



## **Safeguarding Local Heritage: Wedding Rituals of Sárköz, Hungary**

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This chapter analyses the *Sárközi lakodalom*, a local event of the heritage of Sárköz based on mid-twentieth century traditional dance events and weddings and registered in the Hungarian National Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage. I treat weddings as a complex heritage system, since they embrace almost all the manifestations of intangible cultural heritage, including several listed in the National Inventory. The aim of this chapter is to explore the representation of the heritage of Sárköz in the twenty-first century and the cultural identity of the community.

**Keywords:** Hungary, ICH, dance, wedding, identity, UNESCO

## Introduction

More than twenty years have passed since UNESCO established and adopted the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2003. In the time since then, it is perhaps no exaggeration to say that it has become one of the most popular conventions of the world organisation.<sup>1</sup> One of the tasks of States Parties to the Convention is to map and list the intangible cultural heritage (ICH) within their own countries.<sup>2</sup> But the process does not end with the inclusion of items on national inventories,<sup>3</sup> as UNESCO's recommendations include the ongoing monitoring of heritage communities. In Hungary, the Directorate of Intangible Cultural Heritage of the Hungarian Open Air Museum coordinates the tasks related to the Convention, an important part of which is the ongoing liaison with those communities on the national inventory.<sup>4</sup> The Directorate is in contact with the communities from the very beginning of the nomination process, and they go through a process of articulation and awareness-raising during the process of nomination writing, which helps them to live, safeguard and transmit their heritage.

In this study, I will analyse one of the most important events of the community inscribed on the National Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2012 with the title *Folk Art of Sárköz: Weaving, Embroidery, Beading and Costume, the Wedding of Sárköz, (Sárközi lakodalom)*.<sup>5</sup> It reflects the importance of efforts to safeguard traditions at the local level. In traditional peasant culture,<sup>6</sup> the wedding held a prominent role, being one of the main dance occasions in the life of the community, attended by both the young and old generations of the village. In this context, today's event aims to present and represent the traditional wedding procession and customs. I will compare the traditional wedding with the *Sárközi lakodalom* festival in 2023.

<sup>1</sup> For comparison, it is worth looking at the number of elements proposed for other conventions. If we look only at the well-known World Heritage Convention, since its creation in 1972, 1223 sites have been inscribed. The Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity has inscribed 730 heritage elements since 2003.

<sup>2</sup> The *Basic Texts of the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (UNESCO 2022) includes information about the responsibilities of the State Parties.

<sup>3</sup> The National Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage was established in Hungary in 2008.

<sup>4</sup> For more on the significance of the national inventory in Hungary and the role of the community, see Csonka-Takács 2017.

<sup>5</sup> In the rest of the paper, I will use the name of the event in Hungarian to make it easier to distinguish.

<sup>6</sup> In the ethnographic context, the peasantry is a social category, most basically agricultural workers. The dissolution of traditional peasant societies in Hungary dates back to the 1960s.

The *Sárközi lakodalom* is not part of the heritage element on the national inventory; it is an organised event (hereafter capitalised as the Event). The main purpose is to present and promote the traditions in Sárköz and it is an artificially created event that historically never existed in this form.

This study argues that weddings (traditional and heritagised as well) can be seen as a complex heritage system in which several manifestations of ICH can be found. Various questions arise as to what extent the wedding customs and dances presented at the Event follow the wedding rites of the past. How has the heritage itself changed, and how has the fact of presentation shaped the heritage itself and the dances and music? Indeed, in what way can the practices still be seen as an expression of community identity? or is it more of a tourist attraction? This chapter aims to find answers to these issues.

## The Field of Research

Geographically, my research was carried out in the southern part of Hungary, on the lower Danube, between Szekszárd and Bába in Tolna County. Following the regulation of the course of the Danube in the nineteenth century, the region underwent an explosive change. Its peasant population started rapidly to become enriched and urbanised. Nonetheless, it proved difficult for the region to continue to prosper because of the rigid estate structure and the practice of having only one child.<sup>7</sup> The period of growth and affluence is reflected in the rich folklore, costume and social structure of the region (Kósa and Filep 1978, 163–164). In a narrower and ethnographic sense, only the four settlements south of the estuary of the Sió river (Őcsény, Decs, Alsónyék, Sárpilis) are counted as Sárköz; Bába, Szeremle, Érsekcsanád, Pécsvárad, Zengővárkony and Váralja are also included here, however, because of cultural similarities and marital and economic-cultural relations between the Reformed (Protestant) settlements (Borsos 2011, 203).

<sup>7</sup> The practice of having one child (*egykézés*) in Hungarian peasant society began in the mid-nineteenth century as a deliberate birth control system, whereby only one child is born in a family. It was typical in closed, Reformed villages, including the villages of the Sárköz. As a result, land ownership increased in value, as wealth was not fragmented and the desire for a more demanding life was strengthened. The practice became socially accepted and eventually a moral norm. The social consequences of this birth control, including the risk of national destruction, were already recognised between the two world wars (Morvai and Tátrai 1977).

I grew up in a county-centre town on the border of this region, a positionality which has determined my attitude towards the local culture. In addition to this, since 2015, as a staff member of the Directorate of Intangible Cultural Heritage of the Hungarian Open Air Museum, I have been actively involved with communities on the national register, including the community of Sárköz. All this helps me to bring both etic and emic perspectives to this analysis.

