



Ethnoscripts and nationographies: imagining nations within ethnographic museums in East Central and Southern Europe

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Abstract

The article highlights comparatively several major steps in producing national master narratives within museums of ethnography and folklore heritage in East Central and Southeastern Europe. Drawing references to different countries since the end of the nineteenth century, it analyzes the role of ethnographic museums in the production of narratives about ethno-cultural specificity of national communities and in organizing the visions of national pasts along the notions of the “authenticity” and “uniqueness” of folklore traditions. The author points out the various initiatives in establishing such museums (imperial projects, nation-building agendas, cases of transferring examples from Western Europe, etc.) and outlines the influence that Herder’s ideas of the “Volk” had for the people of East Central and Southeastern Europe in pursuing ideas of national identity through representations of folklore heritage. Tracing the main points in the appearance of ethnographic museums in this region, the latter are regarded as closely related to the symbolic construction of nations and as core elements of imagining national communities until today. In the context of newly emerging nation states in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the interest in folklore traditions as repositories of national values appeared to be both an element of reasserting national specificity and an anchor of intransient cultural characteristics at the face of the evolving modernities and rapid social change. After a detailed attention to this function of ethnographic museums at the turn of the twentieth century, the article dedicated a separate attention to their input in maintaining policies of national representation during and after the communist regimes in the countries of East Central and Southeastern Europe – with an emphasis on the ideological appropriation of the ideas of the “Volk” in communist times and the revived interest in folklore heritage in contemporary world.

Introduction

An important element in the different national and regional history museums in countries of East Central and Southeastern Europe has been the special place held by representations of the past dedicated to folklore traditions and ethnographic heritage. Whether possessing the status of separate institutions, or being involved as units within larger museums, such exhibitions customarily follow a specific mode of representation that comprises ethnographic items, which are organized in separate collections and refer to a no longer existing everyday life: houses, household items, agricultural tools, ceramics, jewellery, weapons, folk costumes, musical instruments, transportation means, etc. Different attributes of rituals and festive ceremonies are also presented and they generally include artifacts related to religious practices, beliefs, wedding rites and other social and cultural activities. Whenever occupying an outdoor exhibition area, the variety of folk architecture is presented alongside water and wind-mills, buildings for craftsmen's activities, stone-paved paths and artificial streams crossed by small bridges. When prepared indoors, they focus mainly on housing interior and indoor maintained crafts. As the Museum of Ethnography in Cracow instructs us in its information bulletin, 'On the ground floor there is a chain of rooms, each one an authentic reproduction of a folk interior from different regions of Poland. Upstairs there's a dizzying array of folk costumes, whilst the display of painted Easter eggs could trump many a contemporary artist. Other outstanding displays include a rather splendid 17th century wayside shrine. Lovely reconstructions of traditional buildings which make up rooms on the ground floor, whilst upstairs the visitor is greeted by a corridor full of various traditional country dress and along the corridor is a maze of exhibits regarding school life, farming, various skills such as woodcarving, leather tooling, weaving, fishing, musical instrument making... then on to traditional Polish festivities in marriage, Easter and Christmas... very thorough and interesting.'¹

Such presentations can be seen in many similar museum units that display ethnographic and folklore heritage across Europe, and particularly in its East Central and Southeastern part, where they are widely spread and occur in almost every existing town as part of national and regional museums. These exhibits of vernacular heritage that is characteristic for a specific geographical area usually demonstrates the pride of the local population and the related state institutions; for other visitors, they pose the chance to observe realms of the social and cultural history of the "nation" – through artefacts and practices, which in their majority are no longer used or performed. Recreating aspects of a "traditional" way of life of ordinary people (most of them actually village inhabitants), the objects are destined to exhibit the representative elements of this traditional culture, one that is frequently supposed to possess "authenticity" and represent an "absolute aesthetic expression." The majority of these exhibitions promote the idea of uniqueness – both in terms of the collection, and of the special skills implied in the creation of the objects and the complex craftsmanship which had been carefully guarded by the masters of the past, have been handed down across generations and which have been unfortunately lost in the encounter with modernity.

