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Waterpipe. The rethinking of an ethnical practice's meaning in city

Abstract

The paper attempts to examine the multicultural society of Budapest in the context of the Oriental tradition brought by the Arab, Turkish and Persian immigrants. The author presents the smoking of waterpipe as an object of a transfer from immigrants custom into general fashion. According to the author, by using shisha – the transmitters make effort to create familiarity and feeling like at home. Nevertheless, this practice dislodged from the original context (or users) and became a fashionable mean to create or to support social circles. This is a good example of general question of a process by which ethnic traditions and customs become parts of life in multicultural environment of big cities nowadays.

Keywords: waterpipe, tradition, fashion, ethnic specificity, multicultural

Introduction

Continuous tradition, dynamic tradition, building up, making and rethinking of tradition, interaction of traditions, transmission, care, abandonment – definitions, subjects, research fields which have always been in the centre of attention in ethnographical-anthropological questions. The waterpipe, as an ethnic tradition, or an integration of practice into a rather different culture could be placed to this research methodology. This is a custom that appeared in Hungary and Western-Europe in the early 1990's, and spread widely among Hungarians at the beginning of the 2000's. It was not a sudden, and more importantly, a conscious building of tradition, it was a long process.

If there are people from another culture living in a culturally different country, who have got their own customs and practices, it could give them a sense of security to see that they could easily preserve their traditions, customs and practices. This process, however, cannot be introduced without influencing the

living elements of traditions and culture of that particular country. We can talk about an interaction, i.e. all elements have an effect on each other through social interference. I consider smoking waterpipe a cultural element, an Arabic-Turkish ethnic custom, which gained a new function in a new environment for both the receptive and the transmitter side. What is more, we can list other specific cultural elements from the notion of exotic East such as food, furniture, ornaments, accessories, clothes, drinking tea and coffee. When, on the one hand, it is fashion, the other it is a tradition. Therefore, we can ask where we can find the borderline between the two sides. This paper investigates this phenomenon in more details.

Continuity of culture and tradition

Culture as a repeatedly discussed and re-discussed, interpreted and re-interpreted concept can be placed in the focal point in the topic of smoking a waterpipe or shisha. This remote tradition of a remote culture has crossed several countries, nations and cultures over centuries to reach and spread over Europe. Its appearance in major cities accompanied migration processes as settling Arabic, Turkish and Persian people. It brought them along and, although not consciously, spread in their new environment what they had inherited from their ancestors.

Anna-Lena Siikala interprets “tradition as a local knowledge associated with collective memory and equipped with emotional attachment, which, despite its potential to disappear or dissolve, has to be treated as a complete, monolythic element of reality by all means” (1998:1).

The concept of ethnic specificity

I construe smoking waterpipes as an ethnic specificity. According to the article about ethnic specificity written by Jenő Barabás in the Hungarian Ethnographic Encyclopedia (*Magyar Néprajzi Lexikon*), “ethnic specificity is such an element or complex of a culture that has a specific nature for a longer period of time in the sense that such an element or complex can only be found in the culture of the given ethnic group, where it is a general phenomenon while it does not exist or is only of secondary importance in other groups” (1977: 742–743). Any manifestation of a lifestyle can become an ethnic specificity: a value judgment, a knowledge level, a piece of art, styles, norms, customs, etc.

In my view, smoking waterpipes can be construed as an ethnic specificity in the sense that it is typical of an ethnic group, i.e., the Arabic, Turkish and Persian people, it is their culture that it derives, evolved and even further developed from, to become a custom in other cultures and ethnic groups. What my study focuses on is this further development: arriving in Europe, then in Hungary and

particularly in Budapest. This Oriental custom has become visible and accessible to everybody and a favourite leisure pursuit to a large number of people over last decades. By now, they can identify with it even if it is an ethnic specificity. This is the process that I call *specificity importation*. I coined the concept “specificity importation” as the transformation process of a tradition in the course of which, exposed to a series of social interactions, a well-established ethnic custom becomes a part of such a multicultural medium that is fundamentally different from it.

The duality in this process is that it is, on one hand, an organic part of transmitters' efforts to create home and familiarity, inseparable from its context; while, on the other hand, having been dislodged from its context and from other related customs, it reaches recipients who use it as means of being together with their own communities.

The subject of specificity importation, i.e. of the process, is the specificity itself: smoking waterpipes in this case. It becomes consumable, experienceable and, what is more, popular and fashionable in this multicultural environment by indirect, spontaneous transmission.

