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FOOD HERITAGE AND FOOD RITUALS AS AN INDISPENSABLE ELEMENT OF CONTEMPORARY 'CROSSOVER FOLK CUSTOMS'

THE EXAMPLE OF CSÖMÖR (HUNGARY)

ABSTRACT

Nowadays, 'classical' folk traditions are seen as an inherited spiritual and material cultural value from the past. The new millennium has seen the emergence of 'glocalisation', a process that goes hand in hand with globalisation: the role of local culture has been enhanced, which strengthens local identity and can also be a source of cultural capital that can be monetised through festivals and tourism. The activity of the new generation of 'traditional' communities is not limited to maintaining a conserved, static cultural heritage in an unchanged form. Instead, they are both reconstructing and rebuilding traditions, with the aim of creating new traditions that successfully appeal to the people of the present. This paper focuses on rituals and community interactions, presenting food types. Through some examples, it looks at how new folk customs are constructed according to the principles of crossover, design thinking and social innovation.

LOCATION OF THE RESEARCH: CSÖMÖR, A RESILIENT

Csömör is the second largest village in Hungary, a traditional dead-end settlement.¹ The village, which was depopulated during the Ottoman occupation, was settled by

1 Reference to this study: Katalin Juhász: Food Heritage and Food Rituals as an Indispensable Element of Contemporary 'Crossover Folk Customs'. The Case of Csömör (Hungary). In Anikó Bági and Patricia Lysaght (eds.): *Living Eating Habits, Revitalized Foodways and the Concepts of Tradition and Food Heritage*. Budapest: ELTE RCH Institute of Ethnology – Museum of Ethnography, 2025. pp. 367–384.

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Lutheran and Catholic Slovaks, and later by Catholic Germans from Budaörs, Pest County (Hungary).² From the late 19th century, the socio-ethnic composition of the population, which had by then doubled, changed radically, mainly because of those who moved there to reside, from Budapest. Many of the old calendar customs (e.g., carnival masquerade; Saint Lucia Day customs) were already being revived – from memory – in the 1930s.³ The proximity of the capital, Budapest, favoured bourgeois transformation, but a large part of the population held on to their old traditions.

In tri-ethnic Csömör, even socialism could not totally disrupt community life and social cohesion – there was always, for example, religious education in the schools, while the Catholic Germans never missed the preparation of the Corpus Christi processional street carpets made of flowers, and now other denominations and non-religious people join them in these processions.

And when, with the collapse of the socialist regime (1990), the previous cultural orientation determined from above ceased, and a local government independent of political parties was established, there was even more opportunity to apply local ideas and patterns in creating a renewed festive culture.⁴

2 The mass settlement of Slovaks and Germans in two-thirds of the country's territory (in settlements depopulated due to the Turkish occupation) was generally characteristic during the 18th century. For details of Slovak settlement, see: Gyivicsán, Anna: *Anyanyelv, kultúra, közösség. A magyarországi szlovákok* ('Mother tongue, culture, community. Slovaks in Hungary') (Budapest: Teleki László Alapítvány, 1993). Regarding Csömör, see, with further references: Báti, Anikó – Juhász, Katalin – Zentai, Andrea and Vargha, Anita: 'Szlovák hagyományrekonstrukció és örökségesítés Csömörön' ('Heritagisation and the Reconstruction of Slovak Traditions in Csömör'), *Ethno-lore* 36 (2019), 81–122.

3 Gönyey Ébner, Sándor: 'A farsang hajdan és ma Csömörön' ('Carnival in the past and today in Csömör'), *Ethnographia* XLIII (1932), 28–29. <https://real-j.mtak.hu/17313/1/Ethnographia_1932_043.pdf> accessed 5 September 2023.

