

Childhood and children in the contemporary Paganism in Hungary

Viola Teisenhoffer

Viola Teisenhoffer : Postdoctoral fellow, Faculty of Social Sciences, Institute for Social Science Research – Laboratory of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Liège (Belgium), viola.teisenhoffer@uliege.be

Résumé :

Cet article explore le rôle des enfants et de l'enfance dans le contexte du paganisme contemporain en Hongrie, un mouvement spirituel visant à reconstruire les croyances et pratiques religieuses préchrétiennes. Bien qu'il y ait relativement peu de rituels s'adressant directement aux enfants, les pratiques s'inspirent largement des éléments culturels propres à l'enfance, et la transmission religieuse s'appuie sur des relations associées au statut d'enfant. En examinant différents cas où le rôle d'enfant est attribué aux participants et où les expériences propres à la petite enfance (telles que la naissance, le conte et le jeu) sont mises au service de la transmission et de l'apprentissage, je tente de montrer comment l'enfance est impliquée dans ces pratiques, en particulier dans la transmission religieuse, les récits biographiques et les expériences des participants.

Mots-clés : paganisme contemporain, transmission, rituel, enfants et religion, spiritualités contemporaines

Abstract :

This article explores the role of children and childhood in the context of contemporary Paganism in Hungary, a spiritual movement aimed at reconstructing pre-Christian religious beliefs and practices. While there are relatively few rituals directly addressed to children, the practices are greatly inspired by cultural elements proper to childhood, and religious transmission relies on relationships associated with the status of children. By examining various instances in which the role of child is ascribed to participants and in which experiences proper to infancy/childhood (such as birth, storytelling, and play) are put to the service of transmission and learning, I attempt to show how childhood is implicated in these practices, particularly in religious transmission, biographical narratives, and participants' experiences.

Keywords : contemporary Paganism, transmission, ritual, children and religion, contemporary spiritualities

Abstracto :

Este artículo explora el papel de los niños y la infancia en el contexto del paganismo contemporáneo en Hungría, un movimiento espiritual cuyo objetivo es reconstruir las creencias y prácticas religiosas precristianas. Aunque hay relativamente pocos rituales dirigidos directamente a los niños, las prácticas se inspiran en gran medida en elementos culturales propios de la infancia, y la transmisión religiosa se basa en relaciones asociadas al estatus de niño. Al examinar diversos casos en los que se atribuye a los participantes el papel de niño y en

los que experiencias propias de la primera infancia (como el nacimiento, el cuento y el juego) se ponen al servicio de la transmisión y el aprendizaje, intento mostrar cómo la infancia está implicada en estas prácticas, en particular en la transmisión religiosa, las narraciones biográficas y las experiencias de los participantes.

Palabras clave : paganismo contemporáneo, transmisión, ritual, niños y religión, espiritualidades contemporáneas

Introduction

In the past decade, Hungary has undergone an “illiberal” turn, resulting in a pronatalist policy that favors conservative conceptions of the family which the current government considers to be in line with the country’s Christian traditions. Accordingly, middle-class couples are being offered new opportunities for financial support and tax benefits to encourage them to bear children in order to counteract demographic decline (Szikra 2018), and denominational schools are increasingly gaining weight in public education (Hermann & Varga 2016). From this perspective, Hungary appears as an ethnically and religiously homogeneous, essentially Christian society in which there is little room for alternative family values. However, given the emergence and apparently rapid growth of various new forms of spirituality since the years following the regime change (Kürti 2001a), one might wonder whether these might challenge the organization of family life and the representations of childhood advocated by government policies and inspired by Christian culture. This question is relevant for at least three reasons. First, it is well known that a number of contemporary spiritual practices are constructed against institutionalized religions and, more specifically, Christian denominations (Hanegraaff 1994). Second, according to the most recent census, membership in Christian denominations is clearly in decline, while the number of persons who claim to belong to “other religious groups and denominations” or who refuse to answer the question about their religious affiliation has increased considerably¹. Thirdly, and more generally, while the literature on the role of children in contemporary spiritualities and new religions is yet scarce, several elements suggest that they ascribe particular roles to children, rely on specific representations of childhood, and introduce “new, experimental notions of childhood” (Palmer & Hardman 1999: 2). Indeed, as Helen A. Berger observes in relation to Wicca in the United States, “children are believed to more easily access the divine as they have not yet fully developed a rational, talking self” (1999: 15). Or, as Zoreh Kermani (2013) shows, the way Pagan adults understand childhood has implications both for their own childhoods and their children’s adulthoods. One might also think of “indigo children”, a conception that ascribes a spiritual mission to children in the New Age (Singler 2019).

