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CUSTOM AND RITUAL IN CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL SCHOLARSHIP

“We live,” begins a current diagnosis, “in an era of hyper-complexity,” (Gabriel & Scheu 2023, 9, ot [own translation]), in a present characterized by manifold crises and by apocalyptic rhetoric; by the pressures of acceleration, growth and availability. With all the challenges and excessive demands of everyday life, it isn’t surprising that we humans seek out niches for ourselves – straightforward and easily manageable – in which we build connections to a past we perceive of as “our own”, with clearly defined traditions, and through which we can experience a sense of orientation and control. Customs, rituals and festivals represent such niches temporarily. Not infrequently they are perceived or identified by actors as “ancient” or as having always existed. As an exemplary media survey indicates, customs are often used in public presentation to point out regional characteristics and collectively shared identities – ascribing to them the weight of long tradition (see Drascek 2016, 21). This phenomenon seems to be a kind of reflexive reaction to processes of modernization or change that evokes especially when the speed and impact of these processes are perceived as threatening by the contemporaries.

The threshold to romanticization is seemingly quickly crossed – which is, in and of itself, not necessarily a problem. However, when such descriptions of the past turn into reactionary ideologies and when they promote “retrotopias”, i.e., “visions located in the lost/stolen/abandoned but undead past, instead of being tied to the not-yet-unborn and so inexistent future” (Bauman 2017, 5), they become a challenge for democratic society and its sciences and scholarship. Influenced by the intellectual-historical epoch of (late) Romanticism, the subject of German “Volkskunde” itself (Folklore Studies as historical predecessor of contemporary Cultural Anthropology in German-speaking countries), evinced, in the initial phases of its formation and institutionalization in the second half of the 19th century, a certain affinity to the retrotopian concepts and approaches of that era. We shall focus on that particular historical aspect in the course of this paper.

“Cultural Anthropology”¹ usually sees itself as an observer and interpreter of social processes, and does not set out to offer instruction, directives or moral verdicts. Yet through its observations and interpretations, cultural anthropology can certainly provide suggestions as to how a society that views itself as diverse could constructively react to “deviant” points of view. However, this requires that complex processes be observed, researched and categorized in a differentiated and unbiased manner. When it comes to understanding living tradition and influential narratives of the past, the cultural anthropological study of customs and rituals remains an indispensable analytical gateway, the approaches and perspectives of which are outlined and discussed below.

The following text is a slightly revised chapter from a monograph in which we introduce readers to the study of a Palatinate custom (see Schneider & Uhlig 2023). The idea is to offer students a compact overview of cultural anthropological research into customs and rituals. As we primarily have a student audience in mind, specifically those in their first semesters, we have endeavoured to present and explain the basics as clearly as possible – clarifying them further where necessary – and to largely avoid jargon and otherwise unnecessarily complicated terminology; nor can we trace all the subtleties of a complex and still ongoing debate.

Culture and Everyday Life – Performances of Interpretation and Coping

Cultural anthropology studies everyday cultural phenomena in the past and present. It applies a broad concept of culture and places the acting people and their attributions of meaning at the centre of its analytical approaches.

We understand the term “culture” to mean processes of interpretation and coping that are socially and medially imparted, collectively shared and produced, that also feature subjective biases. Simply put, it is about the way how people shape or have shaped their lives – scrutinizing the means and resources and under what conditions they manage or have managed to do so. Ultimately this means that everything that people use and create in order to cope with the challenges of everyday life can be understood as culture.

1 It is hard to give satisfying English translations for the terms “Kulturanthropologie/Volkskunde”, “Kulturanthropologie/Europäische Ethnologie” or “Empirische Kulturwissenschaft”. The literal and, at first glance, adequate translation “Cultural Anthropology” is problematic, as Cultural Anthropology in the Anglo-American context actually denotes what is known in German-speaking countries as “Ethnologie” – i.e., an academic subject that traditionally focussed on the study of “non-European cultures”. It is also difficult to translate “Kulturanthropologie” into “Cultural Studies”, which is an independent scientific discipline in itself – with its own traditions that can promote specific expectations. Thus, for purely pragmatic reasons, we use the term “Cultural Anthropology” – but understood as a continuation of Volkskunde/Folklore Studies in the sense of a historically arguing and mostly ethnographically working science that focusses on people’s everyday lives.

According to this understanding, culture is neither synonymous with a homogeneous group whose members share the same normative values (keyword: national culture), nor with dominant aesthetic preferences (keyword: high culture). Neither of these two understandings of culture is quite suitable as an analytical perspective or category due to their often-implicit essentialism – that is, the assumption that phenomena inherently possess an immutable core (i.e., an essence) – as well as their occasionally ideological evaluations and hierarchizations. These are rather fictions that influence people's thoughts and actions. Thereby, these ideas themselves become the subject of cultural anthropological research and analysis.

