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“Gyöngyösbokréta” (1931–1948)

An Interwar Folk-Cultural Movement

That Influenced Identity Construction and Heritage Preservation

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Abstract

The post-World War I period was characterized by a search for identity and a turning towards the past, which, in Hungary’s case led to the (re)discovery of folk culture. The idea to represent the popular traditions of the Hungarian peasantry was realized as part of the Saint Stephen’s Day celebration in 1931 in Budapest, and in just a few years, these annual performances of the popular dances and customs became a movement: the support of the ministries allowed the movement’s leader to form an association which was joined by a hundred groups from Greater Hungary.

Whereas the government saw the potential in this movement, these peasant groups were soon given a representative role in the identity construction. At the same time, these performances also served to preserve the endangered folk heritage. In a decade and a half, the movement had an impact on fashion and tourism, as well as strengthening the idea of revision.

In this article I aim to present the history of the Gyöngyösbokréta-movement and highlight the mentality of the era regarding popular culture, the relationship between rural Hungary and Budapest, the notion of heritage preservation and identity construction.

Keywords: identity construction, heritage protection, popular culture, traditions, representation

The Gyöngyösbokréta (Pearly Bouquet) movement – peasant culture to support the national idea

“Gyöngyösbokréta is the name of a regularly recurring theatrical spectacle consisting of dance, song and play performances by peasant groups in Budapest from 1931 to 1944, around the 20th of August each year.”¹ But the movement that grew out of these performances had a much wider range of activities, as well as varied institutional and support networks. After the success of the first folk tradition performances, which initially proved contentious, a national organization was soon established for the preservation of folk traditions. The peasant groups presenting their living or vanishing folk traditions appeared both at home and abroad as ambassadors of Hungarian culture. The first Gyöngyösbokréta performance – at that time

¹ Sándor Gönyey, “A Gyöngyös-bokréta története,” in *A Gyöngyösbokréta. Írások és dokumentumok a mozgalom történetéből*, ed. Krisztina Dóka – Péter Molnár (<https://folkradio.hu/folkszemle/cikk/28/a-gyongyosbokreta> – accessed: June 6, 2021) 1.

still advertised as the “Földműves Játékszín” (Farmers’ Play Scene) was held on – the day of the celebration of Saint Stephen, the founder of the Hungarian state – August 20, 1931, and from this point on, they can be referred to as Gyöngyösbokréta performances, bokréta villages and groups.

The idea of the Gyöngyösbokréta did not appear in a vacuum, rather its ideas were in line with the cultural and nation-building aspirations of the time: the traumas of the post-war period had triggered the phenomena of “hungarocentrism” and “cultural introversion”², so the country’s (cultural) leadership saw potential in building on and representing folk culture. While Kuno Klebelsberg³ emphasised Hungarian cultural supremacy, Bálint Hóman⁴ focused on national education, and their ideas influenced cultural policy between the two world wars. In secondary school education, “education on a par with European education, but with the strongest national orientation” was the guiding principle, and popular education also played a significant role.⁵ As the movement emphasised national characteristics, it fitted into this cultural policy, which, as Klebelsberg put it, was fighting against “the infusion of international culture into the broad strata of the Hungarian people. Because then it would be twisted out of its national character [...]”⁶ By bringing Hungarian culture to the surface and by presenting it to the public, the movement soon won the support of the state: the National Hungarian Bokréta Association, which brought together the village groups who presented their living or disappearing traditions, was founded with the support of the Ministry of Religion and Public Education and the Ministry of the Interior.⁷ After the first performance in Budapest, it became clear that there was much more potential for these village groups to contribute to the creation of traditions and the strengthening of Hungarian identity than just the performances around August 20. While before 1920 Hungarian folk culture was national only in its elements⁸, the Gyöngyösbokréta appeared as an initiative for the spectacular representation of the same values, alongside the political orientation of the interwar period, which was grounded in national values, and the series of performances intended to present

² Gábor Ujváry, “Pozitív válaszok Trianonra – Klebelsberg Kuno és Hóman Bálint kulturális politikája,” *Korunk* 23, no. 11 (2012): 70–72.

³ Minister of the Interior (3 December 1921 – 6 June 1922) and Minister of Religion and Public Education (16 June 1922 – 24 August 1931)

⁴ Minister of Religion and Public Education (2 October 1932 – 3 July 1942)

⁵ Ujváry, “Pozitív válaszok Trianonra,” 70–72.

⁶ Kuno Klebelsberg, “Az Országos Magyar Gyűjteményegyetem. I. Törvényjavaslat nemzeti nagy közgyűjteményeink önkormányzatáról és személyzetük minősítéséről. Benyújtott a nemzetgyűlés 1922. augusztus 17-iki ülésén,” in: *Gróf Klebelsberg Kuno beszédei, cikkei és törvényjavaslatai 1916–1926*. (Budapest, Athenaeum Irodalmi És Nyomdai R.-T, 1927), 75.

⁷ Csaba Pálfi, “A Gyöngyösbokréta története,” *Táncudományi Tanulmányok* 7 (1970): 126–127.