4 According to Pusztai and Schell, the genesis of the East European 'new wave of inventing traditions' is the result, first of all, of getting rid of the previous cultural orientation defined from above, and then after the institutions of local self-government were restored, the opportunity arose to apply local ideas and patterns in the creation of the renewed festivity culture. See, in this context, Pusztai, Bertalan: 'Das Schicksal der Kultur und des Lokalen in der postmodernen Image Produktion' ('The Fate of Culture and the Local in Postmodern Image Production'), in Schell, Csilla ... Prosser-Schell, Michael and Pusztai, Bertalan eds.: *Re-Invention of Tradition in Ostmitteleuropa nach 1990: Neue, "gefunden" und revitalisierte Feste mit Schwerpunkt auf Ungarn* (Münster / New York: Waxmann, 2018), 21–38; Schell, Csilla: "Laßt uns eine Tradition machen!" Verdichtete Beobachtungen zur Wandlung des Festwesens und zum Phänomen der "Re-Invention of Tradition" nach der Wende in Ungarn. Ein Impulsbeitrag' ("Let's make a tradition!" Condensed observations on the transformation of festivities and the phenomenon of the "re-invention of tradition" after the fall of communism in Hungary. An inspirational contribution'), in Schell, Prosser-Schell, and Pusztai: *Re-Invention of Tradition in Ostmitteleuropa nach 1990: Neue, "gefunden" und revitalisierte Feste mit Schwerpunkt auf Ungarn*, 9–19.

Thus, the re-invention of local traditions that regained momentum after 1990 in former socialist regions of Eastern Europe, could be realised relatively soon in the case of Csömör. After the political regime-change, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) were formed one after another, and an extremely diverse traditional preservation activity developed in Csömör on the initiative of (community and individual) citizens. Private and public collections of folk costumes, local history relics (documents, photos, objects), and ethnographic objects were formed, as were minority organisations and folklore groups.⁵

The author of this study began fieldwork in Csömör in 2016 as part of the project 'Reetnographia 2' of the Hungarian Ethnographic Society and the Ethnographic Museum, Budapest. In addition, Anikó Báti and myself have been studying and documenting various areas of Csömör's gastronomic culture since 2018 as part of different research projects.⁶ In this volume also we are both dealing with the food-heritage-related-activities of the Slovak tradition-preserving community in Csömör – though approaching it from a somewhat different perspective, respectively.⁷

One of the key findings of our previous research on cultural and social resilience is that Csömör's exceptionally high level of resilience is based on the social capital generated by the strength of its civil society. Since 1990, the population has doubled with people moving out of Budapest in order to reside in the Csömör area. According to a sociological survey in this context, most of the newcomers have integrated into the local society.

At local level, Csömör's representative body acting on behalf of its citizens, is not composed of political parties but of members of local NGOs. It is also important to note that, contrary to general trends, intangible and tangible cultural heritage is not primarily used for developing tourism, but rather for the building of community and the strengthening of local identity. As the mayor, István Fábri, emphasised: 'Csömör is a large municipality of 10,000 inhabitants, but we call it a village because of its

5 Báti–Juhász–Zentai and Vargha: 'Szlovák hagyományrekonstrukció és örökségésítés Csömörön', 86–90.

6 2018–2024: 'The Social Embeddedness of the Public Catering of Children. Issues and Opportunities' (NKFIH 128925); 2021: 'Social and Cultural Resilience in the Carpathian Basin' (ELKH–NTI); 2021–2023: 'Heritage Education, Cultural Memory, Identity' (ELKH–NTI SA-35/2021); 2022–2026: 'Heritage construction in contemporary community settings – Identity, Memory, Representation' (NKFIH 143295).

7 See Anikó Báti's study in this volume.

community life and traditions. If I were to sum up the two things that make us love living here, they are tradition and community.’

Thanks to the activity of local communities, cultural life in the settlement is vibrant and diverse: there is a settlement-level event almost every week, and, in addition to this, smaller-scale programmes are also organised on a daily basis. It is quite common for these programmes to include the sharing or the selling of various foods, and there are also many that are specifically gastronomic in nature.

The common preparation of meals by groups of friends, and the offering of homemade cakes and other delicacies to the entire village population, are key tools for community building in the settlement. And special emphasis is placed on food-heritage activities by the ‘Furmicska’ Association, based in the ‘House of Our Tót [Slovak] Traditions.’⁸

CONTEMPORARY (FOOD) HERITAGISATION

The Furmicska Association in Csömör is an excellent example of innovative contemporary heritagisation. Activities pertaining to it are not limited to preserving or reconstructing cultural heritage in an unaltered form, but feature rather both a reconstruction and a construction of traditions, with the aim of creating new and constantly-renewed traditions that successfully appeal to people.

