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## **Pagan revival, re-enchantment, and new forms of rituality in Hungary: the case of the Kurultaj festival**

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### **Abstract**

This article explores how ancestry is displayed in the festival Kurultaj where historical reenactment clubs, contemporary Pagan leaders and their followers, politicians, physical anthropologists, and archaeologists as well as folk ensembles gather to celebrate present-day Hungarians' purported Central Asian origins. Considering this event as an instance of re-enchantment closely connected with the Pagan revival, the article's objective is twofold. On the one hand, it attempts to understand how Pagan conceptions of the past exceed the strict limits of groups engaged in (re)creating pre-Christian religious beliefs and practices, reaching a wider public and interweaving spirituality with politics and historical sciences. On the other hand, it suggests that the Pagan revival, as re-enchantment, might be characterized not only by the sociological, economic, historical, and ideological background of the persons and groups that instigate it but also by the new forms of rituality that compose it.

Key words: Hungary, Neopaganism, Neo-shamanism, re-enchantment, ritual, ritual objects, historical reenactment, Kurultaj

Thousands of Hungarians gather biannually near Bugac, a village of the Great Plain, to celebrate their purported Central Asian origins in the frame of the Kurultaj festival launched in 2008. During this three-day event, whose name means 'tribal gathering' in Turkish (and other Turkic languages), the otherwise arid and uninhabited area is reminiscent of a nomad camp in the Eurasian steppe by virtue of a large yurt village and numerous persons dressed in reenactment and folk costumes. The program consists of different means of evoking what Hungarian culture may have been at the time of the occupation of the Carpathian Basin by the Magyar tribes and before through the reenactment of historical combats, nomadic sports competitions, folk music shows (Hungarian and Central Asian), archaeological exhibits and lectures as well as shamanic ceremonies. The rising number of visitors (45,000 in 2008, 210,000 in 2016)<sup>1</sup> and the fact that the organizers can count on government subsidies (since 2012) illustrates the growing appeal of ancient history in Hungarian society. Indeed, the democratic transition enabled the rediscovery of romantic ethnogenetic theories that strive to credit Hungarians with a glorious imperial past and inspire new forms of spirituality aimed at reviving pre-Christian religious beliefs and practices (Szilágyi 2015). While the foundation myths that posit present-day Hungarians' Hun and Scythian (and even Sumerian) origins were proscribed during the socialist rule and relegated to exile (Povedák and Hubbes 2014), their comeback since the democratic transition suggests that many Hungarians are now 'under the spell of roots' (Szilárdi 2014).

Since the 1990s, the activities of autodidact and non-mainstream historiographers, historical reenactment clubs and practitioners of local forms of Neo-shamanism have evolved

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<sup>1</sup> According to the figures of the media brochure released in August 2022 by the association in charge of organizing the event, the Magyar Turán Alapítvány. Available online: <https://felvidek.ma/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/szervezok-osszefoglalojaban-ITT.pdf>

into a conspicuous and multifarious movement that, drawing on the ancient past, aim to reappropriate and/or to revive their pre-Christian ancestors' values, traditions, techniques, and beliefs. Some engage in autodidactic research about virtually all things Hungarian and/or follow the teachings of Pagan intellectuals who promote esoteric interpretations of local history that assign a spiritual mission to Hungarians. Others turn to a local form of shamanism (*táltosság*, or 'táltos faith', *táltos hit*) which its representatives believe has been secretly preserved over the centuries, despite all efforts to suppress it. Still others are more attracted by ancient lifestyles and their practicalities and become involved in associations or less structured groups committed to historical reenactment, experimental archaeology, naturopathy, or ecological farming.

Despite its increasing social visibility and the growing body of literature on this movement, it still is difficult to accurately establish its scope and its borders. Indeed, what Hungarian authors label 'Pagan intellectual orientation' or 'Pagan metaculture' (Szilágyi 2012; 2015, 158), 'public Paganism' (Koložsi 2012a) or 'nomadic nostalgia' (Kürti 2016) has developed by leaps and bounds in the past years. These synonymous terms point out, the conceptions of history and of Hungarian culture underlying the Pagan revival are not limited to the Pagan revival but permeate wider segments of the local society. The relatively widespread use of a supposedly ancient runic alphabet (see Maxwell 2004) and the ideological discourses underlying the foreign policies of 'eastward opening' (see Moreh 2016) are examples of this public Paganism. While the Pagan revival, understood as the recreation of pre-Christian religious beliefs and practices, clearly represents a spiritual alternative among others that emerged since 1989 (see Kürti 2001), their relationship with other instances of the appeal of the ancient past in Hungarian society is less evident. Does the Pagan revival represent a former "subculture" or a religious and grassroots manifestation of neo-nationalism that overtime has become mainstream (Povedák 2014, 2020, 2022)? If so, is this fascination with the pre-Christian past and with Hungarians' Central Asian origins a merely ideological and political matter or also a religious one? How do these Pagan-inspired representations of the past instill what Hungarians scholars of the Pagan revival have labelled the 'sacralization of the nation' (Szilágyi 2012; Povedák and Hubbes 2014; Szilárdi 2014)? What is the place of the cultural practices promoted by this Pagan orientation among other religious/spiritual and/or political alternatives? How do the romanticized conceptions of history underlying the Pagan revival and 'nomadic nostalgia' become persuasive beyond any nationalist inspiration?

A way of approaching these questions, as well as to account for the intertwining of spirituality and politics in the 'Pagan intellectual orientation' and the Pagan revival, is to consider them as instances of 're-enchantment'. Understood here as emergent ritual practices that evolve outside institutionalized religions, the notion of re-enchantment enables us to discern how nationalist ideals can acquire a religious and/or spiritual valence in the context of the above mentioned nomadic nostalgia, public Paganism, Pagan metaculture and Pagan intellectual orientation. . More specifically, it implies the "return" of traditions and the "charm" with which they often fascinate a variety of social agents ('tradition-holders', functionaries, tourists, ethnologists, and others) sometimes have, though not exclusively, explicit connections to religion or are presented as new forms of religiosity' (Isnart and Testa 2020, 9). The Kurultaj festival, where the different social actors and groups captivated by public Paganism and the Pagan revival proper act together, seems particularly adapted to examine the heuristic value of this notion. As an instance of re-enchantment, this event, which its organizers label as a 'tribal gathering' (*törzsi gyűlés*) and a 'celebration' (*ünnep*) rather than as a mere festival<sup>2</sup>, is of