The case of the contemporary Paganism in Hungary, which has recently gained considerable social visibility through its growing presence in the public space, is also compelling in this respect. This religious orientation relies on the reconstruction of pre-Christian religious beliefs and practices that supposedly date back to the 9th century, when, according to the founding myths, the Magyar tribes arrived in the Carpathian Basin, or to even earlier nomadic empires, i.e. to the Huns and the Scythians. Pagans, who often define themselves as “walkers on the path” (of the ancestors and/or of spiritual development), become knowledgeable representatives of what they consider to be the “true” and “authentic” Hungarian traditions in their quest to restore a way of life they consider to be authentic and close to nature, which they believe has been corrupted by the pitfalls of modernity. In Hungary, as in other Central and Eastern European contexts, Pagan thinking is closely related to the recasting of local identities after the fall of the Iron Curtain (Anczyk & Grzymala-Moszczyńska 2012; Aitamurto & Simpson 2014; Rountree 2015). Accordingly, the emergence of this movement is connected to the gradual rise of (ethno-)nationalism in the country. Thus, while forming an alternative religious minority (Szilágyi 2015), the discourses and representations of the ancient past that circulate in the Pagan milieu are also present in official political discourse, memory politics, cultural policies, and, in some cases, even in school education. This suggests that Pagan values and ideals may have an impact on family values and children’s worlds, despite the emphasis placed on the Christian foundations of Hungarian society in public discourse and government policy.

In order to approach the question of how the Pagan revival might change child rearing and, conversely, how the children growing up in Pagan families might potentially influence religious practices, I will examine the role of childhood in this milieu. Drawing on the ethnographic material I have collected during my ongoing fieldwork among Pagan groups in Budapest², I will show, on the one hand, that although there are relatively few rituals addressed directly to children in this context, this religious universe is strongly inspired by cultural elements (such as tales and songs) proper to childhood. On the other hand, we will see that the transmission of knowledge and experience relies on relationships associated with schooling and thus to the status and to the role of children. I will thus examine the various contexts in which the role of child is ascribed to participants and in which symbolic actions and experiences proper to infancy/childhood (such as birth, play and storytelling) are put to the service of transmission and learning. In doing so, I will attempt to identify the ways in which children and childhood are involved in these practices. I will argue that (1) transmission relies on more or less permanent or fluctuating asymmetrical relationships of master/disciple, initiate/novice, and healer/patient; (2) Pagan leaders draw on their own childhood experiences which they bring to bear on the new practices they create; and that (3) ritual participation often implies experiences of “maturation”, “learning”, “growth”, and “development” which also point to the importance of childhood in this spiritual practice.

Nationalism, education, and contemporary Paganism

The conceptions of the ancient past that nourish the Pagan revival emphasize the nomadic origins of present-day Hungarians and their kinship with Attila’s Huns and, by extension, with Central Asian peoples, and assume an uninterrupted relationship with steppe cultures, past and present. The spread of this “spell of the roots”, to borrow a Hungarian scholar’s expression about Pagan thinking (Szilárdi 2014), in turn goes hand in hand with the rise of ethno-nationalism in Hungary, in which the current government also plays an active role (Bradford & Cullen 2021). Thus, research on the Central Asian origins of Hungarians has been brought into the limelight by the Hungarian Research Institute (founded in 2019), which offers conferences, lectures and online media content on recent discoveries about the nomadic past, among other aspects of Hungarian culture and history. The fact that this institution is headed by the current Minister of Human Capacities who is passionate about archaeogenetics illustrates the high priority the government gives to rediscovering the origins of Hungarians. At the same time, the Natural History Museum and the National Museum have organized thematic exhibitions such as “Attila’s Heirs” and “The Domestication of the Horse – from the Ancestors of the Horses to the Horses of the Ancestors”, or “Sabretache Plates – the Treasures of the Hungarian Conquering Elite”. On a less formal level, various associations organize lectures, festivals, historical reenactments and trainings, publish books, and thus contribute to the dissemination of knowledge about the ancient past.

In line with the national pride that this cultural policy seeks to instill in Hungarian citizens, the idea of the Eastern roots of present-day Hungarians is also increasingly emphasized in school curricula, along with other elements of what the government considers to be authentic Hungarian culture. Patriotic education begins in kindergarten and public schools are required to promote what is locally called *magyarságtudat*, “Hungarian consciousness” or consciousness of one’s own Hungarian-ness. As the press informed the general public, what can be understood as an “awareness of being Hungarian” was even the subject of a survey in some kindergartens where parents had to evaluate statements such as the following: “the institution considers it important to promote national traditions and to foster Hungarian identity and patriotism” and “in the institution the children learn

about moral norms, become capable of following a set of values, and enjoy the celebrations and commemorations associated with them” (Népszava 2023). As one interviewee in this news report pointed out, these statements are not surprising as patriotism is included in the National Basic Program for Early Childhood Education, which serves as a guideline in public kindergartens.

The cultivation of national sentiment is reinforced in later stages of public education. In several elementary schools, children learn folk dances as part of the curriculum and teachers are required to include legends recounting founding myths grounded in romantic nationalism in children’s reading exercises. As an extracurricular activity, children in some schools can also learn a supposedly ancient runic script. Founding myths can be evoked not only in history classes, but also in seemingly unrelated subjects. A high school geography textbook, for example, briefly refers to an episode from a foundation myth when discussing galaxies, specifically the Milky Way³:

“In ancient mythology, the Milky Way is known as the ‘Path of the Armies’ or ‘the Starry Path of Prince Csaba’. According to the legend, Prince Csaba, the leader of the Székelys’ [Hungarian minority in Transylvania] and the son of Attila’s, the king of the Huns left this earthly life on this starry path. He later returned along the same path, whenever his people needed him. It is one of the symbols of our national unity, and the Székely anthem pays tribute to this legend: ‘Lead your people to victory again / Prince Csaba, on the starry path’.” (Jónás et al. 2023)

Transylvania, “an ancestral terrain (...) connected to Hungarian ethnogenesis” (Kürti 2001b: 43) and “a symbolic center in the patriotic imagery” since the Treaty of Trianon (Losonczy 2009: 267), is the fieldtrip destination of many high school students whose institutions apply for funding from a state-sponsored agency. This program was created in order to ensure that young people gain first-hand experience of the Székelys and other Hungarian communities in neighboring countries whose minority position is associated with romantic nostalgia and cultural resistance in nationalist thinking.