⁸ László Tókéczki, “Konzervatív reform a legkorszerűbb eszközökkel,” *Valóság* 33, no 2. (1990): 50.

folk traditions soon grew into a tourist attraction. The movement, which was supported by the state, was active in many fields: the bokréta groups took part in important cultural events, became a key element in the development of Hungarian fashion, strengthened Hungarian identity, demonstrated to foreigners the richness of the folk life and represented Hungary at international events. The movement born out of the Gyöngyösbokréta presentations had a huge impact on the preservation of folklore and the elements of popular culture as it was the first attempt to preserve and stage this “beautiful, ancient heritage”.⁹

The idea and background of the folk tradition performances

The return to and cultivation of folk traditions was not only a feature of Hungary, but also of the rest of Europe, such as the Finnish movement against the Tsarist oppression, which sought to make costumes and customs part of everyday life, the Swedish folk dance performances at the Skanzen, or the folk costume dance performances of Austria.¹⁰ In Hungary, there was a similar initiative as early as the Millennium Exhibition of 1896, where peasants presented their daily lives and their customs and dances. From 1920s, folk costume shows and small dance events were organised throughout the country.¹¹ Even before the war, the Ethnographic Museum and the Ethnographic Society had organised folk tradition shows to collect and record traditions, but these were aimed at professionals, not tourists.¹² However, from the early 1920s, the Metropolitan Tourist Office of Budapest (Székesfővárosi Idegenforgalmi Hivatal) had been trying to develop attractions for the summer period, especially for the period around 20 August¹³ – mainly because of the currency crisis – and decided to hold folk art shows for this purpose. City councillor Vilmos Kovácsházy wanted to brighten up the St Stephen’s Day celebrations with a relatively inexpensive event, so he and Béla Paulini, known for being the director of the musical *Háry János*, decided to stage a folk-dance performance by original peasant groups.¹⁴

Originally a journalist, Béla Paulini (1881–1945) became the leader of this folk-art movement as in 1929, he had remarkable success with the above-mentioned folk opera *Háry János*, set to music by Zoltán Kodály, and performed by the peasants of Csákvár at

⁹ Béla Paulini: “Hajrá népművészet!,” *Bokrétások Lapja* 3, no. 9–10 (1936): 6.

¹⁰ Gönyey, “A Gyöngyösbokréta története,” 1.

¹¹ Pálfi, “A Gyöngyösbokréta története,” 120.

¹² István Györffy, *A népbagomány és a nemzeti művelődés* (Budapest, A Magyar Táj- és Népismeret Könyvtára 1, 1939.) 82.

¹³ István Volly, “A Gyöngyös Bokréta indulása (Adalékok),” *Táncstudományi Tanulmányok* 9. (1977) 350.

¹⁴ Pálfi, “A Gyöngyösbokréta története,” 120.

the Opera House. Even then, ethnographers suggested that he should not stage a folk play but one showcasing the original traditions of the peasants.¹⁵ Even though Béla Paulini was born and raised on the Esterházy estate in Csákvár, where he was introduced to the “deep layers of Hungarian peasant life”¹⁶ as a child and he was active in cultural life, he was an “enthusiastic but ethnographically unversed”¹⁷ initiator of the Gyöngyösbokréta’s activities of preserving traditions. Nevertheless, he alone governed the movement that emerged from the Gyöngyösbokréta performances. For this reason, many people considered the movement and Paulini’s ideology to be flawed, because his early successes led him to “take the reins” of the movement, and he considered it unnecessary to seek further professional advice on the management of folk art. Yet he organised the formation and performances of peasant groups nationwide and edited a journal of the movement. One of the local group leaders, Imre Tőreki wrote that Paulini could not win the personal sympathy of Miklós Horthy because he forgot to invite the latter to the first Gyöngyösbokréta event in 1931¹⁸, but according to other sources, in 1943 the Governor himself conferred on Paulini the title of Royal Hungarian Chief Government Councillor (magyar királyi kormányfőtanácsosi cím) in recognition of his outstanding achievements in the field of Hungarian tourism.¹⁹ His achievements were thus appreciated by many, but his role and perception were controversial both in the eyes of the time and of later commentators.

How folk traditions became Budapest’s main attractions – The beginnings of the movement

A review of the background makes it clear that the Gyöngyösbokréta was not the first time that folk traditions were presented, as there were similar efforts abroad and there was already a history of events presenting folk traditions and dances in Hungary, but what made this movement unique was the speed at which gained success: The daily newspaper, *Az Est* reported that twelve thousand foreigners attended the 1934 performances,²⁰ and it was visited by many Hungarians, too.

Paulini’s original idea was to have peasants on the stage and after the successful presentation of the Hány János folk opera, he was encouraged to stage the peasants’ own

¹⁵ Pálfi, “A Gyöngyösbokréta története,” 114.

¹⁶ Volly, “A Gyöngyös Bokréta indulása,” 14.

¹⁷ Zsigmond Bátky, “Gyöngyösbokréta,” *Magyarság*, September 7, 1933. 4.

¹⁸ Imre Tőreki, *A szanyi Bokréta Néptáncgyűjtés 70 éve.* (2001) http://www.muharay.hu/img/file/szanyi_bokreta.pdf

¹⁹ Paulini Béla kormányfőtanácsos. *Függetlenség* December 25, 1943. 4.

²⁰ Az Est riportjai Szent István napjáról. *Az Est* August 22, 1934. 12.

traditions. Therefore, he went to the Ethnographic Museum to research villages where the traditional costumes and customs were still flourishing or where there was hope of reviving them. In June 1931, barely two months before the national holiday of St Stephen's Day, he began to visit the villages suggested by ethnographers István Györffy and Sándor Gönyey at the Ethnographic Museum in the hope of finding living folk costumes and customs. According to Gönyey's personal recollection, he recommended the groups of Boldog, Mezőkövesd, Buják, Bocsárlapujtő (Karancslapujtő), Nagykálló, Zsámbok to Paulini, for the first presentation²¹. Zsámbok was not initially included, as the group did not have a competent leader at the time.²² In addition to the villages recommended by Gönyey, groups from Kapuvár, Koppányszántó, Mikófalva, Ócsény, Püspökbagád, Szany, Szentistván and Tiszapolgár took part in the first Gyöngyösbokréta in Budapest. Already in this first show, a wide variety of customs and dances from various parts of the country were brought together. The show included a bride dance, a spinning scene, a czardas, a bottle dance, a verbunk, a harvest festival, and many others. By the end of the movement, the number of groups had grown to around a hundred, and the association had some 4,000 members during its lifetime.²³ These included the bokréta groups of villages in the reannexed territories, from Upper Hungary, Transylvania, and Vojvodina.