In addition to observing the whole series of events, my research was based on semi-structured and informal interviews, film and photo documentation. My informants were women and men who were actively involved in the past and present organisation of the Event, as well as its participants and visitors. I tried to take as many photographs as possible, and in order to reconstruct the history of the Event, I collected written documents (invitations, posters, etc.) from the past.

It is important to clarify the word “wedding” as used here, because it has several meanings. On the one hand, it signifies a “traditional wedding”, that is, a rite of passage during several days in the middle of the twentieth century, when two people’s lives are bound together; on the other hand, it signals the *Sárközi lakodalom* itself, the Event lasting several days; and lastly, “wedding” refers to a party and dance occasion with a Saturday evening dinner.

## Theoretical Framework

### Representation

In the twenty-first century, the representation of elements of folk culture in a variety of ways is experiencing a golden age, with numerous festivals, themed days and events being held across the country to promote and make heritage more visible. The antecedents of this effort can be traced back to the traditionalist movements of the twentieth century: the *Gyöngyösbokrét* movement<sup>8</sup> was launched in 1938; a strong dance-house movement<sup>9</sup> be-

<sup>8</sup> Between 1931 and 1944, every year around 20 August, peasant groups held dance, singing and play performances in Budapest under the name *Gyöngyösbokrét*. In 1935, the groups participating in the performances formed a social association under the name of Bokréta Association (Pálfi 1979). It was launched with the specific aim of facilitating the identification of villages that had preserved their traditions, promoting the establishment of folk ensembles in these villages, and assisting the performance of their productions in theatrical settings (Diószegi 2008, 4).

<sup>9</sup> “One of the most recent waves of folkloristic discovery was the so-called ‘dance house’ move-

gan after the opening of the first dance-house in Budapest in 1972, and the so-called nomadic generation craft movement<sup>10</sup> was also established in the same period. Although it is not the purpose or task of this study to discuss the details of these movements, it is essential to mention them in order to see that the processes of representation and heritage management in Hungary today are not without precedent. Overall, it is a question of the emergence, already in the middle of the twentieth century, of outside initiatives which have had an impact on both the traditions and the communities that sustain them. There are many ways and opportunities to promote heritage in the twenty-first century, perhaps one of the most common is the organisation of a local festival, a highlight event that gives community members the chance to showcase their heritage.

Nowadays, becoming visible (visibilisation) has become an important way of keeping folk traditions alive and one of the possible ways is to build self-representation. Communities express their self-image through cultural practices, which is a form of communication with their environment. This representation is based on tradition which sustains community identity (Verebélyi 2005, 27). Each tradition can also be seen as a representation of social relations, since “every action can be a representation of the environment in which it is created and can also be a representation of itself” (Hoppál 2008, 13). This need for representation ideally comes from the community and is the result of internal development.

It is the practice of tradition that ensures the continued maintenance of the identity of communities. An important element of tradition is the ability to adapt to new challenges, i.e. to safeguard old structures while allowing room for new elements to be used (Hoppál 2008, 13). Respect for local traditions creates a sense of local identity, which is about developing

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ment (*táncház*), an urban grassroots youth revival movement that emerged in the 1970s and 80s in the period of late socialism” (Balogh and Fülemile 2008, 43). The *Táncház* (‘dance-house’) model of teaching folk dance and music combines traditional forms of acquisition with modern pedagogical and academic methods. Participants acquire dance knowledge from experienced members or tradition-bearers by direct observation and imitation, to the accompaniment of live music, while using their own individual level of creativity to develop their competence and dancing ability (see more: UNESCO n.d.).

<sup>10</sup> Members of the nomadic generation of craftspeople were also motivated by the need to safeguard the traditional knowledge of disappearing crafts. In contrast to the socialist-era practice of cottage industry cooperatives that produced items according to pattern and marketed the forms of folk art, they sought to preserve the deeper, meaningful layers of peasant culture, the creation of objects close to nature and the preservation of traditional complex knowledge (see more: Fülemile 2018).

a sense of belonging to one's immediate environment, and thus, in a good case, to see oneself as a proud member of the community.

In the twenty-first century, local communities face many external factors that can fundamentally transform and change their culture. One of these influencing factors is globalisation, which exerts an influence worldwide. It would appear that one of the consequences of globalisation is that individual communities are becoming part of a single common world culture, without adhering to their traditions. On the contrary, though, the cultural significance of marginal and local phenomena is increasing (Siikala 1998, 7). Local traditions are always accompanied by a strong sense of identity and the development of a strong sense of place strengthens the community, contributing to the development of the municipality (Hoppál 2011, 13). As Pavlikova also points out in relation to the Czech *verbuňk* and band to the custom of the Ride of the Kings, the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage has strengthened the transmission of folk culture for its bearers, and competitions and festivals have helped to make all this more visible (2024, 158).

### *The “Discovery” of Traditional Culture*

In order to understand the mechanisms and impact on communities of the Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage, we need to go back in time and look at the “discovery” of traditional culture and its representational processes during the twentieth century.