These references to or evocations of the pre-Christian past through legends in public education point to the “two models of Hungarian patriotism” (Losonczy 2009: 269), polarized between East and West, Asia and Europe, paganism and Christianity since the emergence of national thought in Hungary (Hofer 1994). The emphasis on the Christian foundations of Hungarian culture in the current government’s “family-friendly” policy and its support for denominational education is thus not incompatible with the renewed interest in ethnogenesis. For this reason, some authors even speak of a “paganization of Christianity” (Ádám & Bozóki 2019) to describe the coexistence of seemingly incompatible symbols in some political discourses.

However, it would be erroneous to assume that all individuals who make use of pre-Christian symbols are engaged in the revival of ancestral religious practices and beliefs. In fact, as the ethnographic data I have collected among Pagan groups in Budapest and its surrounding areas show, the relationship between practitioners and mainstream politics is not as straightforward as it may appear from the perspective of the discourses and representations they undoubtedly share with some right-wing politicians. In practice, persons engaged in the reconstruction of ancient Hungarian religious beliefs and practices seem more concerned with the spiritual insights and experiences, the meaningful rituals, the deep knowledge of traditions, the healthy lifestyles, the harmonious relationship with nature, etc. that their activities are intended to bring about. It is not without significance that when Pagan leaders advertise their events (retreats, collective rituals,

etc.) on their websites and on social media, they often caution potential participants that their gatherings are apolitical.

Of course, this does not imply that practitioners are not interested in politics or that they are immune to political issues. It does mean, however, that their aim is not primarily political and that they may conceive of political engagement in different terms than mainstream politicians and political organizations. Similarly, the fact that there is a growing fascination with the ancient past in Hungarian society does not necessarily mean that all representatives of the contemporary Paganism agree with the way history and traditions are represented in official discourses and by cultural and educational institutions. For example, I recently came across a social media post in which a Pagan circle known for its extensive knowledge of the mystical foundations and the spiritual mission of ancient Hungarian traditions accused the previously mentioned Hungarian Research Institute of “lying” about medieval archaeological data⁴. In their lectures, the representatives of this circle also express critical opinions about mainstream politicians who, according to them, lack the necessary knowledge to duly represent the interests of the nation. In this Pagan group, in the words of some, mainstream politics is regarded to be on a “low spiritual level”, while the teachings of Pagan intellectuals are held to be on an incommensurable level of wisdom and spiritual purity. If the founding myths, the rediscovery of ancient history and the origins of the Hungarians and the praise of national glory and of “pure” traditions are widespread, contemporary Pagan practices suggest that their “true” understanding depends on rigorous learning and the development of exceptional skills through apprenticeship with recognized Pagan leaders. And, while the variety of sources available to practitioners (Szilárdi 2014; Szilágyi 2015; Povedák 2014, 2024) inspires different means of making the past present, the transmission of religious knowledge relies on similar asymmetrical relationships evocative of childhood learning.

Contexts of religious transmission in contemporary Paganism in Hungary

Persons engaged in the (re)creation of pre-Christian Magyar beliefs and practices creatively adapt archaeological, historiographic and folkloric sources to craft new rituals and gatherings that allow them to act in the spirit of the nomadic ancestors they claim to descend from. As in contemporary Paganism elsewhere (in the West or in the Euro-American world), this implies celebrating the cycle(s) of nature and organizing ceremonies mainly around the equinoxes and solstices, following the “wheel of the year” (*évkerék*), i.e. the cycles of nature associated with those of human life. Knowledge about the past and ancient beliefs are made accessible through regular lectures, which are often broadcast on online platforms, a plethora of books and websites, as well as retreats and “*táltos* schools” (after the name of the religious specialist ascribed to the Hungarians at the time of the conquest).

In general, seasonal rituals in this context are physically demanding and represent true ordeals. For this reason, most of them are not suitable for children. For example, the celebration of the solstices involves vigils, fasting and exposure to high or low temperatures (sweat lodges and/or firewalking, spending several hours outdoors or in poorly heated yurts in the winter). More regular activities consist of lecture series given by Pagan leaders or focus on learning in the “shamanic schools”. The latter are held once a month on weekends. During these gatherings, participants listen to lectures on topics such as healing techniques and folk traditions, and engage in practical exercises in shamanic techniques, such as shamanic journeying and soul retrieval. These teachings

are clearly oriented towards adults, yet, as we will see, several rituals and healing practices clearly refer to children and childhood or display ludic elements.