The Gyöngyösbokréta was not started by a group of ethnographers, tourism organisers or peasant organisations, so there was no institutional background behind the first bokréta groups. However, the Metropolitan Tourist Office of Budapest (Székesfővárosi Idegenforgalmi Hivatal) played a significant role in this effort, financing the costs of the rural groups' performances in Budapest and launching multilingual marketing campaigns to promote the Gyöngyösbokréta performances. In this respect, the role of the capital can be seen as that of a patron, since Budapest's interest was in the success of tourism, not in the development of the movement, the preservation of folk traditions or the strengthening of Hungarian identity. In those years, therefore, apart from the Gyöngyösbokréta performances in Budapest, no other events were held in the rest of the country, and at that time the bokréta groups were not yet performing abroad or important events.

However, the growing interest of tourists, the increasing number of bokréta groups and the varying quality of folk shows, which were in competition with the Gyöngyösbokréta, soon made it essential that an association be set up to organise the events.

²¹ Gönyey, "A Gyöngyösbokréta története," 5.

²² Katalin Hajdú, "A zsámboki Gyöngyösbokréta," *Honismeret* 19. no. 1. (1991) 81.

²³ Pálfi, "A Gyöngyösbokréta története," 145.

To unify the peasant culture – The (National) Hungarian Bokréta Association

The sudden expansion of the groups, the complexity of the organisational work and the increased expenditure made it clear after the first few years that a properly coordinated organisation was needed. With the help of the Ministries of Religion and Public Education, the Interior and Trade, the Hungarian Bokréta Association was set up on the initiative by Béla Paulini. However, the support from the ministries was not entirely altruistic, as they quickly realised that “through the movement, it is possible to send a message within the country and abroad that social, popular and Hungarian politics are being pursued here.”²⁴ As a prelude to this, the Ministry of Religion and Public Education had already issued a decree on April 17, 1934 addressed to the Extracurricular Education Committees (Iskolánkívüli Népművelési Bizottságok), to support the activities and further organisational work of the Association as far as possible and to call upon the local education committees.²⁵ On November 15, 1934, another decree was sent to the teachers, calling upon them to ensure that anyone wishing to take part in the work of cultivating and reviving folk arts should do so only in accordance with the “principles and work plan” of the Hungarian Bokréta Association.²⁶ From these decrees it is clear that the ministries gave both intellectual and financial support to the work of the Bokréta Association. As a result, more municipalities began to re-evaluate their traditions in order to join the movement, and intellectuals began to support the movement as it gained in popularity.

Financial support for the Budapest events of the Gyöngyösbokréta was thus provided by the capital city, the Ministry of Trade and Commerce, and Paulini himself set up a system of patronage: in return for the full amount of their membership fees, the patron members received folk art objects²⁷, and patrons did not have to pay an entrance fee and were given reserved seating at local bokréta shows. Not only individuals, but also towns and counties could become supporters of the movement. In 1934, already 14 major cities had become full members.²⁸

In addition to financial support, the aforementioned moral support was also important in the history of the association, and after the 1934 decrees, a decree was issued in 1935 clarifying the tasks of the association.

²⁴ Pálfi, “A Gyöngyösbokréta története,” 122.

²⁵ László Debreczeni, “A »Gyöngyösbokréta« aktáiból,” in *Táncművészeti Értesítő* (Budapest, Magyar Táncművészeti Szövetség, 1956), 100.

²⁶ Imre Molnár, “Főtitkári jelentés a Magyar Bokréta Szövetség 1934. évi működéséről,” *Bokrétaok Lapja* 2, no. 4 (1935): 3.

²⁷ “A Magyar Bokréta Szövetség közgyűlése,” *Függetlenség*, March 28, 1940. 5.

²⁸ Molnár, “Főtitkári jelentés,” 3.

The decree dated June 27, 1935 in Budapest, first described the aims and activities of the association: “The aim of the national movement started under the well-known name of Gy. B. is to preserve the originality of the special characteristics, distinctive features and traditions of Hungarian folk performing arts and to make them known both at home and abroad.” This decree also stressed that the Hungarian Bokréta Association, under the supervision of the Minister of Religion and Public Education, “carries out its activities in the public interest, excluding all commercial aspects, purely in the spirit of serving Hungarian national culture.” The cottage industry activities, which belonged to the performances, also required the approval of the Minister of Commerce.²⁹ The collection, display and sale of “folk articles” also called for organisational cooperation, and the decree stipulated that only the Hungarian Bokréta Association, in addition to the IBUSZ, could sell such articles in an organised manner.³⁰ This was important because the Hungarian Bokréta Association organised exhibitions of folk art and sold folk art products during the performances.

