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PERFORMING BELONGING, CELEBRATING INVISIBILITY?

The role of festivities among migrants of Serbian origin in Denmark and in Serbia

Abstract

Serbian migrants living transnational lives consciously or unconsciously move between visibility and invisibility in their performance of migrant success stories. Cases in point are public festivals, performed to make visible migrants' successful inclusion in Danish society, i.e. celebrating invisibility. Meanwhile, other celebrations are consciously relegated to the invisible confines of the Serbian homeland. This article analyses celebrations in Denmark and in Serbia and shows how visible displays of ethnicity and difference tend to turn into easily palatable heritage versions of Serbian culture when performed in a Danish context. In turn, the visibility acquired through celebrations of migrants' belonging in their homeland is inclined to render invisible those who did not take part in the migration experience.

Keywords

Visibility • invisibility • spatial division of ritual space • public celebrations • Serbian migrants in Denmark

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1 Introduction

In April 2013, the Danish–Serbian Friendship Association in the Danish town of Næstved was involved in the celebration of no less than three public events within a month. First, more than 300 persons, including representatives from municipal key institutions such as trade-unions and political parties, gathered to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Association. A few days later, a similar number attended the Association's folklore dance festival, and finally the Association made itself visible at Næstved's annual open air festival by organizing a large food stand with Serbian grilled specialties. Through these acts, the Serbian minority of the Danish town were able to communicate their sense of belonging and their ability to fit in with the customs of the host community, while at the same time celebrating their cultural particularities as Serbian Danes.

As will be shown below, folkdance performances and food specialties from the homeland are often standard ingredients in the attempt by ethnic minorities to demonstrate belonging while, simultaneously, maintaining difference and sameness. By laying claim to public space and addressing the local public, citizens of foreign origin are able to make their presence visible and thereby, on a more symbolic scale, to demonstrate their contributions to the vitality of local communities, in terms of hard work, tax compliance and other civic virtues. In this manner, the visibility acquired through these acts may also be seen as the result of conscious efforts to blend in, i.e. a celebration of having become invisible, which according to

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my informants implies being identical with the Danes (see Juul 2011: 239).

As has been discussed widely in the literature, festivals, ceremonies and celebrations are important means of maintaining and enhancing migrants' sense of belonging (see Boissevain 1992; Fortier 1999; Gardner and Grillo 2002; Salih 2002). Belonging is, as expressed by Nagel (2011: 110), basically a matter of the heart: "it is a feeling of being part of something and some place, and its absence may be felt very keenly". Belonging is, however, often an incomplete process. On the one hand, it is structured by laws and norms, and involves negotiations between dominant and subordinate groups that can lead to reformulation of the terms of membership. On the other hand, individuals can belong to places, groups or communities in some ways and not in others. In this process, issues of visibility and invisibility may play a crucial role, among other things by defining membership.

In this text, I distinguish between "public celebrations", which are formal acts or performances directed towards the majority public in the community in question, and other (semi-private) celebrations. These tend to be less visible, targeting primarily the private or semi-public realm of migrant communities themselves. Here, it is rather the markers of difference that are played out as a way of strengthening the sense of belonging, of kinship and of ethnic roots. Often lifecycle events, such as weddings, serve as arenas upon which the elation and joy of having succeeded as a migrant can be celebrated through lavish festivity. Such events usually take place in the country of

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origin, a feature that Gardner and Grillo (2002) attribute to the high expenditures, which may render them inappropriate for the relatively low-paid workers to carry out in the country of settlement.

In recent years, this partition of celebrations between public events in the host country and lifecycle events in the country of origin has been challenged as Danish Serbs increasingly support the organization of civic events addressing the Serbian public of their communities of origin. Simultaneously, an increasing number of festivities related to marriage, birth and death are now performed in Denmark. This alters previous strategies of invisibility, where exposition of wealth and success were confined to the private spheres of migrant communities.

The article seeks to look into what Salih (2003) has termed the “transnational division of ritual space”, i.e. how rituals may express very different aims according to where and with whom they are carried out, and how this division may be used consciously or unconsciously by migrants in their quest for social recognition. By examining festivities, celebrated either in the community of settlement or in the village of origin, the article discusses how visibility and invisibility may be performed and enacted by migrants under different circumstances. Before delving into the ritual practices carried out among Danish Serbs, a few words are needed to explain the particularities of this Danish minority group.

