

Local Forms of Everyday Life in Hungary in the Light of Eighteenth–Twentieth-Century Archival Sources

About a New Momentum (“Lendület”) Research Project

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Abstract. The novelty of historical ethnographic, micro-historical, and historical anthropological research focusing on locality is that it does not examine the vertical stratification of society and does not consider the thematic knowledge constructions arising from this. Instead, research approaches the horizontal: local cultural patterns, life worlds, and everyday life; the opinion-forming role of local intellectuals (priests, pastors, teachers, clerks, etc.), local power structures, and the coexistence of economic, social, and political interest groups. By using archival and manuscript sources as widely as possible, in addition to the material side of everyday life, folkloristic areas of knowledge (e.g., narratives, gestures, customs, rites, beliefs, religious images and practices) can also be studied and revealed. The problem of religious and ethnic diversity makes these issues particularly relevant. As a final outcome of the research, we expect that with the help of local sampling and “thick descriptions” prepared on the basis of a large-scale source base, intricate shapes of everyday life can be identified. By focusing on historical localities, the research can take a decisive step towards rejuvenating the twentieth-century study of “folk culture” through a more modern approach that broadens the social vertical spectrum.

Keywords: locality, local society, local culture, migration, everyday life, historical ethnography, historical anthropology, microhistory

Brief topic designation

The research conducted by the MTA–ELTE Lendület “Momentum” Historical Folkloristics Research Group¹ is an organic continuation of the 2018–2023 project of the same research group (Lower priesthood in the eighteenth–twentieth-century local communities in Hungary and Transylvania), which focused on

1 This project is funded by the Momentum Program of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences; the author is the leader of the MTA–ELTE Lendület “Momentum” Historical Folkloristics Research Group.

the cultural mediating role of a well-defined ecclesiastical social stratum, namely Catholic priests and Protestant pastors in local communities.²

The new five-year-long research, which started in October 2025, covers the region of historical Hungary, and its thematic focus will be shifted to historical *localities*³ and *local communities*. In contrast to the traditional approach of the “local history’ school,” for us, localities provide an opportunity for deep historical excavations and data acquisition to help us understand broader social and cultural historical contexts along the lines of the questions and themes of historical anthropology, using the method of microhistory. In Hungarian ethnography, investigations into local cultures have been ongoing for decades, but in recent times they have increasingly lost their historical orientation, while Hungarian economic, social, and cultural history research—compared to Western European models—applies less often than it should the possibilities offered by the method of microhistory.⁴

There are still numerous basic questions to be answered regarding the thousands of modern local communities in historical Hungary. We have few exemplary studies based on the widest possible archival source base that, for example, focus on the socialisation and formation of new rural and urban communities emerging in the eighteenth century at the time of the repopulation following the Ottoman conquest, and on migration and integration as relevant issues to this day. Who and with what tools, channels, and culture-forming mechanisms formed the local cultures that became prevalent and characteristic of the population coming from all over and settling in the given locality? How can these processes be interpreted from the perspective of local power structures, lobby and interest groups, dominant personalities (families), and especially the highly active and influential intellectuals (priests, pastors, teachers, clerks, doctors, etc.)? The coexistence of religious and ethnic diversity renders these issues particularly exciting. In relation to intellectuals (as in our earlier research focusing on priests), it is considered that intellectuals were the (almost) exclusive creators of sources, and they were the ones, rather than peasants, who produced ego-documents of outstanding importance.⁵ As a final outcome of the research, it is expected that with the help of local sampling and “thick descriptions”⁶ prepared on the basis of a large-scale source, the intricacies of everyday life will be revealed.⁷ By focusing on historical localities, the research can take a major

2 Cp. Bárh, “The Lower Clergy;” Bárh, ed., *Lower Clergy*.

3 Cp. Appadurai, “The Production of Locality.”

4 Magnusson and Szijártó, *What is Microhistory*; Szijártó, *A történész mikroszkópja*.

5 Schulze, ed., *Ego-Dokumente*.

6 Cp. Geertz, “Sűrű leírás.”

7 Frykman and Löfgren, ed., *Force of Habit*; Lüdtke, ed., *The History of Everyday Life*; Gyáni, “A mindennapi élet”; Brewer, “Microhistory.”

step towards rejuvenating the twentieth-century academic tradition of “folk culture” through a more modern approach that broadens the social vertical spectrum.