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<sup>2</sup> This ambiguity of the Kurultaj between entertainment and ritual as well as the secular and the religious/spiritual, which I tackle in the following pages and which may possibly be considered as a component of 're-enchantment' in this case, point to the more general question of the devotional aspect of festivals. As M. Teewen, M. Sen and A. P. Rots (2023) show in their analysis of the entanglements of patronage, play and piety in festivals in Asia,

particular interest for several reasons. First, it attracts not only Pagan leaders and their followers, but also historical reenactment clubs, politicians and diplomats, archaeologists and historians, craftspeople, and folk groups as well as thousands of visitors that are not necessarily involved in the Pagan revival. It is thus an interesting example of how public Paganism' and the Pagan revival proper may interact and/or merge on the borders of politics, science, and spirituality. Second, the festival is not declaredly a religious event, but, as we will see, in several occurrences, it encourages participants to adopt attitudes of reverence and/or contemplation. In this sense, it points to the importance of new forms of rituality in re-enchantment. Notably, the Kurultaj mobilizes ritual forms that are not declaredly such, but which refer to contemporary Pagan rituals in which the ritual frame is more readily discernible<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, attracting many visitors, this festival, and the experiences of 'enchantment' it offers, may affect persons who are not actively engaged in a quest of new religious/spiritual alternatives.

In order to tackle this, and to attempt to confront the notion of re-enchantment with ethnographic data, I will explore the ways in which ancestry is exhibited in different spaces and activities of the Kurultaj<sup>4</sup>. The hypothesis I would like to put forward is that this otherwise elusive and protean movement might be characterized not only by the sociological, economic, historical, and ideological background of the persons and groups involved in it but also by the new forms of rituality it inspires. By doing so, I wish to shift the mostly textual and narrative focus of the existing body of literature on Hungarian Pagan revival towards a more pragmatic one. As a means of doing so, I explore the ritual spaces and actions involved in the Kurultaj. Drawing on the pragmatic and relational approach of ritual, which places the analytical focus on its formal particularities and the ties between participants, humans and non-humans, rather than on symbolism and the extraneous sociological effects of ritualization (Houseman and Severi, 1994; Houseman, 2006), and its application to contemporary rituals (Houseman 2007), my objective is to explore how ritualization can contribute to the experience of 'enchantment' the whole of the event may elicit. I will attempt to show that the ways in which museal objects are displayed are likely to establish a ritual frame. I will argue that in the exhibits of the festival they may be considered not merely as archaeological remains and/or pedagogical illustrations of the past, but they may also act like ritual objects. As we will see, the different activities and spaces of the Kurultaj, however vested with a scientific aura, affect rather than convey knowledge to visitors, affording the experience of being related to ancient Hungarians and having Attila as a common ancestor.

### **Approaching Pagan revival in Hungary: between spirituality, popular understandings of science, and politics**

The nationalist values and aspirations at the heart of the Pagan revival proper and the concomitant 'Pagan metaculture' (Szilágyi 2015) this movement delineates are certainly a crucial factor in its expansion. However, it would be reductive to suppose that this implies a necessary ideological concord among the different groups and individual social actors that sustain it. Indeed, as Hungarian scholars of the Pagan revival have observed, this movement

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pious attitudes are not always necessarily religious. The distinction the Kurultaj's organizers make between other festivals and their 'tribal gathering' calls for further ethnographic data and comparison with festivals elsewhere.

<sup>3</sup> The instability of the ritual frame also characterizes the emergent spiritual practices involving angels analyzed by T. Utriainen (2016) in Finland as instances of 'enchantment'. However different the context and the ritual form, it is interesting to observe that, here too, the underdetermination of the boundaries between ritual and everyday behavior enable varying degrees of engagement in the practices in question.

<sup>4</sup> The insights discussed here are based on my attendances to the Kurultaj in 2012 and 2014, when I did not yet officially start fieldwork on Pagan revival, and later, in 2021 and 2022. Observant participation at the winter solstice ceremony organized in 2017 in Kolárovo (Slovakia) by the association responsible for the Kurultaj (Magyar-Turán Alapítvány) also provided some of the data used here.

promotes a variety of conceptions of the ancient past and of how it should be reconstructed. These can range, among others, from the already mentioned idea that present-day Hungarians descend directly from the Sumerians, and others, such as that the heart chakra of the Earth is located in Hungary, or that the Huns' ancestors come from Sirius (see Kolozsi 2012a; Povedák 2014; Szilárdi 2009, 2014), to 'alternative scholarship' on the Hungarian crown that ascribes ancient origins and magical powers to it that, in turn, inspire rituals centered on it (see Kolozsi 2012b; Kürti 2015; Povedák 2016, 2023). Furthermore, Pagan groups' orientations may also vary according to the extent they are willing to admit ideas and practices from western spiritualities and/or Christian elements, enabling some authors to distinguish between 'Western-type urban shamanism' and 'ethnic-based syncretic groups' (Povedák and Hubbes 2014, 141) and identify a Christian-Pagan syncretism (Szilárdi 2009; Povedák 2014a).

In the light of this multitude of discourses, it is as difficult to identify the Pagan revival's frontiers as finding the adequate descriptors that allow to accurately refer to the persons engaged in this movement in Hungary in a way to do justice to participants' experiences reflected in ethnographic data. Indeed, because of its multiple ramifications towards politics, science, and education (in the form of non-academic historiography, archaeology, folklore, and linguistics), historical reenactment as well as alternative therapies, various networks overlap. The ethnographic material I have gathered so far<sup>5</sup> shows that Pagan revival operates in a rhizomic way, through multiple connections between Pagan leaders, their followers, and the respective social fields they evolve in. The issue of delimiting the above mentioned 'Pagan intellectual orientation' and the Pagan revival proper<sup>6</sup>, can be illustrated through the examples of two emblematic Pagan circles that I conduct fieldwork in, in Budapest and its surroundings. Because of the different stances they take in making the past present, I label one of them 'intellectual' and the other one 'shamanic'. The first one takes inspiration mostly in mediaeval chronicles, while the other one in the period before the Hungarian conquest of the Carpathian Basin, in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries. Accordingly, their relationship to Christianity differs in that shamanic practitioners reject evangelization as a harmful colonial power responsible for the loss of ancient beliefs and traditions. Intellectual Pagans also give primordial importance to shamanic qualities, but, interestingly, they ascribe the preservation of ancient spiritual knowledge to a monastic order, making the Pagan revival compatible with Christianity (see Povedák 2014a). Furthermore, both circles are part of a vast network that exceeds the Pagan revival proper, linking it to politics of memory and historical reenactment. Indeed, from the perspective of the

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<sup>5</sup> This article relies on ethnographic data gathered through observant participation in two Pagan circles in Budapest since 2015. The materials presented here benefited from fundings from the LabEx Hastec (Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes / Paris Sciences & Lettres), between 2017 and 2018, as well as from the the ERC CZ project "ReEnchEu" (n. LL2006), led by Dr. Alessandro Testa between 2020 and 2022 at the Department of Sociological Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University in Prague, and funded by the Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports.