2 Yugoslavs in Denmark and Vlachs in Serbia

The group of migrants included in this study is special in several ways. First of all, they arrived in Denmark during the 1970s as Yugoslav guest-workers, but after nearly three decades of expatriation, their homeland disintegrated and they became Serbs. Apart from being Serbs, they form part of a minority group called the Vlachs, which, although small in Serbia, held a majority position among the Yugoslav guest-workers in Denmark until the 1990s, where the influx of refugees from Bosnia changed this picture.¹

Their insertion into the Danish society is generally experienced as successful. This is underpinned by high employment rates, economic consolidation and an often expressed feeling of being well-integrated into the Danish society to which almost all hold citizenship. Their tightly knit social networks that entail both a rich associational life among the émigrés in Denmark and maintenance of strong links to their communities of origin in Serbia make the group particularly interesting for research on performance and belonging.

The strong social cohesion may be linked to their status as a minority. The Vlachs in Denmark all originate from a few villages in eastern Serbia along the border with Romania. They speak their own language, Vlaski, and were at the time of the first migrations in the early 1970s among the most ruralized of all Yugoslav guest workers in Europe. According to Schierup and Ålund (1986: 78), their habit of living in three-generational households facilitated a particular form of chain migration, where children could be left with their great-grandparents while the two middle generations joined efforts to put aside enough money to enable a fast but successful return.

In Denmark and Sweden, which were among the most popular destinations, the Vlachs tended to cluster in certain areas. In Denmark, they settled primarily in four industrial towns of Eastern Denmark, each of which now hosts 50 to 100 families. With time, the prospects of moving back to the village on a permanent basis have dwindled and their position now is best characterized as a “silent integration”, where insertion into society takes place unnoticed on an everyday basis (Petersen & Rytter 2006).

For the Vlach villages in Serbia, the rush of out-migration implied that many villages had most of their inhabitants living abroad by the early 1990s. In the village of Ljubicevac, where I did most of the fieldwork, less than 10% of the inhabitants are now permanently settled in the village.² Nonetheless, capital and labour continue to be invested in keeping the houses and the home village “up to standard”. Many visit the village several times a year and families often spend the bulk of their summer holidays “at home”. Particularly among the large group of retired persons, it is common to divide their time equally between their beautiful house in the village and a smaller home in Denmark close to their children and grandchildren. A prerequisite for keeping strong ties within the group and to the home village has been frequent celebrations and festivities held either in Denmark or in the village of origin.

3 Methodology

The article takes its point of departure in three recent public events held by Danish Serbs. As the research revolves around the performance of belonging and on how Danish Serbs divide their celebrations and ritual space between Denmark and their homeland, data are derived primarily from ethnographic observation and analysis of recordings and articles documenting the festive events in question. These all took place in the year of 2013 and were selected because they represented different “prototypes” characteristic of the activities carried out by the Danish–Serbian community. One event took place in Denmark. The other two festivities were carried out in Serbia. As I was not physically present at all the events cited, documentation for the Serbian evening in Denmark was found primarily in local newspapers and on the homepage of the Association. This was compared with experience gathered from participation in similar events during earlier fieldwork (see Buciek & Juul 2008; Juul 2011). Analysis of the two events in Serbia was based on participant observation (the pensioners’ dance) and an analysis of digital recordings (the Diaspora Fair). This was supplemented with informal conversations with people (primarily older migrants) who were present at the events. Finally, seven in-depth interviews were carried out with key persons such as the wedding photographer, a Danish–Serbian bride and five members of the community. Together with insights generated during previous fieldwork between 2005 and 2013, the interpretation of these interviews served to understand how people make sense of the changing ritual practices and the narratives surrounding them.

Fieldwork in Serbia was carried out in October 2013. Because this period lies outside the main holidays and because the events described mainly attracted a public over 40 years of age, the article primarily conveys the perspective of the older generation of Vlachs, who were born in Serbia but have a migration experience from Denmark. Hopefully, future research can uncover the new role of life-cycle celebrations among and between generations. This is, however, outside the scope of the present article. Finally, I have chosen not to include the many disputes of a more personal than political content, which characterizes much of migrants’ associational life, as these are of limited relevance for the present topic.

4 The ambivalences of (in)visibility

Invisibility has been used to describe certain groups of migrants whose quiet insertion into their new country has led to a lack of

interest from the general public. This ability to blend-in often hinges on perceived similarity either in language, culture or skin colour (Fortier 2000, 2003; Leinonen 2012). Visibility, in turn, has been applied to groups of migrants deemed "out of place" i.e. too exotic, too religious or in other ways too different to be integrated in the majority society (Nagel & Staeheli 2008). In all cases, however, visibility and invisibility are perceived as conditions more or less imposed on individuals or groups by external structures such as the media or political, social or cultural institutions in the host country.

