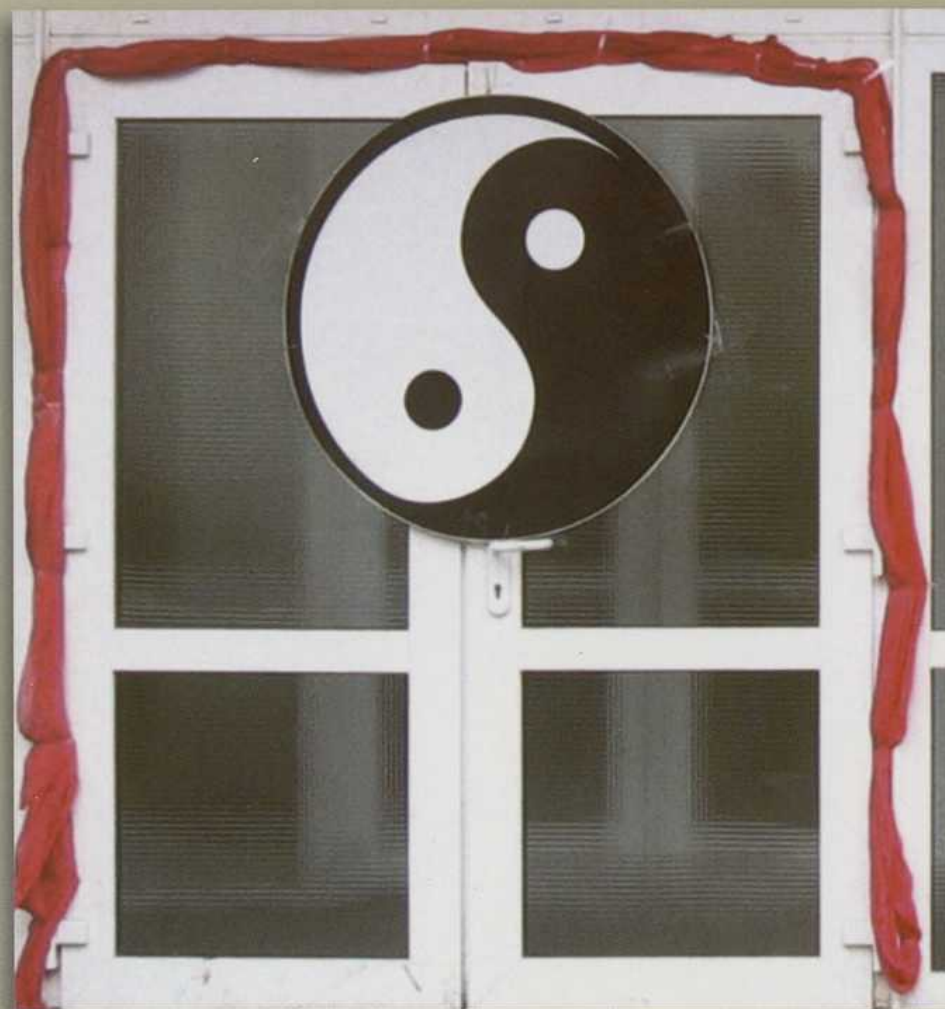


# ETHNOLOGY INĽARODOPIS

# SLOVAK SLOVENSKÝ



**5**  
**60 • 2012**

ISSN 1335-1303  
EV 3355/09  
MIČ 49 616  
Price 2,50 €

## FROM CONTENTS

KRAVANJA, Boštjan: Shift into the average or how to combine images of paradise with a war zone: the Sri Lanka case

FUJDA, Milan: Western 'Eastern wisdom' and the concept of new religions: remapping the field

KARÁSEK, Matej: At the edge of Europe: Balkan as a European periphery

HUBINA, Miloš: Ways of misperception: A few notes on Asia in (not only) Slovak minds

SLOVENSKÝ NÁRODOPIS (SLOVAK ETHNOLOGY) is a journal published five times a year by the Institute of Ethnology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences in Bratislava, Slovakia. Four issues are published in the Slovak language, the fifth issue in the English language.

