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## Introduction: The (re)invention of tradition and identity politics in four European case studies

Ann Wand

The idea for this special issue of *Ethnoscripts* initially started as a result of preliminary fieldwork in the German-speaking province of South Tyrol, Italy, in September 2016. At the time, I was working on a research proposal under the direction of Dr Nicolette Makovicky of the School of Interdisciplinary Area Studies, University of Oxford, as part of a team research assignment with Dr Robin Smith, now of the University of Leiden, Dr Gareth Hamilton, University of Latvia, and Dr Dimitra Kofti, Max Plank Institute of Social Anthropology, Halle, Germany. Since our project revolved around identity politics in borderland communities as expressed through European festivals, I visited Vipiteno (Sterzing), Italy, on the Austrian-Italian border to learn more about male associations and their involvement in the yearly Krampus festival (5th December). I was particularly interested in their use of 'black face' as a way of expressing a local, masculine and predominately German-speaking identity.

As a result of our preliminary research into European festivals, such as the Zvoncari in Croatia, the 'Krampus runs' in Styria, Austria, and the Merio performance in Sochos, Greece, we started to notice a series of themes that kept cropping up across the various border performances (for example, gender, [white] nationalism, masculinity and immigration issues, to name but a few). In addition, we observed a noticeable disconnect between the classical anthropological literature on ritual, tradition and performance, which focuses primarily on non-European case studies (see van Gennep's *The rites of passage* 1960 [1909]; Victor Turner's *The ritual process: structure and anti-structure* 1969; and Huntington and Metcalf's *Celebrations of death: the anthropology of mortuary ritual* 1979), when compared to the more recent studies in the anthropology of Europe. Indeed, a quarter of a century ago, Cohen pointed out that, while '[m]any studies of urban religious and ethnic movements have been published in recent years [...] the structure and significance of seemingly frivolous, playful cultural movements like carnivals, fairs and festivals, have been relatively little explored' (1993: 1).

Therefore, in March 2017 I decided to expand our research into European festivals by organizing a conference on 'Winter Festivals and Traditions' through the School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography at the University of Oxford. The series of papers in this special issue focus on four main case studies, two of which are a direct result of that conference: the Krampus

festival in Salzburg, Austria (Matthäus Rest and Gertraud Seiser), the Plough Monday traditions of the East Anglian fenlands (Richard D.G. Irvine), culinary nationalism in Catalan festivals (Venetia Johannes) and the feasts of St George and St Elijah in Bosnia (Safet HadžiMuhamedović).

As the anthropology of Europe continues to establish itself firmly in the wider discipline, an uneasy divide has emerged between the classical literature and the study of Europe today. While anthropologists such as Cesare Poppi have tried to incorporate Hobsbawm and Ranger's notion of the 'invention of tradition' into their work – in Poppi's case, his work on the Ladin-speaking community of northern Italy (1992) – limited references to European case studies in classical anthropological literature suggest the need to merge classical themes and comparisons with non-European material with the anthropology of Europe in order to avoid the Occidentalising 'west versus the rest' dilemma, which can be found in some aspects of the discipline, as Irvine has pointed out in previous personal discussions. In order to fill this lacuna, this issue sets out to focus on two main themes: the (re)invention of tradition, an idea first mooted by Hobsbawm and Ranger ([1983] 1992), and its relationship with identity politics.

As van Gennep's (1960/1909) and Victor Turner's (1969) concepts of liminality and *communitas* play a central role in the construction of many European festivals, it is this ritualized communal response to social 'structure' (through the lens of identity politics) by the 'unstructured [...] or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders' (Turner 1969: 96) that is prevalent during the liminal phase of some rites of passage. While Turner refers to religious beliefs and practices in the social sciences 'coming to be seen as decisive keys to the understanding of how people think and feel about [economic, political and social] relationships, and about the natural and social environments in which they operate' (1969: 6), the same could also be said of secular and religious festivals and the traditions incorporated within them.

Festival performers' reactions to social structure (whether positive or negative) can be found in historically male group associations, such as those that participate in the Krampus and Plough Monday festivities through the actions of their participants. In addition, when examining HadžiMuhamedović's research on the Bosnian feast days of St George and St Elijah in response to the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, I noticed that his work mirrors Delamont's (1995: 155) observations that '[t]he social structure of saints reflects the social structure of society' in the minds of the individuals who revere them, while culinary feast days, like the seasonal food stuffs of Catalonia, demonstrate nationalism in response to Spanish territoriality, as Catalans use food to celebrate themselves in order to preserve their regional-cum-national identity.<sup>1</sup>

1 Turner argues that 'when a social group whether it be a family, clan, village, nation, congregation or church celebrates a particular event or occasion, such as a birth, harvest, or national independence, it also "celebrates itself"' (1982: 16).