According to the anthropological position put forward here, culture is decidedly not a normative category – that people should behave in one way or another – but rather a dynamic coordinating system that guides observation and directs our view of past and present actions and ways of thinking in their respective spatial, social and temporal contexts. Culture represents a concept that roughly outlines the field of research and, on a case-by-case basis, needs to be more precisely defined with concrete, accurate and specific terms. A central category of cultural anthropological research is the concept of “everyday life”, the “most inconspicuous form of social coercion” (Laermann 1975, ot), which in this context refers to the sphere of the familiar, the routine, and thus to patterns of thought and action. These patterns are sometimes found to be proven and reliable, but may also only be weakly reflected (see Bausinger 1996, 33; Simon 2008; Schmidt 2018).

This leads to methodological consequences, since anything that is unknown or unremembered cannot be articulated – in the course of an interview or fieldwork – and thus can hardly (or only very inadequately) be interpreted by scholarship. A synchronous approach that relies only on interviews and participant observation to analyse constellations of a time period may encounter limitations worth considering. Additionally, researchers frequently experience a lack of literature on everyday behaviour or the ordinary and mundane in general.

Following Jürgen Habermas' (1985, 67, ot) dictum on “the peculiar tracelessness of a certain type of progress”, this gives rise to the idea that there are curiously missing traces of the apparently obvious and self-evident – that is of everyday culture. Proving the historicity of everyday cultural phenomena in detail with the help of evidence or empirically collected data and thus making them dateable and interpretable can sometimes be a laborious undertaking (see Schneider 2016, 336).

Such hurdles and obstacles do not, however, diminish the necessity of incorporating a historical perspective on the phenomena being studied. Rather,

careful consideration of the historicity of everyday phenomena benefits the scientific depth of investigations and the more precise perspectivation of the results. Failure to consider the historicity often leads to greatly reduced, even one-dimensional, results, since the present cannot be fully explained from, in, and of itself. Approaches that do this are referred to as “hodiecentrism”, or a fixation on the present; this is a reduction that can be counteracted by including the historical perspective. For this reason, historian and sociologist Hasso Spode speaks of “gaining distance through history”, which has proven itself an “effective means against ethno- and hodiecentric prejudices” (Spode 1995, 108, ot; see also Karl 2020).

Taking the learned and socially traditional form(-ing) of everyday life as their core area of research, cultural anthropologists ask about contexts and relations, as well as the functions and meanings of human ways of thinking and acting. The subjective and internal experiences of specific people or individuals are just as interesting as the structural conditions under which people may collectively live but which – as previously indicated – they do not necessarily always consciously perceive.

The actor-centred perspective values people’s perceptions and intentions as to how they live their lives. In research, however, in order to arrive at a differentiated view that takes into account the complexity of culture with its dynamics, ambivalences and contradictions, the perspectives of the actors – the so-called emic viewpoint – should be combined with a more distanced (etic) perspective. Thus, scholars attempt to take into account all those (infra)structures that may not be registered or reflected upon by the actors (indeed they may not be able to), but which shape and determine their everyday thinking and actions. Possible external factors include, for example, economic constellations, (cultural) political interventions and guidelines, religions as value systems, with religious institutions as their guardians and multipliers, as well as demographic developments, migration movements, processes of mediatization and general technological changes. Following the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1976), such an approach, which attempts to understand the life processes of people from their own perspectives and to see these in the context of social (power) relations and mechanisms, is referred to in research as praxeological. Culture is therefore determined by the “dialectic of requirements of the situation and internalized patterns of action” (Schmied-Kowarzik 1993, 89, ot). Or in other words, culture can also be understood as the continuous adaptation of people to the requirements of a constantly changing everyday world.

The Structure of Customs/Rituals

Examples of interpretation and coping are, to name just a few, certain nutritional habits or specific explanations and treatments of illnesses. Forms of and negotiations around political engagement, child-rearing, and technology are also culture, as are religious practices, the organization of work and the nature of working environments, various leisure activities and also the implementation of customs. In cultural anthropological scholarship customs are defined as

“formalized, structured actions [...] with a distribution of roles, a gameplay, carried out by groups at fixed times of the year or on special occasions in family life or at social, professional or political gatherings. Prerequisite for the effect and the functioning of customs is the understanding of their meaning, on the side of performers as well as of participating spectators, as the figurative, the costumes of the players and their customary props have symbolic character and employ a symbolic language. This only applies, however, within a given historical period, for a specific region or for a specific social group” (Weber-Kellermann 1985, 16, ot).

Understood as social actions, customs and rituals convey contemporary values that are expressed through group-specific images of self and others (see Gerndt 1997, 88). As mentioned above, they provide opportunity for orientation in the world. As products of their respective times, they convey world views and provide space for interpersonal encounters. Customs and rituals, as summarized by Ingeborg Weber-Kellermann (1985, 16, ot), are “means of interpersonal communication” and “often significant as an expression of joy or sadness, of approval or protest, often as a support in coping with life for those who practice or take part in them.”

Customs and rituals – and here we simply take some of the incisive terms from the table of contents of Weber-Kellermann’s book *Saure Wochen, Frohe Feste* from 1985 – have a “representational value” and can regulate the “social order” (to both stabilize and destabilize). This is particularly evident in customs of reprimand and promulgation, referring to symbolic actions that sanction social misconduct. In this context customs and rituals function as designated mechanisms and instruments of social control for collective conflict resolution (see Scharfe 1970; Kramer 1974). The exclusionary and discriminatory potential of customs and rituals should always be considered and critically reflected upon (on gender discrimination see Schwedt 1999; on the subject of violence see Hauschild 2008). A “traditional rhythm” structures the year – whether through liturgical dates and seasons, the calendar of public festivals or personal occasions such as birthdays that are celebrated with friends or family.

