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## Utilisation of Carnival Case of north-eastern Slovenia

**Abstract:** Article/presentation focuses on two Carnivals, which can reveal socio-economic and cultural conditions and continuum of traditional culture. The first one is the most important Carnival in Slovenia named Kurentovanje in Ptuj. The second one takes place in Maribor, the capitol of the region of Štajerska. Article analyses these carnivals as an excellent cases of invented tradition transformed in the process of commercialisation and nationalisation.

**Key words:** Carnival, Slovenia, urbanisation, post-socialist transitions, nationalisation of culture

### Kurentovanje in Ptuj

It was initiated in 1959 by the head of city gymnasium Drago Hasl (1900-1976), who later became the first president of the Committee for Kurentovanje and in 1968 the president of newly established Folkloristic Society in Ptuj. Previously he was writing articles on foloklore, music and library science. He was a distinguished cultural activist of the town of Ptuj. Watching very loose concept of the yearly masked processions in Ptuj and reading contemporary ethnographic analyses on masking, he felt that carnival offers an excellent story and possibility for the development of local tourism. He wanted to preserve customs and habits from "demonic times". Since the mask of "kurent" was especially popular and strong in this sense the carnival was named Kurentovanje. (Kmetec-Friedl 2003: 113)

On 27 February 1960 Historical Society of Ptuj organised first ethnographic event. The participation of masks and spectators from surrounding villages was surprisingly big. Folkloristic group from nearby village Markovci performed, spearsmen were dancing; they were followed by "ploughers", the "rusa", the "bear", the "fairies", the "cockerels" and the "korants". The whole performance was filmed by national television. (Berce 1998: 54)

Next year even more groups from nearby villages have responded to the call of Historical Society. In 1961 organisers also managed to attract ethnographic groups from western Slovenia ("Laufarji") and eastern Slovenia

("Borovo Gostüvanje"). To host as many ethnographic groups and visitors as possible, during 1960s Committee upgraded Kurentovanje on streets with a meeting in city stadium in the morning of Carnival Sunday. The whole performance was directed by famous opera director Franjo Potočnik.

In 1966 a Counselling body of eighteen local members and distinguished artists and scholars was appointed, among them Niko Kuret — ethnographer from Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, and famous painter France Mihelič. In 1969 they decided to move the event from the stadium back to the streets "to strengthen connections between masked participants and spectators". Carnival groups from abroad also joined the event. Because of weather conditions and financial difficulties the event had to be modest but tourist potential was not neglected. Foreign televisions were attracted and tens of thousand visitors from neighbouring countries attended.

Next important step for the development of Kurentovanje came in 1994 when the Carnival was extended to several days and the majority of events was placed in the big Carnival tent in the outskirts of the city. The main procession was still held on Carnival Sunday. (Berce 1998: 53-79)

Beside that, a great ceremony in front of city hall was added. This opening ceremony announced a shift of the municipality government to the Carnival and its Prince — always an important person from the region. At that time Ptuj also became a member of FECC — Foundation of European Carnival, which helped to gain even bigger international reputation (Internet source).

In 2007 Kurentovanje started on February 10 and closed on February 20. Organiser of 47<sup>th</sup> Carnival Festival — Consortium Kurent — attracted participants and visitors with rich programme of dances and musicians, breaking various records, awards for best masks and with regional gastronomy. And of course, yet another biggest summit of Kurents in the history of the Ptuj's Carnival was expected. (Internet source)

## Who is Kurent?

Kurent or Korant is one of the most prominent masks in Slovenia. The hypothesis on his geographical and temporal origins are very diverse: for some he is authentic mask from Drava plain, for others he was brought by Uskoks, people who were fleeing from Ottomans in 16<sup>th</sup> Century (Gačnik 2003; Simonič 2004).