Oriental customs appearing in Budapest

Based on my experiences and on what my interviewees told me, three ethnic layers can be distinguished in the custom of smoking waterpipes: Arabic, Turkish and Persian. A café or shop is identified with one of these three ethnic groups in which the origin of the owner or of the manager plays a decisive role. If the owner is Arabic, the shop run by him also has to be considered Arabic. Moreover, sometimes even the country (e.g. Syria) is also indicated in the name, advertisements and websites of the shop.

When waterpipes began to spread in Hungary, many people did not know where to locate its origin and roots. Such ignorance was coupled with prejudices. One of my interviewees, the manager of a restaurant told me the following story:

We asked, say, a Hungarian table if we could bring them a shisha, if they wanted to try it, and they reacted by saying ‘Oh, my God, no, thanks’ and they fled. That could be some stereotype that they thought it contains some drug, something wrong.

Later on, maybe due to an affinity to the East, prejudices gradually lessened and even vanished at some places, and many people began to perceive smoking waterpipes as their own custom.



1. Persian restaurant in Budapest

A custom newly appearing in Hungarian multiculture: smoking waterpipes

Perhaps the most important would be to grasp and understand why and how this tradition that constitutes an organic part of Arabic, Turkish and Persian culture, has become so influential in that culture. What interest me is the context in which waterpipes appear culturally, socially and as consumer goods. And then, how does it reach completely different cultures like ours?

Shisha plays a kind of social role – it is unquestionable. The tradition could only be spread in the circle of men because, as we know, the relationship and separation between men and women are very strictly regulated in the Arabic world. Women are not given the same rights as the stronger sex. Shisha is one of the oldest Arabic tradition. But it is not only a tradition and custom: it also means entertainment and relaxation to them. In nearly every café and tea shop in the countries in the Middle East you can smoke shisha. It also fulfils the function of smoking but it is more of a ritual, the art of smoking rather than puffing away a waterpipe.

The assessment of this fashionable phenomenon of using shisha, as compared to a tradition, is a central question in my study. Nearly every one of my interview subjects highlighted this vanishing but still visible line between user groups. I cannot state that separation is clearly possible as transitions can be observed instead, yet I think the essence of the custom of smoking shisha lies somewhere between these two axes.

History of shisha¹

You can only understand why and how the custom of smoking shisha appeared and has spread in Hungary if you recall how that custom appeared in its homeland, its original environment.

Waterpipe is presumed to have originated in Rajasthan and Gujarat, India's two Western regions sharing a common border with Pakistan. It is those regions where it started its glorious journey through East Asia, Persia and the Middle East to North Africa, Egypt and to the Osman Empire where it reached the peak of its popularity, and lived its golden age in the 17th century. As it crossed several different cultures throughout its migration, they naturally affected its structure, use and the related ceremonies. Waterpipe in the shape that began its conquest in the 1990s and arrived, for instance, in Hungary cannot at all be called final. The continuous cultural, social, economic and last but not least technological changes resulted in the evolution of numerous versions of the waterpipe as a tool. With different developments and experimentations, the supply of shops selling waterpipe is renewed from time to time.

People have always been interested in narcotics and drugs because they needed some escape from the world of their everyday doings and everyday lives. The desire to get into an unworldly, trance-like state appeared at all epochs as it appears today; and people's resourcefulness help us to keep on discovering new ways and new tools for that.

Drugs and narcotics have been made mostly of the parts of some plant(s) found in their environments. For new discoveries and developments, they had to make a lot of experiments which required different tools and devices. One of these tools was waterpipe which was called as nargile (coconut shell) and shisha (the word "shisha" originally meant the humid, sticky tobacco product flavoured with some sweetener, such as honey or molasses, from the Middle East that was used to stuff waterpipes.)

The custom of smoking a waterpipe did not become widespread in the Osman Empire until the 17th. That time is probably interrelated with the appearance of tobacco that merchants from England brought to the country from American colonies. With the prohibitions of the Muslim religion (the use of any kind of drug was forbidden), waterpipe could not gain acceptance for a long time. It became really popular when drugs were replaced by fruity tobacco. Due to the rapid and intense spreading of the tradition, waterpipe reached more and more people, launching a real "waterpipe craze".

¹ As a source for this chapter I used an article on waterpipes written on www.toriblog.blog.hu (accessed: 20.04.2012).

