

Institutional developments of the „sorbian folk dance“ after the Second World War

„The Wends (respectively the Sorbian people) only have one national dance. He has some resemblance to the polonaise and the menuet at the same time and can be danced following all melodies which we have named the folk songs with tempo di menuetto, polacca and serski (wendish). The people call this dance even the wendish one. (serska reja).“

(Smoler/Haupt 1996 [1841/43]:218)

This was written by the Sorbian folklorist Jan Arnošt Smoler in 1841 in his collection of upper and lower Sorbian folk songs. Here he mentions for the first time **the** „Sorbian folk dance“. In Sorbian language today it is called the “serbska reja”. The original text follows a detailed portrayal of the dance action but does not describe single steps or elements of the dance.

The Sorbian people are one of the four approved national minorities in Germany. Their number is estimated today at about 40,000 people in the upper and 20,000 in the lower Lusatia region. This number becomes considerably smaller if we only count Sorbian speakers. Following an inception of a so-called "national rebirth" since the middle of the 19th century, the collection of folk culture and the transfer into written form became more and more important. Most notably under the influence of the work of Johann Gottfried Herder, this led to a construction of a national culture in the Sorbian history as well. Of course the Sorbs knew more one "typical" folk dance at this time. Many other dances were well known. Nevertheless, these dances were not ascribed with comparable meanings as the one identified by Smoler. Hence, the other dances remained secret and were not reflected neither by the collectors nor the dancers even as specific and typical Sorbian "national" dances. Therefore, **the** "serbska reja" was not described any more as one "folk dance of the Sorbs" besides many others, but was emphasised as a specific "sorbian" national one. Smoler marked the "sorbian folk dance" as a "national dance" and lifted it up hereby to a new level of meaning. Above all, in the 20th century within the folklore work the interpretation of Smoler was used over and over again for their treatments of stage dances. This ensured that **the** "serbska reja" to this day is seen as an embodiment of the Sorbian national dance and is found itself in current folklore discourses about tradition and modernity.

Nevertheless, at no time did there exist a "danced" equivalent of the homogeneous image of an "own, real and authentic" folk dance in everyday life or at festive days of the Sorbian people. Where at first numerous facets and stampings of folk dances could be observed, by-and-by developed an independent phenomenon of **the** Sorbian folk dance developed. In terms of the sociologist Emile Durkheim's the "serbska reja" became a "fait social" – a "social fact"¹. Therefore, since that time this phenomenon carries a self-image which is based on processes of negotiation between the surrounding conditions and the interpretations of its single bearers. In contrast to the "folk dances of the Sorbs" **the** "Sorbian folk dance" (Cf. Lorencec in 2003), respectively the "serbska reja", arises out of its real substance. This emerged self-image was never fixed but permanently negotiated and attached with new meanings. Different surrounding conditions regulated the phenomenon and processes of negotiation and interpretation which transformed its understanding from time to time. At least single actors or bearers of culture formed the "sorbian folk dance" in a decisive way.

How the "serbska reja" as the so-called Sorbian national dance could be institutionalised after the Second World War in distinctive ways is the subject of this article. By showing the example of the "Serbski ludowy ansambl" – literally translated from the Sorbian language as "Sorbian Folk Ensemble" but in German language officially called "Sorbian National Theatre" – I will indicate the factors of the process of institutionalization of the Sorbian folk dance by using the theory of institutionalization of the sociologist Richard W. Scott².

I. The "serbska reja" as an institution

Until today repeatedly the question is asked as to, when a folk dance is specifically sorbian, authentic and traditional. More or less clearly developed images and claims emerged about what can be identified as a sorbian folk dance in general and what to expect from it. Thereby different interpretations clashed again and again. Divergent "*expectations* about the observance of certain *rules*, which claim obliging *validity*" (Esser 2000:2, emphasis in the original)³ led to debates about the authenticity of its substance between traditional protection and modern staging. Beyond these permanent discourses of interpretation, the serbska reja became an institution. According to Scott, it incorporates first of all a certain canon of control. This canon seems meaningful and adequate in a specific time for the large part of the bearers of culture. As well as this canon of control that exists as a social construct, social facts also

¹ Durkheim defines a „social fact“ (= fait social) as an every more or less agreed kind of action, which appears in general areas of a given society and which has a life of its own independent from its individual statements. (cf. Durkheim 1965 [1895]: 114).