Yet, despite these festivals' attempts to encourage a shared or diverse identity in order to 'remove tensions arising in the process of maintaining social structure' (see Rancane 2011: 366), performers' interpretations of supposedly historically 'accurate' carnivalesque practices raise questions over whether certain traditions performed today are still reflexive of social concerns and political issues. In addition, performers' identities are also brought to the fore, as some masked and unmasked performances provide vehicles with which to express larger concerns regarding immigration and identities, whether ethno-religious, nationalist or rural. This special issue's focus on the performer, alongside the festivals' participants, also functions as a means to fully recognise and account for the complex and ambiguous ways in which performers are made sense of in certain political settings, while also allowing the authors of this special issue to move beyond the boundaries of Hobsbawm and Ranger's work in order to add to the growing body of literature in the anthropology of Europe.

### The (re)invention of tradition

The (re)invention of tradition goes well beyond the confines of secular European festivals, as I discovered while teaching an anthropology tutorial at the University of Oxford on neo-paganism in Britain. The late Margot Adler, reporter for America's National Public Radio (NPR), was a self-proclaimed pagan practitioner who was drawn to the neo-pagan movement because it '[searched] in the ashes'<sup>2</sup> of pre-Christian traditions, which had been destroyed over the course of two millennia. Neo-pagans, it was discovered, were re-creating these traditions by searching for songs and ancient lullabies to invent vibrant traditions that were at home with their 'intellectual integrity' (ibid.) and aligned with their ethics and ideals.<sup>3</sup>

While 'invented traditions' are designed to 'establish continuity with a suitable historic past', Hobsbawm and Ranger argue that this connection with history 'need not be lengthy [...] into the assumed mists of time' ([1983] 1992: 1-2). Although the neo-pagan movement tends to associate itself with a very distant part of history (see Adler 1986 for more information), the East Anglian fenlands' Plough Monday traditions were revived starting in the 1980s. Moreover, it should be stressed that these invented traditions and their link with history are 'factitious', as 'they are responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations'. In addition, they 'attempt to structure at least some parts of social life' through unchanging ritual repetition in response to social change (see Hobsbawm and Ranger [1983] 1992: 2).

2 See Talarski 2014.

3 More information on Margot Adler's work on the neo-pagan movement can be found in her revised edition of *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-worshippers, and other Pagans in America Today* (1986).

The Krampus festival in Austria and South Tyrol is one such example. During fieldwork I was constantly reminded that these rituals and traditions were historically ‘Christian’, however regardless of conflicting research which indicates the contrary (see Raedisch 2016), Rest and Seiser found that some Krampus practitioners use their traditions to reinforce a white male identity in reaction to social changes like non-European immigration and female emancipation.

Catalonia, on the other hand, and its gastronomic calendar provide a unique alternative to the invention of tradition in the form of what Johannes calls ‘gastronationalism’, a term coined by Michaela DeSoucey (2010). The use of food to promote national identity encourages social cohesion just as much as the use of flags or anthems to personify the idea of ‘the nation’.<sup>4</sup>

Beyond the use of cultural symbols, Cesare Poppi argues that, ‘These invented traditions are sometimes used to reconstruct a unified national and ethnic identity in order to receive group recognition and distinction from surrounding neighbours’ (1992: 113). Conversely, in Safet HadžiMuhamedović’s study of Bosnian saints and the courtroom of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), the nationalist agenda of certain former Yugoslav politicians resulted in what the author calls an ‘*invention of the absence of shared tradition*’ in order to ‘unimagine’ (my word) the shared lives of Serbs, Croats and Roma and reinforce Bosnia’s diverse identities.

This supports comments made by Hobsbawm and Ranger to the effect that the use of invented traditions could be an indicator of much wider social problems (see 1992: 12). With Creed (2011) and Howell (2013) showing how the survival of festivals and devotion to them are able to provide a window into socio-economic and political concerns, ‘tradition’ is no longer merely a representation of culture, it also becomes a response to outside groups, factors, (nation) states and changes to society and the environment.