The decree was amended several times. In 1935 the organisation was renamed the National Hungarian Bokréta Association, defining the scope of the association’s activities.³¹ The statutes of the National Hungarian Bokréta Association were also amended in 1942, in which the aims were extended to include the unification of the Hungarian people (countryside – Budapest), tourism, foreign presentation and the revival of folk industry.³²

As at the time of the first Gyöngyösbokréta, the success of the production was far from clear, so as another kind of support, the performances were advertised in as many forums as possible, and the Hungarian press and radio published reports on the Gyöngyösbokréta-movement from its first performance. In 1934, with the support of the government and in the frame of the Hungarian Bokréta Association, there were two significant developments in the promotion of the movement. Firstly, for Hungarian readers, the Association launched a monthly journal called *Bokrétások Lapja* (The Journal of Bokréta members), which was renamed *Hagyomány Szava* (The Word of Tradition) in 1940. In these periodicals, the names of the newly established local bokréta groups were published highlighting their costumes and folk art, and the performances of the bokréta groups were detailed. Béla Paulini edited the journal and wrote most of the articles and news alone, but he also published articles by ethnographers and local bokréta leaders. Secondly, from 1934 the events were increasingly promoted as five-language booklets were published.³³

²⁹ A M. Kir. belügyminiszter 178437/1935. B. M. számú rendelete. „Gyöngyös Bokréta” elnevezésű népművészeti előadások rendezésének és rendőrhatalósági engedélyezésének szabályozása. *Budapesti Közlöny*, June 29, 1935, 10.

³⁰ Pálfi, “A Gyöngyösbokréta története,” 124.

³¹ Molnár, „Főtitkári jelentés,” 3.

³² MNL OL K 150–1943–VII–5–184455–6194.Ob_Szü 541.

³³ Ujváry, “Bokréták a Galga völgyében,” 19.

Structure of the association – How the organization worked

Each bokréta groups comprised approximately 8 couples, i.e. 16 persons from one village, who were trained by the local teacher, cantor, priest or notary, and the local organisations included officials in addition to the members. One of their duties was to hold a general assembly in the first month of the year to elect a president, vice-president, secretary, treasurer and auditor, who would make up the leadership of the local bokréta group.³⁴

The management structure of the association was like that of the branch organisations: it had a president, a general assembly, an annual report and a set budget.³⁵ The association and its branches thus had a well-organised system, but it was Béla Paulini who ran things at the central level and the group leader intellectuals (teachers, notaries, priests) at local level. The bokréta leaders were financially supported by the Ministry of Religion and Public Education in the organisation of bokréta affairs, but they received little professional help. Not all the leaders had an adequate knowledge of ethnography and folklore. Although the leaders of the bokréta groups were intellectuals, they often caused problems by imposing their own will and ignorance on the safeguarding of the traditions. It depended on the attitude and ability of the leaders whether their groups presented the authentic traditions they had found or ‘hungarianised’ traditions that had never existed. In this way, their activities also had a major influence on the customs and dances that would be considered original in later times, since the upcoming folk dance movement was based on the dances and customs that had been discovered and presented by the Gyöngyösbokréta movement.³⁶ Ethnographer Imre Romsics’s research has shown that

“In Kalocsa, the leaders of the Gyöngyösbokréta movement, especially canon Ferenc Kujányi and painter-teacher Lajos Gábor, intervened in the development of folk art in a significant way. Elsewhere, intellectuals, especially village teachers, played an important role in organizing the independent artistic life of the peasantry, creating and organizing folk theatre, patriotic celebrations, harvest balls, and Gyöngyösbokréta groups, and introducing new songs, customs and costumes.”³⁷

In many cases, however, local leaders took a stand and their awareness helped to preserve the original folk costumes and traditions. In the case of Tiszapolgár, it was the

³⁴ MNL OL K 150–1943–VII–5–184455–6194.Ob_Szü 532.

³⁵ MNL OL K 150–1943–VII–5–184455–6194.Ob_Szü 532.

³⁶ Tibor Vadasi, “A hagyományörzés mai kérdései és problémái,” in *A néptáncmozgalom néhány alapvető kérdéséről*. (Budapest, Népművelési Intézet, 1979), 49.

³⁷ Zoltán Fehér, “Két ujja van a ködmönnek, kerek alja a pöndölnek (A bátyai népviselet változásai),” *Forrás* 2003. 5. http://epa.oszk.hu/02900/02931/00053/pdf/EPA02931_forras_2003_03_11.pdf

priest who preserved the decaying traditional costumes in the parish church for posterity.³⁸ The above-mentioned ethnographer-museologist, Sándor Gönyey, for example, was one of the first to propose the village of Zsámbok for the Gyöngyösbokréta, but there was no suitable local leader at first. It took four years – of studying other bokréta groups – until the local teacher became a suitable leader, and eventually organised two groups, a small (for youngsters) and a large (for adults).³⁹ These examples, both positive and negative, demonstrate the great role and responsibility of the leaders of the local bokréta groups, since it was essentially they who determined whether traditions and costumes were preserved, and if so, in authentic form or modified.

It can be seen, therefore, that Béla Paulini quickly reached the highest level of support, both financial and intellectual, making the Gyöngyösbokréta one of the most supported social movements of the interwar period. However, as the Gyöngyösbokréta-movement was the first attempt to preserve and stage popular traditions, it had many difficulties and the leaders had a great impact on what we call popular traditions today.

From local performances to national political events and performances abroad

The events at which the bokréta groups performed reflect the place and importance of the movement in society and in cultural politics. The main attraction was the Gyöngyösbokréta performances in the capital around Saint Stephen’s Day which was later extended to Saint Stephen’s Week, where tens of thousands of people from Hungary and abroad attended.

After the foundation of the Bokréta Association, in addition to the shows in Budapest, the villages also organised bokréta performances at local fairs, often inviting the bokréta groups of nearby villages to participate, and the larger towns also invited the bokréta groups to their events. Paulini’s credo was that all festivities should be hungarianised, from Christmas to the pig slaughter⁴⁰, which he imagined with the participation of the bokréta groups. For this reason, the Bokréta Association (re)organized some traditional Hungarian festivals with the contribution of the bokréta groups.

