

Alternative Religiosities in the Soviet Union and the Communist East-Central Europe: Formations, Resistances and Manifestations

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“I joined the Party to keep ourselves out of the System.” Neo-Pagan Survival Strategies in Socialist Hungary

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Abstract: The paper presents a Hungarian Ethno-Pagan group (Bolyanest) which was established in 1979, active in and around Budapest. In the early 80s the group was a forum for New Age-like ideas: Gaia cult, esoteric concepts, natural-based peace-campaigns, yoga, Reiki and other theories about nature, love, humanity, human potentials and peace. The author analyses how this group shifted slowly from the New Age to the Neo-Pagan characteristics during the 80s. The group had a complex survival strategy, which contained several conscious and instinctual responses to the communist system. One of these was the use of espionage: having an informer within the police from among their membership to provide reports that were to benefit the movement. Another strategy was that some members joined the Socialist Party to reassure the communist authorities of their loyalty. The Hungarian society considered communism as a field of parallel realities: one was the communist system’s narratives, and the other was the society’s private discourses. Beside these, Bolyanest members created a third reality: the group’s own value-system and narratives. The cognitive ability to alternate between the realities was also an important key to survival.

Keywords: New Age, Ethno-Paganism, anarchism, nationalism, Gaia cult, Socialist block, Hungary

“Now, posteriorly, we call it a dictatorship (...) but we were simply living our happy youth, knowing how to behave in this or that situation. (...) Why? Don’t we still have to follow idiotic by rules?” – a woman¹ pondered so about her alternative movement’s activity during communism. The author – still as a child at the end of the 70s and in the 80s – too, heard his parents’ admonition several times: not to speak about anything in school; it was best to be open only, and strictly, within one’s closest circle, and even then, it was best to be prudent! People learned in their childhood that if the powers-that-be want to hear something, it had to be said, whether we believed it to be true or not. Afterwards, we could wink at each other or mock it anyway. Still, there were youths in whom this hypocritical state of being caused greater dissension than in most others, and they sought out and formed communities which included those who longed to find a form of sincerity and the “truer reality” behind the “official truth”. Some of them had even refused compulsory military service due to their beliefs and convictions. Some pleaded religious, others pacifist-humanist commitments. The communist regime observed and kept tabs on these individuals. Reports about them are valuable sources from the period when the Hungarian Krishna movement was taking form, when the Hungarian-founded, internationally known Neo-Protestant Christian church, *Hit Gyülekezete*

¹ The quotation is from an interview with a 52 years old woman, that I have conducted in 2014.

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[Congregation of Faith] was established, or when the Hungarians' "ancient ancestors" narratives started to couple with religious rhetoric and conviction, shaping the ideological basis of ancient small churches and current traditionalist groups, perceived as a mass phenomenon².

The religious ethnographic research of Hungary in the 1980s had not yet identified the shaping of the New Age-type, Neo-Pagan, and Christian movements taking place before its eyes, exploiting the slackening communist rule³, or, if they did, they did not dare to study it. Researches on Neo-Paganism in socialist Hungary started only after the collapse of the regime in 1989 as retrospective studies⁴.

Over the past decade, in examining constructions of religious, ethnic, community and cultural groups, my concern is how a given community constitutes itself in the course of its discourses and how the participants' identities and knowledge bases relate to their environment. One of my researched groups is *Bolyafészek* [Nest of Bolya or Bolyanest], which was established in 1979. In the course of talks and interviews, the group's "heroic age" in the 1980s frequently cropped up. It is these memories that inspired my present paper. I was interested in how they recall today – in their current discourses – that certain past which many of them lived through, given that most of them are now over 50. The experiences of that ample quarter of a century cannot be done away with by anyone: the *oral history* changes with the group itself. Hence, in my paper, I'm not only examining the past, but how the past relates to the present: how the group formed its identity, survival strategy and profile in the 1980s, and how the 27 years – that have elapsed since the change of regime – affects their current image of a bygone era.

1 Theoretical and methodological frame

*Vernacular religion*⁵, the relationship of the individual and the community, and the heterogeneity of the groups, has been concerning me for a long time. To what extent can we speak about groups at all, and, to what extent, only about the aggregate of the actors' individual knowledge? How does the process of synchronizing values – and at least in certain regards – and the common repertoire of narratives⁶ happen in the course of joining the group? I don't want to look for the "characteristics" of the group. I'm not interested in the phenomenological characteristics of the movement, but the way in which a new religious movement and its discourse is developed and becomes embedded into its environment. The group can be considered as an *interpretive community*⁷, but interpretations do not overlap one another. Robert Glenn Howard uses the expression³ *vernacular authority* for those manifestations observable in outlier religious groups, when the members construct norms, narratives and relationships without a central control or with an expired control over their experiences, suggestions and narratives. A similar decentralizing process started in the 1980s in a group (Bolyanest), bearing partly religion-, partly nature-oriented and partly the New Age characteristics⁸.

