

## REVIEWS

Gierek, Bożena and Wojciech Kosior, eds. *Feast as a Mirror of Social and Cultural Changes* (Beyond Language vol. 6). San Diego, CA: Æ Academic Publishing, 2020. Notes. Index. 211 pp. \$44.99 (paper). ISBN 978-1-68346-196-8.

Feasts, or celebrations that include festive events and a special meal, are an indispensable part of human life. All over the world we see the revival of local traditions as a counteraction to the globalization and secularization of cultures. In the introduction to *Feast as a Mirror of Social and Cultural Changes*, editor Bożena Gierek argues that traditional feasts and festivals can provide unique and valuable “materials for researching social and cultural changes, including the influence of urbanization on rural feasts” (6).

This collection includes ten case studies that explore the current state of traditional festivals in different countries. The volume’s strengths are its global reach and the sheer variety of the material. The authors are focused, for the most part, on celebrations that took place within the past ten years. Colored photographs greatly enhance and support the text. Geographically, the essays span three continents, addressing festivals both large and small in various European countries, as well as Asia (Buryatia, India) and Africa (Uganda). Each chapter is accompanied by a substantial bibliography.

Part I addresses the role of festivals in maintaining or creating an ethnic identity. Authors in this section generally agree that “closed” (addressed to a narrowly defined specific community) non-commercial festivals, based on deeper religious, cosmological, and mythological concepts, tend to lose participants and shrink, while “open” public festivals attract a much wider audience, including young people and tourists.

Ewa Novicka examines the concerted efforts by Buryat intelligentsia and authorities to maintain and reinforce the Buryat cultural identity by the means of three new annual festivals. The *Geseriada*, based on their national epic and centered around the famous mythological hero Geser, lasted for only four years. The next festival, *The Night of Yokhor*, organized around a traditional circle dance, began in 2008 and is still going strong. The most successful festival, *Altargana*, is a large biannual international event that offers a blend of tradition and modernity, including sports competitions, a song contest and even a beauty pageant.

Monika Salzbrunn shows how recent Swiss carnivals reflect the changing concepts of Self and Other in contemporary multicultural society. Traditional carnivals were unthinkable without irony and grotesque. Sadly, in the multiethnic city of Payerne, carnival-like festivals at some point included unacceptable jokes about minorities and women. In response, the festivities in 2017 featured a giant swimming pool with women in burkinis, which were “meant to symbolize a global

message for peace and tolerance” (46). On the other hand, in Lausanne’s carnival there were no xenophobic comments, but the carnival looked more like an ethnic festival, celebrating local immigrant cultures. The author concludes that in these new carnivals “there is neither derision or irony, nor an upside-down turning of stereotypes here: it is a *mise-en-scene* of an imagined Self rather than an imagined Other” (48). She notes that carnivals are changing, but there is still a place for irony, masquerade and wordplay.

Alina Romanovska addresses what she sees as creolization of local cultures in the Latvian city of Daugavpils, located near the border with Russia. Here different ethnic groups—Latvian, Russian, Polish, Belarusian, or Jewish—regularly celebrate their holidays. Young people prefer open public festivals, like Russian Maslenitsa, to “closed festivals”, addressed to one particular ethnic group; they enthusiastically accept the celebrations, including foods, which leads to creolization and hybridization of local traditions, and establishes Daugavpils as a multicultural city.

László Mód shares his research on Hungarian grape harvest feasts and demonstrates how a tradition, popular in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was reimagined in order to better express local identity and also attract tourists.

Part II concentrates on today’s religious and traditional festivals. In a detailed essay, Kiyoshi Umeya analyzes the spiritual and cosmological meaning of lengthy and elaborate funeral rituals, ceremonies and meals in Jopadhola culture in Uganda. “Funeral rituals are one of the largest and most eye-catching among all activities in Padhola” (81), he notes. However, today “the feasts, funerals and relationship between the dead and the living are changing extensively” (93). They are shrinking because of migration to the cities, smaller families, and the intrusion of professional funeral services.

Tatiana Minniyakhmetova shows how food-centered rituals help keep tradition alive. She discusses the ways of the Udmurt, a so-called “Trans-Kama diaspora group,” were able over the centuries to preserve their pagan beliefs and avoid Christianization. Ritual feasts, some of them honoring domestic animals like cows, horses and geese, are still very important here. Minniyakhmetova underscores the “close relationship between food and identity” (113) because some of her respondents “cannot imagine their lives without these festivities” (114).

Bożena Gierek explores the changes in Lajkonik, a beloved Kraków festival based on medieval historical events. The enduring popularity of this festival, for both local residents and tourists, can be explained by the fact that it is a multisensory celebration. The audience can participate in “watching, listening, touching, dancing and feasting” (133), and costumes and performances have been updated.

Frédéric Armao shows how a medieval Irish ceremony, originally a cattle fair and a ceremony to protect the cattle, acquired a new life as the Fire Festival of Uisneach. In “a fine example of social and cultural changes” (156), the President of Ireland Michael Higgins attended the festival in 2017 and lit the ritual fire. “His gesture is arguably as political as it is symbolic. The President of

Ireland, the representative of the Irish state . . . inscribed himself into a millennial tradition, that of holders of power and knowledge bringing ‘light’ to the country” (155). People dressed as witches and fairies joyfully danced around a bonfire “in a pagan or pseudo-pagan ceremony.” Armao concludes that “At the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it seems that a newer, more tolerant, more syncretic Irish society is on the rise” (156).

The chapter by Tigran Simyan and Ilze Kačāne brings new insights even to the well-researched topic of New Year celebrations in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia. The authors demonstrate how the staple of New Year’s Eve shows, the head of state’s televised address, was reimagined in the Christmas and New Year shows of newly independent Latvia and Armenia.

In contrast to the celebratory tone of the majority of the essays, Marek Moroń discusses the danger of igniting ethnic conflicts, when festivals can be used to pitch community groups against each other. In Bengal, India during highly politicized confrontations there were cases of Muslims slaughtering a cow, a sacred animal for the Hindu, for the holiday of Eid ul-Adha while the sacrifice of another type of domestic animal would be acceptable, and Hindus were playing loud music near mosques. The issue was resolved only through government intervention.

Although the volume would benefit from some English language editing, this is an informative and timely contribution to the field of festival studies that can be useful to both scholars and the general public.

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