Renewed tradition takes a ‘crossover approach’, combining both the local and the ‘imported’, and old and new elements. It is thus characteristic of contemporary heritagisation trends and practices, not only in music (where the term was first used), but also in other areas of culture.⁹ The Furmicska Association leader, Erzsébet Szabó, is not only passionately committed to preserving and continuing the Slovak traditions of Csömör, she is also – due to her good organisational and networking skills, and sufficient creativity – able to unite and successfully manage the

8 From the end of the 18th century until 1945, the folk name ‘Tót’ was officially used, which only acquired a pejorative meaning as a result of the Slovak national awakening in the 19th–20th centuries. Although the name ‘Slovak’ became established, the name ‘Tót’ still prevails among Slovaks in Hungary – see: Gyivicsán, Anna: *Anyanyelv, kultúra, közösség. A magyarországi szlovákok* (‘Mother tongue, culture, community. Slovaks in Hungary’) (Budapest: Teleki László Alapítvány, 1993), 55.

9 The study of this contemporary heritagisation process is increasingly popular in Hungarian social and cultural studies. See: Eitler, Ágnes and Ament-Kovács, Bence eds.: ‘Polyphonic Perceptions of Heritage and Heritagization – Case Studies’, *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica* 68/2 (2023).

Association as a whole.¹⁰ She instinctively applies the so-called 'design thinking' approach, which is:

both an agile tool and a way of thinking; a creative problem-solving process that proactively responds to the needs arising from the economic and social environment, using novel solutions. Its central element is, in addition, continuous connection with internal and external users and a primary focus on solutions.¹¹

By 'internal users' is meant the members of the Association (from children to adults), who, themselves, actively participate with their own ideas, while 'externals' are the visitors to or audience of the various programmes. Some of the latter have direct friendly/relative relationships with the Association members – thus forming a wider circle of stakeholders – and they regularly participate in the programmes. The other part consists of interested new residents of Csömör or visitors from nearby settlements.

The Slovak community organises almost a hundred events a year. Half of this count as various performances by dance groups. The other half (about fifty per year) are feastday 'traditions', seasonal household activities celebrated as community programmes (pig slaughtering, canning, harvesting), education (day care, courses, camps), and municipal events (e.g., 'Puff Pastry and Doughnut Festival at Shrovetide') – all of which are also occasions for cooking, eating together, and selling food.

The culinary part of the new 'folk traditions' of the Slovak traditionalists in Csömör, is not limited to just the preparation of selected dishes as it also includes appropriate food preparation and dining rituals, modes of hospitality and consumption, as well as scenery accessories and decorations that fit the occasion. These also reflect a crossover approach, design thinking, and (innovative) creativity. The cooking is done while wearing traditional costumes, and partly with traditional tools (authenticity), in a 'show kitchen', so that the public can follow the work live (performance). At the same time, modern techniques and tools are used in order to

¹⁰ About contemporary key actors in heritagisation, see Eitler, Ágnes: 'Towards the Analysis of Tradition-Based Projects of Locality: A Case Study from Rural Hungary', *Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics* 16/1: 29–54. DOI: <<https://10.2478/jef-2022-0003>> accessed 5 August 2024.

¹¹ Since the early 2000s, 'design thinking' has developed into one of the most influential approaches to foster creativity and innovation. For a review of this principle, with many references, see: Syed, Fahad – Shah, Sana Hafeez – Waseem, Zenab and Tariq, Adeel: 'Design Thinking for Social Innovation: A Systematic Literature Review & Future Research Directions. *Proceedings of 1st International Conference on Business, Management & Social Sciences (ICBMASS) 2021*, Available at SSRN: <https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3916835> accessed 5 August 2024.

prepare the large quantities of food partly for sale, and old traditional recipes are also adapted to today's needs and circumstances (innovation). Catering, and the sale of homemade food, represent an important source of financial support for the Association (profit-making management, sustainability).

In terms of food heritage, there are several types of events involving food-heritage elements (see the list below), but in most cases each event will include more than one aspect of food heritage.

