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Kmet, *Občan*, and Žetalanec (Peasant, Citizen, and Villager): Reflections over the Transformation of Collective Identity among Haložani between 1974 and 2006[1]

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After a long sojourn in an exotic[2] setting, it is enticing to engage in retrospection. Such is the purpose of this text. We shall consider how the remarkable transformation of a sub-pannonian village over the past four decades has affected the way its residents understand themselves as members of society. A leading question will be: How have the social identities of *kmet, občan*, and/or Žetalanec (peasant, citizen, and villager) variously informed this collective self-understanding over these many decades? Through it's telling this is also a story of changing theoretical perspectives within the author's discipline—social and cultural anthropology. And at another level, this narrative is a looking glass for viewing, more generally, changing collective identities among those many Slovenes who yet today continue to reside in the countryside on the estates of their predecessors. [3]

Haloze is located in south central Slovenia. In 1974, it was a marginal backwater in socialist Yugoslavia. In those days, local residents and I thought nothing of hunting wild boar and collecting mushrooms across the Macelj Ridge, marking the region's southern perimeter. Thirty-three years later (21 December 2007), that very same ridge became a vigilantly patrolled Schengen frontier separating the European Union from the Republic of Croatia. Internal borders were created as well. Following independence, Slovenia was apportioned into 212 self-governing municipalities. Slovenia's new Constitution and EU membership have provided its residents with fundamentally new conditions for living their lives. We are led to ask how Haložani (people of Haloze) have adjusted

1 This article is a revision of a paper presented at the ASEEES Convention, San Antonio, Texas, 20 November 2014 for the panel: Scholarly Disciplines Regarding Slovenes and Slovenia: Continuity and Change in that Last Quarter Century. The author gratefully thanks Maria Todorova for her commentary on the original paper, an inspiration for the text's revision.

2 The meaning of "exotic" in this context is best understood with reference to the author's biography (Minnich 2012).

3 The following statistic suggests that "rural heritage" remains an important referent in the self-understanding of most Slovenes. Namely, Slovenia, Moldova and Bosnia Herzegovina are the only European countries where more than 50% of the population is still categorized as rural according to the Geohive statistical service. See: www.geohive.com/earth/pop_urban.aspx.

their collective self-understanding to the multifarious new borders impacting their lives.

Since its beginnings, social anthropology has assumed that knowledge about the human family and its domestic organization is fundamental for understanding greater society. Family households are central to this narrative where I portray how they are organized, how they relate to one another and greater society, and how they reproduce themselves. Thereby I consider the family-household's potential as a key referent in one's self-image as a member of society.

Anthropologists[4] studying Yugoslavia and Slovenia following WW II were attracted to rural villages; these "little communities" were seen as repositories of folk culture and society (Redfield 1960). Holistic village monographs became the currency of this scholarship and included members of the Society for Slovene Studies. Among them, Joel M. Halpern, set a standard for such writing with his monograph: *A Serbian Village* (1967). And Irene P. Winner followed in Slovenia with her monograph: *A Slovenian Village – Žerovnica* (1971).

As I prepared to enter the field in the early 1970s, village studies were losing their salience in social and cultural anthropology. The romantic notion that village life was a repository of a people's culture was no longer credible. Yugoslavia's rural villagers had become wage earning commuters, guest workers abroad and participants in the pervasive institutions of an expanding socialist welfare state. Local lives and beliefs were manifestly shaped by factors extraneous to a local social order. Nevertheless, I was confident that certain aspects of village life still reflected the integrity of local society and attested to a locally experienced sense of community.

Upon entering Haloze, I avoided social anthropology's traditional quest to document the functional integrity and structural equilibrium of a local community. Rather, I sought evidence for the persistence of a "marginal rural culture"—a locally perpetuated system of knowledge and practices. The holistic objective of traditional village monographs was abandoned for depiction of what I came to understand as *an indigenous system of practical knowledge*.