In the course of my ongoing fieldwork, I have identified three principal means of evoking or invoking the pre-Christian ancestors. Despite their differences, all three revolve around the figure of the *táltos*, a local shaman identified here as the main religious specialist of the ancient Hungarians (see Hoppál 1996)⁵. According to Pagan practitioners, despite all efforts to suppress the ancient Hungarian traditions during the evangelization, they were maintained by the *táltos* who operated in secrecy. Thus, most of the Pagan activities are aimed at reviving the knowledge, the wisdom and the spiritual powers attributed to this religious specialist.

In the group I call the “intellectual circle”, participants can identify with ancestral figures through a corpus of narratives presented in lectures delivered by self-taught experts in Hungarian history and folklore in a bookstore specializing in non-academic historical literature⁶. In this context, it is mostly the narrative evocation of historical figures endowed with the qualities of the *táltos* that enables participants to “meet” the ancestors, so to speak. In the group I refer to as the “shamanic circle”, virtually all participants have the opportunity to engage in experiences attributed to the *táltos* through the use of techniques derived from core shamanism, a contemporary spiritual method based on shamanic techniques considered universal, stripped of their cultural specificities⁷ and made accessible to those interested in the frame of “*táltos* schools”. These consist of regular (monthly or quarterly) weekend retreats in which anyone who wishes to learn about ancient traditions and worldviews can participate for a fee. The activities include “teachings”, i.e. lectures by the leader of the shamanic school, practical exercises that introduce participants to shamanic journeying, vision quests and healing techniques, among others, as well as occasional sweat lodges and, in some cases, firewalking ceremonies. In what I call the “therapeutic” circle, such means of spiritual development are also available, but there is a strong emphasis on health and alternative therapies such as body massage, reflexology, bone-setting, and medicines attributed to ancient Hungarians. While all of these may appear to be bookish and/or physically demanding adult activities that require rigorous study and discipline, this does not preclude the representations of childhood from being of paramount importance in ritualized learning.

Child-like adults in ritualized learning

The lectures of the intellectual circle are also addressed to adults, since these activities take the form of a people’s university, where the Pagan experts serve as the knowledgeable professors and the participants are the more or less uninitiated students. The owner proposes two or three lectures per week, some of which constitute cycles on a specific topic, reminiscent of university courses (for example, on the coronation of medieval kings or on the Pauline Order, which is regarded as the heir of the spiritual knowledge and abilities of the *táltos*, or again on the Pilis Mountains to the north of Budapest, which are considered to be an ancient “sacral center” of Hungary). However, several elements suggest that these narratives have little to do with academic history. The lectures seldom present a clear argumentative structure, what is said appears rather as an uninterrupted flow of thoughts about the deeds of historical figures, with new details and examples continually introduced, making it impossible for the public to complete the course, so to speak. As arguments tend to be replaced by maxims, these lectures are evocative of storytelling, but also of preaching. What Pagan intellectuals teach, for example, are not open to debate, and this also applies to the shamanic leaders who also offer training in the form of lectures. According to my observations, only

those of lesser renown of the Pagan intellectuals allow questions following their lectures. Indeed, the most esteemed experts rarely allow any opportunity for interaction with the public. In addition, some lectures last for three hours without a break, making it impossible for the participants to fully grasp the propositional content of what is being said. Accordingly, the audience is not expected to take notes, their learning is not formally tested, and no diplomas are awarded. There is, therefore, no set time limit within which the “students” are expected to become knowledgeable about the past themselves, thus perpetuating their status as students indefinitely. It is as if these events are designed not so much for the audience to learn history as for them to absorb arcane esoteric knowledge.

In these occasions, the economy of speech is perhaps the most telling of the roles assigned to the participants. In both the intellectual and the shamanic circles, the listeners are invariably placed in the role of children/youth who must learn while the speaker (referred to as “teacher”, *tanár úr* in the intellectual circle, and “spiritual teacher”, *spirituális tanító*, in the shamanic circle) is placed in the role of an elder who necessarily has more life experience, knowledge and wisdom than their audience. This asymmetrical relationship is also present in other contexts of Pagan ritual practice, both in the case of occasional ritual collaborations among peers and of spontaneous interactions among pupils. In the first instance, the specialist who orchestrates a particular ceremony or a sequence thereof is invariably regarded as the elder, even by those present who may also have considerable spiritual experience and/or are already regarded as “teachers”. This was often the case in the shamanic school I attended, where the leader invited some of his peers to give teachings. For example, on one occasion, a Canadian Hungarian spiritual leader conducted a sacred pipe ceremony while the founder of the shamanic school acted as a participant, as did his pupils, even though he had extensive experience in this practice from his many stays in the United States, among the Lakota. Throughout the ceremony, an outside observer would have hardly distinguished him from any of the other participants, were it not for his much more graceful gestures while manipulating the pipe, as he was also compelled to act as a pupil.