² „Varying Emphases: The Three Pillars of Institutions.“ In: Scott 1995: 34 ff.

³ Translated from German by myself.

develop a life of their own, which emerges according to general frameworks and also determine the future action of the single actors. The sociologists Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann describe this interaction between basic conditions and single actors or actor groups in the process of the institutionalization and creation of social facts as a dialectic principle⁴. Institutions once established „win about the action of the people soon an objective power from which they can hardly avoid, although they have created the rules and the institutions based on it by their own, and also perpetually reproduce them by their activities“ (Esser 2000: 3)⁵. By and by this canon reacts in current way counter to future actions of single bearers of culture. According to Scott’s theory of institutionalization not only a general framework has influence on the establishment of, for example, folk art ensembles. The guidelines of action appeal to single actors or groups of actors, although if they have originated only from the actors themselves and are maintained by their activities. Scott defines his term “institution” in the following way:

„Institutions consist of cognitive, normative, and regulative structures and activities that provide stability and meaning to social behavior. Institutions are transported by various carriers – cultures, structures, and routines – and they operate at multiple levels of jurisdiction. In this conceptualization, institutions are multifaced systems incorporating symbolic systems – cognitive constructions and normative rules – and regulative processes carried out through and shaping social behavior.“ (Scott 1995: 33, emphasis in the original).

Phenomena like the serbska reja and its historical social construction are seldom reflected and fixed consciously in written forms. Hence, it is extremely difficult to fathom its complexity. Since such phenomena are often perceived as relatively stable dimensions, perpetual adaptations and processes of negotiation always challenge them. On the one hand, institutions reflect specific basic conditions. On the other hand, their directives of action retro-act on actors or actor groups although these directives have originated only from the actors themselves and are maintained by their activities. To capture these different and changing dimensions of the institution serbska reja, I will explain the three pillars of the process of institutionalization as defined by Scott.

⁴ Cf. Berger, Peter L./ Luckmann, Thomas. 1969/1987. *Die gesellschaftliche Konstruktion der Wirklichkeit. Eine Theorie der Wissenssoziologie*. Frankfurt/Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag.

⁵ Translated from German by myself.

II. The three pillars of institutionalization⁶

Scott describes three pillars for explaining institutionalization processes: the regulative, the normative and the cognitive one. All three pillars are closely connected and influence each other. Nevertheless, they may have different strengths. The regulative pillar encompasses the temporary prevailing general frameworks that have an effect as political or economical factors of influence from the outside acting on the social fact. Thus they provide the general scope of action for its development. Written regulations and laws, which go along with mechanisms of control and sanctions, stay in the very centre. The cognitive pillar describes individual, subjective experiences and creative knowledge of single bearers of culture as actors. Guidelines of behaviour and values, which can be described within the normative pillar, emerge out of the permanent negotiations between these single actors within the general framework. In contrast to the regulative pillar with its impact rather “from outside” these internal processes of negotiation are likewise action-oriented in dealing with the social fact. Nevertheless, they do not underlie legal possibilities of sanction from the outside, but rather internal social control. Such new general-valid, for example, originate with the establishment of new organizations.

In contrast to the rather orally imparted knowledge about many different folk dances in the premodern age the process of institutionalization of the serbska reja produced in the 20th century is a consolidation of written regulations and fixed norms with a homogenizing trend to a national dance. The non-national folk dances of the Sorbian people on the other side are marked by changeability and heterogeneity of everyday life and festive days. The establishment of the serbska reja as a social fact out of the folk dances often led to the fact that the dances of daily life stand diametrically opposed to it, although their bearers helped in creating and negotiating it at the discursive level. The three pillars of institutionalization help to exemplify different levels and meanings of the serbska reja in professional, semi-professional and amateurish Sorbian dance groups. In the next chapter I choose the Sorbian Folk Ensemble in Bautzen/Budyšin for showing this complexity of development.

III. The development of the Sorbian Folk Ensemble.

The establishment of the serbska reja as national dance we can be traced from Smoler’s first description. Until the world wars there were a huge number of initiatives to search for folk dances of the Sorbs and to collect them systematically. After 1945 the reconstruction of the

⁶ A more detailed analysis of Scott’s „three pillars“ I carried out already in "*Wessen Tradition? Grundzüge der Institutionalisierung des „sorbischen Volkstanzes“*" in *Lětopis* 54(2007)2: 3-19.

