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UDC: 394.6:381.14  
Original Scientific Paper

Received: October 15, 1987



RITUAL HAGGLING  
AT CATTLE FAIRS

On the basis of her own observations over the last ten years and comparisons with earlier ethnographic descriptions, the author analyzes four phases in ritual haggling. Offering definitions for *custom*, *ritual* and *performance* or play, she distinguishes analytically between the ritual and the performance aspects of such haggling. It is emphasized, however, that in reality these components are indivisible, just as are the utilitarian and symbolic aspects of ritual haggling. The author concludes that the meaning of this ritual lies in a psychological mastery of the conflict between the depersonalized exchange of goods for money, and direct, complex relations of people who live in small (village) communities.

We will speak of ritual haggling at village fairs, one more example of performance or "theatrical" events in everyday life (as defined by Ivan Lozica, 1985). These are phenomena on the border between reality and play, where human behavior usually oscillates between ritual and performance. Since we will be speaking of ritual and performance in the context of what we call customs, it would be useful to define first these concepts from the aspect of cultural anthropology.\*

*Custom* is the established behavior of people with which they create predictable, repeated, social - therefore traditional, situations. Customary behavior is in opposition to

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\* The first version of the article was published in *Dani hvarskog kazališta*, Split, 1985: 348-357.

creative, innovative behavior. Only both these aspects intertwined, however, comprise the fabric of everyday life, or culture in a broader anthropological sense of the word. Periodic weekly, monthly and yearly fairs, for which everyone knows in advance what they will be like and what they are for, serve as an example of a defined custom that punctuates the flow of everyday life.

Within custom as the broadest level of established behavior one finds *ritual*. Clifford Geertz, one of the leading contemporary anthropologists, defined it as a symbolic system which consists of strictly formalized behavior (the deliberate use of movement, word, object etc.) and is a means for expressing some deeper cultural meaning. Formalized haggling at a fair is certainly an example of such behavior. Furthermore, as Geertz says, ritual consciously and unconsciously expresses and supports fundamental cultural values, meaning of life, and provides legitimacy for the existing cultural order. All known human societies have ritual, including contemporary industrial society. In earlier human communities, however, which did not have written communication or electronic transmission of images, expression of the meaning of life through movement and word was of crucial importance.

A further characteristic of ritual is that it has a powerful effect on the emotions of those who take part in it, either actively, or as passive observers. Ritual in the broadest sense of the word is simultaneously a model of some cultural system (its abstraction) and a model for acting in that cultural system (i.e. a model according to which people are socialized, accepting a dominant culture). (Geertz 1973: 87-125). Therefore, unlike performance, ritual is not distinct from reality, rather its experience in an emotionally and rationally intensive way.

In *performance or play*, to the contrary, the performers' awareness that what they are doing isn't real is essential. They can identify with another character or situation only to a certain degree, as is often the case in performances within carnival ritual. Performance can also be based on a conscious distancing from something that once was part of everyday life, but has ceased to be so. For instance, we have seen on television on several occasions how the inhabitants of certain villages seriously portray "our traditional wedding" as part of the carnival revelry, so that the television crew will film them (Ritig-Beljak 1986; Supek 1982). This is pure acting, and is not a presentation of some past event, because the "actors" are giving their vision of the past and their arbitrary symbolization of cultural values that they think were then dominant. Just as Lozica points out in the above-mentioned article, the ritual that actors present on stage or before cameras no longer has the meaning of a ritual. It becomes a performance.

When haggling at a fair, the buyer and seller who get so involved in outdoing each other that they are temporarily preoccupied with form, and the desire to attract as many onlookers as possible, are then overstepping the limit of ritual behavior and start to perform.

### **Haggling at Fairs**

This is a vivid situation from everyday life, bringing together what are at first glance incompatible elements: a serious and extremely practical rational situation of purchasing and selling, with ritual and even play. Who today has play and fun in mind when dealing with payment and prices?