Slovak Ethnology is devoted to research in the fields of ethnology, cultural/social anthropology and related disciplines. The papers published in the journal focus territorially mainly on Slovakia and Central Europe and are oriented towards social analysis based on field research predominantly. The editors prefer analytic, theoretical or synthetic articles contributing to current debates in the social sciences. The main themes of the journal include ethnic, cultural and historical development in Central Europe; social and cultural aspects of economic and political transformations; modernisation processes in both rural and urban areas; ethnicity and minority issues; the role of cultural heritage in the European context; history of the social sciences and humanities. Contributions on other topics are also welcomed. The journal also publishes research reports, book reviews, interviews, critical comments, and other news items.

The journal also provides a space for discussion of important issues in the social sciences as well as critical response to the published articles. All major articles undergo reviewing by commentators selected internationally.

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FRONT COVER: Symbols related to 'Oriental' traditions, once a preoccupation of occultists, have become a generally shared cultural resource in contemporary 'Western' societies. An entrance decoration of the school, serving, during a weekend, as a site of an Esoteric Festival 'Miluj svůj život' (Love your Life), Prague, 6-8 March 2009. Photo by Milan Fujda.

BACK COVER: *Upper part*: Covers of the books on 'Eastern wisdom' traditions published in Czech in >>

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## CONTENTS

## EDITORIAL

- DEÁK, Dušan: Editorial – From Eastern ‘Other’ to Other (B)east.....494

## ARTICLES

- KRAVANJA, Boštjan: Shift into the average or how to combine images of paradise with a war zone: the Sri Lanka case.....499
- FUJDA, Milan: Western ‘Eastern wisdom’ and the concept of new religions: remapping the field.....513
- KARÁSEK, Matej: At the edge of Europe: Balkan as a European periphery.....539

## RESEARCH REPORTS

- AZAM, Shafia: Cultural experiences in progress (based on my observations in Slovak Republic).....556

## ESSAYS

- HUBINA, Miloš: Ways of misperception: A few notes on Asia in (not only) Slovak minds.....563

## INTERVIEW

- DEÁK, Dušan: Locating the Oriental in Central Europe (Interview with Dr. Gabriel Pírický).....570

## NEWS / OVERVIEWS

- HRUSTIČ, Tomáš, BRAZZABENI, Micol, FOT-

- TA, Martin: European Science Foundation Exploratory Workshop: The Two Sides of the Coin: Gypsy Economies between the State and the Market, Lisbon, September 20-23, 2012.....576
- POPELKOVÁ, Katarína: Folkcool: Folk Theatre. World Premiere of a Live Journal (Notes on a Performance).....579
- SALNER, Peter: Opening of the Jewish Community Museum in Bratislava.....582
- Editorial Board: The Andrej Kmeť Prize and the Title of Museum of the Year 2011.....583

## BOOK REVIEWS / REVIEW ESSAYS

- Culture and Social Diversity in Slovakia: Bitušíková, A. (Ed.): Theoretical Perspectives on Diversity Research; Bitušíková, A., Luther, D. (Eds.): Foreigners Among Us; Bitušíková, A. (Ed.): Global and Local in a Contemporary City (Peter SALNER).....584
- Tatiana Podolinská, Tomáš Hrustič (Eds.): God Between Barriers. The Social Inclusion of the Roma by Religious Means (Eva KREKOVIČOVÁ).....586
- Peter Salner (Ed.): Transformations of Jewish Identity after the Holocaust (Magdaléna KUSÁ).....587

- CONTENTS OF THE 60<sup>th</sup> VOLUME.....590

## EDITORIAL

## FROM EASTERN 'OTHER' TO OTHER (B)EASTS

Talking about constructions and perceptions of the 'East' more than thirty years after Edward Said's seminal work *Orientalism* (Said, 1978), which made long time ago academics reconsider their critical thinking about the countries clustered under the rubric of Orient, may seem today indeed outdated. Debating the essentialism of our notions that capture cultures in bounded spaces after the post-structuralist critique of well-designed schemes of the human world accompanied by the linguistic turn in social sciences may again seem to be repeated too often. Then why do we still think it productive to mould the journal's issue around the 'East' and its already heavily deconstructed images?