The construction of personal inventions, and the development of group identity, fell into the sphere of authority of individuals and sub-groups (hubs). The central figure of the group is not of the main institutional kind, but a coordinator, founder and denominator of the group examined here by me, Gaffer Bolya (with emic term *Bolyapó*). That is why – although more or less oscillating naturally around values preferred by the central symbolic individual – the personal, *vernacular religions* never constituted a dogmatic "religious" system. That was never their goal. Notwithstanding, I can point out the values and narratives along which the group is organized, even if the group is remarkably multifold.

² Szilágyi and Szilárdi, "Istenek", 62; Povedák "Transformations", 99.

³ Tomka, "Religiöser"; Szilágyi and Szilárdi, "Istenek", 62-63.

⁴ See Török, "New religious".

⁵ I use it as Primiano does ("Vernacular", 38-39). The changing concept of the term in scientific discourse see Howard, "Digital Jesus", 4-10, 18-22.

⁶ Together referred to as *register* – see Imbert, "The register".

⁷ Rabinow, "Representations", 251.

⁸ According to Strmiska's terminology (Strmiska, "Modern Paganism"), in the first decade they were similar to the "Western" kind of Paganism" rather than the East-European ones.

I conducted fieldwork⁹ in the *Bolyanest* since 2010. However, the retrospective narratives in spontaneous speech events were insufficient, so I had to rely more on the interviews. The group published a retrospective volume commemorating the 35th anniversary of its existence, where recollections can be found by 76 such individuals who were connected with the group for more or less time. I have used this documentation as well in the course of my analysis. I compared my experiences – especially when I analyzed the social context – with the scholar works on Hungary's communist era (results of cultural anthropology, history and sociology).

Examining the *vernacular discourses*, I used Michel Foucault's discourse-theory¹⁰ and its later theoretical contributions of e.g. Norman Fairclough¹¹, Teun van Dijk¹² or Arturo Escobar¹³, complemented by the more recent results of cognitive semantics¹⁴. Through the discourses, the individuals set and continuously overset their *cognitive registers*¹⁵. The individuals' actual *clouds of meanings*¹⁶ have more or less overlaps instead of parity. Depending on individuals and situations, different emotions appear, different knowledge-registers are activated¹⁷. Therefore, the current recalls of "the past of Bolyanest" set a multi-dimensional range of narratives (with many ambivalences).

2 Hungary in the 70s and 80s

In certain respects, the post-modern in Hungary started in 1956¹⁸. The Soviet Union crushed the Hungarian fight for freedom. The reorganized communist power (the Kádár-regime) turned the spheres of public and private life unambiguous once and for all: not progress, but two (parallel) realities exist in the society. One penetrates the public and official scenes and the other can only be lived through at home and in a fragile private sphere. Skepticism toward big narratives blazed the trail in humourous folklore genre (ex.: jokes, anecdotes) and in art (e.g. conceptual art, postmodern eclectic symbolism in literature) and pushed its way forward from the 60s¹⁹. More and more people were disappointed in the progress and the revolutionary ideas²⁰. This epistemological schizophrenia rendered the respected part of society "otherwise thinkers"²¹, and the truth as "second reality". This division dressed the smaller – alternative – social groups (ex.: small parish churches, Neo-Pagan groups) with a "third reality", parallel to the regime's and the social majority's ones. The capacity to switch between these realities, as in the prerequisite of orientation in the "cognitive labyrinth", survived the 1989 political transformation.

After the post-1956 years of bloody reprisals, in the 60s, the Kádár-regime changed tactics and began a permissive-paternalistic politics. During this time, citizens lived in relative comfort, albeit restricted, but were able to travel abroad, could embark in self-owned businesses, and on the basic civil rights front,

⁹ Online ethnography, multi-sited ethnography and long term participant observation must have been extended with interviews, as my fieldwork started well after the researched period of the group.

¹⁰ Foucault, "L'Archéologie", "L'Ordre".

¹¹ Fairclough, "Language".

¹² van Dijk, "Discourse".

¹³ Escobar, "Beyond".

¹⁴ Imbert, "The register"; Tolcsvay Nagy, "Kognitív".

¹⁵ Imbert, "The register".

¹⁶ Tolcsvay Nagy, "Kognitív".

¹⁷ Tánczos, "Egy moldvai".

¹⁸ At that time, the vast majority of Hungarian society still believed that a world that is socially sensitive, responsive to national matters, built on truth and democracy, could be molded. Thus, the revolution was characterized by a considerable social consensus: the majority felt it as progress. However, they later – as the revolution was choked in blood – were confused. The revolution became maladjusted in schools, in the media and could not be mentioned in public, or, if it came up, it had to be condemned.

¹⁹ Klaniczay, "Ellenkultúra".

²⁰ Individualism spread in the Hungarian society. A vast number of people simply looked for personal survival strategies: wellness of their families, the autotelic raising of financial benefits and living standards.

²¹ Szilágyi, "Emerging".

there was reduced severity, especially when compared with the other socialist countries²². That is how they explain that Hungary was the socialist block's so-called "happiest barrack"²³ in the 70s, with an apparent religious freedom, even though religious movements were frowned upon²⁴.