Scholars like Ghorashi (2010) link processes of visibility and invisibility to a culturalist turn in discourses of integration in western European countries during the course of the 1990s where more concern was directed towards ensuring migrants' integration as citizens. For Ghorashi, this entailed that migrants' cultures came to be seen as completely different from the culture of the majority. By defining migrants through assumed socio-cultural non-conformity, a heightened attention to difference was created, which implied that those groups that stood out as "most different" from the "host population" became extremely visible. This focus on difference and socio-cultural non-conformity is according to Ghorashi also present when "active and emancipated western women" engage in "helping out" migrant women from their position as invisible. Here, a focus on difference often entails that the competences and skills of these women are left unnoticed (ibid: 77). While highlighting the effects of the culturalist turn on migration politics, Ghorashi's analysis nonetheless appears to relegate migrants to a position of passive objects leaving no room for understanding migrants' active efforts to become either invisible or visible as part of an attempt to blend in or be heard.

Nagel and Staeheli's work on British Arab activists likewise tends to consider invisibility as detrimental to migrant's inclusion into society. In contrast, visibility, in terms of making themselves seen and heard, is perceived by their informants as part of a general struggle to enhance their status in the public eye. Visibility is considered a necessity if they were to "submerge particular forms of stereotypes, that have been stigmatized in the public discourse" (Nagel and Staeheli, 2008: 84).

Indeed, Nagel and Staeheli (2008: 92) recognize a certain ambiguity among the activists, who on the one hand see themselves as different from the dominant white and English population, but on the other hand also seek to avoid being categorized within minority categories, for example based on their religion, out of fear of being connected to Islamic radicalism. They compare this situation with the difficult choices faced by disabled people: Should they pass as similar/able-bodied or should they perform the dominant culture's stereotypes of otherness/disability? Both groups face the same type of dilemma, knowing that by "passing", one may face a profound sense of misrecognition and dissonance (ibid: 87). Ambivalence and ambiguity are, therefore, likely to follow whatever choice is made.

This emphasis on ambiguity in relation to visibility and invisibility seems fruitful when looking at the Serbian Danes who have had to deal with the common identification of Serbs as the villains of the 1990s Balkan wars, and with the derived public image, displayed in fictional TV series, of Serbians as warmongers, smugglers and drug tycoons. Few attempts to confront such stereotypes were (to my knowledge) registered among Serbian Danes. Instead, remaining invisible by stressing sameness became an attractive manner to avoid these less agreeable aspects of visibility. Particularly during the 1990s, a generally negative view on their homeland attachment seems to have been conducive to a down-playing of cultural difference and to the relegation of major cultural celebrations from the eyes of the Danish public to the less visible hinterland in Serbia.

Where invisibility in the works of Ghorashi, Nagel and Staeheli is seen as detrimental to integration as it makes citizens powerless and objectified vis-à-vis the state, the situation of the Danish Serbs underscores ambiguity. Here, both visibility and invisibility relate closely to belonging. As transnational beings, people can obviously "belong" in many different ways and to many places, but it is always a dynamic (and even contested) process, not a reified fixity. Effective belonging and membership to host communities and homeland can always be questioned and membership must, therefore, be enacted and regained again and again through acts of visibility or conformity. Because the results always depend on the context and the audience towards which it is enacted, it can never be a fixed state with either negative or positive effects to the individual migrant. This point is likely to be missed out if (in)visibility is viewed solely as structurally imposed. This will be further elaborated in the next paragraphs.

5 Performing belonging through visibility and invisibility

Exploring the intricate ways in which migrants struggle to construct their lives and maintain their membership both in the area of settlement and in the places they have left entails looking into the multi-local practices of group identity. This in turn delineates the politics and social dynamics of "fitting in".

As mentioned above, visibility and invisibility are not static conditions. Although not entirely under the control of the individual, visibility and invisibility may be characteristics that individuals actively take upon themselves to achieve certain goals vis a vis a certain group of on-lookers. Migrants as well as other individuals may choose to enforce or downplay their visibility to ascertain or occlude their position whether in the host society or in the community of origin.

One does not simply and ontologically "belong" to the world or any group in it. Belonging is an achievement at several levels of abstraction. For Bell (1999: 3), identity is, first and foremost, the effect of performance, not vice versa. This perspective is useful for the present study as it underscores the active role of the "performers".

Citing Butler, Fortier (1999: 43) explains the role of performativity in relation to identity formation:

Performativity is not merely about routine or the reiteration of practices within one individual's life. Nor is reiteration 'simply replicas of the same'. Rather [...] performativity is about the reiteration of norms that precede, constrain and exceed the performer. Performative acts include legal sentences, baptisms, inaugurations or other forms of statements that do not only perform an action but confer a binding power on the action performed. Viewing identity as performative, then means that identities are constructed by the very expressions that are said to be their result.