Firstly, on February 3, 1935, the Association organized the event entitled Hungarian Carnival in Gyöngyös, in which the villages around Gyöngyös took part. The dances and customs of the repertoire of the bokréta groups were presented here, and while spinning

³⁸ Sándor Gönyey, “Az 1938-iki Gyöngyösbokrétáról,” *Ethnographia* 49 (1938): 427–429.

³⁹ Ujváry, “Bokréták a Galga völgyében,” 25.

⁴⁰ Béla Paulini, “A jubileumi esztendőre ez szóm és mondásom,” *Bokrétások Lapja* 6, no. 10 (1939): 1–2.

and harvest festivities were presented, there were no carnival elements on the programme.⁴¹ In an article published after the event, Paulini described the success of the performances, and said that “with this Hungarian carnival we are now beginning to build up a national folk art festive series, which we will have to complete with the Hungarian Christmas.”⁴² In 1938, the town of Győr organised the Hungarian Carnival with seven bokréta groups, and that year, the Hungarian Christmas was also organised with six bokréta groups.⁴³ But following the popular calendar, there were also programmes in between to celebrate the different festivals of the year.

The next of these renovated traditions was the Hungarian Pentecost with eight bokréta groups, held in Vác on May 16, 1937, as a national bokréta event. The Hungarian Pentecost programme included the “Pentecost king election” and “Pentecost run” based on folk tradition, and the bokréta groups also performed May or Pentecost traditions.⁴⁴ It was the first time that the group from Szada had performed,⁴⁵ and for this occasion, they learned the folk song “Ma vagyok, ma vagyok piros Pünkösöd napja” (Today is the day of red Pentecost), which was not otherwise known in Szada.⁴⁶ Thus, in the case of Hungarian Pentecost, the groups’ performances were already adapting to the occasion with each group presenting Pentecost customs, but this also meant that in some cases, they did not perform their own traditions. In this case, too, the aspect of invented traditions is confirmed in this form, where local leaders use the data available to them to create an ideal type of folk tradition which then becomes a representative tradition at national level. A similar phenomenon can be observed in the case of bread festivals, which are a combination of several previous customs.

The New Bread Festival was held in Szeged on June 29, 1937. This event is not without precedent and origin. In Szeged, however, no harvest festivals had been held before, but Szeged was a desirable choice because it is located in the Great Plain, where there are many agricultural workers, and because it was also the new border of the country. “The significance of this celebration is especially great here, on the Trianon border, where thousands of families lost their bread as a result of the terrible disaster.”⁴⁷ The quote illustrates a case where invented tradition plays a role in building national consciousness

⁴¹ Gönyey, “A Gyöngyösbokréta története,” 9.

⁴² „Lábujjspiccel Ruganyozz!” Magyar Farsang Gyöngyösön. *Az Est* February 6, 1935. 4.

⁴³ Gönyey, “A Gyöngyösbokréta története,” 9.

⁴⁴ Ünnepek-érdekességek 1937. március 1-től 1938. március 1-ig *Bokrétások Lapja* 4. no. 3–4–5. (1937) 5.

⁴⁵ Zoltán Kecskés (ed.), *Gönyey Sándor szadai képei és a szadai Gyöngyösbokréta története*. (Szada, Tájházi Füzetek. Közhasznú Kult. Alapítvány Szadáért, 2002) 7.

⁴⁶ Kecskés (ed.), *Gönyey Sándor*, 7.

⁴⁷ Népi Bokréták mesés felvonulása a Magyar Kenyér szegedi ünnepén. *Délmagyarország* July 1, 1937. 5.

and supports the idea of territorial expansion. Paulini adopted many details from the previous bread festivals, but he also added his own ideas to make it more Hungarian. The next bread festival had to wait four years: On July 27, 1941, the National Political Service and the National Hungarian Bokréta Association organised the Hungarian Bread Festival in the reannexed city of Subotica,⁴⁸ which gave the movement not only a cultural but a national political significance with the success of the territorial reclamation policy.

But it was not the only example when bokréta groups participated in events of political significance. During the second world war the Bokréta Association was asked several times to accompany or perform for soldiers or foreign politicians. The events of the war had an impact on the bokréta groups as some of them were disbanded because several bokréta participants were conscripted. This made it increasingly difficult for the Bokréta Association to put together a full programme for the St Stephen's Week celebrations,⁴⁹ but they had new performances. In 1942 in Cluj Napoca and other towns of Transylvania, bokréta presentations were organised for the Hungarian Defence Forces, where one hundred and twenty bokréta members performed their traditions for Hungarian soldiers.⁵⁰ On June 4, 1942, at the request of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, some bokréta groups travelled to Vienna for an international event in honour of wounded soldiers.⁵¹ There were several bokréta tours in Vojvodina⁵² and in Transylvania⁵³ organized by the Ministry of Defence where the participating bokréta members accompanied the soldiers on their way and held some folk-art performances for them. The most important military event where the Bokréta Association participated was the entry of Regent Miklós Horthy in Kosice, where they had a representational role.⁵⁴

When the government recognized the representational role of the bokréta groups, the Bokréta Association was often asked to participate at the receptions of foreign statesmen. On May 4, 1937, Austrian Federal President Wilhelm Miklas was given a reception befitting a head of state on his visit to Budapest. In St George's Square he was cheered by a splendid group of a few hundred members of the Pearly Bouquet.⁵⁵ Some weeks later, 32 bokréta groups attended the reception of King Victor Emmanuel III of Italy and

⁴⁸ A Magyar Kenyér Ünnepe a kormányzó szegte meg az új magyar kenyeret. *Zala Megyei Ujság* July 28, 1941. 1.

⁴⁹ Ujváry, “Bokréták a Galga völgyében,” 48.