Both through their research activity and through the policies of exhibition, museums of ethnographical and folklore heritage emphasize the role of inherited traditions and the clues for "genuine" self-identification, which people of the present would carry out with communities and

groups of the past and would embrace them as identical, albeit so distant. Providing outlets to cultural realms that have largely disappeared in the twentieth century (and in many cases already in the nineteenth century or earlier), such museums emphasize the value of tradition that they imply has remained preserved over centuries. Furthermore, they outline the significance of cultural specificity, which – despite the multitude of variants and shared expressions across regions and ethnic groups – insists on uniqueness and authenticity. No matter their involvement in overall expositions of history, most of these museums are, however, deeply a-historical by their nature, particularly by presenting a certain realm of the past as spanning across long temporal frames and by positioning communities and individuals within an ever-lasting temporal continuum. This not merely prolongs the voicing of such traditions in contexts where they have obviously disappeared, but also projects images and notions of ethnic and cultural peculiarity, centuries before most of these practices were documented in the ways they emerged in ethnographic exhibitions. More importantly, museums represent this heritage by customarily failing to reflect on the discourse that had motivated their construction, namely on their uses as identity tools and elements in the nation-building processes.

It is the bracketing of an important constructivist stage in the representation of such museum units, which attracts my attention here: as illustrating an approach that essentializes ethnographic and folklore heritage and refuses to acknowledge the elements of appropriation and utilization of this heritage for purposes closely related to the realm of the political. In my understanding, this appears both a symptom of the interpretation of traditional culture in the face of modernity, and a symptom of the region of East Central and Southeastern Europe, where the sensitivity to the preservation of this culture in the midst of several empires in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, gained special resonance. In a paradoxical way, for the people of this region, folk culture and folklore traditions were both core elements, on which collective notions of national specificity were grounded, and the passwords that enabled these communities' entrance into modernity.² In the context of enhancing national awareness and a strengthened will to adhere to the circle of modern European nations, the notions of “the people” and “the folk” showed up as tools to bridge the void caused by the accelerated temporalities and the symbolic clusters of meanings through which traditional collective identities could acquire their modern “hypostases.” They were those niches, which – as outlined by both European and local intellectuals, store both the traits of genuineness and the potential for making the modern nation, both the conservatism of traditions and the impetus toward social and political modernization.

The purpose of the current text is to shed light on several major points in the development and production of national master narratives within museums of ethnography and folklore heritage in East Central and Southeastern Europe. Touching upon several examples from different countries from the end of the nineteenth century until today, I will highlight the function of ethnographic exhibits in producing narratives about ethno-cultural specificity of national communities, in organizing national pasts according to the notions of the “folk,” and in guiding collective imagination within the parameters of centuries-old cultural traditions. Whilst regarding the development of these museums as closely related to the symbolic construction of the nation, the article will outline their role in essentializing folklore traditions and depicting them as repositories of intransient “national” values. The major objective of this text is to attempt to consider the practices of representing ethnographic heritage as expressions of a ‘homemade

hegemony' (see Comaroff and Comaroff 1992) which enables the independent nations in this part of Europe to remember their own pasts, to poeticize their cultural roots, and to facilitate their encounter with modernity.³ Whilst outlining particularly the input of ethnographic heritage in the birth of national museum in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the text will pay attention also to the uses made of ethnographic discourses during and after the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe, thus emphasizing the peculiar projections that it constructed in the face of recent ideological, technological, and societal transformations.