As I have observed in informal interactions among the pupils of this shamanic school, such asymmetrical relationships tend to develop spontaneously. As they share elements of their personal lives and spiritual experiences with each other during mealtimes and breaks, participants may also assume the role of the elder, offering advice and sharing personal insights about a particular life experience. For example, one male participant was seeking spiritual experiences to help him in finding peace amidst the turmoil his divorce was causing in his life. On a particular morning, during breakfast, a number of female pupils advised him in a way reminiscent of a mother supporting her adolescent son. In addition, the leader of this shamanic school can also be perceived as a father in the frame of the monthly activities. The participants are thus not only pupils, but also, albeit implicitly and/or temporarily, the spiritual children of this leader. In this regard, the experience of a woman with whom I attended this shamanic school is telling. In reflecting on her learning process during the year-long training, she recounted how, for several months, she had relied on the leader for spiritual guidance in her life choices, calling him regularly, as if he were her father. However, as time passed, she came to realize that she could rely on herself and the spiritual knowledge she discovered within herself through the various exercises offered during the monthly weekend retreats. It is not without significance that she developed her own activity as a life coach, giving in turn advice and guidance to others. Thus, the nurturing relationships indicative of adult-child relationships and of parenthood, as well as of the recursive nature of initiation, are pervasive in the ritual and in informal interactions that pave the way for spiritual growth in this context.

Children in Pagan rituals

While adults are often assigned the role of children in these contexts, to my knowledge few rituals are explicitly directed towards children. In the “shamanic” circles, these tend to be private naming ceremonies designed for a particular family or a group of families. This does not imply, however, that children are necessarily excluded from rituals. During the teachings of the shamanic school I attended, the leader spoke of a secret ritual he performed after the birth of his children. This is reminiscent of “welcoming rituals” in Wicca, where the placenta is also used (Berger 1999). He buried the placenta, which he obtained from the hospital after heated negotiations, and planted a tree on top of it, which the family visits every year on birthdays. If these birth-related rituals remain confidential, the names given to children born into Pagan families reveal their spiritual background. For example, Zsályá, the Hungarian equivalent of sage, i.e. a medicinal plant used to smudge ritual participants and spaces, is a name often given to girls, while boys are given the names of heroes from Hungarian national mythology, such as Hunor, Koppány and Nimród.

In the “therapeutic” and the “intellectual” circles, children participate in these practices and in the transmission of religious knowledge in summer camps⁸. This raises the question of whether activities aimed at children can be considered as ritual (listening to folk tales and legends, drawing, crafts, visiting historical sites) and, if so, how they might influence the ritual creativity of adults. It is significant that much of what is taught to children in these summer camps involves symbols and representations that are invoked in adults’ rituals. For example, in the “therapeutic” circle, the following activities are proposed:

“Etiquette, conduct: table manners; how to treat men, women, the elderly.

Falconry, archery, horseback riding; costumes and weapons of our ancestors [falcons are used as oracles on some occasions: their flight is interpreted as an omen for the times to come; on other occasions, arrows can be used as a medium to carry prayers to the sky].

Rovásírás (runic alphabet) [purportedly used by Hungarians since ancient times and which appear on ritual objects], unusual history class.

Getting to know the sacred turul bird [mythical bird assimilated to the falcon] and its legend.

The preservation and respect of nature, of Földanya (Mother Earth) [often evoked in ritual teachings and speech]. Eco-friendly lifestyle. Foundations of self-defense, whip [an instrument traditionally used by shepherds, but also in Pagan ritual to cleanse the ritual space].

Handicrafts: felt making, folk games, pottery, medicinal herbs. How farm animals live, what they eat, how to take care of them. Reading the tracks of wild animals (behavior, nutrition, characteristics of the forest animals in the area).”⁹

The intellectual circle’s 2023 summer camp proposed activities related to King Matthias Corvinus (1458-1490), who inspired a series of children’s stories and is revered by its leaders as being the successor to Attila the Hun, according to their esoteric view of history¹⁰. According to the program outlined on the circle’s website and social media, the children would experience life at the court of King Matthias, learn the language of the time, reenact battles, write chronicles, etc. It is as if these playful activities materialized and enacted what is taught about King Matthias in the intellectual circle’s lectures.

This variety of orientations (earlier or later medieval), of ways of involving children as well as of

ideas about what children should be taught are determined by the idiosyncrasies of Pagan leaders. More specifically, their spiritual path, i.e. the various influences to which they have been exposed to during their training as experts in ancient history and ways of life, seems to determine the role they ascribe to children in their activities. Accordingly, the interviews I have conducted with some Pagan leaders and the biographical narratives available on others show that this inclination towards the recreation of pre-Christian beliefs and Hungarian traditions and practices deemed authentic is understood to be rooted in their upbringing.