At this time, the North American cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz developed a theory for anthropological investigation and description that offered a clear alternative to the sociologically grounded approach of social anthropology. This encouraged my departure from the structural functionalist perspective of European social anthropology. In his promotion

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[4] Here I refer exclusively to North American colleagues. For an account of how this scholarship articulates with the work of Slovene colleagues (ethnographers, ethnologists, and cultural anthropologists), see: Slavec Gradišnik (2000).

of anthropology as an *interpretive science*, Geertz asserted, "anthropologists don't study villages… they study in villages" (Geertz 1975a: 22). His goal was to describe how meaning was generated and maintained in local settings through symbolic interaction (Geertz 1975a: 22).

During my initial fieldwork in Haloze, I did not fully appreciate the implications of Geertz's hermeneutic method for documenting and interpreting field material. Rather, I pursued social anthropology's well-proven empirical emphasis upon careful documentation of the organization and function of the family household—in the case of Žetale, autonomous subsistence oriented nuclear family homesteads. For nearly two years the everyday life of households and relations among them became the locus for my *participant observation*—anthropology's essential tool for data collection.

Žetale and its peasant-farmers anno 1974—"life behind God's back"[5]

In August 1974, my wife and I moved to Žetale, a dispersed village located in the southwestern corner of Haloze. She taught German and Serbo-Croatian at the elementary school, where the headmaster invited me to lead the school's photography club. School contacts opened doors to local families where we soon helped with fall chores—gathering and pressing apples, pitching hay and even spreading manure. With time we were drawn into the daily rhythm of local life. And our automobile—one of very few in Žetale—increased our popularity as a coveted means for moving people and produce. The stage was set for my *long conversation* with Haložani, seeking ultimately to understand and describe their *life-worlds*.[6]

The center of Žetale included a school, parish church and rectory, firehouse, general store, post office, and medical dispensary. Village residents, roughly 550 at the time,[7] lived in houses separated from the village center and one another by adjoining arable land, orchards, vineyards and woods. Fittingly these homesteads were affectively referred to as *domača gruda* 'home ground'.

At the time of fieldwork, nearly all Žetalanci (residents of Žetale) lived in subsistence oriented agrarian households and identified themselves as *kmetje* 'peasant-farmers'. They kept livestock, maintained orchards and vegetable plots, and cultivated grain and various other crops needed for fodder and their own table. As opportunities arose they sold cider, must and

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5 *Bogu za hrbtom* (Slov.), an expression frequently used locally and elsewhere to describe Haloze in 1970s.

6 "Life-world" refers to the totality of life as experienced by my interlocutors in the field. See: Husserl (1976).

7 1971 population of Žetale: 539.

brandy, as well as an occasional calf, mushrooms, chestnuts, charcoal, and firewood. But the most important source of household cash was wages earned by commuting to local industries or abroad.[8] Such income enabled modest improvements in farm equipment and house furnishings. Bank loans to improve one's agrarian enterprise were unheard of. And investment in public infrastructure was negligible in a region where peasant-farmers lived under the stigma of being private landowners engaged in an antiquated mode of production.[9]

In those days, a rich repertoire of skills was retained collectively within local households. These included: viticulture, horticulture, intercropping, animal husbandry, butchering, apiculture, roof thatching, timber hewing, barn raising, barrel making, cart and wheel making, charcoal making, and blacksmithing. Such skills were imperative for maintaining a complex array of agricultural routines, farmstead equipment and structures, and they were part of a barter economy founded upon the exchange of labor and locally produced goods. The quest to describe marginal culture and my personal fascination in this locally transmitted system of practical knowledge drove my field study forward and shaped the final monograph, *The Homemade world of Zagaj*[10] *– An Interpretation of the Practical Life among Peasant-Farmers in Western Haloze* (1979).

Žetale was one of most isolated settlements in the municipality of Ptuj. Access to public services located at the distant center was limited to one daily bus connection over pot-holed macadam roads. Locally, ox-drawn two-wheeled carts were still used to transport heavy loads from better roadways to those many Žetale homesteads still inaccessible by motor vehicle.