<sup>6</sup> I use the term 'Pagan revival' as an alternative to 'Neopaganism' used to describe comparable practices in Western Europe and North America, such as Wicca (generally underrepresented in Hungary, see Szilárdi 2009) and 'ethno-paganism' used in the Hungarian literature (Povedák and Hubbes 2014) which, in my view, overemphasizes the *sui generis* character of this movement in Hungary. Keeping in mind the different origins and ideological/political stances that apparently divide Pagans in the West and in Central Eastern Europe, I am also attentive to the fact that this dichotomy between eclectic/reconstructionist forms is not clear-cut (Strmiska 2005; Ivakhiv 2005, Rountree 2015, 2017). The ethnographic data I have gathered shows that however strongly Hungarian Pagans emphasize local traditions, they do resort to exogenous (for example, North American native) traditions. This term also allows considering that persons engaged in this movement do not use a single auto-designation, and they do not refer to themselves as Pagan (*pogány*). Whichever their preference, persons I have met during my fieldwork do not identify themselves as being 'Pagans', as other authors have also noted in Hungary and in other contexts (Simpson and Filip 2013; Povedák and Hubbes 2019). 'Walking on the path [of the ancestors]' (*útonjáró*) and 'preserver of traditions' (*hagyományörző*) are recurrent self-designations.

Kurultaj it is compelling that despite the divergences of their means of evoking the past, representatives of both circles were present at the first time the event was organized.

The intellectual circle operates chiefly in a bookstore in Budapest. Beyond running an own publishing house, their activities consist in public lectures given by autodidact independent researchers praised for their expertise concerning all things Hungarian. They refer to their knowledge as ‘mythical history’ (*mitikus történelem*). As it becomes apparent from the teachings available at the bookstore’s lecture room, their aim is to recover what they call ‘organic culture’ (*szerves műveltség*) that includes an extraordinarily vast field. It contains non-academic theories about protohistory and esoteric interpretations of Hungarian language, folklore, national mythology, and some national emblems such as the crown as well as the creation of sacred places. There seems to be no single term that leaders or participants use to define themselves. Prominent figures in this circle are called ‘the greatest’ (*a legnagyobbak*) or ‘professors/teachers’ (*tanár úr*). One of them is a renowned Pagan expert who is originally an art historian. Gábor Pap inspired visual artists by encouraging them to take inspiration in folk art which, in his view, contains snippets of an original Hungarian worldview that should be decoded and restored to ensure the country’s prosperity. While his conceptions of Hungarian history and culture may be qualified as esoteric and are not recognized by mainstream scholars (Kolozsi 2012a; Povedák, 2023), he received the lifetime achievement award of the Hungarian Academy of Arts in 2016.

Despite this clearly educational model of organization, the experts of this circle are hardly committed to pursuing academic history which they vehemently criticize for deliberately concealing important facts that are supposed to prove the spiritual mission of Hungarians in world history. This is manifest not only in the semantic contents of their teachings suffused with references to astrology and spiritual powers, but also in the form and context of their enunciation. While academic science is about raising new research questions and debating ideas, this Pagan understanding and use of history is unquestionable. Accordingly, its transmission rather resembles incantations, sermons, and revelations than logical argumentation. It is not surprising then that the followers of this circle acclaim these intellectuals not so much for the clarity of their thesis, but rather for the wisdom and spiritual elevation that allows them to decode the esoteric meanings and messages of Hungarian history and traditions.

Although the shamanic circle is no less intellectual than the other one, as knowledgeability also plays an important role here, rituals are of greater importance. This strand of the Pagan revival is committed to reviving the beliefs ascribed to ancient Hungarians (Diószegi 1978; Hoppál 1996; Kürti 2000), and draw heavily on the core shamanism created by Michael Harner (see Harner 1982; Lindquist 1997). Its leaders propose regular retreats and seasonal celebrations as well as shamanic trainings involving encountering their power animal through shamanic journeying, different healing techniques, such as soul retrieval and vision quests, sweat lodges, and, in some cases, firewalking. While shamanic leaders often call themselves ‘spiritual teachers’ (*spirituális tanító*), they also refer to themselves and to their followers as ‘walking on the path’ (*útonjárók*) and ‘preservers of tradition’ (*hagyományörző*). These terms imply both the idea of a trajectory of spiritual development, that is, that of ‘seekership’ proper to new religions and spiritualities (see Sutcliffe 2016) and that of the recovery of local traditions. Accordingly, the activities of the leaders of the different shamanic circles overlap both with international spiritual networks and local historical reenactment. For instance, a renowned shamanic leader regularly invites experts he holds in high esteem for their commitment to what is called here ‘preservation of tradition’ (*hagyományörzés*), such as an archer and a falconer, to teach in his shamanic school. He also initiates periodical ritual

collaborations with other spiritual leaders, both Hungarians and foreigners, notably in the frame of winter solstice ceremonies<sup>7</sup> and an international shamanic festival he founded.