The establishment of ethnographic museums

A look into the history of museum institutions in this part of the continent reveals the key role of ethnographic collections in the process of identifying the nation and in the political efforts to define it within geographic territories and in ethnographic peculiarities. The creation of ethnographic museums occurred during the long time span of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries that saw the construction and crystallization of national identities. The appearance of museums of ethnography in East Central and Southeastern Europe was closely connected with the establishment of ethnographic collections related to imperial ambitions that resonated in the demonstrations of people and cultures within the empires at the time (see Barringer and Flynn 1998; Aronsson and Elgenius 2011). Whilst the British Museum developed special departments of Africa, Oceania and the Americas to represent the cultures of the indigenous peoples of four continents, the Russian Ethnographic Museum (founded in 1901 as a branch of the Russian Museum) sought to unite the peoples who lived on the vast territory between the Baltic Sea in the West and the Pacific Ocean in the East. In the territories within the Habsburg monarchy, during the nineteenth century, a number of provincial museums – Landesmuseen – were founded to register the characteristics of each region and its inhabitants (see Bentz and Raffler 2012). In the case of the Ottoman Empire, the last imperial power impacting on the Eastern and Southeastern Europe in the nineteenth century, it developed a major program of collecting various antiquities in its territory, which it exhibited in the Museum of the Empire, created in 1852. The documents they displayed were basically intended as sources of information for future rulers, so that they could gain knowledge and understanding over the land they were designated to reign. Encompassing large varieties of peoples, cultures and language, empires of the nineteenth century presented this variety through its representative forms within museum premises in imperial centres of power. By showing the treasures of folk culture, arts and crafts, they actually put on display their most important treasure – the vast number of ethnic, religious, and cultural groups accommodated by the widely stretched imperial realm.

An even more important factor in the development of ethnographic collections and exhibitions was the one coming from the grass-roots level (that is, from various ethnic groups within the existing empires and from their intellectuals), and this clearly reflected the impulses of various national communities for self-affirmation within the imperial domain. Forming the core of what would later become “national history museums,” many of the ethnographic collections that appeared throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were expected to assert “national” (e.g. ethnic and cultural) specificity and to promote a vision of common identity and unity of the respective population groups. Propagated vehemently by intellectuals throughout

the region, these visions found epistemological grounds in Herder's notion of the "Volk," which dominated the European philosophical and cultural space in the nineteenth century. According to this notion, the nation existed as something organic; it was distinguished with a unique "folk spirit" (Volksgeist) and a "character," which were clearly outlined and preserved as essential and long lasting traits throughout history. For Herder, language and thought had to be considered as unique for a given group of people – hence all the verbal folklore, dances, songs, music, etc. were inherently specific and marked by inherent peculiarity. All nations were themselves "unique" and "authentic" and they could hardly be merged in-between, hence the finding out, collecting, and studying of folklore traditions facilitated the maintenance of national identity and distinguished it from that of other nations. Guided by an emphasized Romanticist pathos, Herder insisted on the return to the rural culture, to the traditional, and the natural. The presentation of this culture in collective volumes and museum collections was perceived as enabling the possibilities of revealing the roots of the "Volk", of preserving the national spirit authentic, and safeguarding national specificity.

Herder's ideas were instrumental in triggering a tendency that quickly spread across all of Europe, where the Napoleonic cult to the Roman and Egyptian antiquities was gradually joined and sometimes substituted by the cult of antiquities, medieval heritage, and the archaic values of folklore and folk art. Within this process, the representations of the "national past" – through the selection and exhibition of ethnographic heritage in museums, was part of the entire process of development of modern European nations. At the end of the nineteenth century, nationalism and politics visibly interfered in the process of creating and developing museums in general, and particularly those hailing the cultural traits of the nation. In that period, however, most of the national groups in East Central and Southeastern Europe were within an imperial domain, so the interest in folk culture was inseparable from the goals of national autonomy and political independence, as pursued by the agenda of modern nationalism. Unlike other museums, however (e.g. the British Museum, the Hermitage, the Louvre, the Museum of Stockholm, etc.), which were created mostly on the basis of royal collections and which aimed to express universal values for the glory of the nation, most museums in this part of Europe had the idea of presenting mainly the "nationally specific," that found expression mostly within the traditions of the peasants communities. The latter was perceived as culturally specific, to the extent that it was related to the enormous peasant communities and it was considered to be "unpolluted" by foreign influences of neighbouring national communities or of the dominant groups within the imperial realm.