Aside from the local voluntary fire brigade,[11] Žetale was notably devoid of secular voluntary organizations in the 1970s. And there was no locally elected council that could effectively represent village interests in Ptuj. Regular mobilization of Žetale homesteaders as members of a village community was limited essentially to activities of the local church parish.

Žetale's *kmetje* understood themselves primarily in terms of membership in autonomous subsistence oriented nuclear family

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8 At the time of fieldwork, three-quarters of Slovenia's peasant-farmer households included at least one wage earner and Žetale was no exception.

9 Nevertheless, Žetale's peasant-farmers readily acknowledged that, in contrast to pre-socialist times, they enjoyed as citizens of socialist Slovenia universal public health care and social services. Many received nominal pensions and all had access to free public education.

10 Zagaj = Žetale / Pseudonyms for local place names and persons were used in this manuscript.

11 See: http://www.pgd-zetale.si/razvoj-pgd-zetale/

homesteads—*domača gruda*. Their lives were guided by the quest to preserve and renew one's *domača gruda* as a viable socio-economic institution. All else was secondary, including their abiding devotion to the Catholic Faith.

The collective self-image of Žetale *kmetje* was sharply demarcated by the *social boundary*[12] they perceived separating them from non-*kmetje*—that is, essentially all others in modern Slovene society, including locally resident teachers and the head master. Furthermore, as faithful Catholics they saw themselves juxtaposed to a modern secular society they supposed to consist primarily of non-believers. Their relation with the local priest was nevertheless ambivalent since he not only tilled fields and kept livestock as they did. He also publicly reprimanded them for violating church edicts—for failing to pay tithes, for working fields on Sunday.

Žetale homesteaders made every effort to promote the education of their children with the hope that they might one day escape from "behind God's back" to a better life elsewhere. And many succeeded, contributing eventually to the well being of their parental homesteads.

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How does one describe marginal culture, and more specifically, an indigenous system of practical knowledge? Many months after leaving Haloze, I still faced the quandry of how to present my material in a monograph. Describing Žetale *as a village* was out of question. And a dry representation of local society as part of a larger whole—as sketched above—was hardly worth the telling. Thousands of similar rural settings could surely be found. What was unique to Žetale, and more specifically, to my experience of Haloze?

Eventually extensive notes and photos depicting participation in one of the agrarian cycle's most important annual activities struck me as important. This field material became a resource for conveying, in terms of practical knowledge, the shared experience of being a *kmet* in Žetale. Once the practice of pigsticking had captured my imagination I collected relevant folklore and ethnographies from around the globe to better understand this activity's multifarious meanings. Within this comparative framework and using my own extensive observations of local everyday life, I described pigsticking as an event conveying mutliple layers of meaning. Once on paper it was manifest that those social relations, material practices and values central to a Žetale's *kmetje*'s self-understanding were dramatized—

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[12] As an essential basis for elucidating collective identity formation, I allude here to the utility of observing how boundaries are created and maintained in the course of social interaction, cf. Jenkins (2004).

indeed, ritualized[13]—through the performance of this exactly structured event.

After again reading Geertz's essays on thick description (1975a) and the Balinese cockfight (1975b), it became apparent that symbolic interaction had come to inform both my analysis and mode of description. I had engaged in thick description and become an outsider in my own department of social anthropology, something of which I was kindly reminded during my dissertation defense.

Furež—"A Story Žetale peasant-farmers told to themselves about themselves"[14]

Aside from irregular weddings and funerals, there was one recurrent annual event in the lives of Žetalanci that affectively unified them as peasant-farmers. This was pigsticking—locally called *furež*, but more popularly known as *koline*. Killing and butchering swine had more to do with "pigs" and relations with one's kith and kin than it did with the production of pork. Taking the life of a farmstead's closest non-human consociate (Leach 1964), a pig, and its appropriation for human consumption was a prototypical medium for celebrating the local social order. *Furež* was a "self-contained ritual" (Handelman 2004) fully equal to religious rites of the church, if not more profound because of its solid foundation in *everyday* local life.[15]

At the time of my fieldwork, Žetale *life-worlds* were rendered special meaning by the sequence of events constituting *furež*: On cold winter mornings, the squeal of stuck pigs reverberated across the frosty hollows and ridges of Haloze like secular church bells, announcing to all that a *furež* was beginning. Already at daybreak guest butchers had gathered at the host household bracing themselves with a round of brandy. Then, the invited head butcher—often godfather or uncle of host family children—honed his knife and somberly took the life of the beast(s) the hosts had fed from their own stove. Once slaughtered, swine carcasses were blessed with a sprinkle of salt—mimicking sacrificial acts of yore (Kuret 1989: 263ff.).