While these two Pagan circles diverge in their means of reconstructing the past, they are loosely associated, and mutually influence each other. This is so not only because their prominent figures have met at public events such as the Kurultaj, but also because of the circulation of their followers between the different groups that make up this milieu. What further complicates the organization of this movement is the wide dissemination of its tenets in the form of books, journals, websites, and video recordings available online as well as through the public events they foster. Whatever their orientation, the different circles that compose this movement draw on a vast body of literature available mostly in specialized bookshops and, of course, online. Leading figures of Pagan revival have an important role in relaying this literature and some of them are authors in what I call a para-scientific intellectual industry similar to the knowledge production of the New Age in general (see Hanegraaff 1998). These writings are an important source of information concerning the tenets that circulate in this universe. Among the ones already mentioned, they claim that Hungarians are direct descendants of Attila, that the first king was a shaman (*táltos*), that Hungarian culture is 40,000 years old, that the Pilis mountains to the north of Budapest are the heart chakra of the Earth or that they contain the remains of the country's ancient, "sacral" capital, or that folk tales (usually read to and by all Hungarian children) contain secret teachings about pre-Christian religious beliefs and practices.

These mythical themes are not entirely new: they stem from what can be called a non-mainstream or semi- or para-academic tradition initiated in the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> century, with the nascent 'national sciences' (Hofer 1994): archaeology, history, folklore, and linguistics. Indeed, the conceptions of the Scythe and Hun origins date back to the formation of Hungarian national identity itself (Klaniczay 2011). Combining an Eastern protohistory with the recognition of the importance of adopting Christianity to secure the territory, Hungarian national identity has been polarized between East and West, or Asia and Europe, since its emergence (Hofer 1994). In the process of 'invention of tradition' (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) concurrent versions of the origin of Magyars and of the cultural elements that may represent them emerged. Faced with the universalism and the ideal of a multi-ethnic nation-state, the imagery of an eastern ethnogenesis was established as a means of claiming national dissent, resistance, and independence in Austria-Hungary (Hofer 1994, 41). In this perspective, the nomad occupiers of the Carpathian Basin were not perceived as pagan barbarians eventually civilized by their neighbors' Christianity, but as an ancient culture already disposing of similarly advanced political functions (a state), technologies (especially in warfare) and religion. In this spirit, drawing on the scattered traces of this pre-Christian civilization, representatives of the nascent national sciences, historiography, archaeology, linguistics, and folklore developed inventive speculations and bold propositions concerning ethnogenesis and protohistory. Some 19<sup>th</sup> century scientists expanded the past 'obsessively' (Klaniczay 2011, 207) suggesting that traces of Hungarian culture could be found in all antique civilizations, from Egypt and the Sumer to Central Asia, that the Bible would be full of Hungarian names and toponyms, or that the first man himself would have been Hungarian (*ibid.*, 185-188).

Although such propositions gave rise to reservations among contemporaries, early historians established a historical thinking that has been expanding ever since. Embraced by non-mainstream scholars between the two World Wars, and later through emigration, this conception of history persisted in resistance to communist internationalism (Koloszi 2012a, Szilárdi 2013, Szilágyi 2015). Accordingly, 'nationalist, romantic and mythical' representations of folklore, at variance with 'scientific' or academic folklore, also appeared, particularly among

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<sup>7</sup> Winter solstice celebrations usually consist in a wake around a ritual fire, accompanied by teachings as well as drumming and singing. Participants are expected to fast from sunset until the end of the ceremony, closed by the greeting of the sun and a communal meal.

amateurs, artists, and politicians (Hofer 1994, 39). Today, this intellectual current thrives among persons sensible to nationalist ideologies and in the Pagan milieu, both opposing western cosmopolitanism and globalization, pointing to the political valence of the Pagan revival.

The intertwining of this movement with mainstream politics will become more evident in the context of the Kurultaj festival. For now, I would like to draw attention to the ambiguities that can be observed in the political stances I was able to record during my fieldwork. The Pagan revival's religious/spiritual and political overtones are nuanced by the fact that some practitioners I have met are quite cautious when articulating their political views and defining their practices. For instance, while some political figures may publicly assume their allegiance to Pagan leaders' ideas (see Szilágyi 2015, 158) and others actively contribute to the promotion of the above-mentioned idea of a Scytho-Hun-Avar-Magyar continuity through scientific and political endeavors (see Kremmler 2022), participants of the activities I have had the chance to take part in prove to be more skeptical about official politics. While followers of the intellectual circle admire their leaders' deep esoteric knowledge of the ancient past and their commitment to restore Hungary's tarnished glory through their teachings, some of them consider that mainstream politicians are 'not on the same level' (*nincsenek ugyanazon a szinten*), implying that the wisdom and the spiritual enlightenment of their Pagan teachers' exceeds by far that of all known officeholders. In the same vein, the Pagan intellectuals whose lectures I have listened to, often formulate severe critiques towards all those, politicians, or any other public figures and laypersons, who 'boast their Hungarianness' (*magyarkodók*, literally 'Hungarianizers') without the proper knowledge, that is, the knowledge they are themselves promoting in their lectures. In this sense, these Pagan intellectuals' national sentiments may be considered as being even more radical than those represented by the current government (and other right-wing political organizations) they deem ignorant of the esoteric foundations of Hungarian traditions.

As to the political orientation of the followers of the local forms of Neo-shamanism, these groups surprisingly attract not only fervent nationalists that support the current conservative government, but also persons who endorse the opposition or declare to be uninterested in politics. This diversity appears rather tangentially in informal conversations which most often revolve around personal issues, such as divorce, child rearing and the like, as well as spiritual experiences, rather than public life. For example, during an activity proposed in a shamanic school I attended, political sentiments surfaced while participants were crafting dreamcatchers. In a chat with those sitting around her, and which everyone could hear, a woman evoked the last show of a famous standup comedian who is particularly popular among liberals, turning the discussion towards her discontent with Viktor Orbán's government. The school's leader, who was in the obvious position of both host and religious specialist, defended the politician whom he had previously already claimed to deeply admire. The conversation did not escalate on the grounds that both parties showed respect towards each other's political opinions: the shamanic leader maintained that he considered the standup comedian shallow and offensive, and the woman did not insist further on her criticism towards the Prime Minister. In this case, it seems, at least on the surface, that the spiritual values of open-mindedness and mutual tolerance proper to contemporary Paganism in general, grounded in countercultural values that distinguish its Western and Eastern forms (see Ivakhiv 2005; Strmiska 2005, 2018), prevailed over the fervent emotions that nowadays arise in discussions about politics in Hungary.

