

## Salutations to Mihály Hoppál

*Bartha, Elek – Anttonen, Veikko*

Wherever folklorists and anthropologists of religion meet and talk about shamanism, the name Mihály Hoppál is likely to appear. Mihály Hoppál has been an ambassador of shamanism more than three decades. The abundance of references to him in scholarly publications over the years suggests that he could be much older than 60. Although referring to old age is a way of showing appreciation, one can by no means make a judgment that the scholarly articles, books and films that Mihály Hoppál has accomplished during his academic career and which have given him worldwide fame, are signs of the author's aging. Certainly they are milestones but they are not to be viewed against conventional measures of time reckoning. Those who know Mihály Hoppál personally can testify the notion that his habitus is a manifesto of ideology in which personal and collective histories coalesce and in which the transcendence of the limits of time plays an important strategic tool in his ethnographic quest for unravelling the structures of cultural life in shamanic communities of the past – as well as their present forms of manifestation. On the occasion of his 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, the colleagues felt the urge to greet him with this volume. The authors of the papers included here celebrate him with those who could not send essays, but instead, conveyed all their felicitations through the editors.

During the two thirds of his life as an ethnographer, Mihály Hoppál has travelled around the world and contributed with his works to the re-emergence of shamanism as an area of academic interest and a cultural fashion. He has participated in scientific conferences, given lectures and presentations at universities, and conducted fieldwork in several continents of the world. Taking a closer look on his travel schedules makes one realize that it is only seldom that he spends a longer period of time at one place. But there is a simple reason for this: by placing emphasis on comparison he trusts *the method par excellence* that has given ethnography, the study of man, its distinctive characteristic as an academic field of study in the modern university. In order to compare, you need to travel. For Hoppál, ethnography means the accumulation of 'visual texts'. On the personal level, his academic nomadism has a model in the subject matter of shamanism itself. He has

internalised the shamanic role of a ritual specialist in which the journey forms the focal point of the profession. “Journey is the life of a shaman” as Mihály Hoppál has written. The Nenets’ expression for the shaman, *widutana* (“traveller”), is an apt term to describe him. By journeying Mihály Hoppál fulfils the fundamental task of a shamanic profession: to act as a mediator between the opposite spheres of life. In his role as an ambassador of shamanism, Hoppál does not only mediate that which is informed by the spirits, but operates as a mediator between East and West as well as North and South in pointing out the significance of shamanic knowledge for the common roots of human cultural history. He has felt at home in dwellings of shamans in Siberia, Mongolia, Tuva, China, Korea, and the Middle East, as well as in other continents. And in the meantime, he regularly returns to the place where his creations have their ‘sacred’ origin and where he gained the first decisive experiences in his childhood and in adolescence that inspired him to choose ethnography as his profession. Central Europe, the Carpathian Basin, Hungary is the *primus locus* in which his routes intersect.

The three towns of North-eastern Hungary, Kassa (today Košice in Slovakia<sup>1</sup>), Sarospatak and Debrecen, are locations that have given many notable personalities to the world. Kassa (Košice) is a multiethnic town that was severed from Hungary in the Peace Treaty ending World War I and which was reoccupied by Hungary for a few years before World War II. According to Mihály Hoppál’s own recollection, his grandmother on his mother’s side spoke seven languages, a phenomenon not uncommon in that multiethnic urban society. The first intellectual inspirations burst out from that part of the family, the influences of which are easy to trace in the later phases of his life.

Sarospatak was the scene of his high school studies. The town is famous for its gymnasium, the spirit of which was widely spread through its Calvinist culture of education. Mihály Hoppál learned to respect the knowledge passed down by his legendary teachers. It is in Sarospatak that he was first touched by the enchantment of ethnography.