Sorbian cultural life was marked by the foundation of many dance groups. These groups were part of regional chapters of the Domowina, the umbrella organization of Sorbian associations. The primary intention was the preservation and care of the Sorbian folk culture. For the practical negotiation and implementation of norms and values leading to increasing anchoring and professionalization of the Sorbian folk dance in the post-war period, three aspects were of outstanding importance: first the capturing of the stage as a new place of the dance, second the number of invented dance festivals as new occasion of dance and third the teachings of Igor Moissejew, head of the State Folk Dance Ensemble of the USSR. The search for the "national character" and the "feeling of the people", according to Moissejew, were the also given paradigms also for the Sorbians engaged in the cultural sector. This shows the relatively rigid and nationalistic understanding of folk-art-production at the time. For the artistic work within such organizations there were fixed aims and detailed tasks, which oriented themselves on the one hand decisively to existing frame paradigms, and on the other hand, to specific subjective images of single actors. According to social position or background everybody plays specific roles, which are reflected in the norms and values as well as in the individual knowledge and action. With the establishment of the first postwar dancing groups among the Sorbian people, trends of professionalization can be observed. Additionally, new places, events and functions of folk dance come increasingly to the fore.

The reconstruction of the Sorbian cultural life after the Second World War was marked among other things, by the foundation of many dance groups which were preserved within the single regional organizations of the Domowina⁷ and aimed at the preservation and care of the Sorbian folk dance. At first the Sorbian cultural brigade as an ensemble of the Sorbian high school in Bautzen was founded in 1949, led by Handrij Cyž. In only the first year they took part in the second Festival of the World Youth and Students in Budapest with four dancing couples choreographed by Sonja Šajbic. New "national costumes of Hoyerswerda" were made especially for this occasion. The scenes "Pisane sanki" (= coloured sledges) and "Pražna reja" (= spinning room dance) also were presented (Nd 1950a: 3). A year later more than 500 singers and 400 dancing couples in Sorbian national costumes took part on the first Central Sorbian National Meeting in Bautzen. Also under the direction of Šajbic, dancers presented the mass scene „Burske lěto“ (= Year of the Peasant) (Nd 1950b: 3). Two-thousand pioneers from 62 schools led by Jan Meškank introduced three folk dances. The first Sorbian National Meeting in 1951 in Upper Lusatia released an impetus of new cultural consciousness and creation of so called national art emerged. In the end, Sorbian cultural groups took part in the third World

⁷ The Domowina was founded in 1912 as the Alliance of the Lusatian Sorbians inc. It acts as an umbrella organization of Sorbian associations and unions.

Festival of the Youth and Students in 1951 in Berlin as part of the "National program of the GDR".

Twelve pairs danced the choreography „Žně“ (= harvest) of the choreographer and pedagogue Thea Maass from Dresden. Also the mass scene "Burske lěto" was performed by 415 pairs from the Upper and 60 pairs from the Lower Lusatia (Nd 1951: 2). In addition to the official shows, Sorbian groups also appeared as an independent Sorbian folk art ensemble. (Sorbisches National-Ensemble 2005: 14). The new beneficial political framework as well as the success of the choreographed works strengthened the wish for a professionalization of the artistic creations (Cf.. Sorbisches National-Ensemble 2005). Beginning in 1945 Jurij Winar, who had acquired recognition as a choirmaster, conductor and composer campaigned for the foundation of a Sorbian folk art ensemble whose members should be found in the amateur work and trained afterwards as professional artists. Advisors and models were sought out mostly in the neighbouring Slavic countries that already owned professional ensemble structures. The direction for the artistic work was based on the teaching of Moissejew, who had developed the "Dances of the people of the Soviet Union" in 1951 that determined the principles of the development of the folklore of dance. Sorbian delegates introduced his thesis during the third World Festival of the Youth and Students. Moissejew named the study of the folk art and the history of the people, filtering out typical characteristics of the dance and the treatment of this material by variation and combination of the movements for the stage as essential points (Moissejew 1951: 9–15). In January 1952, the central cultural committee of the Domowina discussed about the cultural tasks of the 40 cultural groups under their umbrella. They put Moissejew's thesis into the centre of the new orientation regarding the establishment of a new Sorbian self-consciousness. On the 14th of February the same year the "Circle of Friends of the Sorbian folk dances" was established. The new guidelines led by Pětr Malink became the normative basis for the development of the dance folklore:

1. To ascertain all literature about the Sorbian dances. A member of the circle enrolls fluently all written sources tracked down and recommends them to the members of the circle for study.
2. To study all living sources. In addition we want to do research on old dances, conventions and customs among old people, musicians and so on. About the results of this work will be discussed in the circle and written down.