However, despite the romantic national inventions and the grass-roots initiatives for setting up ethnographic collections, throughout most of the nineteenth century in the territories and national groups of East Central Europe and the Western Balkans, museum policies were marked mostly by royal initiatives – of the Austrian Empire (1804-1867) and the Austro-Hungarian Empire (1867-1918). By the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, splendid buildings had been created in the capitals and major cities to host ethnographic collections. But in parallel to these institutions, many regional/ provincial museums were also founded, reflecting the specific relationship and – sometimes, tensions between the national and the provincial with regards to the imperial centres. The Museum of Ethnography in Budapest – one of the oldest institutions in Hungary, was founded as a subdivision of the Hungarian

National Museum in 1872, with a gradually developing focus on the disappearing values of the Hungarian culture (see Marosi and Klaniczay 2006). Around the same time, the study and the preservation of folklore traditions of the Hungarian population in Transylvania was a possibility to represent nationhood and to demonstrate self-differentiation in the imperial context by means of traditional artefacts surrounded by discourses of archaism and cultural uniqueness (see Szabó 2009). One of the first museums in the region – the Slovenian museum in Ljubljana was founded in 1821 with the purpose of developing the cultural life of the region. Including from the very beginning ethnographic collections (mainly costumes), it was soon perceived as a possible site for the promotion of the idea of a common past and heritage of all Slovene speaking inhabitants, and thus an expression of visions of pan-Slavism and Illyrism (see Lozic 2012: 81–82, 92). In a similar way, the National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo, which was founded in 1888 (ten years after the Austro-Hungarian Empire obtained the administration of the region) sought to promote Bosnia's cultural heritage and separate identity, as a means of taking the region out of the orbit of Serbian and Croatian nationalist claims (Ibid.).

For most of the Southern Slavs, the practice of collecting ethnographic materials evolved already in the 1840s, but it only developed as a significant phenomenon after the Pan-Slavic Exhibition that was held in Moscow in 1867. Although all collected items stayed in the Russian Empire, the exhibition had enormous importance, particularly for the people in the Balkans, where it initiated systematic collecting of ethnographic items and explorations across this region. The latter involved initiatives coming from different fields (history, archaeology, ethnography, and geography) in a common effort to recreate the historical past of a given national group and to provide self-explanatory demonstrations of its roots and cultural specificity (see Detchev 2010: 211-214, 256). Having gained enormous popular resonance on a grass-root level (e.g. in private collections and amateur studies), the desire to revive the bygone ages through the contribution of ethnographic traces critically increased as these states began to gain national independence during the nineteenth century or in the first quarter of the twentieth century. As independent nation states they invested enormous efforts into building up their educational and cultural institutions and developed large-scale campaigns for the preservation and popularization of historical and cultural heritage as a national value. In so doing, a range of state institutions (ministries, universities, public associations, etc) were involved and special instructions were distributed for gathering materials related to the nations' historical and ethnographic pasts. In Bulgaria, the establishment of a museum institution started immediately after the national liberation of 1878, leading to the creation in 1892 of the *Naroden Muzej* (People's / National Museum), whose ethnographic collection evolved into a separate institution in 1906. In Belgrade, the Ethnographic museum was established in 1901, after half a century of organized collecting of ethnographic items. Permanent exhibitions of major collections of ethnographic heritage were formed soon after the establishment of these institutions, and although the gathered material in the collections was from the entire territory of the Balkans, the exhibited items were exclusively those related to the “national heritage,” i.e. the one belonging to the ethnic and religious majorities in the respective nation states.

From a certain perspective, the creation of museums of ethnographic heritage in the nineteenth and early twentieth century responded to the need of learning what existed as cultural traits and traditions within state territories, and of expressing this through the exhibited material

objects. However, the major emphasis in these collections and exhibitions was on the illustration of ethnic and cultural specificity. The diversity of ethnic and religious groups that existed as motley patterns under the garments of centuries of imperial rule fell apart into ethnic and national labels – each laying claim to a single “national” identity and claiming centuries-old “rooted-ness” in the respective geographic territory. By itself, it reflected a peculiar policy of time and space – one that posed a given “nation” along an indefinite teleological axis and onto a concrete geographic territory where it was seen as if having lived forever. This intertwined in a curious way the project of modernity with the project of conserving the specificity inherent in “folk culture”: by preserving the age-old forms of traditional culture each of these nation states could imagine its involvement and place among the ranks of modern nations. More importantly, it included the citizens of these states in what B. Trencsenyi calls an ‘ethno-pedagogy,’ i.e. educating the people by confronting them with their past, however, a past that would bear clearly outlined ethnic parameters and an emphasized “culturally peculiar” character (see Trencsenyi 2009). Furthermore, the creation of ethnographic museums in East Central and Southeastern Europe was accompanied by the discourse that this reflected the advancement of these countries – as being able to establish institutions that would reflect the distance that they have maintained to their pre-modern past.⁴ In a curious way, the practices of exhibiting ethnographic heritage in museums of the region revealed a condition for the respective states to embrace with modernity and to join the company of other more advanced nations. Ethnographic museums were thus not only territories where different national groups sought to produce differences in-between, but also spaces where the tension between modernity and traditions constituted the core of national representation.