Debrecen was the town of his university years. Debrecen is often mentioned as the “Calvinist Rome” for being the centre of Central European Calvinism. The conservative atmosphere of the town did not altogether correspond with the avant-garde endeavours of Mihály Hoppál, yet in the 1960s there was a certain resistance and reserve towards the dominant political regime in the heart of the young student that did not leave him unmoved. During the years that he spent at his alma mater, the University of Debrecen (Kossuth Lajos University at that time),

---

<sup>1</sup> The Slovakian town Kassa (Košice) was part of Hungary when Mihály Hoppál was born.

he was not primarily counted for being a student of ethnography, ethnology and folklore studies in the faculty of art, but for being a creative artist who succeeded in gaining disapproval in the eyes of certain representatives of the omnipotent Party. The artistic inclination and orientation paved his way towards areas of intellectual interest that still characterizes his scientific career. Similarly, the later decades of creativity have been determined by intellectual openness and aptness for the new – qualities that took shape during his ethnographic studies, primarily under the guidance of Prof. Béla Gunda, the founder, and – at that time – the Head of the Department of Ethnography at the University of Debrecen. The intellectual workshop, commonly known in Hungarian Ethnography as “the Debrecen school”, which was based on regular fieldwork and characterized by methodological and aspectual diversity, meant a life-long inspiration for him. The major scientific topics in the field of ethnomedicine, folk religion and ritual studies were there already at the beginning and they have oriented his journey through the past and to the future.

After graduating from the university, Hoppál went to Pest, where he participated in establishing the Archive of Folk Healing. He was admitted into the Research Group of Ethnography, at present known as The Institute of Ethnography of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. In addition to working as the director of the European Folklore Institute in Budapest, he still today belongs to the staff of the Institute of Ethnography, located on the hill of the Buda, where he started his research on Siberian shamanism under the guidance of Vilmos Diószegi, a famous scholar in the field of anthropology of religion and folklore studies. After Diószegi's early death, the young Hoppál “inherited” his field of research, as he later recalls it.

After the death of Diószegi, Hoppál's career as a researcher began to unfold. His intellectual openness, his aptness for the new, made him a versatile scholar in many areas of academic interest. He became well known for his works and achievements in the fields of communication, semiotics, folklore studies, and folk-art, as well as for his books and publications on visual anthropology, not to mention his great accomplishments in ethnographic film-making. This widely known versatility and openness was once called by one of his colleagues as a kind of “readiness” and preparedness to the reception of that which is actual and new and theoretically and methodologically significant. Structuralism and semiotics can be considered the major intellectual traditions in the field of ethnography that have played an important role in the scholarly work of Mihály Hoppál. By focusing his attention on images, signs and objects, he has gained a thorough knowledge both of the ma-

terial and spiritual characteristics in shamanism. His books and essays on the topic have been published in several languages and in several countries and continents. His name is related with a great number of conferences, journals and international periodicals. He has been the primus motor in starting several academic series and journals (*Ethnologica Uralica*, *Bibliotheca Shamanistica*, *Shaman*, etc.).

An anniversary greeting cannot provide a review of the whole oeuvre, all the important volumes, essays, films and pieces of work. It is the humble wish of the editors of this book that what has been undertaken here will be placed on a larger frame of vision to convey the message that there is much more to this oeuvre that needs to be elucidated in order to pay due homage to the life and work of Mihály Hoppál. The authors of the present volume present some of the fruits and results of their own work in the form of essays as a gift to the sixty-year-old Mihály Hoppál, hoping that this will reflect at least a small part of his thematically rich oeuvre.

The man with creative energy does not show signs of slowing down – instead, he is still “feeling groovy”. Mihály Hoppál is full of plans. He envisions accomplishing his unfinished works and the works that he has not even started yet. What else can we wish for the sixty-year old professor than a long and healthy life so that he can achieve his goals.

„Itt a szent hely”  
Sacrality and ritual in theory and practice

*Pyysiäinen, Ilkka*

*Anttonen, Veikko*

*Keményfi, Róbert*

*Utriainen, Terhi*

*Holm, Nils G.*

*Bartha, Elek*

*Bimmer, Andreas*