Operationalisation and expected outputs

The research breaks with the interdisciplinary tradition in which the localities to be subjected to historical and ethnographic investigations are selected based on personal ties, local requests, wills, or other criteria that cannot be supported by source data. Instead of an external system of criteria, it seemed necessary to develop an internal, immanent scientific system of argumentation, that will enable us to decide where deep drilling should be carried out. To this end, in the first year of the project, the research group will conduct a macro- and meso-level source exploration and review to decide which members will map out the coverage and objective archival capabilities of the state, church, and demesne archives of early modern and modern Hungary. Data visualisation techniques are used for this purpose. Accordingly, the regions where the density surfaces of available and actually usable archival document (funds) are located will be selected. With the help of metadata tags and visualisations that go beyond the data clouds of archival records, the regions most suitable for the investigation, i.e., localities with the most relevant source documentation, are then selected for analysis.

By creating locality-based digital collections, the project makes the results accessible in the Digital Collection of the Folklore Department of ELTE⁸ already while the research is ongoing. Placing them in a public collection ensures the professional digital archiving and publication of the data, meeting both domestic and international metadata standards. At the same time, our goal is that our research project should comply with the latest trends in research data management.

For the selected localities, in the second year of the project, we intend to launch the process of source extraction using the methodologies of micro-history (basic research in archives and making copies) and organising them into databases. The investigations focus on the two (long) centuries between 1750 and 1950 (however, the establishment of specific time limits obviously depends on the unique characteristics of localities). The thorough collection of the archival documentation will be partly done in groups, and partly individually. In the first two years, extending the theoretical background of the research, mapping out the international literature, and the critical review and discussion of their adaptability are the main tasks.

In addition to the primary objective of the research project, the open-source digital knowledge base created for each locality brings social benefits, as it satisfies

8 folklorearchive.elte.hu (Accessed: 16 November 2025).

the continuously growing interest in ethnographic and local history research: it offers a reliable and verified knowledge base to the wider public interested in local history and to the related sciences. From the third to the fifth year of the project, the results will be published in joint and individual studies and monographs.

Ethnographers and folklorists with a historical approach, and historians with an ethnographic and social history approach are taking part in the project. It is a stated goal of the project to involve in research, data processing, and publishing the undergraduate, postgraduate, and doctoral students of the host institution. (Thereby, historically oriented research can also enable students' local fieldwork.)

The group expects to prepare at least fifty studies and articles. Five monographs are to be produced on five selected localities (partly single-authored, partly multi-authored). The group also plans three editions of source materials. In addition, four workshops, a large international conference, and a congress panel (SIEF) will be held on the topic. The ultimate goal of the project is to build professional relations in Central Europe (primarily: German, Austrian, Czech, Slovak, Romanian, Slovenian, Croatian, and Serbian contacts) to form the basis of consortia for future ERC research grants.

Ten thematic focal points of the research

The material foundations of everyday life: farming, production, subsistence

The archival sources from the eighteenth to the twentieth century enable a complex examination of the "way of life" as it is addressed in ethnographic interpretation. It is a methodological question how we can grasp this complexity in a way that the lifestyle elements of localities are not separated from each other (on the basis of later research fields), instead, are represented as an integral unit. The sphere of daily subsistence is inseparable from (habitual) actions and social gestures (with such largely overlooked elements as hygiene, body image, alcohol consumption, and others) organised around it. A subtopic to this question is how the local individuals who left behind source materials lived and managed their lives, the structure and existential situation of their incomes, and the temporal changes of these aspects within a given locality.⁹ At the same time, the question arises how intellectuals (priests, pastors, teachers, clerks, doctors, etc.) were provided for, putting a financial burden on the village community, or within a household/family.

9 Frykman and Löfgren, *Culture Builders*.

Social “histology”: interactions, groups, networks

Intense and thorough local research allows for a micro-historical approach to social interactions, networks, and groups. Special attention is given to the peasant family, the household, kinship, and the neighbourhood. In addition, such less investigated aspects as the military, women’s networks, or the problems of intellectual families and households are also examined. Where relevant, the network of connections between small and middle-class landowning families, either within a locality or between localities, cannot be neglected. The role of these families in shaping the locality’s culture can also be presupposed (cp. the role of benefactors, building churches, employing teachers, supplying priests/ministers/teachers with books, etc.). The representation of local and denominational interests of small and medium-sized noble families in county forums may also be important.

Local factors of power: dominant roles, dependency relations, interests

In our previous research cycle, we tried to present the local relations of priests/ministers. It transpired that the complexity of local power relations can be grasped through the complex micro-analyses of all actors. Now, the life world and interest network of serf-peasant interest groups, the *communitas*, manorial officials, local state officials, local intellectuals, and church officials will be subjected to this kind of resource exploration. All this is supplemented by the visualisation of the local network of dependencies.¹⁰

Intellectuality and local culture: mediation, uniformity, local character

In addition to the priests/ministers, the role of cultural mediators and other local representatives of the intelligentsia (teachers, clerks, notaries, doctors, etc.) is in our focus, which can be grasped through the sources documenting their daily activities, especially their ego-documents in the given period. The local intelligentsia’s life paths, studies, and book culture constitute the basis for the presentation of the complex local impact mechanisms of their activities.

