Čilejkári – Tradícia ako symbol kultúrnej identity

[“Čilejkars” – Tradition as a Symbol of Cultural Identity]

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This book is written by Adam Uhnák, an ethnologist who lectures at the University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava, Slovakia. It is a complex and comprehensive study of ‘Čilejkar’ microregion focused on the origin and formation of regional culture of this local community. Author deals with the possibility and reasons to preserve the specific image of regional culture. It is written in an academical matter-of-fact tone but is accessible to the average reader too.

Uhnák’s research undertaken for this book took place for quite a long period of time, and he openly considers himself being a part of studied group. Author’s previous work provides impressive reflection on the research methodology, especially in the case of cross-cultural studies and ethnological research in non-European region¹ in which author developed a certain sense of awareness of his own – different – cultural conditioning in specific area. In

¹ See e.g. UHNÁK, Adam: A Tourism Program of Government and its Place in the Process of Preservation of Cultural Heritage on the Example of ‘Pueblos Mágicos’ in Mexico. In *European Journal of Science and Theology*, 14(4). 2018, pp. 179-192.

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this book Uhnák developed such awareness by realising that one's own cultural background may also have an influence on formulating his/her research methodology – and on the results he/she provides.

As Uhnák mentions in his methodological chapter, the search for objectivity can be „*the quest for the holy grail*“ (UHNÁK 2020:17) – both equally „impossible“ to find, but it can be comfortably assumed he has succeeded where many similar efforts have failed. And author's methodological precision has paid off. The tension between the conception of ethnographic group; regional group and local community engages the reader in the dialogue with the complex theoretical perspective of this specific community and its microregion (UHNÁK 2020:19).

Chapter five sets the review of theories of cultural identity, recognising the cultural identity as both a “product” of tradition of local community and the “pressures” from the majority that may affect values and attitudes toward one's (own) cultural identity and self-definition.

Uhnák could not agree more with Geertz on his theory of cultural interpretation in describing the culture as the system of symbols and meanings (embodied in such symbols) in which men understand and organise their attitudes toward physical and social life (UHNÁK 2020:29).

In chapter seven, Uhnák discuss partial and not-fixed regional isolation of ‘Čilejkar’ microregion that has had a crucial impact on cultural development of local community. The main thrust of this chapter appears to be focussed on how the natural geographical boundaries isolated the community from social contact with rest of communities in Hont and Tekov, and so they became the cultural boundary too. Not only the geographical features affected the community development, the religiosity is significant and complex determinant of that development, and so the author makes the important linkages between the religion and culture. Not least the chapter reviews the (Slovak) language as the basis of the ethnic identity, reflected through the historical experience of magyarization of Slovak population, especially in the region where the language is heavily influenced by Hungarian even today (UHNÁK 2020:41–43). In his chapter ‘*The Rise of Specific Regional Čilejkar Culture*’ Uhnák views the contexts of development and surviving of specific culture of this community. He assumes geographical boundaries influenced patterns of cultural evolution of group and helped to preserve its specifics that could be threatened or assimilated into the “other” group – majority. Another vitally important is the role of land ownership in the system of social standing. Author describes several ways of understanding the high social position of farmers and local land owners, and codependent relationships of community members from different social

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positions bounded by e.g. seasonal work opportunities for those of lower income in microregion.

More importantly, Uhnák writes, the land can be realized as an active factor of identity and local community formation. Author provides several proofs to support that claim, including the large-scale immigration to the United States from the region (and eventual motivation for homecoming), and the policy of collectivisation that fundamentally affected the life of this community (UHNÁK 2020:54).

In the last part of the book there is less politics and power but more of symbols and traditions. Author writes about common symbols and traditions that are displayed and embraced within a community, and they provide a sense of safety and connection to the group. Not only the book provides a list of symbols, but describes them, especially the clothing specifics and their meaning and current situation (UHNÁK 2020:63).

The book is a valuable contribution to the academic community for it points out the origin of local community – ‘Čilejkars’ and their culture.

Reviewed Book

UHNÁK, Adam (2020): *Čilejkári – Tradícia ako symbol kultúrnej identity*. Trnava: Univerzita sv. Cyrila a Metoda 2020, 78 pp.