Visibility as well as invisibility in this context must therefore be understood primarily as the act of performing (by acting or lying low). This is not necessarily equivalent with the end result of the performance.

Indeed, the performance of visibility may be both contradictory and conflictual. While Serbian attempts to "fit in" to the point of becoming invisible may provide a temporary hideout from stigmatization, it may also be problematic because it carries the risk of becoming a non-person (see Ålund 1996). Fortier's description (2000: 23) of the "invisible" Italian community in London stresses this ambiguity. Representing themselves as "invisible migrants" enables the Italians to emphasize their quiet insertion into the British social fabric, but it also highlights the political indifference they come up against.

Becoming invisible conveys a fear of losing one's own ethnic and national identity (Fortier 2003: 240). Many Italians, therefore, seek to move out of this invisibility by performing different collective acts of remembrance, rituals and commemorations, thereby creating a new and idealized form of belonging to Britain as "Italians abroad".

Employment of public performances as vehicles for obtaining visibility is also frequent among the Danish-Serbs. Like other groups of migrants, they invest efforts into the re-creation and maintenance of continuity between the past and present by creating places of memory or through the performance of various heritage practices (Juul 2008). These enactments of migrant identity and belonging are carried out both "here" and "there" in what Crang *et al.* (2003: 445) have termed "triadic geographies of belonging", where belonging hinges on places of residence, a sense of homeland elsewhere and a sense of belonging to a diaspora community. Since many of the events that shape our sense of self are connected to specific places, localities, therefore, continue to be important sources of meaning and identity for mobile subjects. This is among the issues that will be explored below.

6 Transnational ties and ritual practices

Who we are derives in part from the multiple connections we have to other people, events and things, whether these are geographically close or distant, located in the present or past (Conradson & McKay 2007: 167).

According to Barth (1969), events such as celebrations and festivals may be seen as vessels of meaning, which can be used by organizers and spectators alike to communicate different kinds of messages. Events may be dichotomic in structure, at once uniting and separating. For migrants residing in a new country, rituals, celebrations and popular culture within the group may on the one hand open up ways to forge new and even morally founded relationships between members of the group. By celebrating bodily together, by eating, dancing and singing, a "we" group is defined *vis-à-vis* a "they group". In this manner, transnational migrants are able to reshape their subjectivities, ethically and spiritually (Werbner 2013: 118), just as new spaces of "belonging" may be created in an otherwise alien environment.

Ritual performances may, on the other hand, also be carried out explicitly to address a wider public of the host country. Highly visible and collective celebrations such as carnivals, parades, games and greetings can turn into important vehicles of strengthening group solidarity and re-appropriating urban space. Visibility may also be acquired by incorporating as a distinct group into existing festivals (as in Næstved's annual fair). Both cases are expressions of migrants' investments in becoming visible as citizens with equal rights to the public space of the host country.

With increased incomes and cheaper flights, many migrants are now able to travel extensively between their new countries of settlement and their "homeland". This allows them to rely on more than one country to construct their social identity and to participate in ritual practices both in the host country and the country of origin. In the words of Salih (2003: 82), "migrants are able to create a transnational division of ritual space which involves a distribution of symbolic and economic resources across both countries".

Salih's framing of a transnational division of ritual space makes it possible to explain how the aims of certain rituals may differ according to where they are carried out and to understand why some ritual activities only acquire full meaning if performed in the sending community. Certain rituals aim to express a collective religious,

national or political identity that has to be recognized in the country of residence. Others seek to give social recognition to the migrants' families within the community of origin. Often ceremonies carried out "at home" try to achieve a twofold purpose:

- They aim to provide a symbolic reintegration into the social and cultural system the migrants have left.
- They serve as a contextual assertion of their difference from the spectators of these rituals, those who remained behind. Thereby they serve to expand migrants' symbolic status and capital.

For Salih (2002: 223), this indicates that the social recognition of not only kin but also the society left behind is paramount to migrants' social status.

Keeping relations to families, friends and communities at home is an emotionally and materially intensive endeavour. Although successful migration can provide improved material opportunities, it is at the same time accompanied by complex dynamics of longing and connection, obligations and guilt (Conradson & McKay 2007: 168). Hage (cited in Werbner 2013: 116) describes how the feeling of guilt remains deeply associated with transnational migration: being born into a community or a nation is in many societies considered a "gift" that one repays through lifelong participation. Leaving the community induces a state of guilt and a sense of debt to the society left behind. Social participation in the new place of settlement may, therefore, be seen as a sign that one has forgotten about the original "debt". These feelings of "distancing" produce a desire for proximity, which can only be overcome momentarily by gestures that convey a sense of being affectively implicated. Performing lavish celebrations in the home village may, therefore, be important visible signs of still caring for the homeland.