3. To list and systematise Sorbian dance elements like steps, motives and artistic dance elements. We want to take a photo of the steps – to get to know them better – and offer reproductions of them to our groups.
4. To create choreographies of the dances emerged after 1945. At this work German professionals have to support us.
5. To describe steps and choreographies exactly and offer them to the groups for practical use.

(Nd 1952: 3)⁸

Until the 20th century there no documents existed with concrete descriptions of dances for the practical folklore work. Consciously the Friends of the Sorbian folk dances engaged in collecting activities of the outgoing 19th century and published suitable collections and single prints. At the same time, the Institute of Sorbian national research in Bautzen as part of the Academy of Sciences of the GDR and the Institute of Sorabistik at the University of Leipzig were funded to provide the necessary basic academic research. Both institutes had to guarantee a detailed understanding of the national culture and with it also of the Sorbian folk dance. The current Sorbian folk ensemble was founded in 1952 in Bautzen as the “Governmental sorbian folk ensemble for music and dance”. In April the same year, the first singers and dancers took up their activity under the direction of Jurij Winar. Above all, dancers from the present amateur dance groups were recruited for the new ensemble. More problematic in these first years was the formation of a choir and an orchestra. The mainly rural population could not understand how artists with a professional education could earn money in this area of folklore work. Although the necessary engagement of German-speaking Lusatians as actors increased the skepticism about the so-called Sorbian character of the ensemble. Nevertheless, for the first time in the Sorbian history folk dance culture reached with the new ensemble such an institutionalized professional level of stagecraft.

Concerning the professionalization of the Sorbian folk dance the question about the dancing offshoot was repeatedly discussed. The main aim for the ensemble in this case was to build up young professional artists out of Sorbian amateur enthusiasts. Since the fifties continuing education for dancers, choreographers and pedagogues proceeded to provide the specific attributes of the Sorbian folk dance and to make this knowledge productive for the work with groups of amateurs. Therefore, also German experts were also consulted. Since 1962 every artist has been obliged to aim for a Master's certificate. The dancers acquired the approved

⁸ Translated from Sorbian by myself.

degree at the State ballet school of Berlin or by an external professional exam for professional dancers (Sorbisches National-Ensemble 2005: 54 & 61; Hendrich 1974: 197). Furthermore, the dancers furthermore came predominantly from East-European training centres, where folk dance was often a main focus of education.

In the second half of 20th century the newly established festival culture set up a main place for the performance of the institutionalized Sorbian folk dance. These festivals include the aforementioned World Festival of the Youth and Students as well as many other mainly regional festivals initiated by the Domowina. Between 1966 and 1989 seven "Festivals of the Sorbian culture" took place in Lusatia. These were highlights of artistic creation for all Sorbian folk dance groups and always were concluded by the professional folk dance ensemble as main act. The festival culture also was also used as political instrument by the government as a token for "successful minority policy" of the GDR. At the same time the Sorbian folk ensemble began to represent the Sorbian national culture in foreign countries, mainly in Eastern Europe. Meanwhile the dancing groups began to create mass dancing scenes which embodied the wish for a new self-confidence and collective memory of the general society. The cultural scientist Inge Baxmann describes such phenomena as a synthetic re-ritualization, which operates against a felt lack of social identification, integration and solidarity. On this occasion the embodied culture becomes a privileged place in the development of new forms of representation of the national thinking and the experience of national community (Baxmann 2000: 193–207). Therefore, these mass scenes of the Sorbian folk dance were strategies of a social homogenization, which should anchor internalised collective norms and values by mimetic behaviour and strengthened the basis of professional stage craft.

IV. Prospect

To sum up I can say that the Sorbian folk dance in the postwar period was strongly connected with the establishment of new organizations. Hence, the understanding of the *serbska reja* as institutionalized Sorbian national dance, which led to the establishment of organizations like the Sorbian Folk Ensemble, discloses from more than one of the pillars of institutionalization. It becomes clear how strongly the distinctive developments of the Sorbian folk dance after the Second World War is marked by changing political frameworks and also by personal processes of negotiation accordingly by the established general norms and values. Because of its professionalization, the Sorbian folk dance was lifted up to a new level. The establishment of the Sorbian folklore movement was strongly based on models and bearers of knowledge from Eastern Europe and, hence, was also strongly engaged to certain personalities and their

personal images, which can clearly be seen within the cognitive pillar. It asserted itself as a canon of norms and a system of values which can be read out of working plans, festival structures and not at least in the new dancing forms of the professional folklore with great impact on non-professional folklore work.