Adult Pagans' childhoods

When Pagan leaders talk about their spiritual paths, some of their childhood experiences appear in retrospect as the sources of their call to go "back to the roots". This shows that the religious liberalization of the 1990ies merely reconfigured the use of resources for Pagan revival that were latent during socialism. Four examples allow to illustrate this. First, the leader of a shamanic circle with whom I have worked more closely, tells us (not only in a more formal interview setting, but also in his teachings) that as a child he was very fond of novels about North American Plains Indians and the Far West, such as those by James Fenimore Cooper or Karl Friedrich May, which were popular during socialism as examples of egalitarian societies. Interestingly, for some, like this shamanic leader, the fascination with the indigenous peoples of North America during this period was, on the contrary, a sign of resistance: depicted as candid, pure and free, they offered a model that stood against the vices of socialism. In this way, he later discovered, when he was in college, the so-called "Indian Game" or "Indianing" (*indian játék, indianozás*) or "Indian hobbyism", i.e., the reenactment of Indian life, battles, and lore (see Kalshoven 2012)¹¹. He soon succeeded in joining this movement, which eventually led him to travel to the United States, where he met "real" Indians, notably the Lakota, and was initiated into the sweat lodge and Sun Dance ceremonies. His teachings and ritual practices draw heavily on what he learned and experienced during these sojourns. Accordingly, the highlights of his ceremonial repertoire are the annual Vision Quest and Sun Dance, as well as the seasonal sweat lodges that he proposes to his followers¹². It is also the "Indian Game" that led him to search for pre-Christian Hungarian traditions. As he recounts, one summer he was walking alone in the forest of the Bakony Mountains where the "Indian Game" is set, and while he was contemplating the idyllic scenery, it suddenly occurred to him that the Hungarians must also have been close to nature, and that they must have had customs, beliefs and moral precepts like those he discovered by reconstructing the cultural practices of the Plains Indians.

The second example is that of one of his followers, who is now a well-established shamanic leader. This emblematic figure of the Pagan revival was inspired by local literature: in his childhood, his favorite book was "Book of Legends. Hun and Magyar Legends" (*Mondák könyve. Hun és Magyar mondák*). First published in 1955, this collection of literary reworkings of legends draws on folk tales, medieval chronicles, and Romantic epics. The interest in exploring pre-Christian Hungarian beliefs and practices inspired by this book led him first to an informal spiritual group¹³ in the 1990s and, more recently to Mongolia where he is being initiated into local forms of shamanism.

The third example is that of a renowned figure of the "intellectual" circle who presents Hungarian history in a particularly vivid way, as if he were a personal acquaintance of all the kings, making his lectures reminiscent of storytelling. Although he is discreet about his past in his lectures, he told in an interview¹⁴ that in his childhood, his grandfather used to tell him folk tales and he was particularly inspired by those that featured kings as protagonists, such as those about King

Matthias. A self-taught historian, he specialized, among other things, in the esoteric interpretation of folk tales and the lives and deeds of Hungarian kings. It was during one of his lectures that I learned about what motivates his insistence on folk tales and what seems to be agreed upon in the Pagan milieu in general. Folk tales are held to contain elements of the ancient Hungarian mythology and religion, and their preservation would have been guaranteed by the children's world, and its stories and rhymes¹⁵.

The fourth example is that of another prominent figure in the intellectual circle. He spent his summers with his grandfather in the countryside, and the peasant way of life he had experienced as a child had left its mark on him. He tells how he was fascinated by the orderliness of village life, which he saw as governed by the cycles of nature and the strict rules imposed by their wisdom and deep understanding of life. This Pagan leader later inspired his followers with the idea of "organic culture", a kind of primal culture, uncorrupted by modernity, and in which humans live in harmony with nature. He was also fascinated by the folk ornaments he saw on various ceramics in his grandfather's house. He compared them to children's drawings and claimed to have found basic symbols that have existed since the Stone Age, and the combinations of which could be used to decipher not only all kinds of ethnic ornamentation (including Hungarian folk art), but also children's drawings. In his view, which has greatly influenced his followers, many of whom are art teachers and art therapists, children's drawings serve as a medium for conveying divine messages because, in his words, "children [up to the age of 7] are carried on the palm of God" and thus they can perceive divine wisdom.

When we connect this to the Pagan understanding of folktales mentioned earlier, it becomes clear that children and childhood take on a special value in this context, a value that goes beyond the usual conservative value ascribed to children. They are regarded not only as the potential future guardians of supposedly ancient traditions and culture but also as the inspirers of their revival of these traditions, that is, the original guardians of these traditions. In these narratives, the asymmetry of the adult-child relationship at the core of cultural transmission is inverted: children become teachers in the sense that they are considered as being more receptive to the divine realm and thus endowed with the spiritual qualities that adults aspire to develop and preserve.

Childhood in Pagan rituals

A winter solstice ceremony in which I participated in the shamanic circle can be evoked as an example of how these tales, rhymes, or songs, usually associated with childhood, inspire ritual practices and discourses. This was an interesting case of ritual collaboration, which, according to my ethnographic data, is quite current in this context. The host, who oversees the shamanic school I attended, usually celebrates the winter solstice on his estate, near Budapest. As previously mentioned, this ceremony involves a period of fasting and a wake, which is enlivened by teachings, singing, and drumming. The participants spend the night in a heated yurt and outside, around the ritual fire kindled for the occasion. On one occasion, the shamanic leader invited a folk singer and self-taught ethnographer and her Tuvan shaman friend who regularly travels to Hungary. Both of them served as officiants and were granted considerable freedom to initiate singing, drumming and storytelling. At two specific moments during the night the folk singer emerged as a protagonist of the ritual wake: while drumming, the songs she sang suggested that she had channeled the spirit of the fire. In a sequence of songs accompanied by her drum, she recited a well-known nursery rhyme¹⁶. The woman interpreted her inspiration to sing this song as a message from the ritual fire:

she immediately asked for bread to be fed to the fire. Later, at dawn, when the participants greet the sun, she launched into a song that all Hungarian children learn at home and in kindergarten, and which is sung when it rains to make the sun come out¹⁷. In this case, this seemingly ordinary song was somehow sacralized by making it a liturgical element at one of the highest points of the solstice celebration.

