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# ***Verbuňk* and Rides of the Kings: Reflections on Transformations of Tradition in the Light of Intangible Cultural Heritage**

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**ABSTRACT:** The study of manifestations of folk culture (including those that have survived in modern society) provides a valuable research field for learning about the mechanisms of tradition and its functioning. In addition to the immanent development of tradition, however, it is always necessary to pay attention to external impulses. In the last two decades, the concept of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) certainly belongs to them, as not only is it a theoretical starting point for grasping the study of folk traditions in the present, but it also has a retroactive effect on their form and longevity. The basis of the presented contribution is a reflection on this issue in the Czech environment, particularly concerned with two examples from the region of South-Eastern Moravia: the solo male dance *verbuňk*, which was entered on Representative List of UNESCO in 2005 (respectively 2008), and the custom “the ride of the kings”, which was entered on the same list in 2011.

**KEYWORDS:** Czech Republic, Moravia, folk traditions, intangible cultural heritage, *verbuňk*, ride of the kings

## **The Concept of Intangible Cultural Heritage, UNESCO and the Czech Republic**

The eastern part of the Czech Republic, consisting of the regions of Moravia and Silesia, is a territory where archaic forms of traditional folk culture have survived longer than elsewhere in the present-day Czech Republic. However, the second half of the nineteenth century saw gradual industrialization, influences of mass culture, and demographic transformations in the countryside even in these regions (Doušek 2016). Everyday life of the late nineteenth century then combined residual forms of folk culture with the ones that were

intentionally safeguarded and often even renewed by knowledgeable interested amateurs and educated intellectuals. It is the Czechoslovak Ethnographic Exhibition that is perceived by historiography as a visible moment which demonstrated the condition and transformation of folk culture in its natural functions in Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia. The exhibition was held in Prague in 1895 and - besides its relation to the Czech national movement of the time - not only was it the crowning achievement of the first ethnographic struggles, but it also opened a wide space for the development of ethnology as a discipline and for the work with folk traditions. The developing staged presentation of folklore expressions brought about a varied picture of folk traditions, the understanding of which - in terms of genesis and transmission - might have not always been apparent at first glance (Pavlicová 2021).

While this issue was, in several respects, explained by the conceptualisation of folklorism and its scholarly study, which established itself in ethnology in the 1960s, it is in this context not possible to neglect an impulse that has more than significantly affected the transformation of folk traditions in the last twenty years. What I mean here is the concept of intangible cultural heritage, which was officially introduced by UNESCO. Today, it constitutes a strong cultural and political influence affecting, both directly and indirectly, the transmission of folk traditions (Janeček 2015).

Although the 2003 Convention<sup>1</sup> that defines the concept of intangible cultural heritage does not primarily speak about traditional folk culture<sup>2</sup>, in the Czech environment its content touched mainly the realm of folk traditions. Discussions in UNESCO were inevitably directed to a broader intersection of perspectives from different parts of the world, to reflection on their historical development and the diversity of local cultures, but also to different understanding of terms used to address ethnic issues, and to different research approaches. The emphasis put on the bearer(s) of culture as a major factor in the concept of intangible cultural heritage brought a dynamical aspect into this issue, which in principle guarantees that the cultural expressions in question will continue.

In the overview study written by Rieks Smeets (a long-term UNESCO worker) for the Czech Journal of Ethnology, we can clearly see how the UNESCO considerations that outlined the possibilities to protect folklore from the 1960s and 1970s on (these tendencies came mainly from Latin American and African countries) resulted, after much development rigmarole, with a broad definition of intangible cultural heritage in the above Convention (Smeets 2022). The Czech Republic adopted this document in 2009; however, its implementation is narrower here than in some other countries - it occurs primarily through the protection of traditional folk culture, which is a somewhat inexact

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1 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.

2 In the sense of lower rural social classes, as it is mostly understood in the European environment at the turn of the 18th and 19th century.

interpretation of the above-mentioned concept (Smeets 2022). Although the international way to the Convention led through a number of declarations concerning support for traditional folk culture, the resulting definition was drawn up without this categorisation (Smeets 2022: 94).