## Identity politics

According to Abner Cohen in his *Masquerade Politics: Explorations in the Structure of Urban Cultural Movements*, ‘[a] cultural movement is *ipso facto* also a political movement. Carnival may [...] appear to be a pure cultural performance, but it is inevitably political from the start’ (1993: 154). When Gerald Creed conducted fieldwork in rural regions of Bulgaria, his study of the Kukeri festival showed how its ‘unique national character’ was used ‘to protect and maintain a Bulgarian essence’ (2011: 18). Just as my doctoral research in South Tyrol showed how German-speakers try to preserve their identity through German culture and education (Wand 2016, 2017), for some individuals the continuing of tradition reinforces their sense of self and thus

4 For information on the use of ‘new symbols’ to promote ‘national movements and states’, see Hobsbawm and Ranger [1983] 1992: 7.

promotes their identity. In addition, certain customs emphasize one's sense of place by indicating where practitioners come from.

When Melody Cox conducted ethnographic fieldwork on the Mamoiada festival in Sardinia, her research on the use of masks by Mamuthones and Issohadores practitioners perpetuated the 'physical, biological and cultural boundaries linking local people to [the village of] Mamoiada as a place'. Moreover, Cox states that Mamoiada identity is connected to one's attachment to the land (2015: 82).

In her research on the *Festa del Badalisc*, an epiphany festival in an Italian mountain village in Lombardy, Francesca Howell discusses the importance of land as an agent that can impact and influence those who inhabit it (2013: 2). In the *Badalisc* festival, the *Badalisc* (or woodland serpent):

*is a symbol of the land and is a connection to nature. He is the Man/Animal. He comes from the land and is captured by peasants, so it's all from nature. As far as sense of place, well, if the Badalisc<sup>5</sup> were missing, the festival would have no meaning [...] it's the symbolism that makes [the festival] special and that gives it meaning. The Badalisc makes it! He gives it all the sense of place. (interview [with] F.C. Howell, Andrista, 5 January 2009). (Howell 2013: 7)*

This idea of a 'festival' as connected to the land helps us to understand the festival's importance in that it not only reflects one's personal identity but also provides a connection to one's roots and one's neighbours. In research on the Bosnian feast days of St Elijah and St George, Safet HadžiMuhamedović found that the Field of Gacko was a space for Orthodox Christians and Muslims to jointly celebrate the saints' seasonal festivals. Before the Yugoslav war of the 1990s, these feast days emphasized a shared identity that was expressed in food, competitions and arranged marriages, despite the 'nationalist destruction' of the war's aftermath. This joint attachment to 'place', whether cognisant or not, is also reflexive of the German concept of *Heimat* (homeland), the place where one is born and where one comes from, which provides a 'sentiment of belonging and of territorial identification' (Giudiceandrea 2007: 138). While not always 'politically loaded', *Heimat* represents a 'precious love' or private asset reminding locals to protect their region from things that are foreign and obscure to it (ibid.; see Fait 2011: 104; Zoderer 1999). This may explain why some members of Rest and Seiser's Krampus troupes are anti-Islamic in their ethnocentric viewpoints.

As for the nationalistic component in some European festivals, nationalism has been called a 'traditionalistic ideology' used to glorify folklore and mythological traditions (Eriksen 1993: 100), even though these traditions may simply consist of re-created falsehoods. While Kavanagh argues that

5 My emphasis.

'All identity [...] is constructed in the double sense of similarity and difference with respect to "Others"' (1994: 76), Lanthaler claims that '[g]lobalisation has not spared provincial and remote rural areas and whoever feels overexposed [from looking] for identification with his/her own small group' (2007: 230). This can be compared with Johannes' work in that Catalan identity is made manifest through an 'imagined community' (see Anderson [1983] 2006), where Catalan's gastronomic calendar, through the region's 'shared consumption of the same foods', connects the individual or 'small group' (my words) to the 'greater Catalan nation'.

Finally, despite the many components of identity, which are expressed throughout this collection's four case studies (for example, rural identity, gender, ritual and communal violence, ethnicity, resistance, national, regional and border identity), the concept of racism and the use of 'black face' is evident in some communal activities. While in some instances 'black face' is also accompanied by violence (see Creed 2011; personal preliminary fieldwork in September 2016), this masked performance can also shift identity, as 'Masks enable individuals in varied ways to transcend their everyday, commonplace roles and conventions' (Honigmann 1977: 270) to provide anonymity (*ibid.*; also Raedisch 2016). However, like the Straw Bear festival during the Plough Monday festivities, controversies have erupted over the years, as Dutch performers at the 'Black Pete' festival have debated whether to 'blacken up' performers in response to racist allegations (see Millington 2013; BBC 2016). Even though Creed's informants in Bulgaria insist that the black skin is 'just a disguise', it suggests 'racist interpretations' to those arriving from other countries (2011: 199). As for Richard D.G. Irvine's work, the use of 'black face' for the Plough Monday festivities has resulted in mixed political responses, performers being concerned over whether or not to use 'black face' in order to avoid associations with racism. Other Fenland residents find that the allegations of racism represent 'double standards' and are 'bloody stupid', fearing that 'political correctness' might interfere with the preservation of English culture and rural identity.