For the 1960s, the self-supporting or cultivating peasant economies practically ceased to exist, and collectivization established cooperatives (*kolkhoz*) or state farms (*sovhoz*). The former large gap between rural and city life became blurred, and industrial labour segments grew²⁵. Due to unified state supervision of mass communication and educational systems, the former living standard of labourers, peasants or civilians vanished, and in its place, a one-of-a-kind, relatively wide-ranging average living standard emerged in society in the spirit of "welfare socialism". Vis-a-vis other socialist countries, the State regime tried to win over the average individual by virtue of relative well-being and relative freedom to travel. The State's loans were decreased and became insolvent to the International Monetary Fund. The well-being could be supported²⁶ by allowing the people to establish certain private enterprises as well, such as industrial production (crafts and tradesmen), and in the field of agriculture (domestic farming), as well as of commerce (private contractors), so-called "second economy" complementing the state economy²⁷. They operated until the end of the 80s, and this second economy played important role for the newly emerging capitalist economy in the 90s. The average worker, after his daily working hours, also performed agricultural, industrial or commercial work for the local community²⁸. It was also possible to establish restricted cultural and touristic communications with the "western" capitalist block countries, which respectively caused leaking of information. Most of the Hungarian society, however, ridiculed the Regime instead of resisting it.

These tendencies caused a quick sparkle within gatherings of cultural, artistic and religious areas since the end of the 60s and 70s. Many attended self-teaching groups that were hard to control by the government. A few people with a prophetic attitude – known as "peoples' knowledge researchers" – e.g.: Gábor Pap, József V. Molnár, travelled through the small villages in the Carpathian Basin to lecture in Hungarian cultural centres. They were alternative thinkers about ethnic history, and had great role in a neo-nationalist renaissance. They wanted to satisfy the need related to the preservation of the supposed "ancient knowledge" and values of the "national temperament" that was presumed hidden and felt humiliated during the years of internationalism that was preferred by the government. The "countercultural attitude" (against any "official" narrative or endeavor) as a social phenomenon was rooted in the centuries when Hungarians were oppressed by the Habsburg monarchy²⁹. This attitude can be also considered as a ground of Hungarian new religious movements³⁰.

3 Bolyanest as an alternative community

This study focuses on a Neo-Pagan group present in and around Budapest, Hungary since 1979 (Bolyanest). This urban movement's founder (*Gaffer Bolya*³¹) lived in Érd (a town near Budapest), and later moved to Budapest – his home is the centre of the movement. In 1999, the group's core members established a legally registered society: "*Nest*" *Nature Conservation and Community Lifestyle Association* (*Fészek Természetvédő és Közösségi Életforma Egyesület*), but this institutional frame serves only as financial background. Currently

²² Hankiss, "Games".

²³ The *happiest barrack in the Socialist Camp* became a frequently referred emic term in Hungary.

²⁴ Povedák, "Transformations", 100-101.

²⁵ Hankiss, "Games".

²⁶ Beside the State's loans in the 70s and 80s.

²⁷ Andorka, "The importance".

²⁸ Hann, "A village".

²⁹ Klaniczay, "Ellenkultúra"; Szilágyi, "Emerging", 155.

³⁰ Csáji, "The past".

³¹ Gaffer Bolya (born in 1944) taught for decades in vocational secondary school pertaining to the printing industry. The group's basis comprised some of his students as well the company of his friends at the time. As a teacher, he wanted to give his students not only the knowledge of the curriculum but life-guiding strategies and human values in the interest of personal – and common – growth.

there are about 50-60 members closely connected to the movement, and at least 100-150 loosely connected. Those who appear occasionally can be estimated as around a thousand, but those who can be reached by widespread online communication media can be many thousands³². The number of the core members did not change significantly from the 80s, but the online platform³³ multiplied the number of persons they can reach in the last decade. Due to their wide social connections, I consider Bolyanest one of the most influential contemporary workshops, where the "new Hungarian mythology" production "mills around", so to speak³⁴.

Despite the fluctuation of participants, they consider themselves as a movement, calling the members with emic term "nest-warmers" (*fészekmelengető*), and they have a strong group-identity. They identify themselves as a pluralist movement seeking elementary knowledge of any peoples in the past and in the current world – how to live in harmony with nature. They protest against the main-stream authorities and culture, so most of them expressly say they are non-Christians, to express their alternative way of thinking against the majority of the Hungarian society's religious identity. They consider many esoteric, Neo-Pagan and Nature-base movements as their "brothers", and they participate in the Hungarian eco-village network. From the nature-based starting point their focus has been shifted towards an imagined "Hungarian folk knowledge" and the pseudo-scientific "ancient historical roots" during the last decades, so they became a rather Neo-Pagan movement than their previous kind-of-a-New Age attitude.

The prestige and influence of the central figure, Gaffer Bolya, is very high. He has a lively and extremely open personality, the beloved "guru" of the movement. In his advice he emphasizes simplicity and the respect of nature and of each other, a teaching which – according to him – is traceable in all religions. He does not care about religions, considering himself neither religious, nor without faith. He is very charismatic. Well read, he is familiar with many ethnographical works, but has also read about Taoism, Hinduism and Buddhism. His library is one of the team's knowledge sources (however, the majority of available works about Christianity are by atheist authors).