Types of community food heritage events:

- old folk customs in a modern garb with food heritage elements
- new folk customs – community events with old and new foods
- community food-preparation as a traditional programme
- education
- hospitality, making and selling food

The activities of the Furmicska Association in Csömör clearly demonstrate that both the preservation, as well as the renewal, of traditions, are in dynamic interaction. In the following discourse, I present some selected activities of the Association based on ethnographic data, and I highlight how the aforementioned concepts are reflected in traditional recipes, food serving, communal dining, and economic practices.

OLD FOLK CUSTOMS IN MODERN GARB WITH FOOD HERITAGE ELEMENTS

Carnival tradition reconstruction

In the 1930s, the people of Csömör revived, from memory, the *carnival tradition of soliciting donations in masks*, at the request of the Hungarian ethnographer/collector, Sándor Gönyey (1886–1963), for photographic purposes. Based on the description provided about the event and the photographic record from 1931,¹² the custom was reconstructed in Csömör with the participation of schoolchildren, from

12 For two photographic collections about carnival created by Sándor Gönyey Ébner in 1931, see: Gönyey Ébner, Sándor: 'A farsang hajdan és ma Csömörön' ('Carnival in the past and today in Csömör'), 28–29.

2022. Unlike how the old custom had operated, however, nowadays the masked team of schoolchildren goes, not to houses as was customary in the past, but to the school classrooms, where they collect food donations (both traditional and modern), from the pupils, and which they consume together in the afternoon.

All Saints' Day and the *Day of the Dead* are family holidays for the Slovak community of Csömör, when they visit the graves of their dead in the cemetery and remember them together. Traditionally, an 'evening meal' for the dead, consisting of wine, water, and pastry, was prepared as, according to traditional belief, dead family members visit the family home at night, during these holidays. To give the Slovak community a sense of national identity on this holiday, Erzsébet Szabó introduced a new 'folk custom' based on her own childhood memories. Every year since 2011, on All Saints' Eve, participants march to the cemetery (dressed in mourning), singing, carrying torches and candles, and remembering their Slovak ancestors next to graves with Slovak inscriptions, with prayers and wreaths (Fig. 2). Erzsébet talks about the old customs (children always listen to this with astonishment), and then the participants return to the 'House of Our Tót Traditions' for a modest buffet dinner (e.g., bread with lard, and pastries). In 2022, the All Saints' Day table, set with water and wine, was complemented with a traditional pastry, the *guglicska* ('walnut basket') in the 'Tót Kitchen', as a decoration (Fig. 3).

NEW FOLK CUSTOMS, COMMUNITY EVENTS WITH OLD AND NEW FOODS

The Ecumenical Prayer Service on 20th of August: Reinventing tradition through food

The ecumenical prayer service held on the 20th of August is largely a constructed tradition. The harvest wreath (once gifted by the harvesters to the landlord) is ceremonially presented to the mayor. Afterwards, the pastors of the different denominations and the choir hold a musical prayer service, consecrating the new bread, which is then distributed among those present. This is followed by a traditional meal prepared in the 'Tót Kitchen'.

The cooking brigade (in appropriate costume, of course) heats the oven at dawn and starts preparing the food. The new bread is traditionally baked in the oven by a married couple. The menu always includes rooster soup with liver-bread dumplings.



Fig. 1. Masked team of Slovak schoolchildren with food-donations in the school, Csömör, 2022. The foods in the wicker basket, are: home-made sausages, apples, store-bought pretzels, and oatmeal crackers. (Photo: 'Vargosz', Csömör, 2022)



Fig. 2. All Saints' Day ceremony in the cemetery, Csömör, 2022. (Photo by Péter Klacsán, Csömör, 2022)



Fig. 3. All Saints' Day decoration in the 'Tót Kitchen', Csömör, 2022. (Photo by Péter Klacsán, Csömör, 2022)



Fig. 4. The menu after 20th August ceremony: rooster soup with liver-bread dumplings, stuffed cabbage, and dessert (different pastries). (Photo by Katalin Juhász, Csömör, 2024)

The latter element consists of a paste of spicy chicken liver with breadcrumbs and eggs, which is now cooked in the soup, no longer wrapped in a tea towel, but stuffed into a plastic casing. Fig. 4 shows how it is prepared and served: the dumplings are cut into rings and served with the cooked meat and root vegetables. The soup is served with homemade pasta ('rotini'), which is also made here. The second course is stuffed cabbage. This is followed by a variety of pastries (Fig. 4). In the past, many people would bring a plate of pastries to these get-togethers. In the last 10 years, however, the organisers have specialised the various activities – the different tasks involved in preparing the traditional meal are now assigned to specific individuals/volunteers. Thus, some cook, others serve or sell, and still others make pastries.