Nargile spreading in the Osman Empire

The prohibition of cafés and of coffee drinking was eventually lifted under the reign of Muhammad III because coffee drinking could never be stopped completely as coffee had been sold in the city despite all prohibitions. It was in those years that tobacco was imported by the English to the Osmans, and thus waterpipe probably gained grounds there in the early 17th century. The Osmans considered making of waterpipes as a real art in those years. Pottery of an excellent quality could be bought in the markets in Istanbul's Tophane quarter where most elaborate waterpipes were produced. The most beautiful colourful hoses of sheep skin, real masterpieces of art, are said to have been made here in the 19th century, a separate market was devoted to their trade near the spices bazaar.

That is how the Osman Empire played its role in spreading the practice and art of waterpipes in the Arabic world in the 17th century. While the structure of shisha has not changed much since then, it has become even more widespread, even in Europe today.

The extreme popularity of waterpipe in Islamic countries was attributable to the religious rule that your mouth may not get in direct contact with tobacco. The hose resolves that problem. The use of nargile has its own etiquette, as, for instance, the top of shisha may not be in a lower position than the user's head, and you should inhale it while sitting on the ground where the waterpipe is also placed. It is taken as an insult if you light your cigarette on the embers of the charcoal in shisha that someone else is smoking because it disturbs the rhythm of glowing. Traditionally, everybody has his own hose, and it is against propriety to inhale from somebody else's hose.

Women and waterpipe

Today, nargile bars serve as venues for people to have a nice chat about daily politics and other important issues. In some Muslim countries, such as Kuwait and Saudi-Arabia, waterpipe is forbidden for women. But in the Osman Empire in the 19th century when cigarettes were spreading widely, mainly ladies smoked shisha tobacco because they did not have access to cigarettes. Female members of the reigning dynasty spent most of their time by smoking shisha, and somewhat later numerous photos were taken of high-ranking ladies while smoking shisha. It was an indispensable part of social events. Today, women are allowed to smoke nargile both in family circle at home and in cafés in most Middle East countries. As the custom found its way to Europe at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, it became very popular among women who belonged to the European elite. It became a part of intellectual gatherings and five o'clock teas. This can be associated with the late 19th century's fad of Orientalism.

Parts and accessories of shisha



3. Waterpipes (photo by V. Nagy)

A shisha consists of three main parts: a bowl made of wood, metal, stone or ceramics, in which tobacco is placed; a jar filled with water; and the hose through which a smoker inhales coal smoke. Charcoal is placed on a grill or aluminium foil on the top of the bowl, which heats up tobacco, and the resulting smoke flows through the water in the jar. You can enjoy the flavour of the tobacco for about an hour.

A waterpipe may have one or more hoses to share it with others in a company. Alternatively, shisha can have one hose and a rotary bearing to make it easy for smokers to pass the single hose around. In Hungary, you can mostly encounter waterpipes with a single hose. According to experts, the multi-hose version is not too practical, what is more, they have an expressly negative opinion of it, because two people cannot inhale the smoke simultaneously, they would inhale the smoke from each other, reducing the joy from it.

One of the things that must be of high quality is the tobacco itself. Not all tobaccos are suitable for waterpipes; the best is the very strong, dark tobacco grown in Iran. The raw tobacco is prepared using complex procedures. Most tobaccos are flavoured with fruit or some other flavours such as cocoa, coffee or mint. The gourmets enhance the pleasure by adding pieces of fresh fruit in the tobacco, making the smoke even more savoury. It is sweetened with molasses or honey. Sometimes they prepare tobacco cocktails and blend flavours.

There is a black or “natural” type of tobacco which is used without any flavouring or sweetening. It is mostly popular among Egyptians. In this case, without using any grill or aluminium foil, they put charcoal directly on the tobacco, and burn it through in that way.

Tradition? – The layer of transmitters

I consider the members of the social group who, as they told me, had moved to Hungary as foreigners, bringing along the custom of using shisha, as transmitters who are on the side of the tradition. By opening shops and cafés they made it accessible and enjoyable to everyone: in summary, they widely spread this custom. I also treat as transmitters the Hungarian people who, as shop managers, waiters or even consumers, help those Arabic and Turkish people.