At the end of the nineteenth century, with the disintegration of peasant society, the way of life and culture of rural communities changed radically in Hungary. As a result of modernisation and urbanisation, the traditional way of life began to change rapidly, which meant “undressing”. In its first interpretation, “undressing” means the abandonment of rural folk costume and its replacement by conventional, urban dress at the community, social level. In the present study, I use the term “undressing” in a broader sense to mean the denial of rural existence (a sign of poverty), the conscious abandonment of certain elements of it and the pursuit of modernisation. This process takes place at different times in different parts of the country, but it follows a process of significant and very rapid change after the collectivisation of agriculture in Hungary. This process accelerates in almost all aspects of life, leading to a complete change of lifestyle (change of clothing, utensils, housing, construction, farming, mechanisation). The function of

traditions and objects of everyday life also began to serve a representational purpose (Csonka-Takács et al. 2023, 237). As with European trends, the discovery of peasant culture led to growing interest in various genres from several directions. The notion that national culture is rooted in Hungarian traditional culture was reinforced. In this period people lacked the necessary capital to modernise peasant farms, but handicraft products could still generate income for many. This is the basis for the “blossoming” of folk art in Hungary, which developed at different rates over time, even in several waves (Romsics and Verebélyi 2019, 5–6). Hungary’s characteristic folk art regions emerged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and became a symbol of Hungarian folk art and national identity from time to time (Csonka-Takács et al. 2023, 247).

### *Discovering the Folk Art of the Sárköz*

In addition to the representational and economic interests that have previously been at the forefront, safeguarding of the cultural heritage practices of the Sárköz has become increasingly important. The need to safeguard folk art in the Sárköz region had already arisen at the end of the nineteenth century (the Millennium Exhibition, the organisation of the ethnographic collection of the county museum). The first handicraft workshop was founded in 1901 and continued to operate for more than thirty years. In the 1930s, with the help of local pastors and teachers, embroidery courses were regularly organised in other villages in the region. The aim was not only to revive and re-educate the art of embroidery at the grassroots level, but also to provide women with work and income. Several students who later became “Masters of Folk Art”<sup>11</sup> after the Second World War (Mihályné Perity, József Kovács, János Tóth) came out of these courses (Sárköz nomination form 2012).

The process of extracting the specific features and values of folk art from its own system and incorporating them into a national cultural model built up from elements of village tradition was carried out on several channels. Intellectual ideological movements, official cultural policy, but

<sup>11</sup> The system of Master of Folk Art rewards folk artists who live in their communities and are outstanding creators in five categories (crafts, instrumental folk music, storytelling, singing, dancing), thus encouraging and assuring heritage safeguarding and communication towards the next generation. The Master of Folk Art award, established in 1953, has been awarded to numerous performers and artists from Sárköz. See Csonka-Takács – Pál-Kovács 2019.

also economic and social considerations played a role in the recognition and interpretation of the traditional culture of the Sárköz region of South Transdanubia. Of course, all this also had an impact on the self-image and self-esteem of the people of the Sárköz (Sárköz nomination form 2012).

After the Second World War, the preservation of material culture was taken over by the Decsi Household Industry Cooperative, where it continued to be carried out on a contract basis throughout the whole of the Sárköz region. The *Gyöngyösbokréta* movement, which started in 1931, did most to safeguard and transmit the traditional culture of the Sárköz region (folk dance, folk song) (Sárköz nomination form 2012).

After the Second World War, the revival folk dance movement soon reached the Sárköz region. The first formation of the *Sárpilisi Népi Együttes* (Folk Ensemble of Sárpilis) led by István Bogár, which later gained national fame, was founded in 1946, and then traditional groups were formed in other settlements, which still safeguard and cultivate elements of the traditional culture of the Sárpilis. Since the second half of the twentieth century, numerous events and associations have helped to promote and disseminate the folk arts of the Sárköz region, organising camps, workshops and various events to showcase their rich tradition. Institutions and NGOs, i.e. organised forms of knowledge transmit and play a major role in safeguarding. The various exhibitions, festivals and celebrations also provide a platform for community representation. Such events, like the *Sárközi Lakodalom*, provide an opportunity for community participation, involving members of the community in the safeguarding of tradition (Sárköz nomination form 2012).

### **The “Traditional” Weddings in the Sárköz**

In order to understand the relation of the representative *Sárközi lakodalom* to the tradition itself, it is necessary to have a general view of the order of the “former traditional” weddings and in other words the pattern, the starting point. These weddings were typical in the region in the mid-twentieth century, which I have tried to reconstruct on the basis of the literature and the narratives of informants. It is not my aim to describe the entire wedding order, but only to highlight those elements that are relevant to this analysis.

In peasant society, the wedding was one of the most significant dance occasions and had an important representational function for the organ-



ising family, often at the expense of their livelihood, representing themselves beyond their financial means (Balázs Kovács 2021, 175–177). In the life of the community, the feast and the eating and drinking was and still is considered a prominent event. In the preparation of the wedding, the members of the wedding, to the extent of their relationship with the families, helped with physical work, providing ingredients for the food, ready-made dishes, wedding gifts and donations of money.

