of these festivals – as the Borgonovo one – have a recent story; or they copy a model already working; or they prove to be something new in a local ritual calendar. Other festivals count tens of re-editions and their organizers recognize their origins in a mythical past. The indicative summary of this varied panorama is provided by the Atlante delle Feste Popolari del Piemonte (<http://atlantefestepiemonte.it>, access 29/11/2018) including the 107 counted festivals. Through the analysis of this knowledge base, it is possible to enlarge the ethnographic reasoning identifying a clearer profile of this contemporary folk system.

Firstly, it is clear that food festivals are feasts, even if they have lost their original religious trait, as it is still evident by the etymology of the Italian word for festival that is *sagra*. This comes from the Latin word *sacra*, sacred. This etymology, in a historical perspective, highlights the profound link and commixing between religious and profane activities that

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<sup>1</sup> The smoke of a cotechino which makes mouth water, polenta on top and now come on, whoever's turn it is.

characterized ancient and medieval rituality (GRIMALDI 1993). However, it points at the anthropological role played by the festivals in the society. If the “sacred” is an alternative vision and understanding of the world that challenges the ordinariness of everyday experience (ELIADE 1999), festivals are a moment capable of altering the everyday-life space and time on different experiential levels (APOLITO 2014). Surely, the festival turns the urban space by altering the fruition and the functional geography, using areas otherwise precluded or ordinarily used for other functions (squares, roads, sports fields) as meeting places and commensality, commerce, dance, artistic fruition. Secondly, the festival calls for an experiential and sensorial modified landscape, marked both by the significant presence of people and food and cooking smells. It follows that, thirdly, the body experience and discipline is transformed and adapted to the occasion, creeping and interacting among people, the more appreciating uncommon dishes in the daily diet, dancing, singing, abandoning the daily composure.

The festivals are lay holiday moments happening above all in the summer season. Historical festivals related to food, such as Fat Ox Fair, or Aosta St. Orso Festival (GRIMALDI 2009; SIBILLA 2001) are organized in the winter season (Christmas, Carnival). However, the food festivals are mainly planned in the summer period, from May to September (DI FRANCESCO 2013; FASSIO 2009); and this can be considered as a heritage of the traditional folkloric system of the harvest festivals as an opportunity for commerce, exchange and consumption of local products. Furthermore, as in the Borgonovo case, these events are the answer to the contemporary demand of gastronomic tourism which concentrates outdoor consumption – as well as the tendency to a form of consumption in non-residential places – in the summer season, when it is easier to enjoy warmer and sunny days (GARIBALDI 2018).

In a food festival the lay moments are prevalent, nevertheless they can be juxtaposed to religious functions, such as Masses, processions and benedictions. This fact distinguishes the contemporaneity from the rituality, typical of that world of tradition (GRIMALDI 1993). Especially, while the peasant festivity was characterized by the collective participation in all the ritual moments and the community identity was created through this kind of participation (BRAVO 1984), nowadays the summer-event programmes are perceived and enjoyed selectively. By way of a menu – to use a gastronomic metaphor – the contemporary man chooses “à la carte” according to his taste. In spite of this, the festival characterizes itself through the gastronomic element, recovering and making relevant the anthropological model of the banquet (DIETLER – HAYDEN 2003), and enriching it with several activities: religious (e.g. Mass, benedictions, processions), entertainment (e.g. exhibitions, shows, theatrical performances), and civil solemn moments (e.g. public speech of the authorities, prize-giving ceremony, parades). In this programme it is possible to recognize the legacy of

the medieval and modern model of the yearly fairs which distinguished harvest and production time in each community. Where such events, however, happened in the frame of an agricultural or manufacturing process deeply set in the society of the time, the current festivals appear as economic heterotopias, tourist products suited to satisfy the search of the general contemporary urban public for other and elsewhere (AIME – PAPOTTI 2012:113-160). These festivals exalt the food and the community, but the selected products to be valorized in the menus have often no bearing on the local community hence ignoring the territorial and seasonal products in favour of media coverage.