Soon, the solemn spirit of the gathering was raised to ribaldry. Menfolk filled the first sausages with blood concoction and arranged them in phallic forms leaving little to the imagination. Thereupon these evocative

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13 Three decades later, Don Handelman used my description of pigsticking as an ethnographic proto-type of a secular "self-contained ritual" (2004).

14 This caption paraphrases Clifford Geertz's conclusion in his interpretation of the Balinese cockfight (1975b).

15 As far as I could determine the parish priest was never invited to a *furež*, but along with other elite persons he was the regular recipient of *furež* pork—*koline*, see below.

creations were ceremoniously presented to womenfolk in the kitchen for cooking. The resulting lewd atmosphere evoked rumors, gossip, and off-color humor, including occasional jabs at the parish priest and other local notables.

The remaining day of sausage making and butchering was spirited by lively discussion ranging far beyond the tasks at hand, but centered on shared local lives. In the evening, a large group of kith and kin was invited to an elaborate convivial feast, lasting long into the night. And much of the fresh meat retained after the day's labor was used to host the final feast.[16]

Subsequent gifts of *furež* pork and sausages cemented more distant social relationships. As my wife confirmed from her classes at the Žetale School, a family's *furež* was one of the few days in the year when local school children were too sick to attend school. And not infrequently, their sick leave terminated with delivery of sausages to their teacher.

Pork was called *koline*; it was understood as the product of this particular event and could not be bought or sold. It was a gift, not a commodity (Minnich 1987).

Participation in *furež* was a statement of what it meant to be a *kmet* in Žetale. It was a quintessential act of self-identification in the many households that had endeared us during the course of fieldwork. *Furež* was a story Žetale peasant-farmers told to themselves, about themselves much in the same way as the Balinese cockfight confirmed the identity of its practitioners (Geertz 1975b).

Žetale anno 2006 – from *kmet* to *občan* (from peasant-farmer to a citizen of Žetale)

On a gorgeous spring day in April 2006, we visited Žetale for the first time in two decades. Approaching from the west my wife and I were surprised by a sign welcoming us—in Slovene, English, French, Italian, and German—to the Žetale *občina* (municipality). Eight years before our revisit, a local referendum was passed establishing this disenfranchised village and surrounding settlements as an independent municipality. The consequences were many. Along our way we passed a newly opened (1999) elementary school in the field where the local postman's cattle had once grazed. As we drove up to the old school house, where my wife had taught, three flags were flying—the banners of Žetale, Slovenia, and the European Union. This was now Žetale's new village hall, located in its most prominent public building dating from 1882.

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[16] Handelman (2004) concurs with me that these three ritual segments convey solemnity, ribaldry and conviviality. The above account is based upon participation in four pigstickings held in 1974 and 1975.

After parking in the village center, it was our good fortune to be introduced to the Žetale mayor who quickly identified us with our sojourn in the 1970s. With pride he gave us a signed copy of the recently published *Žetale Chronicle* (Butolen et al. 2004). We discovered inside an account of our sojourn and a list of everything I ever wrote about Haloze. This was an utter surprise. In contrast to many fellow ethnographers, I had no part whatsoever in the production of this impressive village chronicle.

Alongside a vastly refurbished local dental and medical dispensary in the village center, a large sign advertised European Union financial support in the late 1990s for the expansion and renewal of the municipal water system. Every residence scattered along the ridges of this drought-ridden region had been provided not only with asphalt access roads and phone lines, but running water and fire hydrants as well. Not far from the center, yet another sign designated the departure point and map for an ecological trail through the municipality—a New Age tourist attraction financed by the Royal Dutch Embassy in Ljubljana. Later that evening I discovered the Žetale municipality webpage,[17] listing elected officials and commissions and serving as a bulletin board for local events and public notices. Having secured a phone line to each local household, municipal authorities now assumed all residents are accessible by computer modem. Computers are an integral part of instruction at the Žetale elementary school.