In the mid-twentieth century, there was a tradition of separate weddings for the bride and the groom. There were practical reasons for this: there was no building large enough to hold the wedding, so the groom and bride's guests were entertained separately. The newlyweds were present in one house and the other, constantly shuttling between the two venues throughout the wedding party (Balázs Kovács 2021, 200).

This is not exactly how weddings used to be in the old days. It was separate for the bride's house and separate for the groom's house. And then the couple would wander around all night. (Pál-Kovács 2023c)

The timing of weddings was determined not only by church regulations but also by farming considerations. In the whole country, including this region, most weddings were held during carnival period, when agricultural work had not yet begun (Balázs Kovács 2021, 202).

After the announcement of the engagement, the first task, in which the best man played an active part was to invite the guests (*hívogatás*) to the wedding. The closest relatives and in-laws were invited first, followed by the immediate neighbours. It was polite to reciprocate the invitation, and so the closest relatives and neighbours helped with the wedding preparations (Balázs Kovács 2021, 195–196).

The wedding ceremonies were held on Wednesday, preparations beginning three days earlier, on Sunday, this activity of food preparation being known as the *készítő* (maker). During this process, the women baked cakes, kneaded the dough for the soup and slaughtered the animals (Balázs Kovács 2021, 200–201). “In the old days, in my mother's time, which I'd say was the twenties and thirties and before, we always had the wedding on a Wednesday. They started slaughtering the cattle on Wednesday and finished on another Wednesday” (Pál-Kovács 2023a). “There was also an order to who was invited to the maker. Who was called for what. Now, you see,

the young women were better at making pasta noodles and things like that, and the older women, who were better at bread dough” (Pál-Kovács 2023a).

In the traditional custom, the wedding gifts and presents were brought to the groom’s house the day before the ceremony. This custom was mainly prevalent, however, in the first half of the twentieth century, and later merged with the bride’s dance (Balázs Kovács 2021, 201).

In the wedding party after the reception of the musicians and guests, the first big event in the morning was the dressing of the bride, assisted by three or four women. Given the complexity of the wedding costume, the dressing was the highlight of the wedding day. This was followed by the bride’s and groom’s farewell ceremonies, where the best man spoke in rhythmic text, saying goodbye to his parents on behalf of the young couple.

The newlyweds, accompanied by their own wedding guests, arrived separately for the church ceremony and went separately to the lunch. From the groom’s house, a joyful marching procession would go to meet the bride, and a separate carriage would pick up her belongings (furniture, clothes, etc.). Often, the groom had to solve tricky games in order to get the bride (Balázs Kovács 2021, 222–238).

There was also a fixed order and rules for the wedding dinner, including the seating and the menu. The main organiser and master of the events of the wedding was the best man,<sup>12</sup> who set the sequence of events in motion with a set of rhythmic texts and who also “conducted” the wedding games. The games included a number of instrumental dances, such as the broom dance and the glass dance. The bridal dance and the new bride’s dance were ritual dances, many variations of which are known in the region. In traditional weddings, the newlyweds left the party after midnight while the wedding party continued.

The next morning, according to local custom, the “new” wife’s head was wrapped in a fine white shawl, known as a *bíbor*, a rite known as *tekerődzés*. At sunrise, the wedding feast was concluded with a so-called *tyúkverő party* in which the guests went to the houses of the people who had earlier left the wedding party and continued the party there. Usually, the bride did not attend (Balázs Kovács 2021, 246–262).

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<sup>12</sup> “The living tradition of Hungarian best men” was inscribed on the National Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2024. See: [www.szellelmiorokseg.hu](http://www.szellelmiorokseg.hu)

## *Housewives' Dance and Bridal Dance*

Traditional weddings usually included a “housewives’ dance”.<sup>13</sup> The women who had helped did not have opportunity to dance during the first part of the wedding party, as they were occupied in preparing and serving the dinner. At the end of the meal, the best man introduced the housewives to the wedding, one of them with her hands tied; he asked the guests to donate money because she had suffered a painful burn. The women who had been working in the kitchen then made a noisy clamour with kitchen tools in front of the wedding party. Usually, the women performed an *ugrós* dance with tools, in circles, in couples and as a solo too (Balázs Kovács 2021, 245–251). This happened, of course, not in festive costume, but in everyday outfits that could get dirty in the kitchen.

Among the dance events of traditional weddings, the bride’s dance and the dance of the new wife should be mentioned. Different variations of these dances were spread throughout the Hungarian-inhabited areas, but the common characteristic was that all members of the wedding party paid money to perform a dance with the new bride.

## **The Event – An Analysis of the *Sárközi lakodalom* as Self-Representation**

The Event was first held in 1966 in Sárpilis, initially not as a separate festival but as an integral part of a region-wide Folklore Festival of the Danube Region. In the early days, the main day was held in the town of Decs, also known as the capital of the region, but later it became a travelling affair, with the towns of the Sárköz region alternating hosting the main day of the programme.