Since customs and rituals are also referred to as phenomena of the “extraordinary”, the question may arise as to what customs and rituals have to do with everyday life if they exist outside of it. In attempting to transcend the everyday, they point to the state of everyday life and, with their structuring function, also have a more or less direct impact on it.

Beyond this structuring aspect, customs and rituals demonstrate a complex, dialectical and ambivalent relationship to the cultural dimension of time. Utz Jeggle (1992, 620, *ot*) reflected upon this contradictory relationship and warned from being deceived by the historical mimicry of customs and rituals and the associated “danger of prehistoric fixation”. Jeggle was referring to the frequently observed tendency to date the origins of customs and rituals back to “ancient” days or even to a “time immemorial”; a tendency which in his opinion is promoted by their regular occurrence and recurrence. This “commitment to the traditional” (*ibid.*, *ot*) is associated with a cultural realm that is characterized by stability and permanence and thus offers a comparatively static alternative as a counterbalance to the accelerated ever-changing living conditions of modernity. Inherent in customs and rituals, therefore, is a mechanism or moment of deceleration, which may reflexively point people to the “peculiarities” of their existence, because

“in them, at least apparently, the connection to the cultural heritage, the principle of permanence, is maintained. The longing to see something of one’s origins is so much greater than the desire to know something about them that the compulsion to the primitive does not even shy away from distorting history” (*ibid.*, *ot*).

The inclination to link historical age and tradition with customs can be observed in almost every region of the German-speaking world (and many other European countries). One striking example of this is the Swabian-Alemannic Carnival. In his overview of the development of this southwest German variation of pre-Lenten carnival, Werner Mezger (1999, 42, *ot*) concludes that its fascination “for both insiders and outsiders” stems from the impression of its “primitiveness”, and that it derives its significant qualities from the attributes “historical” and “traditional”. However, since only a few carnival locations can really legitimately and verifiably lay claim to these attributes, tradition and history are in most cases “simply artificially created [*i.e.*, simply claimed; *our note*] by interested parties and invoked until the active members themselves finally believe in it.” (*ibid.*, *ot*) This development culminated in newly founded carnival societies – the emergence of which experienced an unexpected boom and dynamism, especially in the 1970s (see *ibid.*, 34) – describing themselves as “historic”. This was justified by, for example, the linking of a newly created masked

figure to a character of local legend. This designation then gets further reinforced in the course of the ten- or eleven-year anniversary, when the tautological descriptor “althistorisch” – implying a connection to ancient history – is often introduced (ibid., 42). Openly expressed doubts about the historicity, tradition and pre-Christian origins were, in the past, typically received with deep resentment and indignation by representatives of the Swabian-Alemannic Carnival (see ibid., 8).

Given their complicated relationship to time, the often implied or assumed historical witness of customs and rituals is also relativized, since they are part of a much more complicated network of temporal references and are not actual historical witnesses of a specific past era. Rather, they themselves, as well as the origin narratives spread about them, bear “witness to the ideas that one era has about another, older one. Like history painting, this historicizing tendency uses certain attire to express a longing for lost times in one’s own time” (Jeggle 1992, 622, ot). It is at this point, especially, in the theatrical staging of history, that the seductive attraction – still effective today – of the retrotopias previously described above can be recognized and studied, thus underlining once again the need for the phenomena being studied to be situated in history with the utmost precision.

Where and insofar as customs and rituals call back to history, they represent the expression of an “imagined past”, to use Benedict Anderson’s concept of *imagined communities* (1983). In his work, Anderson mapped out to what extent such ideas about the past were part of the (re-)staging of nationhood. And in the same year as Anderson’s classic, the essay collection *The Invention of Tradition* by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger was published, which quickly became a classic in its own right. The individual contributions in this much-cited volume also show the complex interplay of the past and present in connection with the creation and introduction of rituals and symbols. These are then often attributed with great antiquity and an aura of “having always been” in the public consciousness and are used for the consolidation and self-affirmation of communities and larger groups.

By examining customs and rituals, the “emic images of the past” (Schlee 1993, 443, ot) – i.e., those images that a social group creates of itself and of a collective biography – as well as the longings of a specific time can be identified and analyzed. These yearnings can change and temporally shift, which in turn can affect the forms of expression.

(Possible) Functions and Meanings of Customs/Rituals

All this points to the question of what functions and meanings a custom or ritual has for the actors involved. Actors, in this sense, refers not only to the people

who actively practice a custom, but also to those who witness or experience a custom as spectators (and, from their own perspective, perhaps only passively). Through their expectations and statements, they exert a significant influence on the customs, as do people who are hostile to customs and rituals, who categorically avoid taking part and who may reject publicly practiced customs as anachronistic, politically incorrect or – to take the thought in another direction – as a commercialized spectacle void of authenticity. To use a pithy expression by Gerd Baumann (1992), a custom/ritual “implicates others”, and therefore always includes a heterogeneous group of people. This polyphony suggests that customs and rituals should be theoretically thought of as custom or ritual *complexes*. This means that in addition to the temporal, social and performative dimensions (the biography of the custom, the concrete local custom, the actors performing it), the discursive level must also always be taken into account, that is how the custom is written and talked about – in public as well as in the private sphere.