The ceremonial leader at most ritualized events of the group is usually the central figure, Gaffer Bolya (although some venues also have their own organizers). The rules are flexible and rather implicit, although the seating, the manner of standing in a circle, the speaking order and rhetoric move in rather strongly entrenched patterns, the majority of the participants being fully aware of the procedures (and those who aren't, will be courteously reminded).

The participants of the group are mainly from the city's middle class, but there are farmers, entrepreneurs, intellectuals among them. The average age (by today) is well over 55. Their education is at least secondary or higher, consequently, the Bolyanest movement is an intellectual endeavor. The group is not easy to classify: it could be interpreted as a new religious movement, or at least a New Age group and even an alternative, ecologically conscious lifestyle movement, with periodically different emphasis. They never dealt with Neo-Paganism as a global phenomenon, but their endeavor has been gradually shifted from nature-based, instinctual notion of liberty (80s) towards the ethnic-responsibility and search for ethnic roots (90s and 2000s), and nowadays towards the eco-conscious lifestyle (from 2008).³⁵ They do not presume a "continuation of pre-Christian religious beliefs"³⁶, but they consciously reconstruct a "unified knowledge" made of Hungarian folk knowledge and any of the "indigenous heritages" all around the world.

The discourse about Christianity has been very complex, but more of the members deemed it "superstition" with strong authority over people³⁷. The motifs for the tree of life, the cross, the sun and moon, are considered as ancient motifs, and the majority of the group sees in Christianity the persecution of natural, ancient knowledge. By today, Christianity is often accused with the eradication of ancient,

³² Due to the relatively strong fluctuation and the great number of ad-hoc inquirers, some participants in community events often don't even know each other.

³³ The e-mail chain letter, frequent forwarding, mailing lists. They established a blog, but it does not work.

³⁴ Hubbes, "New"; Szilárdi, "Ancient".

³⁵ This process can be clearly seen in many of the Hungarian eco-village movements (comp. Farkas, "Újpagányság").

³⁶ Kolozsi, "Social", 8.

³⁷ This was in tune with the attitude of Hungary's communism offering only the pretense of liberal attitude towards the religions.

“natural” faiths, and the “original religion”³⁸ of Hungarians³⁹. The majority also blames Christianity for the “strict system” rendered into global proportions and the “disenchantment” of the world (using Max Weber’s term). This anti-Christian attitude could also be a consequence of the impact of the official ideology of the communist regime, but intertwined with the intensified desire for freedom and nature-consciousness. In the following part of my paper I analyze the most important discourses which have determined the participants’ group-identity in the last decades.

4 Discourse 1: Difference between order and system

One of the first common feelings, which formed the group’s discourse and established its particular aspect of the group’s spiritual guide, Gaffer Bolya, was about the “order” and the “system”, the opposition of notions. According to him, everything has its order in Nature, everything is connected. This represents for him the ideal and holistic notion of “order”, where there is interdependent, instinctual cooperation between the parties, in spite of rules. In contrast, societies throughout history created “systems”, surrounding individuals and groups with increasing norms, specifying their places, thus alienating them from one another. It is not hard to recognize the roots of this anarchist idea and natural law, for instance in the concept of “spontaneous order”. Gaffer Bolya has read Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Leo Tolstoy, but I have no data on whether he has read the works of James Guillaume or Mikhail Bakunin. The resistance to rules and thirst for freedom, the instinctive mutual “give and take” solidarity depending on people’s ability and knowledge, as the basis for “nature-based communities” (as he refers), remains to this day the nucleus of the group’s mentality.

The thirst for freedom and openness was the call that brought the first members and the seed for the group into harmony. This was the common denominator for the very divergent layers and different cultural backgrounds that summoned the group to life. They were curious about everything that was in harmony with their wish for freedom. “We knew that we knew nothing. But we also knew that we wanted to know everything.” – as one of the participants put into words (2013/M/56)⁴⁰. “The light – filtering through the slackening chain – has clarified for us that freedom is among us, therefore within us, we just have to live with it!” – as one woman poetically recounts, who was still a student in the 80s (2014/F/52).

One member has used “organic pluralism” to label the teaching that the group has made its world: it acknowledged to me that this was close to anarchism and the New Age, but for him, as he explained, the so called “Hungarian Indian tribes” were the closest analogy. This was not without roots: it is well known that, in the name of new primitivism and proximity to nature, after the 1950s, smaller and larger friendship-associations created imaginary “Indian tribes” in Hungary, and tried to investigate, how it would feel to be “unspoiled” Indians. This “imagined Indian” culture (generally the North American prairie Indians attracted the most attention), as an alternative group-clustering phenomenon, which started in Hungary not only during socialism, but already in the decades between the two world wars, as a kind of secession (exodus) movements, continuing with increasing vigor after the second world war⁴¹. In the 70s, however, this phenomenon received new impetus from the New Age movements – and, for instance, the Hippie, the popular “Hair” movie or John Lennon’s peace movement. They received not only inspiration, but justification for their ambitions from them.

The proximity to nature, the yearning for freedom and the responsiveness to keep the so called “natural” knowledge, was paired with the respect of Hungarian folklore. Because the group’s other basic principle was pacifism and antiviolence, they sought the natural – in their vocabulary “organic” – knowledge with playfulness, and the fact that whatever they did, they must take it semi-seriously: “there was always the

³⁸ This is an imagined “system” of religious knowledge, which is wanted to be “reconstructed” by many Neo-Pagan groups. Bolyanest did not join this competition, but they also have ideas about the “ancestors’ faith”.