Anyway, he is located in Indo-European space between Greece and Scandinavia. Niko Kuret was convinced that Kurent is a link of a larger chain of furry masks. There are supposed to be around one hundred of furry masks in the region from today's Bulgaria to Germany and Switzerland (Kuret 1984; Gačnik 2003: 125) Double name of this mask — Kurent and Korant in sur-

passingly the result of its modernisation: ethnologists and some villagers prefer to use the term Korant because it designates its original setting, while name Kurent designates relocation of the mask from village to the city of Ptuj and its spreading to national and international level (Gačnik 2003: 145)

According to "traditional believes" Korant is a demon, chasing winter away and wakening nature to the spring life and growth. His appearance and movement is superior to other masks. This is why he is not loosing his influence and still encourages all kind of modifications and applications: beside the Carnival role he is also a symbol of Ptuj Rotary Club, Ptuj Motor Club, he represents a military unity of Ptuj, he escorted Slovene ski-representation, and he can even be seen as logo on sausages. (Gačnik 2003: 146)

It the past — before his urbanisation and mass media popularisation after the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War — only young unmarried men were allowed to wear this outfit (Korantija). Apart from being a demonic creature Korant was a medium of local identity and brotherhood so it was quite common that masked parties from neighbouring villages came into a fight, many times with bloody outcomes or even deaths. After the 2nd WW, Korants were trying to scary young girls and collect handkerchiefs from them. Today also women and children were Korantija even though some disapprove that.

The most distinctive part of Kurent's outfit is the head-mask made of ship skin with a long leather-made and coloured nose. Lower body is covered with furry-coat. He wears high shoes. He also brandishes a wooden club covered with hedgehog skin on the bottom end ("ježevka"). (Brence and Gačnik 1998: 38)

Korantija used to be made by the countrymen themselves, nowadays there are special craftsmen supplying an increasing market. Korantija can also be seen in different local variations. Aleš Gačnik, the most involved researcher of contemporary carnival in Drava plain, has noticed that Kurant's outfit today tends to be more beautiful (not demonic, scary) with a longer furry; for that purpose, skins are being imported from Bosnia (Gačnik 2003: 131-2).

## Carnival in Maribor

Maribor is the biggest regional centre, including also Ptuj as its background. First known notice about city Carnival comes from 1847, mentioned in the book *Marburg, Seine Umgebung, Bewohner und Geschichte* written by Rudolf Gustav Puff. In his opinion German honesty and Slavic willingness joined in great hospitality, in particular during grape gathering and carnival.

But the primary source still remains a newspaper *Marburger Zeitung* (1862-1945). We can find out that carnival procession and parties were quite different. On Ash Wednesday 1871 the procession was lead by 14 riders on

horses, followed by 19 decorated wagons. The participants were the most influential townsmen. The next year they were dressed in costumes borrowed from city theatre. And outmost important: procession finished with the funeral of the Carnival. It was done symbolically by throwing a puppet into the river of Drava. (Godina Golija 2003: 234-5)

Articles from the following years describe masquerades, elite dances ("re-dute") etc. where the mask of Darwin, Persian princess, Egyptian saint Ifis etc. could be seen; quite adequate for those times of evolving scientific evolutionism and orientalism. Some of the masks were also critical to Austro-Hungarian social reality. (Godina-Golija 2003: 235) Parties were usually selective and closed, sometimes due to a political orientation of the participants. The Carnival procession seems to get marginalised or even lost at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> Century, maybe because of ever increasing conflict between supporters of German and Slavic visions of the region.

Between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, after the treaty of Rapallo, when Italy incorporated the western part of today's Slovenia, some political migrants resided in Maribor and started to organise so called "Black and white Redute": closed parties for elites with special themes ("devize") like Japanese night, Bohemian night, In Hollywood etc. Clothes were usually very expensive, designed specially for the event (ibid.).

After the Second World War people were more concerned about the reconstruction of homeland. On the other hand, new communist leadership wanted to overcome the old traditions and implement a new circle of holidays. Carnival was more a meter of private affinities and parties, not something to be developed systematically and publicly.