The specific functions a custom fulfils and the meanings attributed to it may vary from case to case. Based on numerous studies that have been put forward in the field of cultural anthropology, however, we could, with some caution, generalize, that customs in our present day serve to

“socially anchor the individual or to open up the possibility for ‘communalization’ or the formation of sub-groups or sub-cultures. The historical differences in the practice and meaning of customs arise from the fact that both social life and the people participating in it have changed fundamentally in the transition to modernity and that a new world of customs had to develop as a result” (Simon 2013, 96, ot).

Accordingly, due to the often-difficult situation concerning reliable historical sources, it would be absurd, and in many cases simply impossible, to make a sound attempt at providing serious evidence of temporal, social and content related continuity within the framework of a cultural anthropological study. The subject also refrains from making normative assessments – for example, whether a custom is socially appropriate or harmful, whether it is artistically valuable or of inferior aesthetic quality. Affirmative romanticizations stand in the way of a differentiated analysis just as much as do pessimistic cultural resentments. Those who understand current changes in customs (for example in the sense of eventization, which promotes commercialization and low-threshold spectacle) directly as cultural regression and an emptying of meaning overlook (or ignore) the fact that customs and rituals always correlate “with current individual and social needs” (Simon 2013, 90, ot). Analogous to the concept of culture presented above, customs and rituals must be seen as serious attempts to respond to the challenges of their time – even if this may not always be

obvious to contemporary observers. Understood in this way, and regarding current sociological research, customs and rituals can also be described as resonance phenomena, since they offer individuals and collectives the opportunity to establish a cognitive, social and emotional-affirmative relationship to themselves, to their environment, to their “own” history and to their “own” living environment (see Rosa 2019).

“Folklorization” and “Customs” as Objects of Research

The critical voices are, however, important indications of a phenomenon that is described in research as folklorization or the cultivation of customs. It cannot be denied that large public festivals² or (festive) customs are often used as building blocks for the construction and expression of regional or local identity (see Schicht 2002) – whereby these political instrumentalizations can also be interpreted as serious attempts to respond to contemporary challenges. It will always remain a question of context.

An example from Rhineland-Palatinate is illustrative of festivals being used in this way:

“Whatever it is that makes Dürkheim so popular far beyond the borders of the Palatinate, the Wurstmarkt, as the largest wine festival in the world, has certainly played a large part – and not only in September, when the celebration goes on for ten days and nights. Bad Dürkheim and the Wurstmarkt belong together just like the Palatinate and wine” (Klag-Ritz 1988, 107).

These self-assured observations are to be found on the cover of a book about the *Dürkheim Wurstmarkt*, but customs and rituals that are practiced on a much smaller scale can also function as regionally specific cultural patterns and identity markers (see Schneider 2013, 53; Uhlig 2017/18). This applies to customs and rituals both on a collective-public level and to those on a more private-individual level. Michael Simon (1998, 176) identifies the North German neo-tradition³ of unmarried people “sweeping the stairs” on the occasion of their

2 The categorical distinction between festivals, celebrations and customs was already discussed several years ago. According to Gerndt (1997) and Bimmer (2001), custom is the superordinate category under which sub-disciplines such as festival research then fall. Historian Michael Maurer (2004) suggested a further conceptual differentiation. According to his ideal-typical distinction, festivals represent social practices that transcend everyday routines, whereas celebrations charge everyday life with meaning.

3 The term neo-tradition is used in the context of the invented tradition (see Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983) and refers to innovations and “inventions” in the symbolic and ritual sphere that were introduced in the course of the profound socio-cultural change since the Industrial Revolution in European countries and beyond. Those neo-traditions were invented, among other things, to strengthen and support social cohesion. As the process of social change in the 20th and

30th birthday as an example of the latter. It is thus possible to identify customs and rituals that are perceived by the public as having a firm territorial connection and are therefore regarded as local or regionally specific phenomena of everyday culture. Whether this attribution actually stands up to critical, scholarly scrutiny plays a less important role. Interestingly, the emphasis on and the upholding of the local and regional has been experiencing an upswing, particularly as a result of internationalization and globalization processes – and not just in the recent past (see Johler 2008, 126; Hirschfelder 2014).

Closely related to the alleged or actual local specificity of customs and rituals is the question of their spatial distribution. The areal diffusion of cultural phenomena is presumably as old as humanity itself and has been the focus of anthropological scholarship since the end of the 19th century through the school of diffusionism (see Müller 1993).⁴ Diffusion processes for customs and other cultural phenomena that are initiated and controlled – and which can also be interpreted as processes of de-spatialization – can already be observed over the course of the 19th and early 20th centuries. In many places in Europe at this time, as the idea of the nation state gained prominence, regionally distinct cultural patterns were subjected to comprehensive and effective homogenization under the banner of modernization and progress. Taking the tradition and customs of St Nicholas as an example, researchers at the Meertens Institute in Amsterdam have precisely traced how these processes are exemplified in the Netherlands (see Helsloot 2012). Varying forms of this as well as other cultural practices underwent standardization. This process was accompanied by the bourgeoisification of traditions, which moved between reform and reinvention of customs and also attributed new functions to the rituals in their new forms.