³⁹ Povedák, “Transformations”.

⁴⁰ The year following the quote denotes the time it was proffered, then the informer’s gender, finally the age at the time of the interview (or the speech event).

⁴¹ Kelényi, “Az indológus”.

possibility of the other answer" (2013/M/65). This resulted in the shaping of a fundamentally pluralistic and tolerant attitude. Pluralism and tolerance, however, were never without restrictions. It has become crystal clear since the initial talks that it referred primarily to whatever seemed compatible with the group's set of values and their accepted narratives.

Other than a few core values (e.g. freedom, nature, ancestors), the group's susceptibility to self-irony remained. These fundamental values were (and are) "respect for the nature, "respect for the ancestors" and "freedom". These notions did not have a "scientific definition", but they have evolved throughout the conversations and positive/negative feedbacks. One participant outlines it as follows: "We never took ourselves too seriously; we always maintained the right to make mistakes and always regarded people's free flow of ideas as a priority. Freedom: (...) we wanted to leave behind even the semblance of a System or Authority. (...) Nevertheless, we didn't like it too much if someone didn't respect our ancestors, what they had left us, be it Hungarians, Jews or whatever sort, because whoever is offensive to others, doesn't belong in Bolyanest!" (2012/M/64). The meetings were (and are) called "spiritual exchange" (szellemi kaláka) which were built upon the actors' mutual give and take relationships: "no matter who, or whatever he/she knows, we can learn from, it's how we felt, so this, too, connects us" (2012/M/64).

5 Discourse 2: Survival strategies (caution and tricks)

"Now, there are those (...) who call themselves anticommunist now, but this didn't come up during the first years. We didn't want to be resistant. We just wanted to be left alone, right?" (2014/M/66) This attitude was one of the pledges for survival. The members of Bolyanest didn't oppose the Regime; they just created their own alternative, parallel realities and a suitable community. They intended to stay away from the authorities, by not withdrawing from it, but by learning "to manage things on site. There was a rock song «I'm outside and I'm inside, too», so, we felt something like this, but above all we were ourselves, ourselves." – as one quotes the LGT band's lines from 1984 by one of the members (2011/M/63). "We knew well that there were members of the [socialist] Party among us, and we never ran them down for it. We did not speak about it. Some of us were even grateful deep down, because among other things, this was what protected us." (2012/F/60) One of the most interesting "methods" was the having of a secret agent: "We suspected who [an informant] was probably sending the reports, and after a while this became evident. He was deliberately sending reports, at least that's how I know, I haven't seen the files, but I was told so that they considered us as «not dangerous». We should be grateful for that, but didn't speak about it expressly, ever." (2013/M/65) A member expressed that "sometimes I would be asked unpleasant questions [by an officer], like, what are we doing there [at Bolyanest], what are we «plotting», so I thought I should join the Party. Nowadays, this may be totally incomprehensible. I joined the Party to keep ourselves out of the System. It seems idiotic, but it happened." (2013/F/66) Gaffer Bolya, the leader himself, was a junior member of the only Party at the time, the Hungarian Socialist Labor Party, and the association of the KISZ (Communist Youth Union of Hungary) before its inception. He recounts, when, in a small local journal, "I wrote about the fact that beside the new landlords and oligarchs, poverty was still the same and the inequality was catastrophic, the inequality among people, so in the end they politely dismissed me [from the Party]" (2013/Gaffer Bolya/M/69).

The façade from the outside was in contrast with the groups inner discourses. This was also a form of survival strategy⁴², and pawn for the preservation of their parallel reality. To the outside they formed a group organizing scientific presentations. On the inside, they yearned to discover and experience the transcendent reality, the unity of nature, and its understanding through folklore. These led them towards a specific type of reconstruction of tradition, pluralistic and rather ambivalent (expressly anti-dogmatic) semi-religious construction.

At the time, it was important not to speak of the Regime's taboo subjects, because it was dangerous, and could get others into trouble as well: "Many of us listened to Free Europe on the radio, but we never openly spoke about it (...); we created our secret language (...); we didn't want them to know what we were

⁴² For joining alternative religious groups as a survival strategy, see Kapitány and Kapitány, "Túlélési" and "Alternatív".