But first we should see how the haggling at fairs looks, before we continue to speak

about its meaning. The description is based on observations at the livestock fairs held in Jastrebarsko in 1978 and 1986, and in Samobor in 1984. Both fairs are regular, held every week, and an occasion for the population of the villages which gravitate to this town to congregate. Men who are not selling or buying gather in one part of the fairgrounds where cattle and hogs are usually sold: they come to enjoy themselves and to take part in the barter play, as well as to run into acquaintances and find out about the current prices and market shifts. The actual ritual haggling goes on in four phases:

1. *Scrutiny*. The potential buyer inquires as to the calf's quality almost carelessly, with the intentional pose of half-interestedness, he looks it over and asks for its price. A group of onlookers forms around him and the seller who listen or ask questions.

2. *Ritual haggling*. Suddenly, when the seller judges that the buyer is serious, he reaches out and grabs the buyer's palm, and slapping resoundingly on it with his palm, he shouts the price: "The going price is (he says a price) and done". The buyer returns with a similar slap and a similar formula:—"I offer this much (a lesser amount) and done!" The procedure continues with both of them trying to maintain physical contact by slapping and grabbing each other's hand. The buyer may also turn and walk away, as if giving up, but the seller calls him back, grabs him by the hand to slap his palm, and shouts a lower price. Meanwhile the gathered men cheer on one or the other, shouting out their commentary: "Why don't you come down a little, the calf still needs to be fed, it's too thin!" - and so forth, or: "Come on, add a little money, you must have it. We'll be drinking it all up afterwards, anyway!". The seller and buyer ask one another for their names, and during the haggling they refer to each other by name, and always use informal address (*ti*).

3. *The highpoint of the haggling*. When the haggling is at its most intense and it is clear that the parties will not give up, but they are arguing obstinately over 100 or 50 dinars, the onlookers who have cheered them so far, and whispered them advice, now start to calm them down, and urge them to come to an agreement. "Hey now, both of you should give way a little!" or "You give half, and you give half, and settle it!" Some even come over and bring the two men's hands together in agreement. When the buyer and seller agree to a middle price, they clasp each other's hands and shake hands in a very pompous way: they raise their hands up high and then drop them down quite far in an exaggerated gesture up and down, so that their whole body shakes and bends during the handshake.

4. *Likovo*. In the final phase the buyer and seller, and possibly the immediate circle of onlookers go off to have a drink together. There are inevitably booths serving alcoholic beverages at all livestock fairs, and booths where roasted and stewed meat are sold. What interests us most in the *Likovo* (the drink) is that the conversation between buyer and seller abandons the former formalized discourse and while they sit on the bench in the tent, sipping wine, they exchange information in a normal everyday tone on the livestock that has been purchased, what it is like, what it prefers to eat, etc. Luka Lukić, who described ritual haggling in the Slavonian town of Varoš (Lukić, 1924) says that they only talked "for real" while drinking together.

Ritual haggling definitely differs from fair to fair, and it has probably changed through time, but the described sequence of four phases is universal. When observing fairs in Jastrebarsko and Samobor, which are quite close in geographical terms, we noted several crucial differences in the way the participants behaved. At the Jastrebarsko fair the haggling went on longer and more noisily, it attracted more of a crowd and responded more to their input. One buyer and seller went through the procedure of slapping palms and shouting

prices while standing on a tractor trailer, like a stage of sorts. In Samobor, however, the haggling went on more quietly, with a smaller circle of onlookers and much less pomp. It often began so abruptly, from what seemed an entirely neutral situation, that it was difficult to record the beginning of the ritual communication and uttering of the initial formulae. When the researcher approaches with a camera, the two hagglers keep turning their backs to her, hiding the movements of their hands. One can conclude, that on a range from ritual to performance, the Samobor hagglers tended more towards ritual, while the Jastrebarsko hagglers tended towards performance. This may be partially attributable to the degree of urbanization of cultural values which are more strongly expressed in Samobor, possibly making the people of Samobor feel that such behavior is "peasant-like" in the sense of backward, and thus ought to be concealed. In spite of this feeling, however, they continue to haggle, "because that is the custom", because tradition is still strong. The participants of the Jastrebarsko fair are less influenced by direct urbanization and therefore still openly enjoy their ritual haggling.