As the process of bourgeoisification has had a lasting effect on the landscape of custom and traditions, we would like to briefly explain it using a regional example – Stabaus or the Summer Day.⁵ This development began in

21st centuries has not only continued, but at times even gained momentum, so have the processes of introducing and adopting new customs, festivals, symbolic acts, etc., also continued unabated. In this sense, the term neo-tradition refers to the demonstrably recent introduction of customs, rituals, festivals and symbolic acts. The prefix “neo” refers to the relatively young age of the phenomenon in question – something that has come into existence only comparably recently. This should not, however, be misunderstood as an implicit categorization; “neo” does not connote a less valuable tradition or even subliminal “inauthenticity”. Every custom, whether it is carried out in public or in a more private sphere, is genuine because it takes place as part of social reality and fulfils a function (or many functions). Whether the associated assumptions about the age or the origins of the phenomenon are plausible and historically verifiable is a completely different question.

4 Diffusionism was a prominent and important concept amongst German-speaking scholars of anthropology. In Anglo-America or Western European countries spatial approaches did not play a greater role and thus, remained a Central European concept.

5 This custom is situated mainly in southwestern regions in Germany.

Heidelberg in 1893. There, the growing scepticism of the citizens towards a traditional practice of processing door-to-door asking for gifts or offerings – known as “Heischen” in German (to beg, to demand) – had not resulted in a ban on the custom. To explain: In the course of the bourgeoisification of social life in the 18th and especially the 19th century, certain festive and customary elements fell into disrepute. Above all, this applied to customary stealing, to all kinds of practices of revenge or rebuke, and it also applied to the custom of Heischen, which was likely often perceived as kind of begging (see Schwedt & Schwedt 1989, 133). Excessive alcohol consumption, which often went hand in hand with these various customary practices, also fell into disrepute, as it would not fit in with the socially desirable ideal of “beautiful folk customs”. As bourgeois ideals and values became established in all areas of social and cultural life over the course of the 19th century, the aforementioned customs came into conflict with these prevailing ideals and values and got discredited.

Back to Heidelberg and the 1893 reform of customs: instead of banning those allegedly inappropriate customs, the regional civic association of merchants and businessmen took up the cause and, with the support of university professors and students, transformed the ritual, so it would be more appealing to an educated middle-class. What was formerly a procession of beggars became – from a bourgeois point of view – a well-organised show that could please the spectators. Thus began, at the end of the 19th century, the transformation of the custom into an event; the beginnings of its commercialization, however, have been traced back even earlier, to late 18th century (see Schneider 2013).

In the following years, the result of the Heidelberg experiment – the large, organized children’s parade marking Stabaus – became a major event. Streams of visitors from the surrounding areas would come, which led to an unimagined growth of purchasing power in Heidelberg on Laetare Sunday, when Stabaus or Summer Day was traditionally celebrated. The Heidelberg example, copied by many others over the next few years, launched a trend – first in the cities on the right side of the Rhine, and then from 1904, cities in the Palatinate on the left bank of the Rhine followed suit. Just as beneficial to the rapid and successful spatial spread of the reformed Summer Day custom was the involvement of the economic elites in the local associations, businessmen who recognized and consistently exploited the commercial potential and mass appeal of the staged neo-tradition (see Schmitt 1992, 106–107).

These developments, as described here, took hold primarily in urban areas. And yet there were minor but not unimportant shifts (see Schwedt 1966, 89) in rural places too, where the renaissance of the Summer Day tradition did not go unnoticed and local customs did not remain unreformed and unrefined. There, too, people did not want to buck the modernizing tendencies of their

time. The degree of modernization varied significantly between the centre and the periphery, however, and in terms of culture, this could be seen, among other things, in the presence of modern civic associations. In place of the associations that were only just emerging in the villages at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, in the countryside, it was often schools and churches, teachers and clergymen acting as the agents of modernization and regulating traditional customs.

Customs/Rituals in a globalized and mediatized world

The spatial spread of cultural phenomena, mentioned in the previous section, played an important role in German-speaking *Volkskunde*/Folklore Studies from an early stage (see Hoffmann-Krayer 1946, 16–19), and from the mid-1920s onward, it became a dominant scholarly perspective in national and international atlas projects (see Simon 2001). From the 1970s at the latest, however, when research began to focus primarily on social constellations, the spatial view of culture came to be considered obsolete and outdated. The dimension of space has received renewed attention in cultural analysis (e.g. in the course of the “spatial turn”) as a result of globalization, which has set in motion hybridization processes in which cultural phenomena, previously thought to be incompatible with each other, merge into new forms (see Roth 2012). Berlin’s *Carnival of Cultures* can serve as one of the most striking examples of this development. A certain carnivalization of public festivities and celebrations has been observed since the last decades of the late 20th century (see Braun 2002). Regarding this trend of carnivalization, the novelty does not comprise of the extensive media coverage and the commercial exploitability of customs and festivals in the first place. Mediatization and commercialization are interdependent (see Hirschfelder 2016; Trummer 2016) and their presence and interplay were already in effect at the end of the 19th century. The novelty lies above all in the speed with which diffusion processes are now taking place. A prominent example from the recent past is Halloween (see Korff 2001; Winterberg 2010; Hahn et al. 2011). The availability of customary elements (see Schwedt 1966, 87–88.), that is the playful and often creative mixing and matching of customary elements to create new tableaux and bricolages, is, on the one hand, by no means new, but in the present-day, on the other hand, it has acquired a previously unknown intensive quality. The *Oktoberfest*, which has become increasingly popular in recent years and is widespread not only in German-speaking countries, is a further example of this development. Both phenomena – the internationalized “typical” Bavarian *Oktoberfest* and the transatlantic reimport of the autumnal custom of Halloween, which originally came from the British Isles – have in common that their success is based on the