After the dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1993, the Czech Republic became significantly involved in UNESCO's activities in the field of emerging intangible cultural heritage and built on its activities that were closely linked to the National Institute of Folk Culture in Strážnice. This Institute, currently one of the professional institutions of the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic, has a rich history. It was founded in 1956, in connection with folklore festivities organized for the first time in the town of Strážnice in south-eastern Moravia (near the border with Slovakia) in 1946. These nation-wide festivities with music and dance performances have gradually evolved to an international folklore festival, the continuity of which (except for two COVID years) has remained interrupted to date. The new societal direction of Czechoslovakia after 1990 (and the independent Czech Republic three years later) essentially changed the work of various institutions, including professional and cultural ones. Many of them were curtailed or even dissolved in the new economic situation, and a similar fate began to affect the former Institute of Folk Culture, although its activity in the field of ethnology, on the one hand, and folklorism, on the other, was very discernible. The Institute published an ethnological journal called *Národopisné aktuality* (Ethnographic News), managed the open-air museum established in the 1970s, organised the aforementioned international folklore festival, and acted as a methodological institution. The post-revolutionary management of the Institute, which became a specialized ethnological institution at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s, fortunately managed to avert the planned marginalisation of the institution; this was aided, among other things, by the strong ties to the UNESCO international platform and activities relating to its network. For example, in 1993 the Czech Section of the CIOFF organization was established at the Institute: not only is it an affiliate of the association of organizers of folklore festivals, but it also provides advisory services to UNESCO and performs its own professional activities. From 1995 on, the Institute was a venue for meetings of UNESCO experts for Central and Eastern Europe, etc. (Krist, Pavlicová 2015). With the integration of the Institute into new cultural structures of the country, the agenda of intangible cultural heritage was naturally transferred into the sphere of its competences, and the Institute became the central institution for this issue.

### **Example 1 – the Verbuňk Dance**

The 2003 Convention resulted in the creation of two Lists - the *Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* and the *Urgent Safeguarding List*. "Masterpieces," proclaimed according to the previous programme *UNESCO Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity*, functioning between 1997 and 2006, were included in the *Representative List*.

The Czech Republic received its first inscription – *verbuňk*, a male dance from the south-eastern Moravia, which was proclaimed a “masterpiece” in 2005. Accordingly, this dance form has been known to the public in this context for almost two decades, which resulted, among other things, from the medialization of the inscription. However, we cannot overlook the fact that *verbuňk* as a dance reached the point at which it was proposed for the inscription through a specific development. That is why this dance is the first example by the means of which we can demonstrate some of the questions that are important for the discussion about intangible cultural heritage, both in the sense of living culture that is contained in it, as well as in the sense of the concept of intangible cultural heritage, and a certain organizational structure that perceives the already inscribed expressions as “national” cultural elements.

If we look at the oldest records concerning the male dance *verbuňk*, we might be surprised that these do not have a long history. Although dance folklorists considered the hypotheses about this dance’s origin or about its ties to recruitment, that is, armed forces hiring in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this hypothesis has not been confirmed by any source. Songs accompanying this dance are associated with “New Hungarian” melodies, which began to spread from the urban Hungarian society to the countryside in the late eighteenth century, but these are assumed to relate only to the modern-age interest in folk traditions at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. That time saw, among other things, strengthening of mutual influence between Czech and Slovak cultures, reflected in social events, students’ town clubs and folk circles, which was an occasion to mutually influence the repertoire (Pavlicová 2017).

The first information about *verbuňk* based on collectors’ records is known only from the late nineteenth century, and, moreover, in a form that resembles the *verbuňk* only vaguely. Martin Zeman (1854–1919), a musician and collector of folk songs from the ethnographic area of Horňácko<sup>3</sup>, recorded a form of male dance called *verbunk* which featured a simple structure of motions and an accompanying melody that was not different from the musical repertoire of the above-mentioned ethnographic region (Zeman 1951). The turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries can be perceived as crucial in particular ethnographic regions in Moravia. The intersection of national struggles, romantic admiration, professional interest and the first wave of folklorism is a certain crossroads for the traditional countryside and its residents. If they had previously been unaware that their culture was something valuable, they gradually

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3 “Horňácko” is one of the sub-regions of the ethnographic region Slovácko (formerly known as Moravian Slovakia). Slovácko is an ethnographic region in the south-eastern part of the Czech Republic. It consists of several sub-regions whose identifying elements are mainly elements of traditional folk culture (clothing, architecture, music, dance, etc.). The demarcation of the imaginary borders of the ethnographic regions is largely connected with the interest in traditional rural folk culture, which has been observed in the European environment since the 19th century and the Romantic period.