### **The Meaning of Ritual Haggling**

If we recall the definition of ritual as presented at the outset, we can pose the question: what is the meaning of ritual haggling at a fair? Which fundamental cultural values it symbolizes?

First of all, we can reject the assumption that ritual haggling has only the rational goal of achieving as suitable a price as possible. Most of the "middle prices" that are reached after the haggling duel correspond to the current market prices. The exchanges made without such haggling are numerous and also use similar prices. There is also a certain social control of profit ("social" in the sense of the concrete group of people who is following the transaction either passively or actively): the seller who asks an unreasonable price will be ridiculed by the onlookers. In earlier recordings (Kotarski, 1917: 185) the custom is mentioned that the seller must toss a little of the earnings before the bartered animal, and the buyer must pick it up and divide it among the "poor". This is another example of the participation of the local community in dividing up the profits - no matter how symbolic an act it may be (especially in terms of the amount of money), it is significant because it indicates an obligation to divide up and to negate, if only symbolically, the mere egoistic, utilitarian meaning of the exchange.

Secondly, there are indicators that the ritual haggling is considered a form of heroic competition. It is always held in public places full of people (unlike the sale of a house or land which goes on in the village, in the house, quietly, without the described ritual). It is always exclusively conducted by men, while women - excluded through the patriarchal tradition from the public sphere of social life - sell (only hogs) in a "normal", unimposing way that may include "normal" bartering and a final "normal" handshake. The people of Jastrebarsko themselves responded to my question of the meaning of the ritualized haggling, that it was "heroic", and that it used to be much more widespread than it is today.

In order to understand the real meaning of this ritual it is important to know certain other facts: that it only goes on among peasants of the same village or region who gravitate to the same fairgrounds; that ritual competition never involves persons who are obviously foreign to the local community; that ritual competition is never held with persons who are either lower or higher than the peasant on the ladder of social hierarchy (which today includes

butchers and restaurant procurers, company buyers, retailers, etc.). Furthermore, during the course of the haggling, participants use first name and informal address and if they part without agreeing on a price, one often hears the phrase: "I won't take it, but we'll stay friends".

In short, one can assume that ritual haggling is actually a way of overcoming, psychologically, the problem that emerges when money is exchanged for goods in small, local communities. The small communities are typified by close relations among people, where no one remains anonymous, where everything is known about everyone's vices and virtues, and little can be hidden. When someone lives in the village, it is hard to take advantage of one's neighbors without directly altering his relation with the rest of the community members. On the other hand, the exchange of goods for money is in itself precise, balanced and depersonalized transaction (see Sahlins, 1972). After something is bought or sold, the contact is over, no obligations remain "hanging" (as they do when bartering scarce goods or when borrowing), i.e. there is no lasting human bond involved: there is nothing personal about such transaction because money as a measure is universal.

Close relations between people in a small community and the depersonalized exchange of goods for money are, therefore, in opposition. In order to live with this without an uneasy feeling, people modify them in various ways: the village store is also a meeting place for exchanging gossip and news; "unofficial" loans are made; goods in short supply are distributed in a personalized way; favors are done, etc. And finally, to return to the subject of the article, the exchange of goods for money among close people in a public place is transformed from an "anonymous duel with money" to a "heroic duel of people" in order for it to be acceptable. And at the end, it is sealed with a group drink which re-establishes the normal, non-ritualized connection between these two people. Ritual haggling and play are therefore used to handle situations charged with emotions, in which two relatively close people have opposing interests, and must make them legitimate and resolve them in a satisfactory way in the presence of people from their home environment. At a deeper level, of which the majority is not aware, conflict must be resolved between the fundamental cultural values which maintain their community and the fundamental market principle of contemporary depersonalized society.