Also public celebrations may be seen in the perspective of obligations, guilt and sacrifice. Often migrants invest both work and money in creating or renewing old traditions and in beautifying the village as a manner of honouring the home community. Unfortunately, diasporic support to public celebrations in the homeland is seldom conflict-free. Often, a bland heritage version is created not to threaten the unity upon which such celebrations depend (Boissevain 1999: 11). Even so, they seldom escape the creation of disunity in the sense that they exclude those unable to afford the authentic costumes or those unwilling to accept the authority of those capable of imposing their version of tradition.

The role of festivities as simultaneously uniting and separating is also stressed by Salih. Because consumption and/or gift exchange in relation to these events are part of a discourse of power between places, these performances of tradition often include a hidden agenda (Salih 2003: 94). Not least the wedding tradition is becoming an arena for performance of social status and class, where dominant symbols are received and interpreted as emblems of status by participants as well as by onlookers. Salih (2003, 98) stresses that:

What counts in this interpretation is not the aesthetic form of the ritual, in the sense of imported consumer goods and fashion the migrants insert in their ceremonies, but rather the social meaning conveyed in the introduction of these.

In the remaining text, I discuss examples of ritual practices among Vlachs from a perspective of performativity. First, I reiterate the role of invisibility in the everyday life of Serbian Vlachs. Secondly, I discuss a public cultural evening held in Denmark under the auspices of the Danish Serbian Friendship Association. After this follows three examples of celebrations held in Serbia, representing different levels of ceremonial activity, from the regional (the Fair), over the parochial (the Dance), to the semi-private (wedding ceremonies).

7 Celebrating the invisibility of everyday life

Among migrants of Serbian origin in Denmark, invisibility is in many ways a cherished quality. Satisfaction is often expressed with regard to perceived similarities between the Serbian minority and the Danish majority population. Ballhausen and Tonnesen (2008) show how similarities in culture and religion are accentuated, often in contrast to Muslims who are framed as difficult to integrate. Particularly, the similarities between the Orthodox faith and Danish Protestantism are emphasized by referring to the common use of the Cross.

On the individual level, keeping a neutral appearance is accentuated. Traditional first names are, therefore, losing out to more cosmopolitan or even common Danish first names as parents consider such names to be more suitable for a successful career.

Also in terms of housing, similarity and invisibility are celebrated. Among house owners, what is valued is a house that resembles the rest of the row. These anonymous standard houses stand in glaring contrast to the extravagant “mansions” built in the village of origin. But in order not to stir up resentment and gossip, the attractiveness of the Serbian house is seldom made visible to the Danes (Juul 2011).

This emphasis on sameness and invisibility has enabled Serbian migrants to cast themselves as “ethnic whites”, leaving the role of “the absolute other” to “darker” and more “different” groups of migrants. This is also conveyed in the statements by a Serbian lady in her fifties:

I don't understand those immigrant women carrying scarves. When my mother and I came to Denmark [in the early 1980s] and saw that no one in the factory were covering their heads, we immediately took off our scarves and sneaked them into our bags. Why is it that these people want to stand out?

The statement underscores how features of invisibility and sameness have been acquired through conscious and individual efforts to blend in. This is in contrast to efforts at the collective level, discussed below, where energy is invested in making the migrant community visible in the communities where they have established themselves.

8 Celebrating belonging – confronting stereotypes?

In most of the Danish towns, where Serbian Vlachs have settled, they have established Serbian Friendship Associations, which have actively participated in local politics. In Næstved, for example, members of the Association have been instrumental in developing a municipal policy of integration, where difference is celebrated, “while leaving aside divisions between ‘them’ and ‘us’” (Næstved Council of Integration, 2012: 2).

The Associations also engage in organising semi-public events where Serbian culture is celebrated. These events serve to create and maintain a sense of unity among the Serbian Danes but frequent inclusion of Danish key personalities from the municipality has secured that these events also act as windows towards the wider public and as acts of belonging. The following account of a Serbian evening celebrated in the town nonetheless shows the difficulties related to the public presentations of a homeland culture.

In the local newspaper, the chairman explained the initiative in the following manner:

A cultural evening like this one is an obvious opportunity to tell about Serbia and about Serbian culture, and put issues such as integration, dialogue and community on the agenda in an entertaining

and different manner. People always communicate well when eating together. I'm in no doubt that we can inspire a lot of Danes when we tell about the Serbs as an ethnic group and about our culture. (Extract from Ugebladet Næstved 10.04.2012)

This was followed by a description of the cosy atmosphere created when servings of spiced sausages, smoked ham and homemade bread accompanied talks on Serbian folk costumes, rituals and festivals.