Local religion

The concept of “local religion” in its current sense was developed in the works of the religious historian William Christian, especially in his 1981 book.¹¹ The concept has figured prominently in historical and anthropological religious research and is still relied on as a terminological and conceptual option. Among his followers, we should highlight the religious anthropologist David Stewart’s book about the demon world of the Greek

10 Cp. Sabean, *Power in the Blood*.

11 Christian, *Local Religion*.

island of Naxos, published a decade after Christian's book.¹² It is instructive that Stewart considered that the concept was usable in connection with his twentieth-century theme. In fact, as he argued, it is only worthwhile to approach real religious practice in this way, through thorough local fieldwork. For him, local religion was a focal point that included not only the religious elements called "folk" by historians and ethnographers, but also the "official" religious practices of local clerics and—what is especially important—the terrain of non-religious beliefs and customs (labelled as magical and superstitious) as well. Some anthropologists of religion continued this line of research in the twenty-first century.¹³ It has brought about a particularly considerable paradigmatic shift in Hungarian ethnographic studies, where strongly interrelated phenomena had earlier been artificially broken up into materials studied using the methods of divergent academic disciplines. In this framework, separate researchers dealt with the folk customs of the given settlement, separating its folk beliefs and its popular religiosity (that is, the popular practice of the official religion). Ethnography did not consider that the manifestations of the official religion and liturgy, represented by the local clergy, belonged to its subject. In our own research, we continue to examine local forms of religion in everyday life as an indivisible unit.¹⁴

Legal custom, morality, legal structures

We plan to conduct studies on the role of laws/customs/norms/morality/legal custom in local communities at several levels.¹⁵ At the community level, interaction between the law and the community, the acceptance, rejection, or specific transformations of the law appear as aspects of the research. At the family level, it is questionable how the official law influenced family life (marriage, adultery, domestic violence, [step]parent-child relations). At the level of the individual, there is the additional issue of legal awareness, legal perception, and legal knowledge, which might also lead to conflicts: it was not necessarily clear what people considered a crime, what made them feel guilty, and how they tried to circumvent the rules applicable to them. These factors cannot be separated from the ecclesiastical system of rules and the interweaving of religion and morality in the era examined.

Ethnicity, religion, migration

We focus on the ethnic and religious factors of migration from the perspective of the social and cultural transformation of emerging local communities. In the eighteenth

12 Stewart, *Demons and the Devil*.

13 For example, Pócs, ed., *Vannak csodák*.

14 Cp. Bárh, "Lower Clergy."

15 Tárkány Szűcs, *Magyar jogi népszokások*.

century, we see less harmonious, mostly conflictual patterns of ethnic and religious coexistence emerging from the sources, with the help of which the complex process of the formation and unification of local cultures can be clarified in our case studies. According to our research hypothesis, from the middle of the nineteenth century, changes in the population's religious rights, social and financial status, and spatial segregation contributed to the intensification of ethnic conflicts in multi-ethnic settlements. To obtain a clearer picture, we focus on the management and regulatory practices of church and state in the Bordieuan sense of "symbolic violence."¹⁶

Social and individual gestures

The research focuses on the concept of gestures, because they help us interpret the mentality, thinking, and habitual action patterns of historical actors when faced with the normative system of the local society. This is assisted by the situational exploration of gestures considered a fundamental element of everyday life (e.g., with the help of legal/trial documents and testimonies).¹⁷

Communication systems

The examination of verbal and non-verbal communication may include verbal aggression (swearing, threats, cursing), ways of expressing social and individual perceptions of time, ways of expressing and experiencing feelings, or the use of the body (arms, hands, facial expressions) in everyday communication. In addition, public (media elements, news, announcements) and hidden (rumor, gossip, social gathering) channels of local communication are also waiting to be explored.¹⁸

Individual life worlds, individuality and world view, individual reconstructions

Ultimately, the research aims to capture the individuality and worldview of historical individuals living in the places explored. For this, it is essential to uncover and analyse a sufficient amount of informative ego-documents (diaries, private letters, testimonies, etc.).¹⁹

16 Cp. Bourdieu et al., *Reproduction*.

17 Cp. Frykman and Löfgren, ed., *Force of Habit*.

18 Ehn et al., *Exploring Everyday Life*.

19 Schulze, ed., *Ego-Dokumente*; Báth, *The Exorcist of Sombor*.

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