**Fig. 1.** Dancers of *verbuňk*. International Folklore Festival Strážnice, 2009. Source: The archive of National Institute of Folk Culture

grew to understand that due to external stimuli. Hornácko as a Slovácko sub-region is a typical example for that. As recent research shows, the influence of national awakeners, artists – composers, fine artists, writers as well as teachers and schools (Maňáková 2022) at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries created a setting which became a fertile ground for all the efforts to maintain folk culture and to pass folk traditions down to next generations. The foundation of a folklore festival in 1957 and children’s folklore festival in 1972 meant a certain institutionalization for the further formation of folk traditions’ legacy in this region, which consists of only ten villages.

On the contrary, from its very beginning the Strážnice festival was conceived as a nation-wide festival, although it rather focused on the presentation of folklore expressions from Moravia and Silesia. This festival continued, in many respects, the pre-war activities of developing folklorism and the work of the above-mentioned clubs and folk circles. For this reasons, the 1946 festival programme included a *verbuňk* contest, which then took place in two subsequent festival years. When the contest was restored in 1986, the dancers who had gained experience with *verbuňk* in the early years of the festival were present at this renewal. In-between, however, the dance was developing within the evolving folklore movement that can also be arranged in chronological stages. After the ideologically burdened 1950s and the “new production”, selected folklore expressions gradually returned to the stage;





**Fig. 2.** A dancer of *verbuňk*. International Folklore Festival Strážnice, 2012. Source: The archive of National Institute of Folk Culture

they were already stylized, but they mostly generally maintained the form of traditional expressions. The return to the “roots”, typical in folklore movement in the 1960s, was accompanied, on the one hand, by the well-founded education movement that provided folk ensembles with organisational and expert assistance and, on the other hand, by the development in the field where traditional folk expressions were associated solely with the oldest contemporaries and their latent memory in the rural environment. Folklore ensembles were improving the music and dance technique of their members, conducting regular rehearsals, cooperating with choreographers, etc. (Stavělová 2021). In this context, the *verbuňk* dance was also evolving in the second half of the twentieth century.

One of the last development layers of Moravian folk dances of the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries featured mainly couple dances, which also included individual, mostly small dance forms of movement of the dancers, with small *cifrování*, jumps and leaps which accompanied the couple dances, being one kind of those. Today we assume that it was this type of movement that led to the formation of *verbuňk*. We can observe the aforementioned *cifrování*, already as an independent male dancing form, in the first film documentaries, for example the documentary *Národopisné svátky Moravy* (Ethnographic Festivities of Moravia) from 1925. We come to the conclusion that this is the developmental line of this male dance, which gradually evolved primarily

within the organised folklore movement; between the two world wars, this set up a platform for the subsequent expansion of folklore ensembles in the second half of the twentieth century.

It has been mentioned above that it was dancers awarded at the first festival contest who were present at the renewal of the *verbuňk* contest in 1986. The corresponding field research has shown that they were also sought-after instructors of *verbuňk* in folklore ensembles in South Moravia, where the dance was spreading. Not only was *Verbuňk* a part of staged performances, but it was also danced at informal dance occasions that were associated with folklore movement. The renewal of the contest was not only an “old-new” dramaturgy contribution to the Strážnice Festival, but it also reflected the popularity of *verbuňk* as a form of male dance, mainly in the ethnographic region of Slovácko. The assessment rules of the contest were created with the participation of ethnologists, whereby several styles of the dance were defined (since Slovácko as an ethnographic region consists of several sub-regions). The assessment focused not only on the dance, but also on singing, dress and footwear (for example, in the first years it was forbidden to dance in dance boots made from soft leather, and the dancer had to wear traditional footwear corresponding to a particular type of folk costume). The jury consisted of experienced *verbuňk* dancers, including those who competed in *verbuňk* dancing in Strážnice in the second half of the 1940s.

The renewed contest was extremely successful with the dancers and the audience – the contest has taken place at the Festival since that date and it is one of the most visited programmes<sup>4</sup>. It is perhaps a bit paradoxical that the form of the contest is among safeguarding measures undertaken for this cultural element. But it was thanks to this contest that the community of *verbuňk* bearers expanded immensely (only the finale takes place at the Strážnice Festival today, while selection rounds are organized in individual sub-regions before the Festival), not only in relation to the contest, which is conceived as prestigious among members of folklore ensembles, but also in relation to the wider knowledge of the dance. As a children’s contest in *verbuňk* dancing takes place in parallel (although *verbuňk* was traditionally part of adults’ repertoire), the folklore movement can be credited for the development of a male dance phenomenon that can be considered unique. On the one hand, it is initiated from the top down in many respects, but, on the other hand, it finds an enormously fertile ground in boys’ and men’s dancing practice, also developed in the natural environment (informal presentations of the dance at customary festivities, its knowledge and interpretation by common dancers etc.) (Pavlicová, Uhlíková 2013).