targeted exploitation of their respective commercial potential, which is itself available because of the pronounced consumer affinity for the occasions (see Egger 2008; Winterberg 2010).

We would like to illustrate how media and popular culture can influence and change customs. In Mexico, the *Días de los Muertos* (Days of the Dead) are traditionally celebrated from October 31 to November 2. The focus is on the collective remembrance of deceased family members.⁶ Since this semi-public commemoration of the dead is celebrated in a lively and colourful way that serves as a symbol of “Mexican culture”, the Day of the Dead has been attracting many tourists since the 1970s. Although the event follows an established choreography with a specific symbolic language, it is also subject to change, for example by reacting to customs from other cultural contexts, especially, of course, to Halloween, which takes place at the same time (see Brandes 1998).

The most recent influence certainly was the Hollywood blockbuster *James Bond 007: Spectre* (2015). The story begins in Mexico. On the Day of the Dead, a masked James Bond, portrayed by Daniel Craig, takes advantage of the hustle and bustle of the festivities to carry out a mission above the rooftops of Mexico City. The parade on the streets seen in the first few minutes is, however, an invention of the filmmakers. There had been no such public procession in the Mexican capital until then. The setting probably called for a pointed visualisation of existing clichés that would meet the expectations of a global cinema audience and also support the plausibility of the plot. In addition, the movie seems to have changed the expectations of both tourists and the Mexican national tourism board. The following year, 2016, saw a public parade in Mexico City that was heavily inspired by the Bond movie (see Hurley 2016). The renewal of the custom was initiated by the Mexican Secretary of Tourism, whose minister, Enrique de la Madrid Cordero, was quoted: “We have to invent the Day of the Dead carnival because, after the James Bond movie, tourists are going to come looking for the carnival and they’re not going to find it.” (Janowitz 2016) The international press picked up on the story, and the novelty was also reported on in Germany (see Sat.1 Frühstücksfernsehen 2019).

In contemporary research, the adaptation of media set pieces and their integration into an existing ritual is analysed, among other things, using the concept of “transmediality” (see Tauschek 2016).⁷ This fact was already pointed out at the beginning of the 1960s in the course of the folklore debate.

6 Anthropologist Stanley Brandes (1997) has worked out how this complex of customs is historically connected with the Catholic All Saints’ Day and All Souls’ Day, as well as with the idea of a Mexican national identity.

7 It should be noted that the processes of adaptation and transformation is not a one-sided issue, but a reciprocal one – which means that customs also influence media representation. Without the *Días de los Muertos*, the 2015 James Bond movie would probably have looked different.

Meanwhile, the significance and influence of popular culture and media in everyday life has increased exponentially to such an extent that it can be said to be an indispensable perspective. A research that ignores the intertwining of customs with popular culture will hardly be able to provide an adequate cultural analysis.

Two final thoughts on this: social expectations and consumption patterns can also have an impact on less prominent customs – at least once they have achieved a certain visibility and prominence (for example, by being recognised as “intangible cultural heritage”).⁸ If they also wish to continue to attract tourists, the ritual practitioners can hardly afford to ignore the expectations of foreign spectators. At Forst’s Twitthimble-Game (Hanselfingerhut-Spiel), to name a regional custom from Rhineland-Palatinate, Germany, a “master of ceremonies” explains the process and the symbolic language to the guests. This explanatory narrator role was added in the early 1970s, due to the increasing number of day tourists who come to see the play since the 1950s (see Schneider & Uhlig 2023, 116–117).

The transmedial dimension of customs and the concrete interplay between the actors of the custom and the observers raises fundamental questions about possible influences and social constellations in the context of research. To what extent do researchers change a custom when they study it? And to what extent do the locals influence the researchers’ perspectives? These questions not only touch on methodological aspects (that is, those that affect the scientific methods themselves), but also ethical ones.⁹

Customs/Rituals as Indicators of social Change – an interim Conclusion

Customs and rituals, as shown above, are always closely linked to social developments and expectations, as well as subjective needs, and can therefore be used as revealing indicators of social transformation processes. Customs and rituals can thus be examined to determine how people of a certain time viewed themselves and what impact this had on their thoughts and actions. This appraisal of the internal view should be combined with the most precise possible ascertainment of the respective temporal layers and developmental processes of the empirical/historical phenomena. The focus is on the analysis of processes of change, of functionality, and subjective and collective meaning.