In 2023, Bába settlement was the main organiser of the *Sárközi lakodalom*. Since the beginning of the Event, there has always been a main venue where the wedding ceremony itself is held. However, even in 1966, when the Event was first organised, the aim was to involve the whole of the Sárköz region and not just one town, so the five towns have always worked together. Decs, one of the largest municipalities in the Sárköz region, was

<sup>13</sup> This dance can be observed almost all over the Hungarian language area, but not always with the use of tools. In Magyarózd, a Transylvanian village, it is typical at dawn, and the dance of the women adopts several movements from the dance of the men. See Pál-Kovács 2022.

the main site until 1990, and part of this was the renovation of the houses in the main street of the village.

The leaders of the village, the workers of the cooperative, the management of the cooperative all wanted to present the best image of themselves. And that's why the town always gave help to the houses, to the residents who practically lived on the main street and in the areas where the programme ... was implemented, where the facades were repainted months before, or if necessary, plastered or repaired, so ... the settlement itself was very nicely spruced up. (Pál-Kovács 2023b)

It can be seen that it was of the utmost importance for the settlement to present a good image of itself, with a good representation of the environment and the image of the town. Nowadays, such renovation work has receded, mainly due to the economic and financial situation.

### ***Course of the Event***

In accordance with the traditional timing of weddings, the Event is not limited to a single day, but there are various activities and events that take place during the week preceding the wedding. Over the years, there has been an order as to which towns organise which accompanying events in the *Sárközi lakodalom*.

On Thursday 22 June 2023, the Event started with the wreath-laying ceremony of the Monument of Sárköz, which was attended by the mayors of the five towns and a couple dressed in costume from each, including the newlyweds from Báta. Despite the fact that the Monument, inaugurated in 2000, only includes the five ethnographically defined inner towns of the Sárköz region (Őcsény, Decs, Alsónyék, Sárpilis, Báta), the mayor of Pörbölly was the sixth to attend the opening wreath-laying ceremony. The question of Pörbölly's belonging to the Sárköz region is not the subject of this paper, but it is worth noting that it is the sixth settlement to appear in the whole series of events, clearly expressing and showing its sense of belonging to the region.

After the wreath-laying ceremony, the programme continued in Decs, where the mayors opened a wedding cooking competition. In his welcome speech, the local mayor highlighted that this Event was mainly aimed at lo-

cal people, as it was particularly important for young people to learn about the local customs and gastronomy of the wedding. After the cooking competition, the participants were invited to Őcsény for the opening of a handicrafts exhibition, which attracts a large part of the village population.

The accompanying events continued the next day in Pörböly, where a football tournament was organised for the region's schoolchildren; in the afternoon the children's dance groups of the region performed in Sárpilis; in the evening an adults' folklore show was held in Alsónyék, and on Friday evening there was a dance house in Sárpilis.

The main events of the wedding, the highlights of the Event, were held on Saturday in Báta, which began with the Whitsun custom of the so-called *Szeremlei ladikázás* (boating of Szeremle). Although the programme included the "courting custom of the carved rowing boat" and the proximity of the Danube justifies the inclusion of this custom, the wedding tradition does not necessarily include the transport of the bride in a boat.

In the afternoon, the dressing of the bride marked the beginning of the Event, which was attended by many more participants and visitors than before. As I have already mentioned, dressing was a priority in traditional weddings, but always within the close family, thus creating an intimate atmosphere. This was not the case in the wedding Event, but part of the attraction was the spectacle of the bride being dressed. The mayor of the town dresses the bride, announcing the names of the clothes and the whole dressing process into a microphone. The groom and the men did not take part in the dressing, but gathered at the so-called groom's house, playing music and singing.

The dressing was not a public event. It was always in a small circle. The *körösztők* (aunts, and other elderly women of the family) dressed the bride in the house, and when they came to pick her up, they brought her out into the courtyard and handed her over. That's certainly the reason why it was included in the wedding programme. (Pál-Kovács 2023c)

After the dressing at the Event was finished, the groom arrived accompanied by a band for the bride's luring out, which took place on a stage set up in the courtyard of the country house. Following the traditional wedding tradition, the best man requested the bride from the groomsmen. In this case the groomsmen were the mayors of the five settlements. The





Figure 1. The main actors of the event: the newlyweds, the best man and the mayors of the villages.. Photo: Dóra Pál-Kovács, Bába, 2023.

Member of Parliament for the region gave a speech on the stage (see Figure 1). Afterwards, the wedding procession arrived at the Catholic Church for a short mass, and then the procession proceeded to the main square of the town. It was here that one of the most impressive moments of the Event took place, a dance entitled the *százszoknyás karikázó*. It has been part of the Event since its inception and brings together dance groups from across the region. It is not, of course, part of the traditional wedding customs, but a form of representation of local dance traditions and community. An open-air folklore show and a fair showing local handicraft traditions enriched the afternoon's programme.

In the evening, the wedding dinner took place in a hired tent, which could be attended with a pre-booked ticket. The organisers tried to follow the traditional wedding programme throughout the evening, with a wedding menu, a housewives' dance, a bride's dance, a wedding party, a farewell party for the new couple and a homecoming procession of the newlyweds.

## Participants, Actors, Roles

The main actors of the Event were of course the newlyweds, who in this case were a couple in real life, but the wedding itself is not real.<sup>14</sup>

The groom and the bride are usually chosen from the dance groups of the local area, typically from among the better dancers. At the 2023 Event, a young man from the dance group and his non-dancing girlfriend took the role of the newlyweds.