The turn of the 20th century and the collection of folklore heritage

Another important impetus in the development of ethnographic museums as hosting age-long and pristine national identity was the practice of open-air museums of late nineteenth century, which hosted ethnographic objects of arts, crafts and household materials within a village of especially established houses that often represented the architecture of different regions (see Chappell 1999). The first such museum was founded in 1891 in Skansen neighbourhood in Stockholm, and was followed by the ethnographic village of Szentendre near Budapest (1896), and by many other similar museums in the other Scandinavian countries: in Norway – Bigdoy (founded 1894) and Lillehammer (founded 1887), in Finland – Seurassari (founded 1909), etc. The idea of these museums was to recreate the traditional life and crafts of the populations of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, presenting them in “live” demonstrations. At the beginning of the twentieth-century, open-air museums appeared in most European states, presenting traditional ways of life before the industrial revolution. The new forms of industrial production gradually displaced traditional crafts and the appearance of these museums was a guarantee for their preservation for generations to come. A visible tendency existed, however, of outlining a particular province as epitomizing old and traditional values and of labelling it as representing a “national” tradition that would surpass local specificities and would preside above regional variations within a given country.

The appearance of these museums and the gradual spread of their examples to different countries of the European continent, outlines the importance of yet another issue – of

“ethnographic urgency” – that has particular resonance in East Central and Southeastern Europe. This emergent need to undertake ethnographic research – as stated by D. Sherman, “comes from the impending disappearance of the culture under study” and poses thus the ethnographer as “a rescuer of the threatened or dying culture” (Sherman 2004: 691). And indeed, for most of the nation states in the region, the persistent appeal for recording representative examples of the quickly changing traditional folk culture under modern influences was a reaction against the perceived threats to cultural identity, as resulting from both the cultural impact from the West and the contestations with immediate neighbours. In late nineteenth century, initiatives for preserving “genuine” forms of folk traditions appeared in all parts of the region and the latter were propagated as holding crucial significance for the nation and the future generations. However, the idealization of selected representative forms of the tradition led also to a somewhat distanced approach to folk culture as an exotic realm. A prevailing attitude was that the emblematic examples of folk art showed the exquisite aesthetic sense of the people. The political romanticism and the tendency of aestheticizing the national past urged ethnographers to collect mainly examples with special artistic qualities, sometimes – as in the frequently exhibited national costumes – combining elements from different clothes to form a real aesthetic set. Furthermore, many of these items found representation in various paintings that sought to depict the folk life style and to form a major ingredient in the imagination of the national past. On an international level, the cultural self-representations of nations formed a particular highlight in world exhibitions at the threshold of the twentieth century, where national cultures selected separate elements of their traditional cultures and exhibited them alongside those of other nations, seeking appreciation about the beauty of their cultural traditions (see Stoklund 1994). Taken out of their context of existence, they attained the status of works of art with special value that could justify a nation’s lag in terms of political or technological development, science or the arts.

In the interwar period, the affirmation of autonomous “national identities” – as reflected in museums of ethnographic and folklore heritage, gained its momentum after the dissolution of the three great empires in the region – the Habsburg, the Russian, and the Ottoman ones. A particularly interesting case was the newly established Kingdom of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs (later renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia), where the policies of ethnic and cultural self-identification were in parallel (yet, very often in conflict) with the construction of a common identity under a South-Slavic label. In 1919, the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb was established, with holdings presenting exclusively “Croatian” ethnographic heritage stretching across the territories of three cultural zones – Pannonian, Dinaric, and Adriatic, and “purging” its links with other areas in this part of the Balkan peninsular. The emphasis on the three main nationalities – Slovenes, Croats and Serbs in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was accompanied by a relative neglect of the cultural heritage of other ethnic groups in state territory, most notably amongst them being those of the Bosnia and Herzegovina regions. Whilst, a Museum to present this heritage was created in Banja Luka only in 1930, it had a clearly regional status (unlike the “national” ones in Belgrade, Zagreb, and Ljubljana) and was an object of rigid reframing alongside Croatian or Serbian identity in territorial and political shifts during World War II, as well as afterwards (see Lozic 2012). A question, which has still remained unexplored with regards to most countries on the European continent, is the state of ethnographic practice during the Second World War, particularly in states with totalitarian regimes, where the new interest in