This event is actually a multi-constructed tradition,¹³ which creates a specific community identity by reinterpreting old elements according to the current needs of the community. The symbolic gesture of the harvest wreath is now directed towards the mayor (the main 'owner' of the village as its highest-ranking leader), while the ecumenical prayer-hour, and the blessing of the new bread, have become a multicultural ceremony by integrating several religious traditions into it.

The creative recontextualisation of ritual elements makes them accessible and meaningful in a modern, pluralistic setting. Innovation is expressed in the combination of religious and secular symbolism, bridging cultural and generational divides.

This adaptation procedure reflects a practical innovation¹⁴ aligned with design-thinking principles: problem-solving based on context, user needs, and available resources. The communal sharing of the blessed bread, and the ritual of eating together, also function as integration mechanisms as new residents can eat traditional foods at a common table with the local inhabitants, thus forming a food community which contributes to social cohesion (Fig. 5).¹⁵

13 The forgotten 18th century tradition of presenting a harvest wreath was re-established by the Minister of Agriculture, Ignác Darányi, in of 1901. In the 1930s, it was first linked to the Saints Peter and Paul Day (29 June) and the blessing of new bread, and then to the feast of Saint Stephen on 20 August. The communist regime stripped 20 August of its sacred content and declared it to be the feast of the constitution ('Day of the Constitution') and new bread. After the change of regime (1989–1990), it again became the feast of Saint Stephen and the feast of the blessing of new bread; see: Kovács, Ákos: *A kitalált hagyomány* ('The Invented Tradition') (Pozsony: Kalligram, 2006). Cf. Hobsbawm, Eric and Ranger, Terence eds.: *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

14 Brown, Tim: *Change by design: How design thinking creates new alternatives for business and society* (New York: Harper Business, 2009).

15 Douglas, Mary: 'Deciphering a meal', *Daedalus* 101/11 (1972), 61–81.



Fig. 5. Blessing and sharing the bread and 'Love hospitality' (agape) after the prayer service, for every participant. VIP guests and other actors are in the big hall (inside), and the wider audience is outside. (Photo: 'Vargosz', Csömör, 2024)

The example of the rooster soup clearly demonstrates creative adaptation to technological changes: the use of artificial casings instead of traditional tea towels contributes to the more efficient, standardised preparation of the dish, while, at the same time, preserving its authentic nature. In terms of work organisation, appropriate division and the specialisation of tasks, make the implementation of the event more efficient. All of these solutions clearly reflect the design-thinking principle of ‘practical innovation’¹⁶ (even if the actors themselves are not aware of this): the needs of the users and the circumstances drive the change.

OCCASIONS FOR COMMUNAL COOKING

The Gingerbread Village: Creating a new community tradition

A special occasion for preparing food communally is the building of a *gingerbread village* before Christmas. The trend of building gingerbread villages emerged in Hungary in the early 2000s.¹⁷ The first gingerbread village was built in Csömör in 2016 by members of the Furmicska Association, on the initiative of Erzsébet Szabó and based on her designs. Since then, the ‘Our Sweet Little Village’ project has become an increasingly-elaborate Christmas event. The realistic village layout includes churches, public buildings, shops, houses, and even a railway station.

The baking of the gingerbread, based on a special recipe, starts at the end of November, and involves most of the Association members, both children and adults alike. The finished model is displayed in the ‘House of Our Tót Traditions’ and is seen by many.

In recent years, the exhibition, which has been enriched with many other elements (a life-size nativity scene in a courtyard, Christmas figures, a Christmas interior in a country house, mobile retro toys, and illuminated decorations next to the gingerbread village), attracts mainly local and regional visitors (with children), but has also gained national fame.

16 Hobsbawm and Ranger: *The Invention of Tradition*.

17 The history of gingerbread villages and towns in Europe and Hungary is summarised by: Juhász, Katalin: ‘Hagyománykonstrukció, örökségképzés: közösségi mézeskalácsfalú-építés mint új karácsonyi “népszokás”’ (“Tradition construction, heritage formation: community gingerbread village building as a new Christmas “folk custom””), *FolkMAGazin* 29/6 (2022), 42–45.