[...] an outsider can only wear all these clothes if she comes to rehearsals every week for at least six months before the Event, learns the songs, the dances and learns to wear this dress. So that's why it's luckier if you choose someone from the dance group... [...] at 2 o'clock the bride was dressed and at 8 o'clock in the morning we were still partying here and she was still in the same costume. Not everyone can take it. (Pál-Kovács 2023c)

Apart from the newlyweds, the active participants in the Event were mainly members of dance groups from the surrounding settlements. Sometimes, there was no longer an active ensemble in a given town so former members were called back for the occasion. This is important and worth mentioning because it allows them to reach out to different generations, with older and younger people coming together to take part in the Event. It can thus become a key to raising awareness and safeguarding the heritage. The Event provides an opportunity for dialogue and communication between different generations, ensuring that traditions are kept alive.

The *Sárközi lakodalom*, as an event, can be seen primarily as a performance opportunity for the dancers, but if we consider it in more depth, it is much more than that. Although we are talking about an organised event, it has an underlying meaning for the participants. In addition to learning about the dances and music, the Event also achieves the objective mentioned by the mayor of Őcsény: that the younger generation can learn about the gastronomy, customs, dances and music of the area, thus becoming part of their identity.

<sup>14</sup> It is worth noting here that during the history of the event, there have been occasions when a real wedding has been held.

Thank God that I was born here in Sárköz and that I can do what I love. Tradition has been part of my life since childhood. I try to show the younger generation how to incorporate this tradition into today's clothes and fashion. My mother was a dancer and a member of the dance group. I inherited all her clothes and the songs and she passed on to me the songs she had learned. We danced in kindergarten and I have been dancing ever since. (Pál-Kovács 2023d)

### *Visitors and Communication*

In the literal sense of the word, we cannot talk about wedding guests at an organised event, but the consideration of visitors to the Event is an important aspect. Since its inception in 1966, the Event has been a key feature of the region, with the explicit aim of attracting as many visitors as possible, thus promoting, maintaining and representing the traditions of the Sárköz region. For this reason, the reference to visitors is perhaps even more justified.

Most of the accompanying activities preceding the main Event were attended by inhabitants of the settlements, as well as the people concerned and their relatives: exhibitors and their families took part in the exhibition opening, and players and their families went to the football match. The Saturday programme, the wedding, was attended by a slightly wider audience. My research did not allow for a full survey of visitors, but the informal interviews revealed that the majority came from the local communities in the area and were mostly involved.

As noted above, the best man played the role of the guest inviter for traditional weddings, while for the *Sárközi lakodalom* this role was mainly assumed by the mayor and the newlyweds. In 2022 and 2023, the dates of the Event were announced at several occasions and venues<sup>15</sup> and guests were invited from all over the country. From interviews with the organisers, it was clear that they expected a large attendance, but they lacked the appropriate boards and leaflets to deliver the information. If the target audience of the Event was not limited to local and surrounding inhabitants, communication and information was problematic, for example, local knowledge was needed to find certain locations<sup>16</sup> (e.g. lack of directional/information

<sup>15</sup> They were also exhibited in several municipalities in Hungary, e.g. in Szentendre at the Hungarian Open Air Museum and in various municipalities in Tolna County.

<sup>16</sup> I missed the opening event of Saturday, the boating of Szeremle (*Szeremlei ladikázás*), as I was



signs). This includes the infrastructure of the settlement: the state of accommodation, catering facilities, institutions, roads, etc. The content and nature of the Event would make it suitable for attracting crowds, but the infrastructure of the various participating towns is not yet ready.

### *Dances on the Stage*

As you can see from the description of the Event, the local dance groups<sup>17</sup> presented dance performances on several days, during which the dancers performed on stage, the youngest dancers showed what they had learned during the year, and the older ones presented new choreographies. The main function of this was to entertain and to show; there was no opportunity to dance together and learn to dance. It is worth adding here Hungarian ethnochoreologist György Martin's view of staged folk dance:

... institutional support was too formalised, which in fact blocked further spontaneous processes. The professional ensembles and institutional amateur folk dance groups understandably wanted to create, or thought they wanted to create, artistic value, and they always imagined this only in the context of stage culture, theatrical production, individual creations, and they did not think of any other possibilities. (Martin 1981, 46)

The stage which acts as a platform for the creation of different choreographies is still an important part of the Hungarian revival dance movement, but the various dance houses and folk pubs provide opportunities for dancers to dance and create spontaneously. This was no different at the Event: in addition to the stage programmes, a dance party was organised in the community centre in Sárpilis, with the participation of the mayor of the village and local dancers. The musicians played only local folk music; no other dances from the Hungarian dance tradition were performed.

From the point of view of dance and representation, it is worth mentioning the *százszoknyós karikázó*<sup>18</sup> dance performed on Saturday, the day of the wedding, which was perhaps without exaggeration one of the most

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a stranger, not knowing the village. Another difficulty was that the previously announced location had been changed, but this was mainly communicated only at a local level, and as an outsider it was not easy to find the new location.

<sup>17</sup> There were seven groups from the regional villages.