talking about. Some referred to America as «the turnip field». Why? After 1956, the American support packages contained so many cans of turnip that we lived on them for two years. So, America and turnips got connected. We thought we were smart when we coined: «he left for the turnip fields», meaning, he emigrated to the US.” (2013/M/67) The 1956 revolution was out of the question, up until the second half of the 1980s, when the change of the political system first insinuated – from 1987 on – that it was an open subject in Hungarian society. This culminated at the renewed funeral of the martyred prime minister of the 1956 revolution, Imre Nagy (his symbolic rehabilitation and elevation to hero-state), where the then Hungarian opposition joined the mass demonstration (1989). The majority of Bolyanest members was present in the huge, several hundreds of thousand crowd. “When it was obvious that something would change, of course we supported the opposition and participated in the demonstrations. We were very enthusiastic; we felt that we were living in historic times. And then, you see what happened?! Poverty, new idiocy, new rules, pseudo-democracy. We didn’t know this at the time. We thought, if it was the end of communism, freedom will come. [laughs]” (2013/M/66). After the democratic transformation (1989) the majority remained “otherwise thinkers”. Currently about half of the group dismisses the European Union⁴³, which they compare to the Soviet Union: “Why, don’t we still have to follow idiotic rules?” (2013/M/66), said one member. The majority of the group consciously deviated from mainstream thinking even after the change of regime, ending up in the pull of different, peripheral discourses: energy-healing, those committed to the Sumerian-Hungarian kinship, the discourse of the pseudo-scientific, nationalistic, prehistoric narratives of, the Scythian-Hun-Hungarian kinship or even numerology, the UFO connections, Reiki and Yoga. Of course, these diverged according to individual preferences. These ambivalent theories appeared occasionally in the discourses, and did not form a common register.

6 Discourse 3: Turning to nature

Although the group didn’t strive for “regime-compatibility”, it had to comply with a few state regime-propagated values. Officially supported hiking practice was in tune with the group’s common efforts. The desire to be in harmony with nature characterized the group from the beginning. This was labeled as an emic term “whole-ness” (with emic term: *egész-ség*): every existing values⁴⁴. The whole-ness is also synonymous with “living in harmony”, as well an allusion to fill the lack of spirituality in the contemporary world. This is one of the most manifold and most frequently mentioned concept, beside the natural “order” and nonviolence (“peace”).

Since the respect for nature was coupled with need to discover and relearn the desire for specific ancestral knowledge, the group’s discourse turned towards simplicity as a primary value. They designated their sacred places, first in the Budapest surroundings, in the forests, in hillsides, then farther locations (Sóskút, Borsodgeszt, Bodrogeköz). Already since the mid-80s, they would hold yearly two-week moves into Nature. They would organize camps for their members and interested acquaintances north of Budapest, in Kóspallag. At such times – since the membership is mainly from the urban areas – the experience of a nature-friendly lifestyle is their main goal, in other words, to salute the “oneness” of humans and nature. They also invite specialists of basket-weaving, pottery, wood carving, etc. to teach them. They sleep in tents or under the free sky, usually with camp-fire and “we learn about plants and animals’ secrets. Sometimes, renowned scientists come with stories about butterfly mating or the migration of birds. The miracle that surrounds us. The miracle, that if you see it, if you have eyes to see it, you understand the fact, that you are one with it.” (2012/F/58)

It was in total harmony with the group’s imagination, that the central figure, Gaffer Bolya, often talked about his experiences when a maple tree tried to teach him, on a Budapest square. “It accosted me, but I continued on my way. The next day, I passed by it again; it accosted me again and wanted to impart its

⁴³ The rejection of the EU in Hungary is relatively low with two thirds of the population still committed to the EU, despite the critical tone.

⁴⁴ An interesting example: during his illness with cancer, Gaffer Bolya considered the tumor as a valuable being which is not bad, just an alternative existence. He recovered from cancer.

knowledge. Again, I went on my way, hurrying to my job. I thought I would return anyway, and if it accosts me again, I will listen. Then on the third day, I passed by again, but [the tree] was cut down. It probably knew in advance, what would happen, that’s why it wanted... I shed tears and stroked the felled trunk. It left me the morsels” – recounts Gaffer Bolya in 2014. Ever since then, he has a guilty conscience, he feels responsible for “understanding the knowledge of nature”, and the imparting of “the knowledge of loving coexistence in nature” (2014/Gaffer Bolya/M/70) became one of the group’s main objective.

At equinox and solstice events, the members of the group hold rituals or “peregrinations” in the Budapest mountains, at the edge of the forest by the great Lebanese cedar tree. They start at sunset and stay until nightfall: they light up candles, lecterns, they stroke the giant cedar, the “old lady”. They bring food and drinks to it, consuming it together, but pouring some onto the ground. They sing and dance around it. They don’t honor it as a god or saint, but they visit and respect it as a wiser companion (elderly friend). They regard it as one of the symbols of the cyclically changing nature. The cedar has filled an important role in ancient Middle-Eastern and Mesopotamian cultures. They consciously chose this site for their equinox and solstice events, which also points to antiquity, the “erstwhile knowledge”. Notwithstanding, the discourse of the Sumerian-Hungarian kinship theory⁴⁵ connected with the “old lady” cult. It has turned into a strikingly marked phenomenon in the last decade, after a new, elderly member joined the group, who had researched (as an amateur researcher) the Sumerian culture for decades. He has written “Sumerian prayers”, which they recount by the cedar.

The existing beings and the strengths of nature are not divided into good or bad powers, but into beings of equal ranks, where a blade of grass isn’t worth more than a deer or a man, and in addition, creates the only so called organic system, the “one-ness”. This could be referred to as a kind of Gaia cult in the group, although this notion was never used by the Nest-warmers. Rather, this *sui generis* approach stems from the well-known Greek *all is one* idea⁴⁶ made commonly known in Hungary by the artist-philosopher Béla Hamvas in the 50s and 60s, whose ideas played a significant role in the Boyanest in the 80s.