8 The concept of “intangible cultural heritage” is a cultural political award invented by UNESCO, which, in the view of UNESCO, includes oral or crafting traditions, art forms and, indeed, customs/living traditions. For an overview of Heritage Studies, we recommend Hafstein (2018).

9 In her reconstruction of a Tübingen research project on carnival Karin Bürkert (2015) shows how research into customs can lead to controversies between the parties involved.

Custom and/or Ritual? Notes on the Terminology of current Research

It should be said that, however, that nowadays some experts consider it inappropriate to speak of custom (“Brauch”) as a research category. They prefer the term ritual (see Köstlin 2022, 45–46). To outsiders this might appear to be a purely academic problem. This is, however, not just about intellectual fashion or style preferences, but about an ideologically critical attitude. It is to be understood as a reaction to the problematic use of the term “custom” by academics, but also – and here the influence on public perception is possibly greater – by media representatives, politicians, cultural policy makers, and cultural associations. The use of the word “custom” (“Brauch”) in the sense of an analytical category is considered inadequate, since it fosters a conceptual template of continuity in form and content that must be viewed critically (see Bimmer 1990; Döring 2007, 30–32). Rather, recent research uses the term custom as a so-called field term, i.e., as a term that is used by the actors themselves in the area of investigation and that can provide information about their perspectives and views.

Unlike the concept of custom, which is sometimes attributed with theoretical vagueness and a backward-looking approach (see Hegner 2019, 171, note 1), the concept of ritual appears to be ideologically neutral and more compatible with international (theoretical) debates. Originally established in sociological and ethnological studies of religious or magical ideas and practices (see Hock 2014, 118–127; Uhlig 2020), the concept of ritual has increasingly been used in German-speaking folklore studies/cultural anthropology since the late 1980s in the wake of a convergence of these fields with international anthropology/ethnology (see Simon 2003, 2; Welz 2013, 215–217). In retrospect, however, it was assumed that this was not so much the result of intensive theory-based reflection, but rather political calculations (see Bimmer 2001, 463). Consulting the relevant literature on the subject, one can quickly reach the conclusion that the categories of custom and ritual are identical in content. Two frequently quoted examples should suffice to illustrate this. Drawing on Weber-Kellerman’s proposal, Andreas C. Bimmer (2001, 445, ot) defines customs as social actions that require a

“certain regularity and recurrence, a group practicing the custom for which this action acquires meaning, and a sequence of actions characterized by a beginning and an end, the formal and symbolic language of which must be known to the group practicing the custom.”

In terms of content, this coincides with Paul Hugger’s (1992, 1433, ot) definition of ritual, according to which rituals

“represent actions, gestures, words [that] have a symbolic, often magical meaning beyond the merely visible, proceed according to certain rules, are repeated periodically and have a binding character for the participants. They are also understood symbolically by the participants.”

Various attempts have been made to draw a categorical distinction between custom and ritual. Gunther Hirschfelder (2005), on the one hand, defines the difference as customs requiring communal acceptance and negotiation and being more closely tied to the (Christian) year, whereas rituals can be shaped more individually and can also be performed by a single person. Dagmar Hänel (2008), on the other hand, has described ritual and custom as structurally identical phenomena. According to Hänel’s proposal, the concept of ritual refers to a general human behavioural disposition, while the concept of custom refers to its regionally or locally specific realization and perpetuation. Such efforts are, however, rare in the current scholarship. A consensus as to the terminological distinction has not yet been established.

The internal criticism of the concept of custom is linked to developments in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The so-called Mythological School, which goes back to Jacob Grimm (1785–1863) and his extensive work on *German Mythology* (1835), had a lasting impact on research on customs at this time. Wilhelm Mannhardt (1831–1880) was a prominent representative of this ancient history-oriented field of research. With his large-scale survey of agrarian customs, Mannhardt (1875/1877) produced a pioneering work for the time. Although the at times speculative interpretations he offered can hardly meet today’s standards, the methodological impulses that emanated from the work were beneficial to a constructive further development of anthropological scholarship (see Perabo 2022).

In contrast to the field’s current self-perception, according to which cultural anthropologists work with an open mind and allow themselves to be surprised by the sources and empirical events (see Bischoff 2014), the Mythological School understood its mission to be a “search for the desired primal Germanic source of ancient history and culture” (Weber-Kellermann & Bimmer 1985, 35, ot). This is an approach clearly based upon the retrotopias cited at the beginning of this paper. Influenced by the Romantic era, the Mythological School was guided by speculative assumptions that were compatible with the paradigm of a Germanophile premise of continuity and that could advance the project of an “ethnicization of the Germans” (Groschwitz 2017, ot). This culminated in the assertion of bold theses of customs having remained unchanged since “time immemorial”, which was not supported by the available sources and also contradicted by empirical observations.