<sup>18</sup> Hundred skirts female circle dance



Figure 2. The szákszoknyás karikázó. Photo: Dóra Pál-Kovács, Bába, 2023.

attractive elements of the Event (see Figure 2). The *szákszoknyás karikázó* is a chain and circle dance “a uniform dance with a regular structure, because the girls’ closed, circular chain does not allow for individual improvisation” (Martin 1980). This dance of the Sárköz-Danube region along the Danube River varied to a larger or lesser extent from village to village, from social level to religious denomination, and shows different stages of the formal development of the dance (Martin 1979, 82).

The *szákszoknyás karikázó*, a circle dance which was previously known as *lépő* (step) has been enacted for a very long time by the girls of the Sárköz region to give emotional expression to the accompanying songs’ lyrics and to show off their costumes. It was known as *lépő* as every Sunday, when they came out of the church, they *stepped one*, as it were (Pál-Kovács 2023b). The *lépő* was part of the traditional wedding ceremony, the bride’s last dance as a girl before she got married: “A couple of girls who were her friends and said goodbye like that. But it’s actually the bride’s last dance as a girl” (Pál-Kovács 2023b).

Even in the early years of the Event, the *szákszoknyás karikázó* was an element of the programme, which, according to memories, was created by Mihály Szabadi, a famous choreographer in the area, who was involved in

the Event. This is where women from the neighbourhood's dance groups dance a choreography together. This element of the programme is a good example of how the settlements of the Sárköz region can come together and promote local representation, as the choreography is created and performed by the community members together. Despite the fact that the *százszoknyás karikázó* is presented as a choreography, the different movements specific to the towns can be observed during the dance, which was illustrated by one of my informants during fieldwork.

### *Dances at the Wedding Party*

One of the main elements of the Event's interpretation as a dance party is the wedding itself, a dinner attended by nearly a thousand people with pre-booked tickets.

During the evening there was tambura music,<sup>19</sup> typical of the region, with a brass band playing only during the dance breaks. After midnight, the tambura music was replaced by a string band<sup>20</sup> which is typical of folk music in Hungary.

The traditional wedding was a good place for learning to dance, as it was an opportunity for younger members of the community to learn the dances from the elderly people, and which they could later practise on their own. Nowadays, dance learning<sup>21</sup> and the transmission of knowledge takes place mainly in institutional settings. László Felföldi (2020) describes five models of dance transmission: traditional, documentary, theatrical, dance house and the intangible cultural heritage model. The traditional one takes place in local communities, through imitation and observation. The documentary model is most similar to the dance learning processes of peasant culture. It allows for the pursuit of authenticity, of accurate reconstruction, through learning from film or dance writing. "In the theoretical model the aim is the authentic acquisition and presentation of elements of dance folklore, 'shaped' mainly from an aesthetic point of view, with an artistic purpose." In the dance house model the dance tradition is transmitted or revived in a modern context. The ICH model "is based on the creative use

<sup>19</sup> *The tradition of tambura music in Hungary* was inscribed on the National Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2024.

<sup>20</sup> *The string band tradition in Hungary* was inscribed on the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2023.

<sup>21</sup> Sándor Varga has dealt with dance teaching and its forms in traditional peasant dance culture. See Varga 2011.



Figure 3. Dancing at the wedding dance party. Photo: Dóra Pál-Kovács, Bába, 2023.

of dance folklore as integral part of local culture, local knowledge and local way of life. Folklore authenticity<sup>22</sup> is irrelevant in this framework, since the main characteristic of heritage is its constant change” (Felföldi 2020, 87–88). In the Event, the mode of traditional dance learning is relegated to the background and the intangible cultural heritage model becomes more visible.

The living dance tradition is still an important part of the intangible cultural heritage of the Sárköz region. This was evident at the wedding party, where the participants danced almost the whole evening without a break. The serving of the various courses of the dinner was slower than usual, but it also gave the participants a good opportunity to dance. During breaks in the meal, people enjoyed themselves between the tables, with one band or another playing music. The musical repertoire consisted not only of traditional folk songs, but also of so-called “party hits” (*mulatók dalok*)<sup>23</sup> which the dancers enjoyed and sang the lyrics to as much as to the folk songs.

The dance set basically followed the dance order of traditional weddings, i.e. the vast majority of dances were slow and *friss csárdás* dances, *verbunk* and *ugrós* (jumping) dances, and in the case of the “party hits”, *csárdás* dances were also observed (see Figure 3).

<sup>22</sup> The question of authenticity is addressed across a wide literature both in Hungary and abroad. In her doctoral dissertation, Anna Székely also discusses this question of how to interpret authenticity in the revival movement, and whether it is even possible. See Székely 2024.

<sup>23</sup> The party hits are folk song-based popular art melodies played at weddings, which became popular in the second half of the twentieth century.



The traditional programme of weddings was followed by the party events and the newlyweds were naturally more at the centre of attention. During the evening, the newlyweds and the parents were greeted, gifts were given to them by members of the wedding party, and a bride's dance was performed.

The housewives' dance (see Figure 4) was also part of the wedding on Saturday. Similarly, this was an important and spectacular feature which, due to the nature of the Event, was organised. This dance followed "the scenario" of the previous ones, where the best man brought the women to the wedding venue. In contrast to traditional weddings, there were also women in traditional costume, wearing white workers' aprons on top of their big skirts.