⁵⁰ Lajos Turán, “Százhusz „bokrétás” játszik ma este Kolozsváron,” *Keleti Ujság* November 14, 1942. 3.

⁵¹ Ujváry, “Bokréták a Galga völgyében,” 48.

⁵² “Az O. M. B. SZ. délvidéki útja,” *Hagyomány Szava* 4, no. 1 (1943): 1.

⁵³ “Búcsúszavak a Bokrétásokhoz. Elmondotta Kolozsvárott 1943. március 9-én Vitéz Kún Iván őrnagy-esperes,” *Hagyomány Szava* 4, no. 4 (1943): 1.

⁵⁴ “A Bokréta Szövetség a Kassai Bevonuláson,” *Bokrétások Lapja* 1938. (5.) 11. 4.

⁵⁵ “A magyar főváros üdvözlöte,” *Prágai Magyar Hírlap* May 4, 1937. 1.

his wife. In honour of the delegation, a reception in the castle gardens of Gödöllő was attended by residents of the surrounding villages dressed in costume. As a favour to the Italian royal couple, “reversing the order of the shawls worn on Pentecost, the girls from Szada now displayed the Italian tricolour.”⁵⁶ On the occasion of the reception, the King of Italy awarded Béla Paulini the Knight’s Cross of the Order of the Italian Crown (Olasz Koronarend lovagkeresztje).⁵⁷ During his visit to Hungary in March 1941, the Yugoslav Foreign Minister Cincar Markovic announced that he would like to see living Hungarian folk art, so the Bokréta Association was commissioned to convene a few bokréta groups.⁵⁸ After the ceremony, the Foreign Minister had a discussion with Paulini, during which they discussed plans for a joint Yugoslav-Hungarian folk art festival.⁵⁹ In the same year, Franz Schlegelberger, the German Reich State Secretary, came to Hungary with his wife, and the couple visited the National Hungarian Bokréta Association, and also watched a local bokréta presentation.⁶⁰

To represent Hungary, the Bokréta Association also performed abroad. In 1934, seventy members of four bokréta groups were sent to Vienna by the Ministry of Culture to perform Hungarian folk dances at a dance competition.⁶¹ A year later, the Bokréta Association was invited to another famous dance competition, the Folk’s Dance Festival of London.⁶² In 1936 and 1938 the bokréta were invited to Hamburg⁶³, while in 1937, a group of bokréta members travelled to Cannes⁶⁴, in 1939 the bokréta groups performed their traditions in Brussels.⁶⁵ The last appearance of the Association abroad was the aforementioned second trip to Vienna in 1942.⁶⁶ There were other plans – e.g. to perform in America – also, but the war prevented them from doing so.⁶⁷

Besides, thanks to the propaganda on the radio, groups were formed in the annexed territories, so in Highland, Vojvodina and Transylvania and the Hungarian minorities similar performances of traditional dances and customs were organized under the name

⁵⁶ Napi Hírek. *Magyar Távirati Iroda* March 1, 1941.

⁵⁷ Paulini Béla olasz kitüntetése. *Nemzeti Ujság* June 5, 1937. 9.

⁵⁸ Napi Hírek. *Magyar Távirati Iroda* March 1, 1941.

⁵⁹ Napi Hírek. *Magyar Távirati Iroda* March 1, 1941.

⁶⁰ Lajos Zehery, “Dr. Schlegelberger Ferenc államtitkár magyarországi látogatása,” *Magyar jogi szemle* 22. no. 17 (1941): 355.

⁶¹ Négy bokkrétát Bécsbe küld a kultuszminisztérium. *Magyar Hírlap* June 10, 1934. 15.

⁶² A Bokréta Szövetség londoni útja, *Bokrétások Lapja* 1935. 2. no. 7. 5.

⁶³ Ujváry, “Bokréták a Galga völgyében,” 31.

⁶⁴ Teljes beszámoló a cannes-i útról, *Bokrétások Lapja* 4. no. 3–4–5. (1937) 1.

⁶⁵ Bokrétások Hamburgban – másodsor, *Bokrétások Lapja* 5. no. 4–5–6. (1938) 3.

⁶⁶ Bécsben sebesült katonák között – bokrétásokkal, *Hagyomány Szava* 3. no. 6. (1942) 1–2.

⁶⁷ József Lele Jr., „Gyöngyösbokréta Tápén,” in *Múzeumi Kutatások Csongrád Megyében* (1983): 40.

of Gyöngyösbokréta. However, they could only join the movement officially after the re-annexation⁶⁸, they were active and for those Hungarian communities this movement symbolized that they still belonged to the Hungarian nation⁶⁹, and when they were official members, they had a special role in the bokréta events to symbolize the togetherness of all Hungarians.⁷⁰

The list so far shows the variety and significance of the events in which the bokréta groups participated. On the tenth anniversary of the first Gyöngyösbokréta presentation, the Hungarian Bokréta Association itself held a celebration which was a major event.

The celebration took place on August 19, 1940, in the Pesti Vigadó. On this occasion, members of 22 bokréta villages marched. The ceremony was attended by Archduke Ferenc József, Archduchess Anna, Minister of Industry József Varga, State Secretary for Culture István Váy, Mayors Jenő Karafiáth and Károly Szendy, State Secretary of the Prime Minister’s Office Ferenc Zsindely, painter Oszkár Glatz, etc. The jubilee assembly was also attended by representatives of the people of the returning Highlands and Transcarpathia. After the hymn, Mayor Károly Szendy welcomed the bokréta members, which was followed by a speech from the Prime Minister Count Pál Teleki:

“I have come here as allies, because the most important thing for all of us is to preserve the Hungarian soul in this nation. [...] I came here because one’s heart is glad when one sees something truly Hungarian, something Hungarian from the soul. And I also came here to thank the people of the village for coming up here to Budapest to teach people Hungarian things. I hope that no one sees this as just a spectacle, but on the contrary, as what is important. They see in it what it really is: Hungarian things. And maybe the people of Budapest will take something home with them, that we are Hungarians and that we should think Hungarian at home too. I came here to thank you not only for your visit this year, but also for the ones you have made so far, and the ones to come, with a true Hungarian heart and true Hungarian joy.”⁷¹

The quote above demonstrates that they were looking for an empirical counterpart to the whole Hungarian idea, which they found in this movement. One might ask why these important occasions were not performed by professional actors and dancers. The reason was that the emphasis was on a culture based on folk roots, which also represented the rapprochement between Budapest and the village and the appreciation of the peasants.