promoting the ideas of the folk was closely connected with new political instrumentalization of the visions of nations' cultural peculiarities.

The communist period and after

The establishment of the communist systems in the countries of East Central and Southeastern Europe after World War II led to a new upsurge of interest in the culture of the “people,” and in ethnographic heritage as epitomizing both the national spirit and the role of the “masses” in historical development. Folklore was perceived as bearing particular importance not only as a valuable heritage from the past, but also as a factor in building up contemporary culture, as a main ingredient of its popular and “mass” character, and a central point for the propagated link between the ruling ideology and the people (see Vukov 2011). This conditioned the flourishing of ethnographic museums in all the countries of the socialist bloc, which was expressed in the opening of numerous local and regional museum units dedicated to traditional culture and involved a range of specialists, for whom collection and preservation of ethnographic heritage turned into a major form of professional activity.⁵ During the entire communist period, ethnographic museums were transformed into an element of the propaganda system of the totalitarian states – as reflected in the postulate that folk culture was a creation of the “working people,” in the overall neglect of religious themes in ethnographic exhibitions, and in the emphasis on the Slavic elements in folk culture. An especially important point was the understanding that traditional folklore culture illustrated well the “democratic” and inherently “socialist” ideas well before the beginning of the nineteenth century. The impetus of preserving the traces of this culture resulted in creating numerous open-air museums and complexes with “traditional” architecture, where to demonstrate again – as if in a display case – the valuable objects of an already extinguished culture.

With regards to the national element in ethnographic exhibitions of the communist period, it is important to note that under the label of ideological brotherhood and joint struggle of accomplishing socialism, most of the museums of ethnographic heritage of the communist period, maintained a strongly ethnocentric and sometimes overtly nationalist discourse. Affirming the regional and local specificity of exhibited items, they insisted on a presumed “authenticity” of the ethnic and cultural groups, which was asserted as finding its highest expression in the culture of the nation, already the communist nation. The spread of these nationalist policies of rootedness and ever-present ethno-cultural specificity could be seen throughout the entire region, with a climactic application in Ceausescu's Romania, Tito's Yugoslavia, and Zhivkov's Bulgaria in 1970s and 1980s. A widely shared characteristic throughout the region was that within the national territory, minority groups hardly found due attention in ethnographic exhibitions on both national and regional levels. When they were at all presented in ethnographic collections, it was mainly to introduce a nuance of cultural diversity, but they were never permitted to take on a more representative character – even in regions where minority groups may have had a significant presence. This also guided the specific approach to regions and regional museums representations of ethnographic heritage during communist times. Whilst regional identities were stimulated and promoted as following unique cultural specificity, they were also believed as variants of a core model – the one of national culture. The dualism between the regional and the national identity was particularly well expressed in the case of the Socialist Federal Republic of

Yugoslavia, where each of the six republics carried out their national and regional politics within the collective framework of the federal state. There could hardly be a surprise that since the 1990s many of these densely knit strategies of embedded-ness within the national and the ethnically autochthonous were objects of systematic debates that searched for overcoming and rigid exclusion, and thus triggered new trajectories of rethinking the nationally specific in the existing ethnographic collections of states that belonged to former Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union.