The slow and *friss* version of the couple dance, the *csárdás*, which is typical of the region, appeared in a variety of ways during the dance. In this region, the *csárdás* is a very deep-rooted and even recently flourishing, important dance type that is still part of their intangible cultural heritage. This is primarily a couple dance, but it appeared relatively often in the form of a circle or chain. This variation has the potential to involve participants who are not so familiar with the local dances. This makes them active participants in the dance which reinforces a sense of belonging to the community.



Figure 4. Housewives' dance at the wedding party. Photo: © László Kovács, Konkam Studio, 2023.

In Hungarian and international dance folklore and dance anthropology studies, the relationship between dancer and musician<sup>24</sup> and its analysis is often discussed. Part of my research was to find out how and to what extent the relationship between them can be detected at an organised event. It should be noted that the spatial structure and use of space<sup>25</sup> at the Event was different from that of the traditional one, which also affected the dancer-musician relationship. The spatial organisation and proxemics of various dance-types had an effect on their formal and structural character, and through this, on the creative process of the dancers (Varga 2011, 104). Due to the size of the tent and the large number of participants, the best man's speech and the instruments were also played over loudspeakers. The Event character of the wedding was reinforced by the fact that the musicians played on a large stage, which, due to its height, rendered the relationship between dancer and musician difficult, as it made the musicians stand out from the space. Nevertheless, on several occasions during the evening, dancers were observed encouraging the musicians to change the tempo of the music. It is a common phenomenon in Hungarian and Transylvanian dance houses for a dancer to slip paper money into the bow of the leading violinist, asking him to play his favourite song and paying him to do so. One dancer at the Event asked for his favourite song in this way.

In some areas of the Hungarian language area, musicians were reputed to be good dancers, often putting down their instruments to join in the dance. One of the tambura musicians danced slow and *friss csárdás* in the evening.

## Conclusion

By their nature, traditions have constantly responded to their socio-cultural context and to the new challenges posed. For this reason, intangible cultural heritage is also in a state of constant change; it cannot be seen as static for it is shaped by the community in its own image. The Event provided an opportunity to showcase the traditions of the Sárköz region, but it is worth taking some time to reflect on this, because despite the efforts

<sup>24</sup> In his doctoral thesis Csongor Könczei deals with the role of the bands of the Transylvanian Mezőség region (Könczei 2011).

<sup>25</sup> Sándor Varga demonstrates that the local dance-proxemics operated as a communications-system, in which important social (ethnic, economic, gender and status) roles and relations were symbolised in Transylvanian Plein (Varga 2011).

to present traditional weddings as authentically as possible, the Event had to respond to the changing context and needs. While some elements of traditional weddings were developed and created in peasant culture and reflected the social and cultural needs of the time, in the globalised, modern world of the twenty-first century, all these elements seem a little strange. For example, the housewives' dance, which used to be an integral part of traditional weddings, with meaning and function for the community, has now disappeared from contemporary wedding rituals, and appeared here mainly for entertainment and demonstration purposes. Looking back at the course of the Event, it is clear that there were several programme elements that were not part of the traditional wedding but were incorporated into the Event to attract the public, as for example, a football tournament or a themed exhibition opening.

Tourism factors have not only led to the inclusion of additional programmes, but have also had an impact on the programmes that are part of the wedding. The dressing of the bride has lost its intimate, family character and has been replaced by that of show and spectacle. In terms of the spatial structures, the stage and sound system at the venues were also included, highlighting the various folklore elements (dance, music) and incorporating modern equipment (sound system, stage) to make them more visible and audible. As a result, the rules of the stage have already influenced the dances, transforming and changing them. Analysis of this impact is not the task of this study, but its mention is relevant for the dances of Sárköz. The choreography of the *százzszoknyás karikázó* dance, a tourist attraction, is the most attractive part of the Event and serves mainly as an illustration of the former wedding custom.

In the case of traditional weddings, the family often disproportionately represented itself, organising the wedding beyond its financial means. In terms of the wedding Event, it is often not a family, but the municipality that acts as organiser. In many cases, public grants and tenders provide the financial cover for the Event, but community donations and support are also common. In the case of the traditional wedding, the chicken and eggs were donated by the community, and in the case of the Event, the tent and the sound system were provided by the local people. Here again, we can see that the earlier community systems are still in place, but the changed medium has also changed the objects of the offerings.

Although the *Sárközi lakodalom* never previously existed in this way, it is an organised Event where tourism factors have a major influence; and

yet it is an important means of maintaining and safeguarding the heritage. For the community, the relationship with their tradition is an important part of their cultural identity, and an organised event is one of the ways of expressing and making this visible. Participating, preparing and organising together strengthens local cultural awareness and the sense of belonging within the community.

The Event aims to present traditional weddings as accurately as possible to the public and to the younger generation of the region. The wedding Event is an example of the importance of the relationship with local traditions for the region, of the way in which its folk art still binds its inhabitants together and is able to safeguard their common identity. The whole of the region's folk art reflects the objectives of the 2003 UNESCO Convention: it is handed down from generation to generation, it is constantly responding to the social and cultural environment, it is not static and it is an important part of the community's identity.

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