

**THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF FOLK CULTURE OF SLOVAKIA**

VEDA, Publisher of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, Bratislava 1995

**PETER SLAVKOVSKÝ**

In societies where information dominates, its clarity and accessibility, encyclopedic literature is also experiencing a boom. It summarizes, classifies and mediates the results of various areas of life. Slovak ethnography long ago felt the need for an encyclopedic work, which would make scientific information about all aspects of folk culture, its manifold developmental forms, the most basic concepts and categories, methods and orientations of ethnographic research, personalities, institutions, periodicals etc. accessible to the wide expert and lay public, in synthetically written entries.

Preparation of a thematic encyclopedia presupposes the availability of an adequate data base in the given branch of knowledge and an institutional background, which will undertake the expert, organizational and financial implementation of the work. This situation appeared in the Institute of Ethnography of the Slovak Academy of Sciences in the middle of the 1980s, after the completion of research work on the *Ethnographic Atlas of Slovakia* (Bratislava 1990, specifically in 1986, when an independent organizational unit was created to carry out this task, and was entrusted with securing the conceptual, organizational and implementational aspects of the work. It worked out a project using the experiences from preparing the entries about folk culture, which were included in the general *Encyclopedia of Slovakia*, the first volume of which appeared in 1972. The number and size of the entries on folk culture published here was very limited. However the motivation, deriving from the feeling of an academic and social need for a separate thematic encyclopedia was a positive feature of this period. One of the basic methodological starting points of the *Encyclopedia of Folk Culture of Slovakia*, as we finally named the work, was an effort to achieve a systematic approach. The entries of the encyclopedia were therefore divided into 5 thematic lexical areas (theory and history of ethnography, material culture, social culture, ceremonial culture and artistic culture) with 30 lexical subgroups. The responsible editors, together with the authors attempted to produce entries in a form that would provide the necessary correlations with entries from other thematic areas and give readers the wider cultural-historical connections, with the help of the note apparatus and index. From the point of view of the origin and development of cultural phenomena and their temporal comparison, it was also necessary to limit the historical range of the encyclopedia. It was not realistically possible to give a picture of the way of life and culture of the people from the periods and areas of interest, which are the subject of the research of archaeology, history and art history. The

aim of the *Encyclopedia of the Folk Culture of Slovakia* was to give readers access to the period of time which is studiable by the methods of ethnographic research, that is the period of things and cultural phenomena which were part of the everyday life of people or of their collective memory. This is the period of the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, which we can also regard as the culmination in the continuous development of folk culture in Slovakia. It was possible to trace earlier periods with the help of the results of related branches of science, especially where it was necessary to clarify the origin or other essential aspects of the subjects of study.

Since a multi-ethnic structure is a characteristic feature of Slovakia, as of many other states in Central Europe, it was necessary to conceive the encyclopedia on a territorial ethnic principle. This approach enables recognition of the variety of the ethnic structure of Slovakia, and explanation of the historical circumstances of its origin and development. The scientific results obtained are not only evidence of the mutual cultural enrichment of ethnic communities on this territory, but also of their cultural cooperation and tolerance. When organizing their way of life, they selected the elements of the national cultures, which suited them best in specific historical, natural and socio-economic conditions. In such cases it was mostly only terminology which preserved ethnic potential. The illustration part of the encyclopedia is as valuable as the text part. The supplementing of entries with illustrative material directly in the text contributed to the greater instructiveness of the encyclopedia. Its documentary value is also increased by the placing of colour plates at the end of each volume, which are connected with the entries by the system of notes.

However, the reader of the *Encyclopedia of Folk Culture of Slovakia* must be aware of two important facts, which significantly limited its final form – the extent of the work and the state of knowledge of ethnographic science. The great variety of forms of life and culture of the folk strata brought a wider range of phenomena and objects than could be included in a little less than 3000 entries. Therefore many of them were included in more widely conceived entries, and the reader can find information on them with the help of the index. Although experts wrote individual entries, explanations could not go beyond the level of superficial information on a given thematic area. Because of this, and because of the fact that folk culture is a constantly living area, it is impossible to regard this encyclopedia as the final work. The new findings of science in Slovakia, especially in social and spiritual culture, urban ethnography and other areas, widen the possibilities for explaining the studied phenomena. The same applies to the theoretical background of ethnography. The possibility of deviating from formerly one sidedly preferred methodologically approaches creates space for the application of heterogeneous theoretical conceptions.

From the point of view of its creators, the *Encyclopedia of Folk Culture of Slovakia* has significance on two basic levels: the scientific and cultural-social. The scientific significance needs to be seen above all in the enrichment of ethnographic literature with a new work, presenting the information about folk culture in Slovakia researched up to now, in an encyclopedic form. From the point of view of the further development of ethnography, it is also important that the encyclopedia mapped the findings obtained up to now and also pointed to the insufficiently studied areas, and so to the need for future research. The fact that during its preparation a body of documentation was formed, which widened the data base of the Institute of Ethnography of the Slovak Academy of Sciences is also of some importance.

On the cultural-social level, we see the importance of the encyclopedia above all in the information which it provides about folk culture as the contribution of ethnography to completing the picture of the national cultural heritage. It makes the way of life and culture of our ancestors, the method of humanizing the environment in which they lived accessible to

a wide circle of readers in a popular – scientific form. Thus the *Encyclopedia of Folk Culture of Slovakia* aims to contribute to knowledge of the positive values of this culture and to clarifying its place in the process which we call the development of European civilization.

Today, the *Encyclopedia of Folk Culture of Slovakia* already lives its own life as a book and in electronic form on a CD-ROM. Not only colleagues from ethnography and related branches of science are interested in it, but also the wider cultured public. It won significant domestic and international prizes – the Prize of the Slovak Academy of Sciences for 1995, the Prize of the Literary Fund in the same year and the prestigious European award in 1996 of the International Prize for Ethnographic and Anthropological Studies of “Giuseppe Pitré – Salvatore Salomone Marino”, which is granted by the International Centre for Ethno-history in Palermo.