The interest in the dance became even more intensive after the dance was proclaimed a “masterpiece”. Research shows that *verbuňk* began to be danced also in other ethnographic regions; in recent years, there has been

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4 The contest took place even in the 2021 COVID period, albeit without audience, and it was broadcast by the Czech public service television with expert commentary.



Fig. 3. A child dancer of *verbuňk*, 2013. Photo: Martina Pavlicová

pressure to allow dancers from those regions to participate fully in the contest in Strážnice<sup>5</sup>. This approach is logical from the perspective that is most significant for UNESCO today - namely, the bearers' own awareness of what they consider to be their cultural heritage. But it is an issue for discussion from the perspective of the peculiarity of the inscribed element. The fact that the form of the dance itself continues to develop is part of the essence of folklore expression - in the contemporary *verbuňk*, we can find many dance elements brought in by individual dancers who enriched the "original" styles of the dance. The originality of the expression is linked to the particular performer, to his creative potential and improvisation, which is one of the basic features in the case of *verbuňk*. But this applies primarily to informal dance occasions; in competitions, performances of most dancers have a fixed choreography. Interestingly, the fact that this element was anchored in one ethnographic area, that is, Slovácko, where *verbuňk* was part of the local dance repertoire, was loosened just by the inscription on the UNESCO List and the dance gradually

5 Several researchers in the Czech Republic have long been involved in the research of *verbuňk*. Apart from the author of the text, who has published several studies on this topic and has devoted her interest mainly to the prominent dance personalities of *verbuňk*, we can mention ethnochoreologists such as Zdenka Jelínková (1920–2005), Karel Pavlišťík (1931–2018), Jan Miroslav Krist (1932–2007), or contemporary researchers - Jitka Matuszková, Jan Blahůšek, Jarmila Teturová, etc.



spread outside that area. *Verbuňk* has become a prestigious symbol of male dancing skills both in the folklore movement and on occasions associated with folk dancing. It features all the attributes of living culture and its bearers identify themselves with the form of the dance rather than with regional affiliation (Teturová 2012).

During its development from the end of the 19th century and during the 20th century, *verbuňk* became part of the rural dance repertoire thanks to the above-mentioned facts, and with the development of the folk movement in the second half of the 20th century, it became part of the repertoire of folk ensembles. It was the living tradition, the generational transmission of the dance and its importance in the communities of its bearers that led to the declaration of *verbuňk* as a masterpiece and, eventually, in 2008, to its inscription on the UNESCO Representative List.

### **Example 2 – the “Ride of the Kings” Custom**

Our second example is the “ride of the kings”, again a custom from the ethnographic region of Slovácko. It was inscribed on the Representative List in 2011 and the inscription applies to the “ride of the kings” held in four Slovácko villages – Hluk, Vlčnov, Kunovice, and Skoronice. In contrast to *verbuňk*, it is basically impossible for the “ride of the kings” to spread to other regions; this organisationally demanding and costly custom has strong ties to the localities where it has survived, even though reports about its history are bound to a wider territory and, to some extent, were documented as late as in the 1970s even in other regions.

Specialized literature deliberates on the genesis of the “ride of the kings”, a ritual associated with Christian Whitsuntide, in a much older context than we can exemplify using the preserved sources. However, the mid-nineteenth century, which is the oldest substantiated point for the occurrence of this custom in the localities concerned, shows this custom mostly as a disappearing tradition. It reached its representative form again alongside the increasing interest in folk culture among Czech educated classes, when ethnography arose as a scholarly discipline and when representative and aesthetic functions of folk customs began to prevail over other functions in many respects. Although the “ride of the kings” was still bound to Whitsuntide in the first half of the twentieth century, it was, at the same time, used for representative purposes even outside the ceremonial occasion. The so-called *cavalcades*, meaning riders on horses (without the ritual character of the king), used to welcome honoured guests and were invited to take part in a number of feasts and festivals; the “rides of the kings” were presented as staged performances. Simultaneously, however, they remained connected to the community and its calendar year.