An ethnographic example of this trend is offered by the Aubergine Festival in Quargnento (in the province of Alessandria), observed between 2014 and 2016. This festival was founded in 2004 by a citizens' committee in order to create a new and original social gathering at the end of summer. The festival programme, during the last weekend of August, has three days of gastronomic events focused on the use of a vegetable: what is worth to note is that neither the village nor the nearby areas have a culinary tradition. Surely, the choice of the aubergine was not based on the idea of promoting a territorial production; but it was based on the aim of attracting the attention of the general public bringing a notorious product already served but still appreciated nowhere in the province district. Nowadays the festival is at the 14th edition and it is promoted and organized by a network of territorial associations. The entire community participates in and a significant number of citizens are involved: more than a hundred volunteers in a town of about 1,500 inhabitants. The festival is also well-known in the province since tourists come from all the major towns around and the cooking faces an average of more than one thousand places.

These “ingredients” outline the essential features of a folk system firmly set in the contemporary background; this is the consequence of the clear combinatorial power which is peculiar to the popular world (BRAVO 1984; GRIMALDI 1996). The ludic reinvention of the tradition is made topical through the festival, by meeting local social and cultural requirements and by creating a holiday system; this system is often felt as continuity between the present day and the ancestral collective past. In those terms, as suggested by Handler and Linnekin, tradition is not a naturalistic and philological datum but a semiotic phenomenon, in which “the relationship of prior to present representations is symbolically mediated, not naturally given it encompasses both continuity and discontinuity” (HANDLER – LINNEKIN 1984: 287). It is about a semiotic game which turns to the present looking upon the future and not the mere reproduction of the past. Food plays a key role in this process.



### **The food of the festival**

Some case studies such as Quargnento and Borgonovo are examples to show that in the present festivals the strong connection between territory and gastronomic choice has disappeared (DI FRANCESCO 2013). This fact is also confirmed by the published Manifest of the Authentic Food and Wine Festivals (CAVICCHI – SANTINI – BELLETI 2013); the publication is a wide-ranging document, suitable to suggest the need for a return to a gastronomic and folkloric proposal closer to the typicalities of the local communities (FONTEFRANCESCO 2015b). In broad terms, the current festivals emphasize a complex role of food, in which its meanings, its practices “share space but cannot be mapped in terms of a single set of three-dimensional coordinates” (LAW – MOLL 2002:1). In the discursive space this complexity opens, it is possible to find, nevertheless, some major paths which define the role food plays for the communities.

First, food is the element which produces and strengthens the local identity narration; indeed, is a metonymic phenomenon which – through the gastronomic proposal – enables to experience local area, its characteristics, both within its borders, among the citizens, and outside, among the inhabitants of other villages. To organize the festival of the grape, as in the case of Lu, a small town in the province of Alessandria, is to emphasize a particular idea of the connection between the territory and the identity: a product such as grapes and wine is put at the centre of the festival meanwhile there is no narration about other geographically meaningful aspects, as for example the cultivation of wheat (FONTEFRANCESCO 2014). Therefore, already in the selection of the products the hierarchy of community values is indicated: it analyses, selects and sets local tangible and intangible features defining the public and identity image in a broader dialectical model. In this model the power the festival must involve, entertain and meet organizers' expectations, the community and attract tourists' attention is opposed to the costs and revenues, which are issues of the business approach.

Furthermore, food is evidently the element with an aggregative power. In the communities the citizens meet to organize the event and to feast. Tens of people rally to organize a festival; generally, there is a primary committee composed by a Proloco association in order to handle them (DI FRANCESCO 2013). Starting from the primary group, participation rises involving directly a growing number of persons in setting the location up, cooking, serving, managing performances. This proactive collaboration not only creates the anthropological conditions for the festival experience (APOLITO 2014), but corresponds with a reactivation of the bonds of sociality among the different groups and members of the local community, therefore confirming the role of social reconstitution which was already typical of folkloric traditional holidays systems, such as Easter collections (GRIMALDI 2012:84-117): while in the case of

such practices the feast reconstituted the unity of the community after the disintegration caused by the winter seclusion, in the case of festivals reconstitution takes place counterbalancing the effects of the daily or seasonal commuting, typical of the contemporary society (GRIMALDI 1996:13-40).