Compared with the British-Arab activists interviewed by Nagel and Staeheli (2008: 90) who were editing magazines or sponsoring lectures, the ambitions of the Danish–Serbian Friendship Association may appear fairly narrow. If a “confrontation of stereotypes” was taking place, it was in an indirect manner. Instead, the event confirmed a picture of Serbia as the locus of “traditional” and rural values. It nevertheless served the purpose, manifested in many other similar public events, of showing the wider public that all Serbs “are not how the media portray us”, which was also the goal articulated by the British–Arab activists.

What the evening also highlighted was how difficult it was for the Association to present more than this particular, harmless bit of Serbian “culture”. First of all, the chairman's insistent claim that Danes can be inspired by learning about Serbian culture was bound to remain hazy. In spite of the ostensible traditions of hospitality and multi-ethnic cohabitation characterizing the pre-conflict Yugoslav Federation, the recent Serbian history of political stalemate, religious intolerance and direct xenophobia makes the proposition questionable. To present a palatable version of their place of origin, which simultaneously can stand out as “special” but not too “different”, the chairman was forced to present an imaginary homeland, based on a bland and un-conflictive version of the Serbian society. In this fictional homeland, emotional issues such as Serbia's recent loss of Kosovo, Serbia's negotiations with the European Union or the war tribunal in The Hague had evaporated.

More surprising was the absence of references to the Vlach minority culture, a background shared by all the Serbs present. There was no mentioning of their beautiful villages or the everyday life between homes in Denmark and in Serbia, issues that could have provided substance to the dialogue on integration and community proposed by the chairman. This occlusion of the personal, emotional or political aspects of everyday culture in the Serbian countryside was probably a conscious choice. By stressing the nostalgia of rural life as opposed to the present urban lifestyles, the chairman enabled a “we” group to emerge, which was palatable to the Danes who are able to draw on a similar national heritage. Attachment and belonging were thus confirmed, while key elements characterizing the transnational family such as emotions, difference and belonging were kept away from the wider Danish public. These came out more prominently in those celebrations carried out in Serbia.

9 Public celebrations in Serbia: The Fair and Diaspora Assembly

The month of July is very demanding down here. Every three days, there is a celebration where you must be present. You get home late and when your children and grandchildren visit, there is no time left to spend with them. All the time, there are weddings, birthday parties, baptisms that you must attend. (Serbian woman, aged sixty)

The ritual activities of the Serbian diapora community carried out in the Serbian homeland may appear as full of contradictions. Many speak of their summer holidays in the village as a time of relaxation.

Nonetheless, most are constantly engaged in hectic festive activities. Despite frequent expressions of fatigue, the amount of private or public celebrations seems to have increased exponentially. New traditions and rituals are added to the old ones, all of which imply time-consuming preparations and economic sacrifices.

One re-invention is the annual Fair and Diaspora Assembly celebrated in July in Ljubicevac, one of the villages where out-migration has been most prominent. Besides shopkeepers marketing a variety of local goods, the festival consists of a football tournament and a number of staged activities. In 2013, entertainment included not only the obligatory folk dance groups but also a beauty contest with age categories ranging from young girls to matronly ladies. Finally, a popular singer from Belgrade lent lustre to the event by attracting between 700 and 1000 spectators.

To initiate the fair, a parade through the town was led by the chairman in his traditional attire, carrying the flag of the municipality. Also flaunted was the banner of the chairman's particular wing of the Danish Friendship Associations.³ After innumerable folk dances and much parading of the local beauties, three women entertained the public with Vlach folk songs, while the winners of the contest were elected.

The beauty contest where lightly dressed women mixed with wearers of traditional home-embroidered dresses and hand-woven aprons neatly exemplified the general mixing of tradition and renewal. Tradition and modernity were likewise contrasted through repeated references to the European Union. A billboard with the E.U. stars surrounding the village name read: "Welcome to the European village of Ljubicevac". The term "European village" [*Evropska Selo*] was continually used by the host and village leader in his praise of the village and its initiatives. Although Serbia is still waiting to become an applicant country to the E.U., the village served, he said, as a model for the villages of the region.

The event was generally an interesting jumble of intentions. In spite of the traditional costumes and the frequent allusions to a rural past, the festival did not link up to any traditional event. The central intention was obviously to celebrate the village as a migration success story. Interestingly, there were no flags or other symbols relating to the countries hosting migrants from the village or from other friendship associations. Despite the inclusion of the term "assembly" in the official name, no official meetings or decision-making took place, a situation that likely reflects the deep divisions that characterize the diaspora community.