The group’s majority also admire “tribes close to nature”, feeling that there is still “unspoiled, ancient wisdom to be found. We also yearn for this, but the modern man has already forgotten it. The Greeks knew it...” (2011/F/59). In the 2000s this observation was completed with searching for bio-farms and healthy alimentation to supply them – in consort with the universal discourse about ecological lifestyle. They consciously search for it and when found, spread the “natural food” of certain small, local bio-businesses, and set them in motion through mission-type distribution networks.

7 Discourse 4: Desire for folklore as an “ancestral” knowledge

They respect traditional knowledge in contrast with scientific “reasoning”⁴⁷. The 19th century romantic nationalisms supposed that the “folklore is a survival of ancient times”, and did not work much with cross-border phenomena. This thesis has been kept as a basic principle by the Bolyanest (and a great part of the Hungarian society). The group started a specific knowledge-reconstruction, to fill in the gaps, as they were predominantly urban mid-class citizens, with just an imagination about “traditional folklore”. With playful experiments, they consciously invent their own customs based on an imagined “folklore”, with the help of the folklore archives, popular ethnographic works, as well as the knowledge and memories of some members. Reference like “grandma’s did it so” forms a frequent legitimation narrative.

One important rite of the group is the farewell to winter, a revival of a Hungarian folk tradition. Once a year in the spring, usually in the weeks before Easter, they conduct the burning of a big ragdoll (*Kiszebábu*) also known in Hungarian folklore. They dress up a female doll with big breasts (winter-woman) and they burn it in a forest-side in the Budapest mountains, as a symbolic expel of winter. They do not call her “witch”, and do not condemn her (contrary to the usual folk practices), but waiting for her later return next

⁴⁵ It had appeared on the scene of Hungarian Neo-Pagan cults between the two world wars.

⁴⁶ Heraclitus’ idea, which – according to some members of the group – resonates with the Vedic teachings.

⁴⁷ Although some members hold the results of the natural sciences in high regard, especially bio-chemistry and modern advanced technology.

December. The necessary timber and coal is picked up in the forest, and they all bring pieces of rags for the clothing. A few members learn the “traditional” songs from folkloristic works and lexicons, but since the lyrics do not always come with the music scores, they try various tunes, sometimes composing their own. This has now become a several decades-old practice, so some invented songs seem “traditional” for the newcomers.

The predisposition for ethnic, ancient knowledge, however, is not confined only to the Hungarian folklore tradition. Based on historical literature, travelers’ accounts, popular books (and online information for the past decade), the group’s scale of values and supply of narratives was enriched. They look for fitting compatible elements to build into their knowledge base. They prefer those cultures that are related or congenial with Hungarian ancestry; such as especially – according to them, and contrary to the official knowledge taught in schools – the Scythian, Hun, Bulgarian, Turkish, Mongolian, Japanese, American Indian and Hindu cultures. Among these, in the 80s, the Indian, Hun and Scythian, while in the 90s, the Bulgarian, Turkish and Mongolian, and in the 2000s, the Mesopotamian and the Sumerian sources became popular, but the former layers also remained. In recent years, *Yotengrit*⁴⁸ theory plays the central role.

Hence, in their rituals, today, the narratives of an envisaged Sumerian culture and urban shamanism mingle into Hungarian folklore together with Pan-Turkism, with Slavic, Baltic, Balkan and specific motifs, chants, and other elements. This heterogeneous – and ambivalent – mass of facts generates different patterns for each individual (configurations). New elements can be built into the discursive registers of the group, if they are compatible to the core values of the nature, simplicity, freedom and organic “togetherness”. It’s not uncommon, for instance, that Sumerian prayers are sung together with Slavic (Mainly Russian) songs⁴⁹ learned in school (since the compulsory foreign language in the 80s was Russian).

Making handicrafts were practiced since the beginning of the 80s for children and adults in the group’s event. The folk or ethnic motifs and techniques⁵⁰ were taught to each other in the group, but sometimes they invited specialists. Many members participated in the “dance house (*táncház*) movement” originated in Hungary⁵¹, and later turned into a worldwide phenomenon.

A significant segment of the members’ living standards deteriorated after the collapse of communism. A specific kind of nostalgia can be observed in the “heroic age” of the group. Their happy youth and the relative well-being offered by the paternalistic state are stressed by some members, despite the oppression. Most of those age groups in their 50s for whom finding jobs is harder due to competition and unemployment, feel themselves defenselessness, which is why the Kádár-era, with a theoretical 100% employment rate, becomes the object of nostalgia. Other members still demonize the Kádár-era. Thus, this kind of political discourse only occasionally appears in the group, and even then, it is pinpointed by disputes. The fact that there were a few Party members in the group or even “helpful agents”, is never mentioned in the disputes.

The contemporary neo-nationalist political discourses affect memory much more: e.g. from the 2000s, the group’s focus often turned to defend the Hungarian agricultural land (not to sell it to foreigners). This cross-pollinated with a neo-romanticism of the Hungarian folklore. Notwithstanding, the group maintained their fundamentally pluralistic, anti-violence and comparatively tolerant attitude.