First of all, let us clarify that for our concerns the 'East' is a cultural category that only partly concerns geographical directions. It also does not correspond to Said's Orient (i.e. East), although it may be similarly represented (for instance as irrational, spiritual, lazy, ancient, uncivilized, exotic, despotic, fanatic, poor...). In our sense the 'East' rather consists of myriads of better or worse organized stereotypical notions related to particular people and their cultural expressivity. Many people considered as such may be of Asian, North African, or Eastern European origin, but they, and this is important to note, may not be as well. What makes them 'Easterners', irrespective of their actual geographic position, is therefore rather their cultural 'Otherness'. The latter was historically postulated by the representatives of the so called 'West', who thereby reflected their own contemporary superior position as well as their inability to understand the different people in other than just oppositional terms, or the terms that would seek to explain the differences in another way than solely against the 'only correct' standards. Yet, we are still convinced that however the 'East' has been deconstructed and its substantiality as a monolithic category broken by manifold evidences, it still lingers somewhere deeply in people's minds as a residue of decades of education that divided people according to some predesigned cultural characteristics. The main goal of this issue is therefore to question the difference that emerges in the opposites and by presenting various approaches that revolve around the construction and perception of the 'East' to show that the way of seeing the 'Other' as the opposite is rarely (if at all) the correct way of researching the cultural variety that we meet around the world.

The academic debate about the so called 'East' and its manifold meanings in the aca-

democratic world as well as in popular culture, whether carried out in cultural, power-related, economic, social, or religious terms, seems hardly to be over. Conversely, it is a complex debate that is hard to grasp in a few sentences, and also to follow in its entirety. Some academics may have moved from the stereotypes of impoverished, spiritual, despotic or sensual, but always geographically and culturally determined 'East' to the considerations of dynamics of socio-spatiality (Lewis, Wigen, 1997) and others may have widely reconsidered the notions of cultural boundaries and the locations of cultural production (Gupta, Ferguson, 1992; Bhabha, 1994). Yet others may have been also seeking the new approaches to the academic articulations of the social and the cultural within a certain space, while heeding to the documentable historical differences (e.g. in the ways how and why people think and act) and keeping the vital (insider's) connection to the subjects of their research (Chakrabarty, 2000).

All these approaches do away with a monolithic notion of the 'East' and 'Eastern' values, or cultures (that of course is equally valid for other socio-spatial categories). However, the problems of everyday social reality - of its historically reasoned present and often momentarily conditioned pasts that results in monolithic and culturally conditioned divisions of the people and the actions taken in order to utilize these divisions - do not simply disappear, because the academics have found more socially and historically sensitive ways of addressing them. Unfortunately, and sometimes ironically too, they re-emerge with the power doubled by what was learned from the academic debates. Moreover, these problems seem to have become, but indeed, in my opinion they always were, truly global. The articulation of 'Otherness', which casting people to 'East' and its 'Eastern-ness' no doubt is, and the confinement of the 'Otherness' to a certain space assigned with a certain culture is doubtless found all over the world (take taboo, caste, barbarian or democracy as examples). In fact, from some points of view, 'Othering', might be sought beyond the progress in human relations, but only as long as it is a tool of recognition (of a difference) and not the weapon of discrimination (based on the oppositional positing of one's self, culture...etc).

Hence the 'East', and the galaxy of its attributes, has been hardly diluted from the world that is, here or there, to be experienced in day-to-day life. It is still present in the rise of voices against multiculturalism, it clashes with civilizations, it stinks in 'Bulgarian' toilets, Islamizes Muslims, and it imprisons pussies and cherishes riots. Besides, it tremendously develops, taking the form of tiger, it competes and dangerously sets its own standards, and it still lives precisely because of its age immemorial. It apparently and quite convincingly keeps its 'it'. Yet, multi-medially and globally connected people (however virtual that connection can appear today), perhaps, advance far beyond the horizon of shallow public effect of the academic break with the notions of spatial stigma, and its racial, colonial, or smoothly said, modernity and progress, undertones. Therefore it is still worth questioning - as this issue hopes to do - how the multifaceted world that is still considered 'Eastern', and indeed perfectly 'Other', is thought about, what it is that makes people choose between the weapon of discrimination and tool of recognition, and hopefully it is worth seeking some other instruments that help us to understand people, too.