Nowadays the Sorbian Folk ensemble fights against insolvency and closure. Because of the breakdown of a supporting general framework, which is above all marked actually by the blocked financial support from the federal governments, the ensemble cannot survive under these conditions of the regulative pillar. In addition, an increasing gap distinguishes amateur dancers and professional dancers. Sorbian amateur dancers are involved at very high level in dancing groups and concentrate here upon the so called "authentic sorbian folklore", while the internationally engaged professional company itself tries to focus more and more on other sections beside folklore art to perpetuate their ensemble. Therefore, the identification with the ensemble by the huge Sorbian population as a "sorbian" ensemble is weak and a bottom-up-negotiation regarding the normative pillar does not work. Accordingly a breakdown of contacts to network partners and experts of folklore in Eastern Europe can be observed. Such contacts till today often depend on individual enthusiasts, who belong to the old formative generation of the ensemble. Nowadays a visible future vision is not recognizable. Maybe the after-war emergence of the *serbska reja* from the idea of a "national dance" to a professional stagecraft was temporary and based on optimal co-operation of the three pillars of institutionalization that provided the room for these distinctive developments. The actual trend of the Sorbian Folk ensemble they describe on its homepage the following way:

„The member of the ensemble are also ethnical link between east and west and cultural ambassador in a united europe. Human morals and usages of the sorbian crowd are font and inspiration for a unique folklorical stagecraft. Among dancetheatre and musical fairy-tales for children, choirprograms and concerts belong to the repertoire. Annual the member of the ensemble perform more than 200 national and international guest performances.“⁹

So the possibilities of institutional developments of folk dances among the Sorbian people and their impact on regional, national and up to the global level are newly negotiable at the beginning of the 21st century and demand for further complex observation of its processes of institutionalization.

⁹ http://www.sorbisches-national-ensemble.de/netprodukt/web/html/english/home_1_1_6.html (24.09.2008).

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Abstract:

The dance culture of the Sorbians offers different kinds of developments and institutionalisation processes during the last centuries where the „Sorbian folk dance“ is just one specific occurrence. A special situation for the role of the Sorbian culture at all emerged after the Second World War. The new status as officially accepted national minority in East Germany goes together with a double support: embedded into the GDR-Cultural policy on the one hand and supervised by the slavic neighbouring countries on the other hand. These

frameworks took main part in building up a hugh number of new Sorbian cultural institutions (museum, publishing company, theatre, scientific institute et al.).

Regarding the „Sorbian folk dance“ in this context the most important institutionalisation arised 1952 as first professional „Sorbian Folk Ensemble“. Its main aims were „to perpetuate, cultivate and develop the sorbian dance and music“. Beside an examination of culture inside the sorbian minority outwards the ensemble represented a successful minority cultural policy. The article examines a fundamental analysis of this institutional development of the „Sorbian folk dance“ after the Second World War including todays tendencies of its vacancies. Using the institutionalization theory of Richard Scott (1995) the article offers a differentiated view on this topic by connecting political general frameworks (regulative pillar), collective arrangements of norms (normative pillar) and space for individual creative interpretations (cognitive pillar) which determine each other. This approach reveals manifold aspects and interactive dynamics of the relation between external Minority cultural policy and internal cultural practise.

Personal data

Theresa Lorenz (Bautzen/Leipzig, Germany)

1999–2004 Studies of Musicology, German language and literature studies and Communication and media science at the University of Leipzig and Kraków

2004–2005 Research assistant at the University of Music and Theatre „Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy“ in the research projekt "The relationship of music and choreography in the ballet of the 16th to 20th centuries" and at the Institute of Ethnology at the University of Leipzig

2005 Co-founder of the *Forum Tsiganologische Forschung* at the University of Leipzig

Since january 2006 research assistant at the Sorbian Institut in Bautzen

Dancer and board member of the *Leipzig Dance Theater*

Recent project

„The folk dance of the Sorbian people in the context of cultural identity demands“
(Dissertation)