8 Conclusion

Paradoxically, it was due to the efforts of the communist regime that the new kinds of the desire for alternative knowledge in Hungary was launched. The endeavor to eliminate the socio-cultural fundamentals prior to the takeover by the communists (1948) generated a feeling of void. With the post-1956 terror gone in the 70s and 80s, and some restricted human rights were given. The political power connived at many grassroots social

⁴⁸ A Hungarian Neo-Pagan movement, which was established by a Hungarian neo-shaman, Imre Máté (Szilágyi 2015); dual worldview with supplementary principals (male/female energies, in spite of good/bad opposition).

⁴⁹ These are lyrical or folk songs, and never communist *chastushkas* or marches. Only a few members feel nostalgia to the communism, so a communist song would cause expressed resistance from the majority.

⁵⁰ The making of Christmas-tree decorations, basket-weaving, or the preparation of now traditional-deemed food fare etc.

⁵¹ Quigley, “Táncház”, 33.

movements and initiatives. Most people in Hungary searched in various scenes for alternative answers: possibilities of a "truer existence" as a "parallel reality". Most of them found it at home, others sought answers in exclusive, smaller new religious groups built on solidarity or deepened faith, or in contrast, esoteric connections at a personal transcendental level in groups showing great fluctuations. Numerous movements unfolded: religious, esoteric and human potential movements, while a new sensitivity to folklore also flourished. These efforts settled into a wide variety of patterns in different groups. Among international trends, the New Age, Neo-Paganism and Christian revival movements⁵² are to be emphasized, though the role of anarchism should be also mentioned⁵³. Due to communist secularization, the anti-Christian official attitudes, and the increasing role of the private sphere, there was an increasing prevalence of so-called self-made religiosity in which one can pick and choose from certain religious markets, all that one finds interesting and acceptable, and from these, build one's own concept-system (bricolage religiosity).

Bolyanest is a typically hybrid form of the movements encompassing a wide scale of personal, vernacular religions: a mixture of the elements of the New Age, Neo-Paganism and eco-conscious movements. The culture-construction of the group created a "third parallel reality" beside the society's second one and the official ideology's. Alternative interpretations of existence within the group's discursive space (which was just relatively divided from the society's discourse field) included a locally-based image of natural unity (similar to the Gaia cult) and a revival of folklore (neo-folklorism). They continued searching for the harmony between humans and nature, and the revival of ancient wisdom, but – according to the mid80s political and non-communist, independence discourses – they, step by step, turned to the Hungarian folklore and ethnic roots.

Bolyanest members were skeptical towards all forms of religious and political systems, and they maintained this attitude. In their discourses, they gave space for alternative interpretations of history, hence the main roles were given to ancient nations' cultures unrecognized by education in schools, but considered by the group as being of kinship with the Magyars, e.g., the Scythes, Huns, and Sumerians⁵⁴. This effort in their culture-construction resulted in the Neo-Pagan identity during the 80s. They molded a proximity to nature, drawn from the folklore treasures, into a creatively reinterpreted esoteric nature-based, global principle, by teaching the unity of birth-life-death and all the beings are connected (see *togetherness, one-ness*).

To maintain this multifold reality, they employed intricate survival strategies. The joining of certain members into the communist party, the tolerance of the secret agent of the State, in fact, appearing to be on their side, and in addition, the image shown to the public and its consciously anti-secular and anti-Christianity, also played a role. Moreover, it is important to mention that in their set of values and register of narratives, they made a conscious effort not to attract the attention of the regime, so as to prevent being considered dangerous. They developed a special coded language, showing an image that was distinctly non-violent, not openly contrary to communism, up until the transition years (1987-1989), when the majority of the members joined the change of regime demonstrations. Their nationalism remained all along a tolerant and pluralistic attitude (except, e.g., against Christianity).

Bolyanest's example points to the fact that contemporary Neo-Paganism and the New Age have significantly common roots in Hungary. The former Neo-Pagan antecedents of the 1920s and 30s – after several decades' latency – were not resuscitated, but totally new groups appeared. Groups of mixed character (pathfinders), similar to Bolyanest, were not scarce, and their number rapidly grew by the end of the 80s⁵⁵, especially the ethno-pagan type of groups⁵⁶. Following the collapse of communism (1989), however, the majority of the Neo-pagan groups were characterized as ethno-pagan⁵⁷, while the bulk of the New Age-type groups have lost their religious nature, their privacy, and they either joined with environmental

52 Tomka, "Religiöser"; Szilágyi and Silárdi, "Istenek".

53 Bozóki et al., "Anarchizmus".

54 These pseudo-scientific theories are not without antecedents: from the 18th century, the grass-root nationalism uses these narratives against the official knowledge, considered as false.

55 Povedák, "Transformation", 99.

56 Hubbes, "Ethno-pagan", 103.

57 Szilágyi and Szilárdi, "Istenek", 74.

awareness and/or the discourse of esotericism and became secularized and market-oriented. A few such groups, however, remained (e.g. Bolyanest), where, in addition to the esoteric worldly explanations, the sensitivity to the wealth of basic ethnic folklore could stay intact, but the *nature-based movement* character could suddenly surface and, intertwining later with the more recent, global discourses, converge with the contemporary eco-conscious movements.

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