Do you recall the 'Polish plumber', or the recent stop to Bulgaria and Romania from entering the Schengen area (which was warmly welcomed by many Slovaks as far I can judge from my own observation of the online debates on the problem)? Well, Eastern Europeans (even if this is here meant to be a pure geographical, and in this case perhaps also a geo-political reference) were being in many contexts cut off from the rest of

the world for at least 40 years. They were being quite successfully colonized by the oppressive politics of 'Eastern' communists as well as being spatially socialized in the economics of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, and still, and in many cases with substantial evidence, they face the careful consideration of their 'Eastern-ness'. So what it is that we think about the 'East' in Eastern (or if you like Central-Eastern – note the difference and the smoothing effect of the 'central'!) Europe? Do we find the spatio-cultural divide meaningful? Do we bring to the fore the historical difference, i.e. mainly the socio-spatial particularities of the social changes in our regions, their conditions and outward conditioning and their manifold articulations or, as it was once assumed (cf. Fukuyama, 1992), we are following our predecessors in treading the path to the global world of democracy? It is in this context where the reasonability of the effort of discussing the 'East' in this volume should also be located.

Are you European or Eastern European, an Indian man asked me a few years ago in the glocal city of Pune whose university was several decades ago called the 'Oxford of the East'. The human, whether or not in Foucault's terms, clearly disappeared from his question. I was predestined to remain 'Eastern' by my Eastern evaluator. That we, people from Central and Eastern Europe, are denied the agency of being differently different and are thought to be 'understandably Eastern' is perhaps the most conflicting way of how to start a debate, let alone academic debate. And of course, this denial does not concern solely us. However, the imagination of long existing and hardly evolving collectivities of 'us and them' has much deeper than just habitual/learned roots. Polarities, however culturally or spatially clothed reflect the ways of how we speak out and sort the experienced reality and will probably remain in people's speech as long as there is 'yes' and 'no'. But when, from what standpoint, why and for what purpose the appearing polarities find their spatially and culturally clothed articulations and whether these need to be overtly essentialist (such as the one mentioned above) is altogether a different question.

\* \* \*

It must be clear by now that most of the texts published in this issue of Slovak Ethnology discuss the notions of the 'East' in one or other way. Reflecting the past decades in social sciences, they mostly treat the partial problems that the 'Othering' with the badge of 'Eastern-ness' (however that is spelled out by the concrete author as Oriental, heavenly, spiritual, or dangerous), brings. The main part of the issue consists of the three research papers, one material study, one essay and one interview.

The 'Eastern' spirituality on the one hand (e.g. of Buddhists and Hindus), or religious fanaticism (e.g. of Muslims), on the other, has become one of the common and clearly stereotypical denominators of the cultures considered 'Eastern'. The religion of Easterners has been therefore probably one of the most studied phenomena and it is still attractive to scholars. Yet, only one of the research papers of this issue explicitly discusses the religion. In his article Milan Fujda seeks to explain the rise of the interest in the 'Eastern spirituality' among the Czech urbanites of late 19<sup>th</sup> and the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century. He, quite convincingly, attempts to link it to the processes of individualization and detraditionalization of religion emphasizing the role of texts and private reading in these processes.

Balkan and the notions that locate it to 'European Orient', or see its people and their cultural expressiveness as having imagined 'common standards' has been discussed in

the article of Matej Karásek. Discursive orientalization of the Balkan region is not an unknown topic in the recent social studies focusing on this region and the author thus participates in a lively debate that often has political contexts and repercussions. The violence and stigmatization, the value loaded poetics of the Balkan's difference from the rest of Europe and the doubtful standards of equal treatment when set against the day-to-day experiences of the people of the Balkan indeed present a problem for a sensitive academic approach. Karásek seeks to explain how several notions attached to Said's *Orientalism* were adopted in order to describe and classify Balkanians. He doubts the monolithic understanding of the region and interestingly relates its common classifiers to the present day policy of European Union.

The last research article in this issue comes from Boštjan Kravanja. Within the contexts of anthropology of tourism he discusses the popular representations of Sri Lanka in the tourist Baedekers. Kravanja seeks to explain how the seemingly opposite images of Sri Lanka found in the Baedekers - as a paradise on Earth and a war-stricken country - can be united, so that the global vision of entertaining tourism will not fade away and yet the 'authentic' Lanka will still keep its secrets and offers. Making the island an 'average' place (for whom, but?) of the global tourist backpacker displays the strategies of the discourse producers that perhaps may be seen in the terms of re-forming post-colonial representations of the places at the same time exotic and real.