Obviously, huge effort had been invested in establishing the fair as a public and egalitarian meeting place, where those living abroad could renew friendships with those permanently settled in the region. Through this act of sacrifice, the organizers were able to repay their moral guilt to their community of origin. This was, however, interspersed with elements of exclusivity and hierarchy. Through the constant evocation of the village as "European",⁴ as an "E.U. territory", and as a model for the region, a distance was created between the migrants and the local non-EU-citizens.

The Fair generally straddled between different goals. On the one hand, it acted to strengthen homeland belonging by making the success of the village and its diaspora population (or a particular group therein) visible towards the population in the region and to strengthen the diaspora population's ties to the municipal authorities (who were purposely invited). On the other hand, it served as a performance of superiority towards those inhabitants who had not taken part in the migration experience (by evoking their status as E.U. citizens or by dressing up in expensive traditional clothing not affordable to the locals).

Because the performance was carried out under the auspices of the local council, it also served to demonstrate the superior rights of the majority population of migrants to the public space and local resources vis-à-vis the permanently settled minority. This served to underscore the wide-ranging social and political marginalisation experienced by the locals who face a general withdrawal of public schooling and health infrastructure in consequence of the dwindling population.

10 Celebrations at the parochial level: the last dance of the pensioners

While the Fair and Diaspora Assembly may be seen as projects of reintegration at the regional level, it is the reconciliation with the past and the emotional memory work which forms the core of the celebrations at intra-village level. These celebrations are reminiscent of old Vlach traditions where "friendship villages" took turns to arrange public dances. The quotations below, collected among the villagers in 2013, show how these expressions of unity and equality still convey strong sentiments of nostalgia:

Every Sunday there was festivity in one of the villages. We would take our bikes and drive there to look at the boys. Local musicians would come and we danced till late in the afternoon.

Everyone would come to the parties, nothing was private.

The friendship village structure is still intact and in charge of organising common activities, such as the farewell-dinner in October 2013 where 250 retired migrants gathered before taking off to their countries of residence. As required by tradition, entertainment involved dancing the Vlach chain dance *ore*. For almost 10 hours, *ore* was performed by pensioners, many of whom were marked by age or physical constraints acquired through hard and unhealthy jobs abroad. As explained by one of the participants:

Everyone will dance, even if afterwards they will have to spend two days in bed to recover.

Long after the official closing time, a few couples persistently placed large euro notes on the foreheads of the musicians, urging them to play just one more song. It was, they explained, difficult and painful to stop, as the nostalgic wording of the songs brought back memories of the hardship they had experienced in the course of their migration.

The event highlights what could be termed as the emotional costs of transnationalism. The reunion, the songs and the dancing acted to reconcile the transnational pensioners with the past and the emotional consequences of being away were "mended" through the performance of ritual practices, kept out of the sight of the people in the new areas of residence.

In contrast to the other gatherings described above, this get-together in Serbia may be characterized as an insider event, where dancing and celebration worked out satisfyingly precisely because they were performed by people who knew each other. As ordered and formal events, with their own rules and hierarchies, performances such as the pensioners dance also include elements of exclusivity and expressions of power relations. These were articulated in different ways: (a) to demonstrate the superior taste acquired while abroad and their position as the economically most potent clients, the migrants felt obliged to voice their disappointment with the meal to the local caterer; (b) a not-quite sober, local inhabitant insisted on joining the chain to dance with the researcher, resulting in a public castigation of the outsider; (c) frustration vented from a visiting villager when winners in the lottery turned out to be almost exclusively from

the hosting village showed that not all participants felt that they were treated on equal terms.

Although the community celebration was intended to soften for a short moment the internal divisions within the migrant group or between migrants and those permanently settled, these incidences highlight how diverse meanings about unity and community tended to surface and become contested in the process. As will be shown below, this social dispersion becomes even more significant when played out in the private sphere.

11 Celebrating in “private”

Until recently, wedding performances have been firmly tied to the Serbian hinterland. While Gardner and Grillo (2002) explained this as deliberate attempts to keep the reckless spending out of sight of the host communities, Salih (2003) emphasizes the role of weddings as arenas in which migrants can perform simultaneous acts of belonging and difference vis à vis the community of origin. In this perspective, weddings only make sense when performed “at home”.

The conspicuous commodity consumption that characterizes the Vlach wedding may be traced back to the very start of labour migrations in the 1970s. As shown by Schierup and Ålund (1986: 53), it was precisely through the development of a ceremonial sphere of society, which consumed a major proportion of their savings that migrants were able to purge themselves from the envy of the community, while reinforcing their status and social networks. During this period, weddings were collective and inclusive acts where the entire village would participate either as guest, in preparing the meals or as spectators and participants in the dancing that followed.