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By 2006, pigs had become pork in Žetale and *furež* had become a relic of the past. The former close knit community of inter-household cooperation and interdependence that once organized *furež* is now subsumed within a new social order. Žetalanci have become citizens of their own self-governing village. Formerly, neighbors and fellow parishioners relied primarily on one another for initiative and cooperation to solve common problems. Now they can turn to their elected representatives and commissioners, who in fact are often the same kin and kith of yore. No longer as peasant-farmers (*kmetje*), but now as citizens (*občani*) Žetalanci establish relations of trust and obligation.

A vibrant and diverse set of local voluntary organizations is also manifest on village webpages. How about joining evening aerobic classes for Žetale women in the gym of the new school? Keeping fit is no longer a consequence of physically demanding daily chores; it has become a goal unto itself.

The lives of Žetalanci have changed profoundly in the short span of one generation. Social recognition and self-affirmation in Žetale no

[17] http://zetale.e-obcina.si.

longer revolve around commitment to the preservation of one's homestead. And labor is explicitly understood in terms of its monetary value. The currency of *koline* gifts is no longer essential glue in the fabric of a local social order. The child of one of my wife's former pupils told me in June 2006: "We no longer hold *furež*, but our parents have told us about it. Today people are too busy; they have tight schedules. If we need to butcher a pig we get someone who knows how to come in and help us on the weekend when we are free."

Several of my wife's former pupils have remained in Žetale, taken jobs in the newly bloated public sector, or commute on vastly improved roads to work in nearby towns. And a few utilize locally available data connections to make a living from their homes. Those few who live from farming have specialized in some form of cash cropping—wine, milk, or fruit.

Any semblance of a household-based indigenous system of technology has given way to global flows of information and integration into the market economy of global capitalism. The "homemade" world of Žetale is a thing of the past. Žetale households, and relations among them, are no longer the motor of cultural reproduction.

Žetalanec and *občan* (resident of Žetale / citizen of Žetale)

The *place* of Žetale and *its traditional agrarian way of life* are no longer undisputed components of a locally shared collective identity; they have become important symbolic resources for consciously creating collective self-images in our shared "late modern age" (Giddens 1991).

The *Žetale Chronicle*, mentioned above, is such a resource—it makes accessible a shared history that is no longer orally transmitted from one generation to the next. Nowadays folk traditions of the past, such as *furež*, are identified as part of a local heritage and as such can be emulated in the quest for self-identification. Suddenly the ethnographer becomes critical as conservator of such tradition. She is the means of its objectification. In terms of so-called material culture we find another set of referents for self-identification; the Žetale tourist association has mobilized local craftsmen, and especially village youth, in the restoration of a local homestead and sundry farm implements, creating a museum enshrining Žetale's agrarian past.[18] Local residents now move in a social universe marked by selective self-identification. They create for themselves an identity as Žetalanec with reference to resources such as those mentioned above.

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[18] www.kam.si/etno_kmetije/vukova_domacija.html.

This quest for a *local* identity is strongly reinforced by the creation of a local polity that actively mobilizes its residents. Peasant-farmers, previously organized through their households and faithful to *domača gruda*, are now invested with the status of *občan*—citizen of Žetale. While identity as citizen is a given in the lives of all, the substance of their identity as villager—Žetalanec—is more strictly a matter of individual predilection and varies greatly between generations.