If these anecdotes drawn from fieldwork in Pagan circles illustrate the ambiguous attitudes of practitioners towards mainstream politics, the case of the Kurultaj festival shows, in contrast, the intertwining of Pagan thinking with right-wing cultural policies, not only ideologically, but also in practice. Indeed, the event was first supported by the radical right-wing party Jobbik, then progressively appropriated by the now ruling Fidesz government, and serves to promote a State-sponsored scientific Eurasian prehistory narrative with racist overtones as well as an occasion for building cultural diplomatic alliances with Central Asian

countries (Kremmler 2022; Stern 2022). However, if these scientific and political ramifications are essential to and conspicuous in the event, its concomitant religious/spiritual aspects seem more elusive.

### **The Kurultaj: between entertainment and ritual**

Organized since 2008 in the Kiskunság region, on the steppe of the Great Plain, the Kurultaj was created by Zsolt András Bíró, a physical anthropologist from the Museum of Natural Sciences of Budapest specializing in the genetic heritage of 9<sup>th</sup> century Hungarians, that is from the time of the conquest of the Carpathian Basin. The idea of the festival was directly inspired by his research. In 2006, he conducted genetic sampling among the Madjars of Kazakhstan which concluded that, beyond the consonance of the two peoples' ethnonyms, there might be a genetic connection between Madjars and Hungarians (see Bíró et alii. 2009)<sup>8</sup>. If this scientific paper is certainly an important element in legitimizing the idea of Hungarians' Central Asian origins in the different circles that support it, accounts of the personal encounter with the Madjars certainly makes it more plausible for the public who is unfamiliar with genetics and physical anthropology. As Bíró evoked his expedition to Kazakhstan in the documentary film on the first Hungarian Kurultaj<sup>9</sup>, he was received as a 'long-lost relative' (*régen látott rokon*). This also had consequences for the Madjars themselves. As he explained, collecting the genetic samples required gathering segments of the population that were not used to visiting each other often because of the great distances between their villages. Delighted to meet, they decided to organize a gathering that would allow the Madjars to spend a few days together. In addition, the participants agreed that they would reiterate the meeting in Hungary. At this occasion, the organizers made a pledge according to which they would meet biannually to celebrate their common origins. Subsequently, the range of potential participants was widened to delegations from other countries whose populations are also deemed to be related to present-Hungarians (Kirghizstan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Turkey, to name but a few).

The Kurultaj has expanded ever since. Indeed, only one year after its first edition, a competing gathering, the 'National Assembly of Hungarians' (*Magyarok Országos Gyűlése*) was launched by a group of historical reenactors who parted with the Kurultaj's founder 'for personal reasons' (Koloszi 2012a, 64), and created an event with similar features but lacking the international scope (see Povedák 2022). Since 2010, the patron of the Kurultaj is a vice-president of the Parliament (who was a key figure of the political transition of the 1990s). In the past years, the Kurultaj has also received subsidies from the current Fidesz government. Also, its organizers are actively engaged in foreign policy matters through their frequent visits to countries whose representatives (ambassadors, diplomats, and scholars) are invited to the Kurultaj. Every odd year Hungarian participants of the festival gather without the Central Asian delegations to hold what is called the 'Day of the Ancestors' (*Ősök Napja*). Smaller in scale, this event features roughly the same attractions as the biannual Kurultaj. More recently, the festival has spinoffs in neighboring countries, notably in Serbia and Romania. It is not surprising then that its organizers label it 'Europe's biggest celebration of the preservation of tradition' (*Európa legnagyobb hagyományőrző ünnepe*).

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<sup>8</sup> Bíró's stay among the Madjars of Kazakhstan was preceded by previous and (also) contested scholarship. It is a physical anthropologist of the Museum of Natural History, Tibor Tóth, specialized in Hungarian ethnogenesis, who 'discovered' this ethnic group in 1965, through a fortuitous encounter with a Kazakh linguist. Although his findings were not recognized at his time, orientalist historian Mihály Benkő unearthed his work thanks to his own acquaintances in Kazakhstan (see Kremmler 2022). It is interesting to note that these expeditions are modeled on the journey of friar Julian, a Dominican monk, who, in the 13<sup>th</sup> century travelled east to attempt to find the Hungarians who remained in their homeland at the time of the Conquest of the Carpathian Basin.

<sup>9</sup> *Kurultaj 2008/Az új Szövetség*, directed by István Bán. Falcon film, 2008.



The name Kurultaj, which means, as mentioned earlier, ‘tribal gathering’ in Turkish (and other Turkic languages) and, as organizers refer to it on the festival’s website, the ‘tribal assembly of the Hun-Turkic nations, celebration of the preservation of the ancient traditions’, reflects a self-exoticizing and ethnicizing purpose on the part of the organizers. The conception of history that underlies it, according to which present-day Hungarians descend from the Huns and that their original culture is considered necessarily nomadic become palpable throughout the event. In turn, the integration of different representatives and representations of Central Asian societies to the Kurultaj is founded on the linguistically inspired ideology of Turanism. Coined in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Turanism progressively evolved into a ‘supranational nationalism’ in reaction to Pan-Germanism, Pan-Slavism and Pan-Turkism amidst the competitive process of 19<sup>th</sup> century nation-building (Ablonczy 2022, 8). Regardless of the intricate ramifications of this ideology, what is of utmost interest regarding the Kurultaj is that it carries different meanings for different social actors and is a vector of various cultural practices ranging from geopolitical aspirations, through keen interest in ethnogenesis and artistic endeavors to educational projects (ibid., 9)<sup>10</sup>. The Pagan revival along with the wider ‘public Paganism’ are, in this context, clearly a further expression of this ideology. In this instance, as we will see, Turanism may convey religious/spiritual overtones and experiences due to the particular forms of ritualization featured in the event, which instill a sense of kinship among participants through the different means of invoking the ancestors.

### ***The attractions of the Kurultaj: invoking the ancestors***

The different spaces of the Kurultaj are carefully organized according to the activities proposed, dividing the area into a more ‘ritual’ or ‘spiritual’ and a more ‘secular’ part. Left of the main entrance, a large yurt village can be found which serves as the dwelling of the members of historical reenactment clubs and all participants who wish to live like a nomad during the event<sup>11</sup>. Here, visitors can discover Hungarians’ purportedly ancient ways of life: the residents of the village are expected to wear rigorously selected, ‘authentic’ period dress, to keep from using any modern materials, and to act in a respectful and exemplary fashion. Also, shamanic groups hold drumming circles and healing ceremonies in this yurt village. It is also the privileged site of historical reenactors’ weddings: every year, couples chose to get married at the Kurultaj under the auspices of shamanic leaders. Opposite to the village, to the right of the main entrance, a large rectangular tent hosts scientific lectures, and is also used as a resting place by persons who crave shade under the blazing August sun. The neighboring yurts extend the nomadic village: a shamanic leader, his family and followers settle here for the duration of the festival and hold regular drumming circles. Next to these, three larger yurts converted into museal spaces present archaeological exhibits. One of them is particularly large: run by the Museum of Natural Sciences of Budapest and called Atilla’s tent, it is, according to its designers, the biggest dismountable yurt in the world.