The activities of the shamanic school are a good example of how childhood is evoked in ritual practices. This training, which, despite what its name suggests, does not confer diplomas or produce fully trained *táltos*, consists of twelve weekend retreats over a twelve-month period. Each retreat focuses on a specific aspect of human life or a domain of shamanic knowledge, such as sources of Pagan revival, love and relationships, birth, death, shamanic journeying, soul retrieval, power objects, healing techniques, relationship with nature, etc. These combine theoretical teachings on traditions with practical exercises. Among the latter, participants engage in “rebirthing”, a practice that can also be found in other New Age practices. Here, the participants symbolically represent the womb and the birth canal. A group of four or five people sit with legs crossed and form a small circle in which the “baby” is curled up and covered with a blanket. The others go on all fours huddling together to form a narrow tunnel which represents the birth canal. Participants take turns in being “born” by hiding under the blanket in the “womb” and making their way through the “birth canal”. Each person chooses a “mother”, “father” or both who wait for them at the end of the “birth canal” and give them a long hug once they are “born”. Another ritual exercise that evokes gestation is the sweat lodge, which is regarded as the womb of the earth and implies being reborn and purified on each occasion.

At other times, participants engage in a mimetic game in pairs. One partner uses movements and gestures to tell a story, while the other attempts to reproduce these gestures and to understand what is being conveyed non-verbally. In yet another exercise, one of the partners dances, while the other is enjoined to imitate their movements as if looking in a mirror. After all these exercises, but also after shamanic journeying, there is a moment of “sharing” in which the participants reflect on their experiences and their feelings. It is in these discussions, especially as the “classes” unfold, but also in informal conversations, that participants describe their experiences as being transformative: “I have changed so much since the beginning of the training”, “I have discovered so many things about myself”, “I am finding healthier ways to relate to my children/family members”. These examples thus suggest that the return to the pre-Christian past implies submission to behaviors associated with children in ritualized settings, which in turn leads participants to draw on their respective childhoods. Consequently, the spiritual values associated with ancient times are symmetrical to the wisdom and closeness to the divine realm ascribed to children in this milieu.

Conclusion

The ethnographic data examined suggest that considering the role of childhood and children in this context is essential to understanding how these practices and representations are passed on and shaped through religious transmission. At this point, however, it is too early to draw definitive conclusions, as a thorough understanding of the role of children and childhood in this religious universe requires further research. I would only suggest that if involvement in Paganism defines a “spiritual path”, as do other instances of contemporary spiritual practice, then the “spiritual growth” that participants seek rests upon various declensions and evocations of childhood and its associated experiences. As we have seen in this overview of some of the representations of

childhood and of the possible roles ascribed to children as mediators of divine presence, despite their apparent absence from the main rituals, these social actors are far from being peripheral in practice. In the ritualized transmission of knowledge about the ancient past, in discourses about their experiences, and in biographical narratives, Pagan leaders and their followers draw on diverse elements pertaining to their childhoods as well as a compelling set of characteristics attributed to childhood in general. In particular, children's songs, folk tales usually aimed at children, and playful behaviors may be used as liturgical elements in ritual settings. At the same time, while most activities are addressed to adults, practitioners' childhoods are also engaged in ritual practices and in less formal interactions. In other words, the spiritual growth and knowledge that Hungarians engaged in the Pagan revival seek to achieve is largely based on, and often inspired by, the practitioners' upbringing. Thus, in the practices studied, multiple figures associated with childhood are intertwined: not only the children that practitioners were, but also an idealized child, receptive to divine wisdom, whose dispositions are sought after and thus influence the adult practitioners' self-perception.

Looking at the larger social context in which these practices develop, as we have seen, there is clearly an instrumentalization of the nomadic mythical past on behalf of the current government, and there are undoubtedly links between the Pagan revival and mainstream politics. However, a closer look at the contexts of transmission of religious knowledge suggests that the perspective of the actual Pagan practitioners on the reconstruction of pre-Christian traditions can be further nuanced. Indeed, I have observed that, among themselves, they seem to be more preoccupied with personal matters than with public life. While they are concerned with the present and future of their country, the practitioners I have met tend to opt for alternative lifestyles rather than overt political action as a means of securing a good life. Regarding children, for example, this involves a preference for natural childbirth, homeschooling and living in remote places close to nature. In this respect, further ethnographic material on childrearing and family values among Hungarian Pagans will shed light on how and what political choices are made in this religious universe. Furthermore, exploring how flesh-and-blood children relate to these practices and how they shape their social worlds will allow for a better assessment of what kinds of knowledge are transmitted and how these relate to the broader social context. Over time, this perspective may thus shed new light on the basic observation that contemporary Pagan and New Age practices are personalized and individualistic religions. The prism of the anthropology of children and childhood will, I believe, eventually allow us to nuance our current understanding of the relationship between the Pagan and the political uses of the ancient past in Hungary.

