

## THE SYMBOLIC DIMENSION OF WEST HALOZE PEASANT TECHNOLOGY\*

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Everyday social discourse among West Haloze's predominantly peasant-farmer population dwells extensively upon those practical arrangements within and among households which enable the pursuit of a common local repertoire of existential routines. In this rugged sub-Pannonian hill country of Eastern Slovenia relations of mutual assistance among its greatly dispersed nucleated farmsteads are fundamental to the integration of local society and the maintenance of a local culture. Here I shall argue that the manifestation of Haloze peasant-farmers' common stock of 'practical skills, knowledge and procedures' (Merrill, 1968) in recurrent agricultural activities constitutes an indigenous technology which, as a discrete setting of social discourse, is a most important symbolic context for integrating disparate levels of meaning in local life.

The symbolic dimension of local technology became apparent through contradictions observed between performance and organization, as opposed to local perceptions of those numerous existential tasks comprising the Haloze agricultural cycle. Following eighteen months of fieldwork, during 1974-75, I discovered that from among all local practical routines, the event for killing and butchering pigs, *furež*, sets the above disparities in sharpest relief.<sup>1</sup> Nearly all local households make their major annual pigsticking into the most festive of regular family holidays. However, when spontaneously talking about the event Haložani most commonly describe its technical detail, debate about proper procedures, recipes and so on. When asked why they arrange their most elaborate annual household feast at the conclusion of the event and invite so many guests, they also respond in pragmatic terms: "When there is fresh meat in the house

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one should celebrate, hence, we are able to pay off neighbors and kin for assistance rendered during the year's cycle of labor exchange." Local adult perceptions of the event are generally inarticulate about its nonpragmatic significance. We shall proceed with an analysis of this aspect of *furež* after a brief review of certain theoretical presumptions which have inhibited a phenomenological understanding of such practical activities.

The analytical distinctions long made within sociology and social anthropology between ritual and technical acts (Durkheim, 1915; V. Turner, 1970) and the instrumental and expressive aspects of behavior (Parsons & Shils, 1951), have impeded the symbolic analysis of activities, like contemporary West Haloze pigsticking, which are immediately perceived by both actor and observer as essentially pragmatic (Barth, 1961; Leach, 1968). Here I shall assume that the material and social arrangements of Haloze pigsticking are both instrumental and expressive. This integrated analytical perspective has been proposed in recent discussions of material culture where the instrumentality or function of technology has been associated with 'form and aesthetics' (Hofer & Fel, 1979) and with 'style' (Lechtman, 1979). But, of course I am interested in the social discourse which produces the artifacts central to the above studies.

While pigsticking, along with animal slaughter in general, has long attracted the attention of European ethnographers and folklorists, their descriptions have focused either on folk beliefs (Kuret, 1965; Lid, 1923) or instrumental routines (Dedinszky, 1979) manifest in the activity. An integrated view of the event's overall meaning for its practitioners has been lacking, especially in reference to important social relationships specific to the local communities where the activity is performed.

The various levels of meaning expressed in West Haloze pigsticking are of course apparent in other technical events. But this event stands alone in the local cycle of practical activities as an occasion creating a liminal state (V. Turner, 1970). And I would assert that it attains this quality because of the unique place of pig slaughtering in local animal domestication practices and its historical cultural continuity within the local regimen of subsistence oriented household production. Killing pigs is a dangerous matter, though very few Haloze butchers would deny their sense of manhood by admitting this.

All domesticated animals on Haloze farmsteads, except pigs, serve a useful function at maturity which requires their careful nurture, rather than their slaughter. And in contrast to other local domesticated livestock, pigs are regularly fed cooked food, often

prepared alongside the family meal on the farmstead hearth. Pigs are indeed the commensal associates of their keepers in Haloze (cf. Leach, 1964). Of course the natural intelligence of swine is another factor drawing them close to the human sphere. In a negative way the intimacy of pigs with people is confirmed by their keepers' explicit refusal to give them names when they name all other large farmstead animals. And, as is common in most European languages, Haložani are most effective in artificially distancing themselves from their porcine associates through the verbal abuse of swine (*ibid.*).

It is not surprising that students of spiritual culture have long identified traditional pigsticking with ritual sacrifice. The killing of such a close farmstead associate is a serious transgression of the normal order of things; it calls forth a situation of moral disarray and enforces the ambivalent man-animal relationship outlined above. It is this specific act that transforms the practical matter of butchering into an event pregnant with nonpragmatic meaning.

And Haložani have not instituted procedures for absolving themselves from the act of killing their pigs. No local or outside specialists are called in to perform the task, as is the case in many other parts of Europe (cf. Lid, 1923). All adult Haloze men are invited to perform this chore during the course of their lives. And few are the cowards who decline such an invitation.

But in order to explore the various levels of meaning which are displayed, even dramatized, during the course of a pigsticking, it is necessary to examine the various frames of reference to which the event alludes, for example, important local social relationships, a local system of reciprocity and local moral precepts.

Social relationships which are fundamental to the organization of local society in West Haloze are apparent in the guest-host behavior which codifies much of the interaction among local households. This well pronounced pattern of behavior can be attributed in part to the pattern of settlement in the region whereby households are geographically confined to distinct nucleated farmsteads with the dwelling usually located within the family holdings and at some distance from the closest neighbor. This dispersion of the population inhibits casual visiting of the sort characteristic for nucleated or row villages.