The central space of the festival, where the formal opening, historical reenactment shows and nomadic sports competitions take place and the invited dignitaries have their VIP

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<sup>10</sup> These are, for example, the foreign policy named ‘Eastern opening’ (see Moreh 2016), what Katrin Kremmler (2022, 180) describes as ‘government-owned institutionalized illiberal science and scholarship’ which promotes, among other things, extensive archaeogenetic research, the oriental inspiration of different artists in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (see Ablonczy 2022), the teaching of the supposedly ancient Székely runic script in extracurricular activities for children.

<sup>11</sup> With the expansion of the Pagan revival and ‘public Paganism’, yurts have become quite popular in the past decade. Persons engaged in the Pagan revival, especially shamanic leaders use them essentially for ritual purposes (teachings, solstice celebrations) and to house their followers when needed. Yurts are also increasingly used as permanent homes by individuals who opt for more ‘natural’ and ‘traditional’ lifestyles in the countryside. Nowadays, there are several companies specialized in the building of yurts.

area, is a circular arena partly surrounded by grandstands for the public. This space is symbolically charged through a huge portrait of Attila hung onto a large wooden frame which serves as a doorway to the arena and a so called ‘tree of life’, a sizeable piece of wood carefully carved with supposedly ancient symbols. This object is sometimes used for ritual purposes in shamanic ceremonies: participants tie ribbons materializing their prayers to its branches and the tree is held to convey their petitions to the sky. The arena is also the location of the closing ceremony of the event, the ‘ritual fire’ (*szertűz*), held in collaboration by different shamanic leaders. This playing field/ritual space is also central to the festival area for logistical reasons. It is directly linked through a path leading to the stables in which historical reenactors keep their horses, cutting the whole of the festival area in half. On the other side, more ‘profane’ activities take place: there is an exhibition tent where craftsmen from all over the Carpathian Basin sell their products, smaller tents that host sports activities (such as wrestling), a large stage where concerts and folk shows take place, as well as a food court and a large crafts market. Beyond the latter, a large area serves as a camping site for visitors. [TO PRODUCTION: PICTURE 1 (Kurultaj map) TO BE INSERTED AROUND HERE]

The event’s program does not readily suggest that it may inspire religious beliefs or feature ritual practices. The most conspicuous attractions are located at the central arena where the grandstands tend to be fully occupied during practically the entire festival. One of the main attractions is the official opening of the festival. First, historical reenactors perform a ‘nomad march’ (*nomád vonulás*), enacting the arrival of the Hungarians to the Carpathian Basin, with warriors riding horses, families travelling on horse wagons and herding their cattle. Then, high dignitaries, representants of the Asian delegations, the main organizer and Hungarian politicians give speeches while the historical reenactment clubs and shamanic leaders line up in the center of the field, wearing their elaborate garments, as a large nomadic army. [TO PRODUCTION: PICTURE 2 (reenactors lined up) HERE] If these performances’ solemnity contrasts with the more uninhibited and spectacular combats and sports competitions, it is in the more private spaces of the event, notably in and around the yurts that ritual activities tend to be more readily identifiable. Weddings and the use of the tree of life for prayers mentioned above as well as the drumming circles appear as being more private as these are never announced on the program, unlike the closing fire ceremony. These rituals can be considered as the private initiatives of the participating Pagan leaders and their followers which visitors passing by are free to join and solemnly contemplate. The drumming circles and, more generally, the presence of Pagan practitioners allow laypersons to get acquainted with revived shamanic practices and, by the same token, it is an occasion for Pagan groups to promote their spiritual services and worldview. [TO PRODUCTION: PICTURES 3, 4 AND 5 (wedding, tree of life, drumming circle) TO BE INSERTED AROUND HERE]

If most of the attractions highlighted in the official program suggest that the event is nothing more than a festival and is mainly aimed at leisure and education, the organizers’ discourses and instructions, participants’ comments on social media, and a more careful look at the sequence of events indicate otherwise. Participants’ accounts on social media suggest a sense of obligation in taking part of the event, as if it were an important family reunion. As the next Kurultaj is announced on Facebook, regular visitors affirm their support by stating their intention to attend or, on the contrary, their regret of having to miss the event for any reason. In the same vein, organizers (also on social media) assess previous ‘tribal gatherings’ as ‘dignifying’ or ‘successful commemorations’ (*méltóságtelejes/sikeres ünnep*). As already mentioned, organizers conceive it as a ‘tribal gathering’ or a ‘celebration’ rather than a festival. According to their instructions, in order to fully enjoy the event, it is best to ‘show oneself to be worthy of the ancestors’ spirit’, that is to avoid drinking alcohol and any loud behavior. Thus, even though the evening activities and nightlife around the main stage and the food court as well as on the camping site tend to contradict this injunction, the Kurultaj is intended to be a

solemn celebration of participants' commitment to ancient forefathers rather than an entertaining festival.