The issue of the journal continues in discussing the chosen topic in lighter formats of essays and interview. Shafia Azam describes her first and later impressions from Slovakia and Slovaks paying attention to 'East/West' cultural divide as experienced via stereotypes she had to pass through, or those that she brought with herself. That these stereotypes still live in the social spaces Shafia interacted with is interestingly documented in her decision to return back to using English in public (the language whose modern history might indeed speak out stories about the 'Othering'!) instead of trying her skills in Slovak! Miloš Hubina does not let the hold of the stereotypes go and in his text thinks about what philosophers in Slovakia consider particularly 'Eastern' and what kind of misunderstandings it might bring. Finally, you may like to discover how, after Said and post-Saidian discussion in Oriental studies, a Slovak Orientalist, Gabriel Pirický, whose expertise lies in Islamic studies, nationalism and secularism in modern Turkey, sees the developments in his field and what he thinks of the 'East', embodied in the Turks of the Slovak historical memory and the Turkey of European presence.

\* \* \*

It is not a long time since a president of a world superpower called for crusades, and today it seems that the battle of Aleppo is just about to begin. It seems that the people whether 'Eastern' or not, still hold their separate sides forever and for all. The differences often do not incite interest, but fear. Is this a too pessimistic vision of the current global social relationships? Are we too tightly confined to our 'habitus', unable to bear the burden of the global man, who fortunately and unfortunately, can be just anybody? What went wrong in the decades of discussing the people, their cultures and their differences from within and from without, so that we are still unable to recognize these differences as something human, whose permanent changes is better to explore, or at least observe with interest, than to despise with? Were the academic endeavours to explain and understand the dynamics of differentiation among the individuals, groups, classes, nations and what not, just academic for the sake of being academic? Or was

knowledge sold for power and discourse moulded in order to conventionally survive the power-knowledge game? 'Keep talking' is the message of Stephen Hawking that wisely introduced the identically titled song of a well-known rock group. This, hopefully, we are doing by presenting this issue to you.

DUŠAN DEÁK,  
Hosting editor,  
University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius of Trnava

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## SLOVAK ETHNOLOGY

Journal of the Institute of Ethnology  
of the Slovak Academy of Sciences  
Vol. 60, 2012, Number 5

Address of the Editorial Office:  
Ústav etnológie SAV, Klemensova 19,  
813 64 Bratislava, Slovakia,  
e-mail: [slovensky.narodopis@savba.sk](mailto:slovensky.narodopis@savba.sk)

Distributed by:  
Slovak Academic Press, Ltd.,  
P.O. Box 57, Nám. slobody 6,  
810 05 Bratislava, Slovakia,  
e-mail: [sap@sappress.sk](mailto:sap@sappress.sk)  
and  
SLOVART G.T.G. Ltd., Krupinská 4,  
P.O. Box 152, 852 99 Bratislava, Slovakia

Registration number: 7091

Print: ETERNA Press, s.r.o.

Electronic version accessible on:  
<http://www.cceol.com>  
<http://www.sappress.sk>  
<http://www.uet.sav.sk/slovenskynarodopis.htm>

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The periodic Slovak Ethnology is indexed in the databases: MLA, CEEOL, Ulrich's, Willings, CEJSH, ERIH (impact database of European Science Foundation – ESF):

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>> 1920s. The printing industry of the period as well as occultism itself was so preoccupied with the written word that the only picture often used to decorate only the front cover. *Lower left:* After a seven-year break (since 1915) the Czech Theosophical Society started to republish its periodical entitled *Lotus*. The text explains why the title (*Lotus*) as well as the format of the periodical of the society was renewed in accordance with its first club periodical issued originally since 1897. *Lower right:* The Tattva Clock: An instrument serving to map the daily flow of the so called *tattvas* (basic elements under their Sanskrit names and enumeration). The clock was published by the publishing house *Zmatlík a Palička* to accompany its books on securing success and happiness by doing things in a *proper* time, i.e. the time when the flow of the appropriate *tattva* is predominant. Archive of Milan Fujda.