The custom has undergone a specific development in each of the four above-mentioned localities. A reversal of this tradition came in the 1950s. At that time, the Czech countryside suffered from forced collectivisation, whereby private property was confiscated and collective cooperatives were formed. Ru-



**Fig. 4.** The village Vlčnov, the “ride of the kings” custom, 2023. Photo: Martina Pavlicová

ral classes lost their ability to farm independently and they became enemies of the state. The political pressure was relentless, the structure of the countryside was changing and this - along with the prohibitions and restrictions on the manifestation of religious life - significantly affected many of the folk traditions associated with the religious year. In the case of the “ride of the kings”, the prestige of the custom disappeared with the extinction of rural classes and the loss of horses, which were taken to state farms.

The change of political regime after 1948 affected everyday life of all social classes in the then Czechoslovakia very significantly. However, after a certain stabilization of the countryside some of folk traditions were restored and developed within the state-supported folklore movement, which also applies to the “ride of the kings”. Although the religious attributes were suppressed (for example, the date was moved outside Whitsuntide in some cases) and the ritual content vanished, the importance for the community in the sense of a festive time and strengthening of local identity of the community members did not become lost.

When speaking about present-day folk traditions, we often generalize. But it cannot be overlooked that the transmission, safeguarding and renewal of those traditions are all primarily associated with prominent organizers and per-



**Fig. 5.** The village Vlčnov, the “ride of the kings” custom, 2023. Photo: Martina Pavlicová

sons who often encouraged the community and individuals concerned. Many of them were knowledgeable amateurs, but many were erudite ethnologists. This was the case of *verbuňk*, where, for example, the ethnologist Karel Pavlišťík (1931–2018), a major figure in the discipline, was a key person. Unfortunately, from the 1970s until the 1990s he was not allowed to work in the field due to political reasons. This was one of the reasons why he was very active in the folklore movement, as this was often seen as an internal emigration for many “politically unsuitable” personalities, making it possible for them to work with at least some freedom. The above-mentioned renewed *verbuňk* contest in Strážnice was one of the results of his creative efforts.

Where the “ride of the kings” takes place, we could also find prominent persons who were involved in the renewal of the custom<sup>6</sup>. Most of them had strong ties to the place and took advantage of their knowledge of local traditions. Among them we can find teachers, local history workers and important witnesses, whom we could refer to with the modern term “gatekeeper” in the case of research on the cultural expressions in question.

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6 These personalities are portrayed e. g. in works: Pavlicová (2007); Habartová, Štěrba (2008).

While thinking about folk traditions in the light of the concept of intangible cultural heritage, we have focused on two selected examples that are closely associated with it due to their inscriptions on the UNESCO Representative List. The concept of cultural heritage has clearly influenced their existence, although not enough time has yet passed to assess major changes in their form and functioning. It is clear, however, that media coverage and institutional oversight are a confirmation for the bearers of the importance and value of the cultural heritage manifestations in question and are powerful impulses for strengthening their local identity and the traditions they pass on.

Although numerous other Czech folk traditions are not directly influenced by the above-mentioned concept, they, in fact, live in its shadow. We can see that with regard to the national inventory of intangible cultural heritage and regional inventories, with the latter working as a further organizational level of intangible cultural heritage; the presence on these lists is a *de facto* binding precondition for possible inscriptions on the international lists. The prestige of these inscriptions motivates many actors to try to get “their” heritage into that company, allowing it not only to be visible but also to receive some kind of support (whether among the bearers and their successors in a community, or in political or economic spheres, for example). This is a logical endeavour at the present time, when folk traditions often exist in the conditions of society as a distinctive part of different levels of identities, but without their everyday functions that were the essential link in the functioning structure of traditional folk culture.

It is currently undeniable that the concept of intangible cultural heritage has influenced, without precedence, the space for the transmission of folk traditions in the field and the relation of the wider society to folk culture, and that it has also given direction to a number of issues studied by ethnology.

The paradox of the aforementioned inaccurate adoption of the Convention in the Czech environment, where it has been basically applied solely to the traditions of rural folk culture (although discussions on the topic of crossing this “borderline” have started with high intensity in recent years), also consists in their heritisation that would not be so obvious without the application of the concept. However, if we focus on the most important aspect of the concept, that is, on the bearers of cultural heritage themselves, we can state that it is in this respect that the UNESCO concept has strengthened the process of transmission of selected expressions of folk culture and, additionally, activated individual communities in this process. This seems to be a natural trend, which the aforementioned Rieks Smeets refers to as a developmental shift in the content of intangible cultural heritage at UNESCO: “In the new strategy ICH is increasingly called ‘living heritage’, which avoids connotations like ‘fragile’ and ‘traditional’ and intends to place ICH at the heart of contemporary culture” (Smeets 2022: 109).



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