Relations among farmsteads are organized around a theme of balanced reciprocity (Sahlins, 1965); one most commonly visits another household on the pretext of either requesting (initiating) or participating in some form of mutual assistance. The decorum of such visits calls for the provision of the guest with food and drink and his deference to the head of the household he is visiting. And in interaction outside of local farmsteads, at the parish store, on the

bus, etc., an ideology of deference to the male heads of local households is ardently expressed, even though wives in fact have considerable authority over the economic transactions of local families. There is thus a clear local recognition of guest and host roles and considerable parish scrutiny of the performance of these roles as well as that of the male heads, or hosts, of local households. This social interaction which is a mainstay of local society underscores the relatively great social and economic autonomy of West Haloze's family farmsteads.

It should be emphasized, however, that Haloze peasant farmers perceive this autonomy as existing among equals. Locally universal knowledge of and skills in common agricultural routines enable households to exchange labor for labor, to engage in mutual assistance. A common 'indigenous' technology is thus a context enabling the expression of egalitarianism in West Haloze society.

With this background in mind it is now possible to outline very briefly some major symbolic themes in West Haloze pigsticking. We have noted that killing pigs brings to the surface of human consciousness fundamental questions of moral order. During the course of sausage making, when adult men and women are carefully segregated into the kitchen and main room of the dwelling, intense perverse joking occurs regularly in both settings which focuses upon taboos regulating the most intimate of human relationships. Incest, adultery and the chastity of local clerics become the themes of jokes and anecdotes. And the first meat sausage is often fashioned into a very explicit phallic symbol which is ceremoniously delivered to the women in the kitchen for cooking and testing before the remaining sausages are filled. Fundamental precepts of social order are thus questioned.

Alongside this drama, it is not terribly unexpected that we also discover a metaphorization of important local social relationships. This is achieved by turning the local social structure on its head. In contrast to all other regular events of mutual assistance in the local agricultural calendar, the roles of guest and host are reversed during pigsticking. Those individuals who are invited as guest butchers (men) and kitchen help (women) during butchering come to the sponsoring household with gifts of wine and food, thus adopting the status of hosts. And the man invited to be the head butcher—a close relative or friend of the sponsor<sup>2</sup>—is granted rather complete authority over the sponsoring household for the duration of butchering and sausage making; he becomes the master of the situation to whom the sponsor must exercise deference as a guest in his own house. The head butcher initiates the various tasks, leads prayers at meals, determines the proper concoction for sausages and

can freely order that wine and brandy be served to the event's participants from the sponsor's cellar.

While the roles of guests, host and head butcher are dramatized through their inversion and a good deal of joking during the course of butchering, the performance of instrumental tasks is not itself the medium for expressing this differentiation. Rather it is a context enabling expression of nonpragmatic meaning. Butchering and kitchen chores transpire among adults with roughly equal competence in the full array of tasks at hand. The head butcher asserts his unique authority as a quasi host by initiating joking and songs and by fussing over those practical details, such as sausage recipes, which are largely agreed upon at the outset by all those participating. His performance is founded upon the exercise of social skills, and to a much smaller extent the dexterity of his hands. During other regular labor exchanges the head of the sponsoring household asserts authority over both his family and guest laborers through a much closer reference to the practical chores at hand.

The moral drama and inversion of social structure evident during the slaughter and butchering culminate at the beginning of a large feast to which an unusually large number of kith and kin are invited who did not participate in the practical phase of the event and not at all of whom necessarily exchanged labor with the sponsoring household during the preceding year. The organization of this feast reflects a sharp return to the normal roles governing interhousehold relations. The real host and hostess take charge. Significantly, however, this feast takes on the quality of generalized reciprocity (Sahlins, 1965). The eldest persons present, irrespective of their guest or host status, are granted deference by those younger than they. And the scope and spontaneity of invitations to the pigsticking supper reflect a spirit of extra-household social commensality. Upon the feast's conclusion all guests are given a token gift of blood sausages; they depart as equals. Special allocations of furež products to the closest of kith and kin are commonly made at a later date when the regimen of balanced reciprocity is reinstated in everyday life.

As no other event of indigenous technology in the region, West Haloze pigsticking stands out as a ceremony of peasant identity. It combines several different levels of meaning into a integrated metaphor of local reality. The social reality and moral order unique to these people are mimicked in a very enthusiastic but structured way. That pervasive order of meaning in the lives of local Haložani becomes an object of play. And thus, paraphrasing Clifford Geertz in his comments on the Balinese Cockfight, 'Pigsticking becomes for Haložani a story about themselves which they tell themselves.' As

Geertz asserts, its function is interpretive—it enables Haložani to fathom their position vis-à-vis one another, greater society and an overarching system of symbols which give order to their lives (Geertz, 1975).

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## NOTES

1. While *furež* is more extensively described in my original monograph on West Haloze (Minnich, 1979), the analytical argument pursued here is somewhat different. The special significance of 'pigsticking' in West Haloze, and elsewhere in contemporary traditional communities of Yugoslavia, is implicitly underscored, quite independent of my own work, in recently published collections of art: in a photographic essay on his native Haloze, Stojan Kerbler has chosen to emphasize *furež* more than other events in local life (Kerbler, 1981). And in a random sampling of Yugoslav naive art (Tomašević, 1973), the motif of pigsticking occurs more frequently than life crises and rituals such as death, baptism and folk healing.
2. It is common for the godfather, *boter*, of the host's children to be the head butcher, but brothers of the host or hostess are also recruited, if the former is unavailable.