Shops, cafés and restaurants, i.e. institutions, act as vehicles in the importation process of this tradition. The question obviously arises: what motivates transmitters? Nostalgic feelings to their roots or the intent to popularise it in the new multicultural? Business objectives or assimilation? Beside those motivations, I think the desire to create home and familiarity can be one of the most important factor.

Fashion? – The layer of recipients

The members of the recipient side of the specificity importation process are the key actors in turning the tradition of smoking waterpipe into a fashion. This is the circle where the level of change signifying the essence of the process can be grasped. The well-established specificity becomes part of a multicultural; it goes into a new environment of which members are the recipients. Even within them, separate groups can be distinguished. The members of the recipient layer use waterpiping as a stand-alone means of their entertainment and relaxation. This duality will serve as the basis of my conclusions.

The recipients of the specificity importation process includes a very important group of young university students who regard waterpipe as a tool of entertainment (I would not detail the data of the survey I made with a certain group). A group of middle-aged businessmen, physicians and lawyers constitute another layer. As the interviews with them unveil, they undoubtedly belong to a group of “professionals”: they go to a certain café of a high price category every day, and make efforts to learn as much as possible about the “art of shisha”. They call themselves the “mainstay”.

Visibility

The characteristics of the specificity importation process and the features of the layers of transmitters and recipients prove that the visibility of waterpipe smoking has three levels in Budapest:

1. public places (parks, lakesides etc.) where youngsters smoke shisha in good weather. Here you can observe the result of the process, i.e. shisha turns into a tool of everyday entertainment and of spending time together.

2. public cafés, restaurants – although anyone can visit them, the majority of the guests are regular customers, from the Middle East or from Hungary. These locations can therefore be considered as semi-public, with limited visibility.
3. homes closed away from publicity where youngsters or “connoisseurs” can smoke a shisha in privacy.

Conclusion

The text was an attempt to present the smoking of waterpipes as a possible object of the specificity importation process detailed at the beginning of the presentation. Based on my personal research, I intended to provide an overview of two layers of this process, i.e. transmitters from the perspective of the tradition, and recipients from the perspective of fashion. Naturally, generalisations should be avoided as my research did not cover the entire city of Budapest; yet, I think the penetration of shisha into the multicultural in Hungary and its further life there are properly represented by the examples given in this paper.

As a conclusion, the duality of this process lies, on one hand, in the shisha being an organic part of transmitters' efforts to create home and familiarity, inseparably from its original context, and, on the other hand, in the shisha, dislodged from its context and from other related customs, reaching recipients who use it as means of being together with their own communities. That dichotomy can be clearly observed in the circle of transmitters and recipients alike.

Smoking a waterpipe has the same significance for the Middle Eastern people as in their original environments. For them, this tradition survives together with other aspects of their culture in a new multicultural environment, i.e. in Budapest in this case. They have turned into regular customers of cafés and restaurants where they lead an important part of their lives, what many people find closed and invisible. Besides, they have been exposed to unquestionable influences: they have adjusted to their new habitat and the local customs, yet, they turn to shisha with some nostalgia with the intent to create home and familiarity in their new environment.

This custom becomes consumable, experienceable and, what is more, popular and fashionable in this multicultural environment by indirect, spontaneous transmission.

According to the Hermann Bausinger's definition, fashionability can be grasped from the aspect that it uses forms from the past to offer them as renewed and aligned to the frames and needs of the present time and place. Such offering occurs in relation with shisha, too: it provides its users with new opportunities for entertainment and relaxation and a cohesion of a community, while its regularity can also make it an everyday custom in micro-communities. I call this layer of users “recipients”. It can also be observed as a characteristic of a younger generation – waterpipe has become a tool of entertainment and partying while their back-

ground knowledge in many cases is rather incomplete. They treat it as a source of pleasure, they smoke waterpipe simply because they “like it”. Differences between the two groups’ expectations in the quality can be observed, which, however, can mainly be attributed to financial reasons.

Differences and limits can, of course, fade away and be permeable for everyone, but there is no doubt that the custom of smoking shisha is widely spreading. Fashion is generally described as a thing suddenly becoming popular and then vanishing in past memories after a shorter or longer period of time. Based on my experiences, however, shisha does not carry that property: many of the recipients take it today as their habit, an inherent feature of their everyday lives, and one of them even expressed his hope that smoking a waterpipe will be an excellent occasion for him to spend some time with his friends in 30 years from now. Is it possible for the specificity importation to turn over the years from a fashion into a tradition in micro-communities?

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