The closing of the event also points in this direction: shamanic leaders light a 'ritual fire' (*szertűz*) held to bring blessings and prosperity to participants. Ritual fires are an essential element of the shamanic ceremonies of the Pagan revival. As one of the shamanic leaders conducting the ritual fire of the Kurultaj explains in an introduction to the ceremony, the smoke carries prayers and pledges to the sky. Accordingly, officiants' gestures are grave and meticulous when lighting the fire, denoting that it is not a mere festive bonfire. At this occasion Pagan practitioners blend with historical reenactors. Participants stand around the fire in two circles traced out with flour. According to the instructions given by the program announcer through the loudspeakers, the inner circle is reserved for the officiants' followers as well as persons dressed in reenactment costumes. [TO PRODUCTION: PICTURE 6 (ritual fire) TO BE INSERTED AROUND HERE] All those wearing regular clothes, even if they are Pagan practitioners, are relegated to the role of onlookers. Conversely, historical reenactors who are not necessarily involved in the Pagan revival are associated to officiants. At the Kurultaj, only participants wearing period dress are allowed to perform the offering involved in the ritual, which consists of throwing a handful of wheat into the fire. The ceremony is accompanied by drumming, singing as well as propitiatory utterances and oaths pronounced by the shamanic leader orchestrating the ritual. In general, he wishes for health, prosperity, and blessings, and commits participants to 'help your nation, your clan, your tribe, your people and your fatherland'. It is significant that in 2020, when the Kurultaj was cancelled because of the pandemic, selected historical reenactors gathered with shamanic leaders to perform this same fire ceremony out of respect for the pledge of organizing the tribal gathering every two years. This suggests that the lighting of a ritual fire is the minimal form of Kurultaj, associating the event to the rituals of the Pagan revival. This ambiguity between leisure/education versus solemn celebration is the most striking at the event's museal attractions. According to organizers, 'Attila's tent' is not a simple exhibit, but a place of 'piety' (*kegyelet*) towards the ancestors and their heritage [TO PRODUCTION: PICTURE 7 (Attila's tent from outside) TO BE INSERTED AROUND HERE].

### *Museum or temple?*

Housed in a huge yurt, built according to traditional techniques, the exhibit consists of an assemblage of objects that are never shown in the same composition elsewhere. Visitors can see a cyclorama depicting the arrival of the Huns to the Carpathian basin by painter Zalán Kertai and replicas of archaeological objects, such as armors, bows and a Hun caldron. In recent years, these objects have been completed by facial reconstructions produced by specialists of the Natural History Museum. From these, Zalán Kertai created portraits that suggest how the persons unearthed by archaeologists may have looked in their lives. The smaller yurt houses an exhibit that displays several skulls, everyday objects and costumes reproduced from archaeological remains. In 2022, the museal yurts were completed by a new one, organized by the National Museum of Budapest, with an exhibit on archaeological objects housed in this institution. Interestingly, in the center of the yurt, museologists installed a 'tree of life' made of natural fiber strings. Visitors were encouraged to write their thoughts on small pieces of paper and attach them to the strings composing the tree: a larger piece of paper tied to one of the strings read 'What is the tree of life telling you? Leave a message'. [TO PRODUCTION: PICTURE 8 (tree of life in National Museum yurt) TO BE INSERTED AROUND HERE] This is clearly reminiscent of the previously mentioned shamanic rituals occasionally involving the tree of life placed on the edge of the central arena. Based on the number of pieces of paper attached, this installation did not engage a large number of visitors and most of them used it as

a guest book. However, some visitors chose to write words of wisdom expressing their support for the ‘preservation of tradition’, such as: ‘The tree cannot live without roots... as man cannot live without a past’. Thus, this stylized tree served as an educative installation evoking the shamanic worldview ascribed to ancient Hungarians, a guest book, and a way of relating to the ancestors at the same time.

All exhibits clearly materialize Hungary’s foundation myth widespread in Neopagan circles and, more generally, among persons receptive to nationalist ideas. However, several elements show that these objects do something more than just convey information and knowledge about the remote past they represent, as museums would do<sup>12</sup>. Perhaps the most conspicuous sign of the evocative nature of these exhibits is that explanation is very scarce about what we are seeing. The explanatory boards emphasize how limited archaeological knowledge is about the Huns and their allies, yet the relationship between them and present-day Hungarians is taken for granted. Significantly, the preferred verbal mode here is the conditional. Also, despite the Kurultaj being an ‘international “tribal gathering”’, explanations are not translated from Hungarian.

Beyond the particularities of the explanatory boards, the configuration of the space suggests that the experience it affords visitors, besides transmitting some knowledge about purported ancestors, is one of being exposed to and being affected by the representation of ancestors in a singular way. When entering Attila’s tent, at the center, a large cauldron stands as an enigmatic object illuminated by the sunlight penetrating through the opening on the yurt’s top, but without any explanation about its presumable uses. As the already mentioned tree of life, this container also refers to contemporary Pagan ritual practices: at the winter solstice involving the Kurultaj’s organizers and many of its regular participants in 2017, a reproduction of such a cauldron was used to cook a ritual meal to be ingested after sunrise. [TO PRODUCTION: PICTURE 9 (meal at winter solstice) TO BE INSERTED AROUND HERE]

Then, the visitor faces various figures reconstructed from and/or inspired by archaeological remains. In the back, the cyclorama presents human-sized male figures on horses in an epic scene resembling a combat. While evocative of Árpád Feszty’s famous painting ‘The Arrival of the Hungarians’ (1894), this picture depicts its figures in detail, including a shaman presumably in trance. Placed in front of the cyclorama, the effigies of two Huns, a man mounted on a horse and a woman displaying a sword, seem to have descended from the painting in the back. Visitors consistently contemplate the figures’ traits and dress; many take pictures with them as if they were newly met acquaintances. [TO PRODUCTION: PICTURE 10 (visitors in Attila’s tent) TO BE INSERTED AROUND HERE] The facial reconstructions and the portraits they inspired, although silent and immobile, also exert the effect of encountering flesh-and-blood persons. During the tour, visitors are in general as silent as the bodies and faces exhibited. Finally, before exiting the tent, there is a wooden box for donations reminding an alms box, where visitors can financially contribute to ‘research on proto-history’.

In such conditions, the question arises: what is it to appreciate an exhibit in which scientific accuracy and accessibility is not necessarily the main preoccupation? In order to tackle this, I take inspiration from some considerations about ritual objects coined by M. Moisseff (2002) in her study of the Aboriginal/Aranda ritual objects called *churinga*. This is a perceptually simple yet powerful artefact that has a special evocative power that refers at the same time to cosmology, non-human beings and the individuals that manipulate them. Following É. Durkheim, she assumes that rituals do not simply say something, but show

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<sup>12</sup> It would be reductive to ascribe a merely scientific and educative function to museal spaces displaying ancestry, especially when human remains are involved. Ksenia Pimenova (2021) analyzes the complexities of the ritual relationships that can emerge in a museal setting through the compelling example of the mummy of an Altaian princess. This case provides elements for further comparison with the exhibitions organized in the Kurultaj and the Museum of Natural Sciences of Budapest.