Fig. 6. 'Our Sweet Village': The realistic village layout made from gingerbread, includes more than 200 objects made from: 70 kg flour, 20 kg powdered sugar, 20 kg honey, 120 eggs, 6 kg margarine, and 2 cartons of mixed spice. (Photo by Péter Klacsán, Csömör, 2019)

The exhibition is free to visit, but revenue generation has also been creatively solved: self-made Christmas-tree decorations, gingerbread, souvenirs, and also homemade jams, preserves, smoked sausage and bacon, as well as lard and greaves made during the November communal pig-slaughtering, are sold, all of which are in high demand. The 'Tót Kitchen',¹⁸ where visitors can buy hot tea, mulled wine, pancakes, 'görhöny' (traditional Slovak potato pie), and other usual delicacies, is also open for business on weekends.

After the holidays, the gingerbread buildings are auctioned off and the money used to support the Association. There were also times when the makers divided the pieces among themselves.

The trend of building gingerbread villages is also a good example of the phenomenon called – after Eric Hobsbawm – 'invented tradition', for which the term 'heritage construction' is more commonly used nowadays. While the old Advent-Christmas dramatic folk customs are being transformed into stage, kindergarten-school, and residential community 'programmes', and also into 'events' within the framework of folklorism, the needs of today for the strengthening of communities, are thought to be best served by the creation of new traditions – that successfully appeal to modern people and establish them in their own environment – such as is evident in the exhibition and fair in Csömör.

The gingerbread-village building is a new type of community practice originally adopted from outside, which the members of the Association have filled with local content and meaning. This is a good example of creating a completely new community tradition for a traditional holiday, which allows for individual creativity alongside repetitive elements, and which helps to raise awareness of the value of the local built heritage, thereby strengthening identity.

For newcomers, the gingerbread project provides an inclusive, low-threshold opportunity for integration, allowing them to engage creatively and collaboratively without requiring prior expertise in local/Slovak traditions. From a design-thinking perspective, the project represents an iterative, collaborative process,¹⁹ evolving each year with new additions and refinements based on participant feedback.

18 About the 'Tót Kitchen', see also Anikó Báti's study of in this volume.

19 Brown: *Change by Design: How Design Thinking Transforms Organizations and Inspires Innovation*; Liedtka, Jeanne: 'Why design thinking works', *Harvard Business Review* 96/5 (2018), 72–79.

CONCLUSIONS

Among the many activities of the Slovak community of Csömör, the examples presented here clearly show that local traditional foods, and their joint preparation and consumption, are given special emphasis in all of the community's programmes. They creatively and innovatively incorporate selected elements of food heritage into their most diverse programmes.

The leader of the Slovak community, Erzsébet Szabó (a gardener and a florist by training), plans and manages all of the community events, most of which are performative (linked to calendar festivals and agriculture), including 'sets', costumes, the 'script' and its implementation, as well as PR-marketing communication, and the sale of home-made products.

Erzsébet is able to unite and manage the community, as she is a good organiser, has the necessary network capital, and is appropriately creative in both obtaining funding and devising programmes and projects. One of the secrets of her success is design thinking (this is increasingly used in business and event planning), the essence of which is to understand and serve current 'consumer' needs, leaving room for innovation and new developments. This design-thinking principle can be found in every aspect of the Association's operations, and its members apply it instinctively, without ever having heard of it.

Through communal cooking, eating, and the reinterpretation of recipes, food becomes a medium for transmitting collective memory and place-based identity. The tangible acts of preparing and sharing traditional dishes symbolically tie participants to the locality's Slovak heritage, while also creating an inclusive identity open to new interpretations and participants. In this way, food heritage acts as a dynamic cultural practice that anchors community identity even amid demographic and social change.

This an isolated case, but according to the data, an analogical practice is common in the whole country: food heritage is a prominent feature in heritage conservation everywhere, a central object of community programmes and festivals, and its presentation can be implemented in many different ways. There are many communities similar to those in Csömör, in Hungary, where traditions are being preserved, reconstructed, retaught, and revitalised in similar complex ways, thereby meeting today's needs.

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