Therefore, the following case studies function as a broad image of how identity and politics coincide when people navigate their way through social concerns by means of performance and 'traditional' festivities.

### The four European case studies

As mentioned above, this special issue is divided into four European case studies. While the March 2017 conference hosted at the University of Oxford concentrated on winter festivals, this issue plans to discuss seasonal festivals throughout the year by representing a variety of interpretations of performers' political ideologies as expressed through European traditions.

The first two articles concentrate primarily on mumming<sup>6</sup> festivals and masked parades where the performers wear masks or express themselves in 'black face' as part of their costume attire. Both festivals are known for their violence, real or symbolic, especially after dark, provoking discussions on the margins of the role of misconduct as a response to 'appropriate' social behaviour.

Starting with Richard D.G. Irvine's paper on the Plough Monday festivities in Britain's East Anglian fenlands, the winter Straw Bear festival is traditionally designed to commence the 'new agricultural year'. Part of the Plough Monday celebrations, in the early twentieth century it was suppressed by local officials due to cadging, only for it to be revived as part of the British folk revival in Whittlesey in 1980 and in Ramsey in 2009. While historically the traditions were connected to the agricultural landscape and labour on the land, the shift to mechanised arable farming and the decline of farm labour does nothing to undermine the importance of locals' relationship with the land. Instead, what has developed is a rural identity that has been transformed in the light of social and economic changes. In its stead is a tradition that promotes local identity through modes of 'anti-structure' (see Turner 1969) in two East Anglian communities.

The Krampus festival in rural Austria brings with it a variety of emotions, from its violent overtones to its use of exotic demonic masks, which can be threatening when performers scare onlookers. In addition, Matthäus Rest and Gertraud Seiser state that Krampus troupes reflect the performers' identity by re-establishing the role of the male figure in society through their masculine and disruptive behaviour. Furthermore, as the women maintain subordinate roles in supporting and feeding the Krampus troupes, gendered demarcations are made evident in this festival through one's place (and agency) being indicated in the performance.

In the following article, Venetia Johannes focuses on nationalism as represented through food festivals. In her research concerning Catalonia's gastronomic calendar, Johannes concentrates on how food can function as an identity marker in the wake of Catalonia's secessionist politics. As the Catalan government and the Spanish state have historically been in opposition, the recent independence referendum in October 2017 has increased regional tensions, resulting in a serious political crisis in Spain. But moreover, this referendum has highlighted the importance of a pro-Catalan identity, with Catalans divided over whether to remain a part of Spain or to go for independence. By examining the foods available on three national holidays (St George's Day, St John's Eve and Catalonia's national day), as well as through Catalonia's 'anti-festival', Johannes explores how certain Catalan foods have become emblematic of a pro-Catalan identity.

6 According to Gerald Creed, 'Mumming is a generic term for masked rituals of apparent European provenance commonly performed at Christmas and New Year, but also around Shrovetide and All Saints Day' (2011: 16).



The final article discusses Christian, Muslim and Roma relationships before the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, showing how the two seasonal feast days of St George and St Elijah demonstrate previous multicultural unity. Despite evidence placed before the International Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) indicating that these three groups have always been divided, Safet HadžiMuhamedović searches through the ‘debris’ of the Tribunal’s legal documents for evidence of a shared identity. Moreover, he also questions expert witnesses at the Tribunal, one of them a leading anthropologist, who described intergroup relations as historically contentious by examining the prosecutors’ informant interviews and comparing them to his own ethnographic research.

The special issue concludes with an Afterword on ritual, conflict and identity written by Robert Parkin who provides the reader with a general discussion of classic interpretations of liminality and *communitas*. In addition, he explores how contexts of hostility are expressed outside festival performances, questioning Durkheim’s claim that rituals necessarily convey notions of harmony and unity to their participants or congregations; in fact, hostility and difference may also be represented, though it is important to distinguish between what happens in the actual ritual performance from external circumstances that may have more to do with identity politics. He also examines how human agency is involved in the invention of tradition, arguing that it is up to the performers to decide which rituals are ‘authentic’ and relevant in the present.

By gathering these articles around the issues of the (re)invention of tradition and identity politics in Europe, we seek to open a lively discussion concerning the merging of European ethnography with the classic literature in the anthropology of ritual, tradition and performance so that we may contribute towards genuine comparativism in social and cultural anthropology.

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