Conclusion

Interestingly enough, the communist period showed again a reproduction of a pattern that was established a century before, and which demonstrated a resistance to modification in the course of time. The “nation” indeed proved to have a lasting and “timeless” occurrence – at least as seen in such collections and exhibits. It is particularly interesting to observe the contemporary attempts by post-socialist societies to distance themselves from the policies of the communist period without discarding the nation-guided representation in ethnographic exhibitions. In some respects, there was a visible tendency of perceiving the ethnographic discourse as a niche where museum policies might find refuge in their estrangement from politicized and historically sensitive topics. The end of the communist rule in countries of East Central and Southeastern Europe marked thus a starting point not only for the re-evaluation of the ideological policies underlying ethnographic exhibitions during communist times, but also for the revival of the presence that folklore heritage could have in the contemporary world. A major expression in this regard was the emergence of exhibitions dedicated to cultural diversities and to traditions of different ethnic groups within the nation states. While being a reaction against the decades of silencing about these “alternatives” to the national (and sometimes nationalist) discourse, it also tells out about the significance of traditions carried out and exhibited in present-day museum contexts. An important point was that these collections were surrounded already not by the appreciation of their utmost value for the “nation,” but rather by their input in the cultures developed historically within a given territory. Thus, aside from providing possibilities to exhibit diversity within the national map of ethnographic heritage, such new initiatives helped also to disentangle this heritage from its national embedded-ness and to view traditions as protean realms, where the national being has been only one of its hypostases.⁶

A key problem faced by museums of ethnographic and folklore heritage nowadays is not so much what resources for representation to find in their no doubt abundant collections. Rather, it is a matter of how to transform their spaces to appeal not only to foreigners and exoticized visitors, but also to locals; how to “de-orientalize” ethnographic exhibits, and how to make their messages adequate to a world that seeks to exit the national frames of interpretation. In ethnographic museums, the link with the present has become largely invisible. In the context of rapidly changing societies and cultures, they are often perceived as a conservative milieu. Reminding about the past, such museums prefer do not address issues and contradictions in contemporary world, they are as if “outside reality” and demonstrate a discourse that is oriented exclusively towards oneself. As D. Sherman phrases it, in them, we are ‘frozen in a perpetual ethnographic present: the time of the other’ (Sherman 2004: 698). The overcoming of this self-complacent character of ethnographic museums in East Central and Southeastern Europe is the

major stake that would create the conditions of their dialogue with the constantly changing world in which the boundaries of nations, cultures, and technologies are constantly at stake and overcome.

By means of a concluding remark, I would like to raise again some of the questions that this politics of “time–space” that is demonstrated in ethnographic museums of East Central and Southeastern Europe poses to present-day visitors and researchers. What motivated the turning of namely the ethnographic heritage in the centres of collective identities for the people of East Central and Southeastern Europe? Was it only a compensatory mechanism to make up for the relative lack of other resources in terms of available collections in the periods of their nation building, or it was rather an impulse to prove states’ origins in a contested geographical territory?! What was so “unique” in objects, which in the vast majority of cases appear on the contrary as widespread and similar in appearance and tend to demonstrate a shared cultural pattern that existed throughout the entire region? What made, and still makes, the reproduction of this model possible and what maintains this “self-evidence” of ethnographic exhibitions – the right of the local and the national to tell its own history in the way it considers proper, and to preserve it unchanged for a long time period? What nurtures the seeming “neutrality” of ethnographic collections and their pretence of staying aside from political considerations? The question is furthermore pertinent when bearing in mind that each of these exhibitions was inherently political, and that the very discourse of the nation was a political construct. But, as the purpose of every representation – especially the one in museums – is not only to exhibit, but also to conceal, we can regard these exhibitions as instances of creating certain narrative fictions, which nation groups would not cease to entertain, but which researchers would have as their duty to question.

Notes

¹ http://www.cracow-life.com/culture/culture_details/666-Ethnographic_Museum

² For a thorough elaboration of this thesis, see Mishkova 2009, particularly her introduction to the edited volume.

³ For an overview of the policies in representing the nation in museums, see Boswell and Evans 1999; Cuisenier 1980; Kaplan 1994; Löfgren 1989. On the multi-faceted relationship between museums, modernity, and new forms of social and cultural memory, see Bennet 1995; Crane 2000; Herzfeld 1996; Huyssen 1995; Sandberg 2003.

⁴ For a subtle analysis of positioning communities along temporal continuum, and particularly between the axes of progress and backwardness, see Fabian 1983.

⁵ For an overview of these tendencies, see Sharenkova 2010.

⁶ For general overviews of the challenges in representing diversity in contemporary museums, see Macdonald and Fyfe 1996; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1997.

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