### **Tradition and Innovation in Ritual Hagglng**

Through comparison of different cases of ritual haggling, as well as descriptions that come down to us from earlier ethnographers, one can conclude that entrenched, traditional behavior has a certain tenacity in this custom. Over a long series of years, in many different regions, there is repetition of the basic four-phase sequence of haggling, mimicry and gestures are repeated (slapping the palms, drawing the opponent to oneself, the high and low pumping of hands during the final handshake, etc.), and the performance of haggling is repeated within other customs as well (the Carnival, weddings) - proving that the basic pattern is not arbitrary but learned, that is, it belongs to the cultural tradition. On the other hand, every ritual haggling is a little different, whether in witty comments, in the way the participants behave, in their attitude towards the audience. There is always room for individual creativity. We will now consider several examples of each of these.

Franjo Ivanišević in his monograph on Poljice in Dalmatia (1905) describes haggling

at a fair. He says that it started with scrutiny of the animal, and then haggling began about the price including shouting, grabbing by the hand, and at the end tapping the clasped hands "to seal the agreement". The halter was believed to bring good luck, so they would also haggle over it, whether the seller would throw it in or not. Ivanišević also mentions mediators in the haggling who were supposed to be neutral, but often cheated (in one case the "mediator" was the buyer's son), which is possible in fairs far from the buyer's or seller's native village.

Far off at the other end of Croatia, in Lobar, Zagorje, Josip Kotarski (1917) described a similar procedure. The buyer and seller haggle while slapping each others' palms, boisterously, with cursing, speaking informally to one another (*ti*) and using first names. They are surrounded by the "uninvited" who make peace between them. When they "have their say" they lift up their arms, and the buyer pulls the seller towards him. Afterwards they have a drink, the "likov", and "you no longer hear a harsh word, rather they say, while they are drinking: 'God give you fortune that your livestock take their feed well'." (1917: 186). When buying and selling land there is no "battlefield". Everything goes on indoors, before two witnesses, with a written agreement. Then, during handshake, the hands are also raised and lowered, and the words "God help us!" are uttered.

In the Slavonian village of Varoš ritual haggling was also recorded. Luka Lukić (1924) provided a detailed description of the dialogue and behavior of both buyer and seller. He showed that as the price approached the half-way point, the tension grew because the buyer and seller, when slapping palm to palm, were haggling for smaller and smaller amounts, but they would not desist, because their reputations depended on it. In such situations, the onlookers get involved, trying to urge them to compromise. Lukić also mentions false mediators who work for a secret cut of the profits from the seller. Later, at the tavern, they drink "*aldumaš*" (another name for likovo) and a conversation is held, as mentioned earlier, "for real", on the purchased animal. Commenting cheating at fairs, Lukić says something that is significant in the light of the proffered explanation of the meaning of ritual livestock fair haggling: "A local man will never pull the wool over the eyes of a local person, only someone from elsewhere... He'd rather tell the local man: 'This isn't for you, it isn't for sale' than anger the buyer." (1924: 266,).

In a considerable work about the folk customs in Jadar, western Serbia, Tomić, Maslovarić and Tešić (1964) spoke of the buying of livestock. The seller, they say, never gives the animal "straight out", but it is a question of honor to "get more" even if only a dinar. During the haggling they hold each other's hands, slap the palm and pull one another, and in the end they say: "May your luck be with you", and they raise their arms up in the air. Afterwards they go off to have a drink, called "*alvaluk*" (likov).