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Notes

1 <https://nepszamlalas2022.ksh.hu/adatbazis/#/table/WBS008/N4IgFgpgghgJiBcBtAugGhAZwJYwgxIAKgJICyAogPoAK5ASsQPIAiI6AagIIAy3nAppXYAmEGkwQAxgBcsAewB2-cQDI6CGkbADcodQBXZ3wQYQAGYVF0BIBGVJsE-IzkAF9kPNygA>

2 I have initiated fieldwork among Hungarian Pagans in 2016, by regularly attending seasonal public celebrations, lectures, a large historical reenactment festival as well as “drumming circles”, and later (in 2021-2022) by enrolling in a “shamanic school”. The main periods of fieldwork were funded by the LabEx Hastec (EPHE-PSL, Paris) and the project “Re-enchantment of Central-Eastern Europe” at Charles University in Prague. My research focuses mainly on two Pagan circles based in and around Budapest which I refer to as “intellectual” and “shamanic”, according to the forms of ritual practice and construction of religious knowledge that characterize them. The ethnographic data presented here were collected through participant observation in various contexts of ritual practice, including solstice celebrations, the activities of a shamanic school, lectures delivered by Pagan leaders, formal interviews with Pagan leaders and informal conversations with their followers. In January 2024 I engaged in a research project on childhood and the transmission of knowledge in contemporary Paganism, EnfaPagan FSR-S-SH-PDR-23/07-RAZY Elodie, in collaboration with Élodie Razy at the University of Liège. In this frame, I am revisiting my existing set of data through the prism of the anthropology of children and collecting new ethnographic materials in ritual activities that involve the participation of children. The fresh ethnographic data gathered in 2024 and 2025 will be published at a later date.

3 I wish to thank Ottó Szendrői, a student in the Cultural Anthropology MA program at Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest for drawing my attention to this.

4 <https://www.facebook.com/kethollos> (post on March 2, 2024)

5 As folklorists likened the pre-Christian religious practices of ancient Hungarians’ to shamanism, contemporary Paganism, which draws on folkloric sources, is intrinsically related to neo-shamanism in this context.

6 Bookshops and esoteric shops are important spaces in the transmission of knowledge in the various contexts of contemporary Paganism. They are not only a means of making the abundant literature available to potential and more seasoned practitioners but also serve as meeting places and as the “public face of Paganism”, to borrow J. Wooley’s (2018) expression.

7 Core shamanism was created by Michael Harner, an anthropologist who became a shaman and created the Foundation for Shamanic Studies. The premise of this shamanism, adapted to Westerners, is that everyone can learn shamanic techniques, such as journeying and soul retrieval, and use them for their own benefit and that of others (Lindquist 1997; Lombardi 2023).

8 Summer camps are compelling and not yet sufficiently explored elements of religious education not only in the Pagan revival in Hungary, but also in more traditional, Buddhist, Jewish and Evangelical settings (Ji 2011, Koffman 2018, Nissilä 2018).

9 Cf. <https://www.tudoemberekiskolaja.hu/iskola/tabor>

10 The relationship between the two rulers is based on astrology and non-academic etymology coined by two well-known “teachers” of the intellectual circle, inspired by the chronicle authored

by Antonius Bonfinius (*Rerum Hungaricum decades*, 1497) and an earlier one by János Thuróczy (*Chronica Hungarorum*, 1488). These historical works present him as the heir of both the Roman family of Corvinus and Attila (Szabados 2009).

11 The design of the recent exhibition on Indian hobbyism in Hungary (“‘The dusk was copper-skinned’. Exploring Hungarian Indianing”, Petőfi Literary Museum, Budapest, 2021) illustrates the movement’s close connection with childhood and imagination. The first exhibition room was furnished as a child’s bedroom, evoking that “Indian books” were often read as bedtime stories, taking children on imaginary adventures on the Great Plains and inspiring the “Indian Game” or “Indianing” in the Bakony mountains.

12 Vision Quests consist of a three-day retreat during which participants remain isolated and fasting at a place deemed natural in the vicinity of the shamanic leader’s dwelling. Their goal is to provide participants with spiritual insights that can solve personal problems and bring about fulfillment. These retreats are a prerequisite for participating in the Sun Dance as a dancer. This ceremony is focused on persons who are determined to dance and fast for four days as an offering for a cause they consider important (for example, the health of a relative).

13 For a description of this spiritual group, see Csáji (2017). This case also illustrates that despite state atheism, New Age tenets have emerged within Hungarian society since the late 1970ies.

14 Cf. https://www.napturul.hu/letoltesek/szantai_sarkanyok.pdf

15 This representation of children’s world as a means of preserving archaic cultural practices, magical spells and rituals echoes evolutionist conceptions of cultural transmission, see Morin (2010).

16 *Egyedem-begyedem, tengertánc / Hajdú sógor mit kívánsz / Nem kívánok egyebet, csak egy falat kenyeret.* [Untranslatable] / Drover brother-in-law what do you want? / I don’t want anything else, just a piece of bread.

17 *Süss fel nap, fényes nap, kertek alatt a ludaim megfagynak.* Shine Sun, bright Sun, my geese are freezing in the garden.