Modern Maribor Carnival started in 1960, exactly the same year as the one I wrote about in Ptuj. It was initiated in 1959 by the Slovene Association, Friends of Youth. The first reaction to this hierarchical cultural policy was parties for children. They were held in some of the biggest city halls. A few years later, these parties evolved into a procession. Children from primary and some secondary schools met in one school yard and afterwards the procession crossed the town. In the Square of Liberty, the Commission declared the winning individuals and group, and all participants got frankfurters and tea.

In 1980s a motorised procession from the nearby village Razvanje was added to children's' procession. The initiator was then fifty-years-old artist, Franc Tobias, born in a small village in Drava plain. Besides knowing the Carnival happenings from his youth, he was fascinated by Carnival Processions in Germany, where he lived and worked for many years. In 1983 he first came to the city with a few of his drunken companion. The fun they had on tractors convinced them to repeat this in the future. Gradually, the procession got the Dragon of Razvanje ("Razvanjski zmaj") to lead the way through the crowds. Tobias was inventing and directing up to 13 thematic trailers per year.

Locals wear specially designed costumes, making jokes, music or just noise. This small tradition lasted for 13 years. It stopped because of the rival folk-pop music event called Marjanca, where participating locals got paid. It also stopped because a promise to join with Maribor Carnival children's procession was never fulfilled.

The City Carnival now starts on Fat Tuesday afternoon on Square of Liberty and ends in the town's Main Square. It still finishes with awarding of the best participating masks. There is no funeral of the Carnival like in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Municipality encourages Association Friends of the youth to continue and make the event better, but there is no real financial or management support for that. It seems it is something that has to be done because of the tradition, but it lacks any strategy, so it is becoming almost a burden. Carnival Festival of Ptuj is obviously too influential and commercially well done to cope with.

### Maribor Carnival parties

In the second half of 20<sup>th</sup> Century there were also some other invented traditions in Maribor. In 1963 a group of skiers and friends was drinking in a mountain lodge on Pohorje (an agricultural and tourist resort near Maribor). With the fuel of liquor, they supported the idea of writer Smiljan Rozman and chose Dušan Štok to be their "Tsar". He was overwhelmed and promised many things he was willing do for the development of skiing on Pohorje. This was the initial kick. Through the years, the event become famous as Tsaring ("Carjevanje") and the star of the event was the Tsar of Pohorje ("Pohorski car"). Today, he wears a sheepskin coat and a fur cap with badges bearing the names of his "predecessors". He – always a man – (still) gives promises and opens a barrel of wine for his "subjects" – workers of the Pohorje ski-industry, their relatives, and busyness partners. The event is attracting more and more media attention and visitors from outside the guild.

Another small traditions in Maribor is Carnival Night ("Karnevalska noč"). It has been organised since 2001 by the Tourist Association and supported by some distinguished artists and scientists. Masks of "servants", the rector and ministers of "Maribor University" were made for that purpose. Due to its figures, this event surely has political implications (the position of rector can only be occupied by the mayor). Ministers are chosen among 10 distinguished and nominated members of the community by all 400 visitors. Candidates for one male and one female minister have to sing, dance and talk to win the approval of the masked voters.

Carnival night looks like German Carnival meetings ("Fasnachts", "Prüfungen"): the quality of the programme makes it prestigious, and participants

seek to join the distinguished event, marking their social status. In 2004 the event did not take place, because of disputes between the Tourist Association and the owner of the Lent Festival Hall. But Association believed in potentials of this "political aversion", so they decided for the next year to move the party to a bigger city Hall. At the end they have done it in House on Nation (Narodni dom) which in my opinion is completely inappropriate. A good carnival story for townsmen and townswomen has gone lost.