Over the years, the number of invited guests has increased dramatically, while exclusivity has augmented. A young woman explained: “We had 500 guests at our wedding. Now that the hotels have increased their facilities, it's no longer common to celebrate at home”. By moving celebrations to the confined spaces of a hotel, the inclusive aspects of the ceremonies are downplayed. The performance of difference becomes crucial, which is why weddings are carefully documented. A wedding photographer interviewed during fieldwork in 2013 explained:

The wedding DVD must feature the dress, the shoes and the bridal bouquet. It must capture the rituals at the church, the dining and the dancing. Most couples wish to perform something that no one else has done. Natural sceneries are popular, as are sequences where the bride, her mother and her sister in traditional costumes haul water from the Danube to bring good fortune to the couple. In some cases, people pay to have their wedding transmitted on local TV. So far the most extraordinary shooting carried out by our business was a wedding ceremony high in the sky in a helicopter.

This visibility is accompanied by the occlusion and “privatization” of the wedding gifts. Earlier, dowry and wedding gifts were paraded through the streets as a collective display of the burgeoning purchasing power of the village. Nowadays, wedding gifts consist of envelopes containing at least one 50 Euro bill per dining guest (a feature that has tempted some to solve the financial problems related to the multiplication of celebrations by depositing anonymous and empty envelopes on the gift tables).

Increased interactions with the communities of settlement also change previous divisions of ritual spaces. The proliferation of mixed marriages implies that weddings are celebrated in the country of settlement, but often celebrations take place both in Denmark and Serbia, in order to resolve conflicting ritual requirements.

Furthermore, economic success in the country of settlement challenges the previous practices of saving money in the host country only to spend it on extravagant celebrations in the home town. Increasingly, people express a desire to display wealth, status and sameness within the host society. This has given a way to new types of celebrations, previously outside the ritual catalogue of the Serbian-Vlachs. This includes celebration of silver and golden wedding anniversaries, 18th birthdays and, most surprisingly, the observance of the confirmation ceremony of the Lutheran Church. These ceremonies provide a fertile ground for a public display of pomp and circumstance as well as sameness, both in terms of religion and alcohol and conspicuous consumption.

12 Conclusion

Contrary to studies highlighting invisibility as structurally imposed, the article shows how migrants actively perform acts of visibility and invisibility to achieve certain gains. For many Danish Serbs, invisibility is associated with successful integration and with being an unproblematic migrant group. Celebrations directed towards a Danish audience, therefore, stress the ability to blend in while maintaining difference. This is in contrast to festivities addressing the home community. These primarily act as celebrations of migrant success, i.e. as performances of difference while maintaining belonging. In doing so, the study demonstrates the relationship between the notions of (in)visibility and issues of place and belonging. It is precisely through the establishment of a spatial division of ritual space that migrants are able to simultaneously shape localities “here” and “there”.

This balancing between the performances of difference and sameness also has a price. While the visible displays of ethnic difference presented to the mainstream society in Denmark often are restricted to easily palatable versions of an imaginary rural culture, the material practices and consumption characterizing the celebrations in the homeland are significant domains through which migrants are able to expand their symbolic capital and social status. This active performance of migrant success to the audience “back home” obviously contributes to strengthening on-going processes of difference and marginalization.

Where rituals and celebrations previously served to reconcile migrants with the community of origin, the needs of the diasporic community increasingly overrule those of local inhabitants who struggle to keep the home villages alive between the festive summer seasons. An effect of the increased festivities performed by migrants is that the population left behind becomes invisible and marginalized both socially and politically, while being relegated to a situation as on-lookers.

Meanwhile, intermarriage and migrants' growing desire to display their successful incorporation into Danish society have prompted the multiplication of festivities held in Denmark. Here, sameness is celebrated among other things through religion, consumption and common tastes for food and alcohol.

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mobilitet - politik - performativitet, eds J. Andersen et al. Roskilde Universitetsforlag, and "From Danish Yugoslavs to Danish Serbs; National Affiliation caught between Visibility and Invisibility, in *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2011".

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Notes

- 1 The exact repartition of Yugoslav groups in Denmark is difficult to ascertain as Vlachs are not registered separately. According to the Danish Statistical Office, 7452 persons from Yugoslavia, lived in Denmark in 1980. By 1990 the number had risen to 10,504 persons. After 1990, some shifted from Yugoslav to Serbian nationality. Others have taken Danish citizenship.
- 2 Data provided by the Kancelarija za Diaspora, Kladovo municipality.
- 3 In most of the Danish towns, several rival associations exist. Divisions are related to politics as well as to strife between families.
- 4 This is in itself contradictory as the whole region belongs to Europe although not to the European Union.