At the same time, the influx of strangers ideally widens the boundaries of the community allowing other non-local people to share. This participation increases both the tangible and intangible assets of the territory. Therefore, the food festival becomes on the one hand a commercial ethnic resource, ethno-commodity (COMAROFF – COMAROFF 2009:20), whose selling increases the territorial economy, on the other hand a way to create a relational context which re-bathe the local community in a broader social context. If, in fact, as suggested by Ferguson, in a global interconnected world the disconnections perceived by the community are significant (FERGUSON 2002:234-254), the intention of creating – through a festival – a new and strong interconnection between the local community and the wide world in order to reinforce the territorial context proves the progressive sense of erosion and marginalization experienced in particular by the smaller villages, as shown in the case of Borgonovo. The festival is a community instrument used to counteract this weakening, ordinary affects (cfr. STEWART 2007). Thanks to the creation of a tourist flow the opportunity to shorten the ideal distance between the centre and the outskirts arises, thus emancipating the communities from a perceived anonymity. This need for renewed centrality is not, however, a feeling only relevant to the present, if we consider that those festivals born in the 1960s, such as the Lu Festival of the grapes (FONTEFRANCESCO 2014), have had the same aim. In the last two decades, owing to the acceleration of the urbanization in the Italian peninsula, the phenomenon has been stimulated and multiplied. In this framework, it is worth noting that, as in the case of Borgonovo, a festival emphasizing the culinary element and not a broader participation in the community life, risks being limited in its effectiveness: the food satisfies an appetite but not the hunger.

## Conclusions

The food of the festivals is therefore a complex, nonlinear, never obvious reality. As it may seem heterotopic, sloppy or wrong, it always tells about the society of the present and the challenges that local communities are facing. This contribution has an ambition to highlight this anthropological datum by selecting the elements that characterize the rituals of these festivals and their food based on the research work being carried out in north-western Italy

through the ethnography of the Borgonovo festival, as well as from the archival research and the wide fieldwork carried out over the years.

Where the current public debate has repeatedly focused on the distinction between authentic food festivals and “fake” ones, here it is highlighted how the food of festivals always deals with territory, even if not through the lexicon of proximity or in coherence with the history. Also, the gastronomic heterotopias state a more and more pressing challenge for smaller communities and for smaller villages: they must counteract a growing sense of marginalization that the rural villages live. The food becomes the instrument to create a bond between centre and peripheral, rural areas; a tool that is modulated and adapted for this aim, to respond to the pressing need for “other” and “elsewhere” that struggles our urban communities.

This work can answer the questions of an observer of the present about the meaning of an alluring “potatoes festival”, compared to that of a “Festival of mixed fried seafood” of a territory in the Po valley: if it is true that these are indescribable choices according to the eye of the gastronome, while the anthropologist focused on contemporaneity can see in those foods not only exotic divertissement, but the common goods which can become tools for the creation of a possible future; a hope on the tip of the fork. Highlighting this vital link between the festival and the community glance at the future, the food festival is not only a glamorous event, but it is – more than ever – an object characterized by a deep political meaning that develops in the not-always-linear interaction of actors: local administrators, not-for-profit associations, producers, patrons, etc. This plurality of subjects is characterized not only by differences but often also by requests, desires and ideality; in addition, this multiplicity is potentially conflictual because of the requests focused on achieving the ideal of future that each subject aims. In this sense, the festival becomes the synthesis of multiplicity wherein the gastronomical choice is an integral part. Therefore, the food of festivals has also a political flavour whose first aromas have been “offered” by this article, and the future researches will characterize it better.

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