Citizens of the European Union

In August 2010, the Žetale Tourist Association invited young people from the Netherlands, Portugal, Latvia, Bulgaria, Greece, and Slovenia to participate in a youth exchange entitled "Where Does Europe Start? – Life along the Schengen Border." During the gathering participants were challenged to imagine Žetale as a perfect village, "where [they] will be able to think creatively [about] how to build an ideal village where all people would have jobs and [enjoy an] ideal style of living."[19]

Tongue in cheek, we might ask if this means Žetale has become a *virtual village*, more connected by Internet than exchange of *koline* sausages. In any case, and especially among younger Žetalanci, citizenship in the European Union is meaningful and opens new perspectives for both their collective self-image and the way they conduct their lives. This is confirmed by their repeated experience of sharing life in their *domača gruda* with peers from other EU countries.[20] They are participants in what Arjun Appadurai has called "virtual neighborhoods" (1996: 193).

Local youth have witnessed, along with their parents, enormous investment in Žetale's public infrastructure propelled by association with, and later, membership in the European Union. Peasant-farmers, formerly sovereign over only their *domača gruda,* have become empowered as citizens of Žetale, Slovenia, and the European Union. They are increasingly dependent on these polities for their material and social well being.

Social Anthropology and identity—from family and community to trans-local life-worlds

Social anthropology's changing perspectives on identity reflect the social transformation sketched above. During the period of village monographs identity formation was not a theoretical priority. This changed once we acknowledged that all lives lived on this globe, regardless of their relative remoteness and isolation, ultimately manifest mobility and global inter-

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19 See: http://www.td-zetale.net/projekti/wdes/.

20 This EU youth exchange continued through 2013 resulting in numerous group excursions to the countries and homes of EU visitors to Žetale.

connections. An individual's collective identity no longer could be uncritically ascribed to membership in supposedly bounded groups. The group gave way to the individual as the locus of social analysis (Minnich 1993). And social anthropologists came to pursue social phenomena such as networks, migration, diaspora, and transnationalism—all of which emphasize the strategic action of individual actors and defy the physical localization and arbitrary delineation of groups.

Already at the time of my fieldwork *self-ascription* had become as important as *ascription* in discussions of identity (cf. Barth 1969; Jenkins 2004). And it has been suggested that the "anthropological self" was born in the following decade (cf. Whittaker 1992). Thereby theoretical perspectives were developed to view individuals as the authors of their collective identities (Minnich 1996). Social anthropologists have been forced to acknowledge that in the modern and post-modern world the construction of the social person is not simply a matter of socialization into a family and local community. Rather we are now challenged to fathom the social integrity of trans-local life-worlds.

I leave it to my successors to engage in another long conversation, elucidating the more elusive social boundaries Žetalanci nowadays engage when distinguishing themselves from others and thereby expressing who they are. Indeed, the connectedness of trans-local life-worlds may best be reflected in the observation of events in local life and their subsequent interpretation as post-modern cultural texts.

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POVZETEK

KMET, OBČAN IN ŽETALANEC: RAZMISLEKI O SPREMEMBAH KOLEKTIVNE IDENTITETE MED PREBIVALSTVOM HALOZ, 1974–2006

Prispevek obravnava spremembe zadnjih štirih desetletij v Žetalah, v južni osrednji Sloveniji, in sicer z vidika socialne in kulturne antropologije. Osrednja tema je oblikovanje kolektivne identitete z namenom razumeti, kako so prebivalci kot člani družbe in skozi čas razvijali predstavo o svojem socialnem položaju. Avtor najprej prikaže spremembe v antropološki perspektivi pri raziskovanju podeželskega prebivalstva in oblikovanja njegove identitete v širšem kontekstu socialnih sprememb v ruralnih območjih Slovenije. Žetalska skupnost v 70. letih prejšnjega stoletja, ki je izražala svojo kolektivno identiteto z ohranjenjem določenih običajev in navad (npr. fureža), je primerjana z današnjo lokalno skupnostjo. Primerjava pokaže spremembe v identitetah kmeta, občana in Žetalanca v širšem družbenem kontekstu. Socialna identiteta, ki izhaja iz pripadnosti lokalni skupnosti, je nazadnje primerjana še s postmoderno percepcijo pripadanja, ki pa je povezana s pripadnostjo skupinam izven lokalnega okolja. Na skupinsko identiteto in življenje Žetalancev med drugim vpliva pojav evropskih institucij.