⁶⁸ Béla Paulini, A Gyöngyösbokréta karácsonya – erdélyiekkel. *Hagyomány Szava* 1940. (1.) 4. 3–4.

⁶⁹ Kende, “A Gyöngyösbokrétánk mérlege,” 380–387.

⁷⁰ Az idej kéthetes országos népművészeti seregszemle. *Hagyomány Szava* 2. no. 7. 1941. 2.

⁷¹ A falu népet köszöntötte a miniszterelnök a Gyöngyös Bokréta ünnepén. *Nemzeti Újság* August 20, 1940. 7.

Fake pearls on the Bouquet – Critics of the movement

Despite the movement's rapid growth, there were many critics of the movement and how it treated the peasantry.

On the one hand, for the peasants, the participation in the Gyöngyösbokréta was a viable way to gain cultural advancement and esteem, however only a small part of the peasant community was made up of the 8 couples per village who were given the opportunity to perform and travel. Yet it was the whole peasantry that the movement's leader wanted to bring to the fore, he stressed the aim of making the peasants understand the value of their folk tradition and of making the upper classes aware of it. As the Gyöngyösbokréta became a huge attraction it provided an opportunity to the peasants to travel, a lot of villages wanted to join the movement, and they tried to make their performances more attractive and more Hungarian, so the authenticity of the traditions became questionable. Thus, the ethnographers needed to check the authenticity as Paulini and the local bokréta leaders had no ethnographic competence, and pseudo-traditions would have reflected badly on to the tourism sector. Furthermore, as it was the first time peasant traditions were on stage, critical voices were raised against showcasing the peasants' culture as a tourist attraction.

Paulini's movement could also be interpreted as an effort to integrate the peasants into society in the pursuit of national unity and, as the guardians of folk traditions. Even so, Paulini stressed the importance of village-town cohesion and the building of national unity. "The real attraction of St. Stephen's Week is the Gyöngyösbokréta. The capital of Budapest is proud of it. ... The English, French, Italians, Germans, Austrians, and Hungarians applaud together. Budapest celebrates the countryside, and the countryside bows happily to the Hungarian capital."⁷²

However, the image the Gyöngyösbokréta performances created of the villages for the tourists was considered false, and the populist writers spoke out against it. Other intellectuals⁷³ also emphasised that the Gyöngyösbokréta displayed only the positive side of popular culture with its stunning costumes and cheerful festivities, all the while concealing the problems. From the 1930s, the village research movements flourished, and they drew attention not only to folk art, but also to the poverty in which the villagers lived.⁷⁴ Furthermore, sociologist Ferenc Erdei highlighted the fact that the peasantry no longer

⁷² Az Est riportjai Szent István hetéről. Teljes a Gyöngyösbokréta diadala. *Az Est* August 19, 1934. 4.

⁷³ E.g. ethnomusicologist Zoltán Kodály, writer Sándor Eckhardt, ethnographer Sándor Bálint, writer Zsigmond Móricz

⁷⁴ Lele, "Gyöngyösbokréta Tápén," 40.

considered their customs and costumes important, but wanted to become bourgeois, that is, to leave their miserable lives and become more like the upper classes.⁷⁵ So the authenticity of the image constructed about the villages were questioned by many.

Other critical voices were raised against Paulini’s insistence that only the peasants should perform their traditions, because it was only the dances and customs performed by the peasants were authentic, while the task of the intelligentsia in the defence of folk art is only to adore and encourage it.⁷⁶ To this end, he planned a series of programmes on the model of the bokréta, entitled “Hungarian Daisies” (Magyar Százszorszép), to form groups of intellectual youths to “cultivate traditions appropriate to the intellectuals”⁷⁷. However, “in the eyes of some writers and those who, as intellectuals or industrial workers, felt inclined to cultivate folk dance, this could also be interpreted as meaning that the Gyöngyösbokréta, intentionally or not, serves to reinforce social differences and to represent them, since it draws a strict line between the peasantry and the intelligentsia.”⁷⁸ This separation was one of the reasons why this movement came to an end in the new regime.

The end of an era, the end of the Bokréta-movement

In 1944, the *Hagyomány Szava* (*Word of Tradition*) reported that “This year’s Gyöngyösbokréta is cancelled.”⁷⁹ Béla Paulini and his wife retreated from the war to the village of Baj, where they ended their lives at their own hands on January 1, 1945 after the wife was dishonoured by Soviet soldiers.⁸⁰ The movement, which had lost its leader, only made a few more appearances.

Attempts were made to revive the movement and to appoint a new leader to take Paulini’s place: among others the celebrated composer and ethnomusicologist, Zoltán Kodály was asked, but no one accepted the leader role.⁸¹ Finally jurist Béla Zsedényi was chosen, who was the President of the Provisional National Assembly (Ideiglenes Nemzetgyűlés), which was formed in 1944, and from May 1945 he was also President of the National

⁷⁵ Ferenc Erdei, *Futóhomok*. (Budapest, Athenaeum, 1937), 146.