Like all other cultural phenomena, customs and rituals have always been and still are constantly changing. The emphasis on supposedly Germanic origins at the time of the German Empire, which corresponded to a then-existing “need for national self-discovery” (Simon & Rieken 2007, XII, ot), appeared in the guise of a “volkish science” (Jacobeit, Lixfeld & Bockhorn 1994) that was compatible with the ideology of National Socialism. Using the example of Richard Beitzl (1900–1982), Michael Simon and Bernd Rieken have argued in detail that the intertwining of science and ideology should be viewed in a more differentiated way and that the anthropological ethos of perspective-taking should also apply in this context.

The sinister alliance between the Nazi regime and science as well as the untenable premise that cultural phenomena are essentially unchangeable and that they are fed by an ancient source, as well as their uncritical reproduction in today’s public reporting and parts of cultural policy, fuel concerns that the concept of custom is no longer viable. It is important to point out this alliance between racial ideology, Germanomania and science in order to understand why the discussion about custom research in German-speaking countries turned so heated and controversial. It is striking that a term such as ‘Brauchtum’ – which is highly problematic because it feigns and romanticises long lines of continuity and homogeneity – has no equivalent in English. As far as the word level is concerned, this may therefore be a problem of the German-speaking sphere. But regarding the social and political developments of recent years, which have made concepts like ‘nationalist’, ‘right-wing’ and associated xenophobic ideas acceptable again in the public talk, we are facing a problem of European proportions.

However, it should not be overlooked that efforts were made early in the 1950s to free research on customs – and Volkskunde/Folklore Studies as a whole – from ideological ballast, or at least to loosen it, with the help of serious historical source work and criticism (see Moser 1954; Kramer 1959 and 1968). The aims were to critically question the twin concepts of “custom and mores” established at that time,¹⁰ and to develop Volkskunde/Folklore Studies as a discipline that was committed to the contemporary standards of social history and empirical social research (see Dünninger 1962; Weber-Kellermann 1965, Schwedt 1966; Scharfe 1970, Moser 1985). Recent research into customs and rituals focuses on processes of change, negotiation and, with a view to the dynamics of digitalization and social networks, increasingly on processes of innovation and mediatization as well as representational tendencies (see

10 In the context of his analysis of customs of reprimand and promulgation, Martin Scharfe (1970) argued for replacing the concept of “custom” with that of “norm”. This use of language has become established in the discipline and with it a sensitivity to the temporality and cyclical nature of social control mechanisms.

Johler 2000, Wolf 2007; Seifert 2016; Tauschek 2016; Gehres 2021; Hirschfelder 2023; Schneider & Uhlig 2023).

Further, it should not be overlooked that the concept of ritual itself also comes with ideological implications and using it without reflecting on the worldviews inscribed in it leads to a Eurocentric bias in one's own research (see Uhlig 2020, 448–451). William S. Sax (2010) has vividly asserted that there is no semantic equivalent for ritual in the societies examined by classical ritual research. According to Sax, many things that appeared irrational to an enlightened scientific worldview have been described as rituals. In such contexts, the term functions as a pejorative, colonialist marker of the foreign and not as a neutral analytical category. Although a comprehensive evaluation of Sax's argument is beyond our current scope, we nevertheless feel it appropriate to make a qualifying comment. His perspective on the concept of ritual points to an important aspect that needs to be considered in the context of postcolonialism debates. To make this aspect the sole measure for the scholarly usefulness of such a complex concept as ritual, however, would mean a radical reduction and narrowing of the scientific discussion and more rhetorical bondage than linguistic liberation.

Against the background outlined here, we believe that in the context of cultural anthropological research there is no reason why the terms custom and ritual should not be used synonymously. We advocate therefore a pragmatic approach; out of respect for the achievements of previous generations of researchers, we do not wish to abandon the use of custom as a term or a concept.

Conclusion

Customs and rituals constitute cultural systems of order that provide orientation and space for resonant experiences for a particular group, thus creating identity. It is instructive to examine the social, spatial, and historical contexts, given that customs and rituals are always responses to present-specific challenges; they reflect social and cultural transformation processes.

The study of customs and rituals is relevant at a time when local traditions are supposedly being levelled out by globalizing processes; "supposedly" because there is not necessarily a logical causal relationship between the boom in globalized processes/effects and the development of cultural phenomena. The emergence of "glocalized" phenomena (see Johler 2008), for example, shows that talk of a blanket "equalization" or "McDonaldization" of culture is often the result of inaccurate observation and ideological perspectives and should therefore be the subject of cultural studies and not its starting point and

premise. How culture presents itself nowadays, how it is lived (and also criticized), is and remains an empirical question (which depends on the validity of historical sources) and is decided in everyday practice. To recognize, describe, analyze and understand this quotidian routine remains the central task of Cultural Anthropology, regardless of whether it examines customs or rituals.

Customs and rituals are ambivalent. From a particular point of view, they can evoke either approval or disapproval. This is because they not only integrate but also exclude, and not only reward but can also sanction. In some instances, customs and rituals may be perceived as “politically incorrect” and “incongruent with the hypermoral demands of the present” (Hirschfelder 2023, 86, ot). They may even exhibit regressive characteristics. In an open society, it is imperative to address these issues in a constructive and nuanced manner. As a discipline that examines cultural phenomena, our objective is not to preserve customs/rituals nor to reject them in general. Instead, we should strive to present multifaceted interpretations of the various everyday phenomena that help people to live their lives.

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