These examples were probably sufficient to convince the reader that the haggling ritual pattern is too uniform to be a coincidence. This pattern, however, is not as rigid a pattern as a role in a performance. It exists and is repeated merely as innumerable individual variants. Here are two examples:

At a fair in Jastrebarsko in 1978, one of the sellers chose as his battle tactic to make fun of the buyers who offered him too little. He said, among other things, that he would personally lend money to the poor buyer if he couldn't offer more. At one moment he even reached for his wallet and took out a bill of 100 dinars and waved it in front of the buyer's nose telling that he didn't care for the pitiful sum, and that when the sale was done he'd spend them anyway at the tavern. But in spite of all that, he was still unwilling to put his price down,

even for as much as those 100 dinars. This man, therefore, tried to limit the meaning of buying and selling as an economic transaction to a minimum through acting, in order to avoid looking like a skinflint, all the while stressing the aspects of honor and competition.

In the other case a buyer immediately said to the seller at the onset of the haggling "Why don't you put the price down a little? You know that it would be shameful for me to pay you the first amount you ask for!" The strategy did not work and the haggling duel ceased. The buyer seemed a little too "soft" for the duel to the seller. And besides, his approach bypassed all the rules of the "game". He rationalized it to such a degree that he destroyed it.

### **Practical Act, Ritual and Play**

People experience the everyday much more complexly than scholars can ever show and explain, by separating it into its components. The fair and haggling that goes on there are events which certainly have an economic side, but also much else (recreational, legal, ritual, moral and, simply, social), which make it a "total phenomenon" in Mauss's sense (Mauss 1982/1925). Before the development of market societies, exchanges were, according to that author, the "glue" that made it possible for human communities to survive. But these exchanges (of goods, women, services, privileges, sacrifices, etc.) meant as much from the legal, religious, entertainment and artistic vantage point as they did economically. Only with market societies and exchange of money for goods did the economic aspect begin to dominate, but in spite of this, you will find much of the "old moral" if you scratch the surface of today's *Homo oeconomicus*, thinks Mauss.

Those who research ritual in contemporary society stress that even modern, practical people are characterized by ritual behavior, much more than one might think at first glance. Pierre Rossel, who wrote on the ritual aspects of the Swiss school system (1981) emphasizes that ritual has always appeared intermingled with utilitarian acts, and only rarely is it completely separated from everyday functionality. Only scholars are interested in distinguishing between the two components, while people experience them as one. Furthermore, Rossel says, ritualized behavior is not always structured in a full ritual: it appears at various levels of organization, often only as a fragment or element, as a symbolic act within some utterly practical context. If in that sense we consider the example of our haggling at fairs, we will see that it sometimes appears as an utterly utilitarian act, without any further symbolic meaning: people haggle for a price in a "normal" way (which is also, of course, culturally determined - recall, for instance, the style of buying at the outdoor market or on the Trieste Ponte Rosso). The subsequent degree of ritualization would be a mixture of real sales and the ritual or play that we are describing in this article. Finally, a further degree of playful purchasing and haggling is a composite part of the carnival and wedding customs, where the performance aspect has become dominant while the economic utilitarianism has been reduced to nothing. All these events have the same outside form, but their meaning is different, i.e. the symbolic component is more or less pronounced.

The form or ritual fair haggling, described above, belongs to the rank of "theatable events" in everyday life (see I. Lozica's definition) which oscillate between reality and play, between ritual and performance. Ritual is an aesthetic, formalized behavior that still belongs to the realm of reality, to intensively experienced reality, while performance is people's conscious attempt at distancing from reality, in order to be able to better express it and

comment on it symbolically. But though performance is a conscious act, commentary of cultural reality is implicit, often even unconscious. In the case of "theatable events", ritual and performance intermingle and therefore should be considered peripheral, complex phenomena which cannot be relegated clearly to one or the other category. The ritual and the performance often appear together in human behavior, and so one can not insist on an evolutionary scheme according to which rituals degrade into meaningless play with time, which is a common thesis in traditional ethnology (cf. Supek, 1987).

Though we may not find, among ordinary people, the form of "folklore theater" in the sense of that complete, complex institution such as developed in the culture of the bourgeois, from the perspective of cultural anthropology it is equally important to discover and know the degree to which, and under which circumstances, an ordinary, average person is always, in part, *Homo ludens*.



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