(represent) and do something (action) and distinguishes between the use of material objects and the discourse that surrounds them (myth). Studying the articulations between the appearance and the function of these objects, she sheds light on the efficacy of the ritual in which they are involved. From an analytical perspective, they act thus as tangible mediations between phenomena belonging to different registers: human/non-human, animate/inanimate, visible/invisible. However, this can only be performed by means of their ritual use: it is only in this context that their manipulation brings to life the presence of the invisible entities which they evoke. Outside ritual action, that which is represented does not possess any tangible, univocal representation.

While ritual objects are obviously designed for a specifically ritual purpose, this is not the case of the items of the exhibits of the Kurultaj, presented mainly as museal objects. However, if a ritual object in general may be understood, in M. Moisseff's words as 'a consistent enigmatic presence but whose meaning remains opaque' that 'serves to designate something that exists beyond that which it represents' (2002, 250), the objects of the Kurultaj's exhibits may be at least comparable to ritual objects. In my view, it is the underdetermination of both the context and the objects exhibited that allow us to see the shift from an ordinary to a ritual frame. It seems that the hybrid context in which the objects are displayed (the yurt is at the same time a museum, a dwelling, and a shrine) render opaque the (scientific) knowledge they are presumed to convey. The ambiguity of the setting and the lack of information concerning the objects exhibited suggest that there is something ineffable concerning them not only because of the scarcity of scientific evidence, but also because of the putative nature of pre-Christian Hungarians, namely the exemplary and exceptional qualities ascribed to them. It is as if they could never be portrayed accurately enough, as it is often the case with non-human beings. At the same time, the objects of the exhibits are sheer materiality and yet they suggest that what they stand for is in fact not representable. The underdetermination of this space and of the purpose of the exhibit reinforce thus the representation of pre-Christian Hungarians as extraordinary beings and provide a material evocation of the ancestral past.

## Conclusion

Due to the complexity of the Kurultaj, which is at the same time a historical reenactment and folklore festival, a semi-official foreign policy summit, a crafts market, a Pagan gathering and an event of science popularization, it would be unwise to draw definite conclusions from the ethnographic data discussed here. However, research avenues and questions can be raised in a way to further and nuance our understanding of this multifarious event and others in which ideas of ancestry (invented or not), autochthony and locality are also interwoven.

The remoteness, the spatial organization of the festival and of its museal spaces, their indeterminacy, and the behavioral indications given to visitors show that the event is intentionally bracketed off from everyday life not only as an informal festivity, but also as a solemn assembly intended to build and consolidate relationships with 'fraternal peoples' (*testvérnépek*). If this has clear political overtones, the ideologies and historical understandings that underlay the Kurultaj are also intrinsically related to the exceptional experiences it may provide for visitors. Temporarily placed in a nomadic camp suggesting remoteness in space and in time, participants are constantly compelled to relate to the ancestors. The monumental historical reenactment shows, combats, and marches, the yurt village, the different Central Asian folkloric performances, the shamanic rituals and the figures and objects displayed in the museal yurts, multiply ancestry: flesh-and-blood persons dressed as nomads, delegates from faraway lands, shamans and their followers, mannequins, and facial reconstructions pervasively and plausibly bring the past into the present. In this, the underdetermination of the exhibit spaces and the inexactness of historical data do not necessarily reflect ignorance or negligence,

but point to a particular intention, that of providing the pragmatic conditions for participants to identify themselves with figures of alterity that represent an idealized society. Furthermore, the ambiguity (between entertainment and ritual) and the occasional whimsicality of the different attitudes and rituals these invocations of the ancestors inspire should not be reduced to ‘false authenticity’, as István Povedák (2022, 80) refers to some elements of the National Assembly of Hungarians. ‘Existential authenticity’ may be more appropriate term to understand these, as Kamila Baranieczka (2016) argues in her study of the Rękawka fair in Krakow. A coexistence of the non-exclusive attitudes of entertainment and religious engagement, which Richard Schechner (2020, 158-159) coined the ‘efficacy-entertainment dyad’ to think together ritual and performing arts, can also be observed in this event that combines historical reenactment and contemporary Paganism, making it comparable to the Kurultaj. Understood as a ‘feeling’ of ‘a kind of fulfillment in life, [of] perceiving things as true, real and valuable’ (Baranieczka 2016, 119), this ‘existential authenticity’ can explain how the (re)invented rituals involved in these events can range from mere historical curiosity to religious/spiritual experience. The symbolic tree of life in the National Museum’s exhibit yurt can be used by some visitors as a guest book, but it may inspire thoughts of wisdom in others. Attila’s tent can be regarded as providing scientific proof of Hungarians’ Hun origins and as an awe-inspiring temple of the ancestors. The closing ritual fire can simply be an occasional ceremony for some historical reenactors and visitors while it certainly has an important stake for Pagan leaders and their followers who hold that the prosperity of Hungary should be secured by ritual means. In the light of these considerations, the notion of re-enchantment appears to encompass, in a rather abstract fashion, specific practices eliciting seemingly contradictory but not mutually exclusive dispositions and experiences, thus challenging the religious-secular divide.

Thus, it can be supposed that these different forms of historical reenactment, that is the recreation of supposedly ancient rituals in these festivals and/or celebrations and the concomitant invocation of purported ancestors, follow the mechanism of New Age and Neopagan rituals that Michael Houseman (2007) coined “ritual refraction”. Aspiring to act in the spirit of wise and spiritually evolved predecessors rather than to exactly reproduce existing practices, these rituals rest upon the simultaneous experience of mutually exclusive emotional states. In this case ritual identification with ancient Slavs, Siberian shamans, Hun warriors and the like provide the means for contemporary Poles and Hungarians to identify with their purported ancestors and the intentions they ascribe to them and, at the same time, examine their own private dispositions in this encounter. In turn, they are afforded powerful experiences of continuity with their supposedly ancient traditions. While this proposition needs to be verified through further ethnographical data, it suggests nevertheless that Pagan thinking (both public and religious/spiritual) becomes persuasive here not only through the ideological discourses that convey it, but also through the specific practices it inspires. Further research into the pragmatic aspects of Pagan revival (whether in its more religious/spiritual or public forms), through the study of rituals and public events, may thus provide additional elements to the understanding of how the ancestral past is instrumentalized in contemporary Hungarian society and elsewhere.

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