There are many other "informal" parties going on in the town of Maribor, from the student campus to old-age clubs, from hostels to pubs, from kindergartens to schools and busyness companies. These events also have some basic "scripts": starting at a certain time, encouraging amusing masks, urging participants to perform, and awarding them. After midnight, the masks can be taken off. (Simonič 2004)

### Historical shifts of masked processions

Ever since the writings of Niko Kuret in late 1950s, masks have been established as the proof and medium of authentic folk and national identities in Slovenia, phenomena quite similar to cultural processes in other parts of Europe (see i.e Löfgren 1989). Kuret made a historical (evolutionist) connection between pagan (Slavic, agricultural) rituals of recreation and modern applications of this legacy. Unfortunately, he felt the Carnival in modern and urban "civil society" to be a degradation, a disintegration of a traditional way of life and belief. He never went to study masks in any Slovene modern town. Nevertheless, Slovene ethnology found his reinvented masks and rituals a very appropriate way to build-up the national importance of the science itself. (see Kuret 1984)

A project of the Slovene Academy of Science and Art – starting about 30-40 years after Kuret's initial impulse toward masks (Fikfak et al. 2003) – was intended to verify what had changed after quite intensive ethnological involvement and promotion of the topic. Renewed field research has shown how ethnological studies during the last forty years have encouraged laymen and managers in the Republic to keep or re-invent Carnivals. Different immigrants from rural surroundings, who might have had childhood experiences with rural rites and protocols with masks hold to this tradition – and they explain the meaning of the habit, referring to Kuret and his cultural evolutionism (Simonič 2005); a phenomena quite similar to cultural processes in Europe (see i.e. Frykman 1995).

If during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century the popularisation of Carnival and masks has been done through urban centres like Ptuj and Maribor (urbanisation, nationalisation). Later in the 1980s we can see the opposite direction.

Villagers that used to take part in big city Carnivals now tend to organise their own Carnivals and processions (authentication, informalisation). They felt they have been misunderstood, cheated; or just wanted to gain some profit for them selves. Carnivals in Markovci, Lancova vas, Hotinja vas and many other villages in Drava plain try to reinvent "old traditions", and at the same time they copy scripts of mass-media events. As a result Ptuj and Maribor are loosing their credibility. But on the other side they are in advantage anyway: the Carnivals are organised by professionals, by managers of culture. This is something their peripheries still can not afford.

Let me add at the end that Carnival processions after 2<sup>nd</sup> WW did not engage social criticism. This was presented only in 1980s, when the concept of civil society and human rights came in foreground. Individualism emphasised the importance of ones outfit, importance of playing with ones aesthetic appearance. The change was connected with the emergence of private enterprise and importance of individuals in opposition to previous collective (socialist) period. Members of (national, bourgeois) community are conformist. In this sense, socio-political criticism survived and continues in time of Carnival, successfully avoiding personal or systematic censorship.

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#### Upotreba karnevala. Slučaj severoistočne Slovenije

Karnevalske procesije u Sloveniji bile su podložne različitim vremenskim periodima i tipovima političkog i kulturnog uticaja. Njihovo ponovno pojavljivanje (reinvencija) je započelo dve decenije posle Drugog svetskog rata kao način ponovnog uspostavljanja veze između starih i novih generacija, seoskog i gradskog, ranijeg i novog životnog okruženja slovenačkog satnovništva. Etnologija je odigrala značajnu ulogu u ovom razdoblju. Ponovo oživljene tradicije korespondiraju s društvenim preobražajima u srednjeevropskim društvima (komercijalizacija) i u okviru socijalističkih kulturnih politika (centralizovana regulacija).

Sredinom osamdesetih godina, posle slovenačkog prihvatanja parlamentarne demokratije i tržišne ekonomije, maskirane procesije su se umnožile, postale raznovrsne, interiorizujući društvenu kritiku kao deo sopstvenog narativa. Autor pokazuje istorijske promene dve ključne karnevalske procesije na severoistoku Slovenije, u dolini Drave.

*Ključne reči:* karneval, Slovenija, urbanizacija, postsocijalistička tranzicija, nacionalizacija kulture