⁷⁶ Béla Paulini, “Esti parasztok,” *Bokrétások Lapja* 3. no. 1–2 (1936): 2.

⁷⁷ Kassáról indul el a „Magyar Százszorszép”, *Bokrétások Lapja* 6, no. 11 (1939): 4.

⁷⁸ Tamás Barta, “Magyar néptáncmozgalom a korai időkben – társadalmi ideológia vagy nemzeti művészet?” *Eszmélet* 26, no. 101 (2014): 147.

⁷⁹ Az ideji Gyöngyösbokréta – elmarad. *Hagyomány Szava* 5, no. 8 (1944): 1.

⁸⁰ Paulini és felesége öngyilkos lett. *Pápai Ujság* January 13, 1945. 4.

⁸¹ Ujváry, “Bokréták a Galga völgyében,” 50.

High Council (Nemzeti Főtanács).⁸² In the summer of 1946, the Bokréta Association was formally re-established on the occasion of the Bokréta-day in Zsámbok. The fact that the movement still had an impact on public consciousness and that the desire for its continuation was still alive in the villages is suggested by the fact that even in 1946 there were villages who wanted to become members of the Association. In that year, a folk-art exhibition was held in Aszód,⁸³ the bokréta groups took part in the bread festival in Szeged⁸⁴ and the Women's League in Salgótarján⁸⁵ and in the framework of the National Peasant Days (Országos Parasztnapok), it was again possible for the bokréta groups to perform, but a few days later the Bokréta leaders announced that there would be no more bokréta: they were accused of demonstrating for the Smallholders' Party (Kisgazda Párt).⁸⁶

One of the last appearances of the bokréta was the "Fölszállott a páva" organised by István Volly on March 20, 1948, and the centenary cultural competition in Gyula in the same year.⁸⁷ Like all associations, the National Hungarian Bokréta Association was dissolved in 1948. The Dance Association (Táncszövetség), which was formed at the time, took the reorganising folk dance movement under a unified hand, therefore *folk ensembles* replaced the Gyöngyösbokréta. "The most important aspect of folk ensemble work is that it seeks to create a creative interaction between this folk tradition and higher culture."⁸⁸

In the following decades, the movement was hardly ever talked of or, if it was, it was spoken of in a derogatory way. From 1969, folk art shows were held again yearly in Vojvodina under the name of Gyöngyösbokréta⁸⁹, which are still considered the largest gathering of the Hungarian minority in Vojvodina.

In 1970, Csaba Pálfi's article on the history of Gyöngyösbokréta was published, and after that, more local historians and old bokréta leaders wrote their memoirs. Thanks to the movement, more than 200 variations of about 75–80 types of dances, 35–40 games and customs were preserved, which could have been lost without the Gyöngyösbokréta,⁹⁰ and most of the subsequent initiatives relied on these traditions.

⁸² S.v. "Zsedényi Béla" in *Magyar Életrajzi Lexikon 1000–1990*. (Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, 1994.)

⁸³ Pálfi, "A Gyöngyösbokréta története," 129.

⁸⁴ Filmhíradók Online. <https://filmhiradokonline.hu/watch.php?id=6180>

⁸⁵ Filmhíradók Online. <https://filmhiradokonline.hu/watch.php?id=6204>

⁸⁶ Ujváry, "Bokréták a Galga völgyében," 51.

⁸⁷ Pálfi, "A Gyöngyösbokréta története," 129.

⁸⁸ Elemér Muharay, "Feltámadt a Gyöngyösbokréta?" *Szabad Szó* September 15, 1946. 4.

⁸⁹ Anasztázia Hajdú, "Régi gyöngyök új foglalatban," *Magyar Szó* June 2, 1986. 7.

⁹⁰ Pálfi, "A Gyöngyösbokréta története," 146.

Conclusion

The analysis of the history of the movement showed how the popular culture gained ground after the lost war and the Trianon Treaty: the peasants’ yearly presentations on St Stephen’s Day initially served as a tourist attraction but soon the folk culture performances were given a representational role by the country’s political leadership asserting Hungarian cultural supremacy and representing the fact that the peasantry was also a respected member of Hungarian society. Thus, only after a few years, the Hungarian Bokréta Association was established with the help of the ministries and the bokréta groups represented the country at gatherings abroad and at important events such as the reception of foreign statesmen or military events, but the celebration of the tenth anniversary of the formation of the Hungarian Bokréta Association itself became a significant event, where Prime Minister Count Pál Teleki welcomed the bokréta groups. In addition, several folk traditions were renewed to create new festivities as part of the identity construction programme. Hence, the movement’s activities can also be interpreted as a nation-building effort, in the context of which a national heritage image was constructed. There has been much criticism of the romanticised image of the village, and critics have raised several problems with the authenticity of the customs presented by the bokréta groups. Despite this, the Gyöngyösbokréta was a pioneer in the protection of folk heritage, it helped to identify and present many folk customs by making the peasants conscious of the importance of their traditions. Even though the movement could no longer function under the new regime, its impact is still felt today.

From the history of the movement, it is obvious that there are several aspects to further analyse: the aspects of national identity construction, the representative role of the movement, the movement’s impact on Hungarian fashion, the use of invented traditions and the movement’s effect on the Hungarian minorities of the reannexed territories who – after the Vienna Awards – also participated in the performances. Also, an analysis of the changes in the life of the peasants and the relations between the capital and the villages built by the Gyöngyösbokréta could provide information about the social situation and the interactions of the different social groups. Here I have not detailed the Gyöngyösbokréta’s impact on tourism and the press’s role, but the examination of both could help us understand the role of the movement in the interwar period’s politics.

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