

# CULTURE CONTACTS AND THE MAKING OF CULTURES

Papers in Homage to  
Itamar Even-Zohar



Edited by

Rakefet Sela-Sheffy and Gideon Toury



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# THE ROLE OF CULTURAL SAINTS IN EUROPE- AN NATION STATES

**Jón Karl Helgason**

From the traditional perspective of literary and cultural history, the canonization of an author or an artist is generally regarded as confirmation that his or her works have exemplary aesthetic or ideological qualities, or at least that they were in some sense groundbreaking or exceptional when created (cf. Sheffy 1990, 511–512). From the perspective of social history, such canonization generally means that the person in question assumes a special semiotic role within a society; he or she is idolized, institutionalized and even mobilized in shaping socio-political realities.

Such actions can be analyzed with reference to Itamar Even-Zohar's discussion of two major concepts of culture as being culture-as-goods and culture-as-tools. In the first case, "culture is considered as a set and stock of evaluable goods, the possession of which signifies wealth, high status, and prestige" (Even-Zohar 2010, 9), in the second case "culture is considered as a set of operating tools for the organization of life, on both the collective and individual levels" (Even-Zohar 2010, 12). The example of skaldic poets within the Norwegian court in medieval times is illustrative of both aspects. On the one hand, the poets were regarded as cultural properties or goods, signifying the king's wealth and power (cf. Even-Zohar 1996, 45). At the same time, however, they were useful instruments in enhancing the royal ideology and the legacy of the king, at least to the extent listeners could understand their complex poetic diction.

The posthumous idolization of individual authors and artists has developed in interesting ways in Europe in recent centuries. Poets, novelists, playwrights, scholars, composers and visual artists have been singled out as leading representatives of their national culture, giving them a status previously held by regal authorities and religious saints. The complex history of this shift in emphasis will not be traced in this paper, but from the perspective of system theory it can be described with reference to the way in which democratic institutions and cultural nationalism have challenged the royal dynasty and the Christian



church within these societies (cf. Leerssen 2006). It can be revealing to refer to these national heroes simply as “cultural saints” and analyze their legacy with reference to concepts traditionally reserved for discussing religious phenomena. The term canonization is already suggestive in this respect. In the following, I will focus on how cultural saints can both be regarded as relics (goods), valuable for the society, and as rituals (tools), instrumental for the organization of life within that society.

### **Saints' Names and Dedications**

A common step in the beatification of a cultural saint is to give his or her name to a public phenomenon. This is a tradition developed in early Christendom and has remained popular through the ages as the Basilica of St. Peter in Rome, St. Petersburg in Russia and the St. Peter's school in York attest to. Renaming of streets in Paris in the last decade of the eighteenth century exemplifies the function of European cultural saints. In the wake of the French revolution in 1789, the revolutionaries wanted to diminish the symbolic influence of the royal court and the church in society; Catholic saints' days were erased from the almanac and royal and religious statues were removed from public space. Names of streets were also altered:

In 1791, the marquis de Villette, in whose house Voltaire had died in 1778, solicited formal approval for his own alteration to the street name on his house from Th  atins (after the religious order located nearby) to Voltaire. ... Villette's enthusiasm fired others. Royalty and saints were swept away by authentic republican saints ... and republican virtues (Ferguson 1997, 26).

Similar examples can be found in other countries. The Pre  eren Square in the centre of Ljubljana, dedicated to the Romantic poet France Pre  eren, was originally named Maria Square, referring to the Franciscan Church of Mary's Annunciation that stands there.

Anniversaries of a writer or an artist often inspire city or state-officials to name or rename a street, building, park or institution, or establish a prize in his or her honor. One of the main streets in downtown Copenhagen, Vester Boulevard, was for instance renamed H.C. Andersen's Boulevard in 1955, when 150 years had passed from the birth of the Danish writer. The idea of such designations is to sustain

the memory of the saint – a name can be regarded as one of the relics of a departed person – but at the same time the renaming has a ritualistic dimension. People crossing or driving along H.C. Andersen's Boulevard in Copenhagen can be seen as symbolically following in the footsteps of the Danish writer. Similarly, Slovenians receiving the Grand Prešeren Award in Slovenia, for exceptional achievements in the field of arts, or Icelanders receiving the Award of Jónas Hallgrímsson, for having enriched or in some way served the cause of the Icelandic language, are dedicated to the saint, in a manner not dissimilar to that of Catholics who acquire a saint's name when they are baptized.

## **2. Icons and Totemism**

Another step in the beatification of a cultural saint is the reproduction of his or her face, head or body in a public space or its dissemination in society by some other means. This tradition mimics how images of rulers and religious personalities have been a major part of European culture for ages, decorating churches, squares, coins, bank notes and stamps. In modern times, there are so many monuments found in towns and cities of Europe that it is necessary to take their histories and locations into consideration. A national fund-raising for a monument devoted to an author or an artist which is placed in the centre of a nation's capital is certainly an indication that the person is considered eligible for the role of a cultural saint. Funds were raised both for the statue of France Prešeren that was unveiled on the Prešeren Square in Ljubljana in 1905 and for the statue of Jónas Hallgrímsson that was unveiled in the centre of Reykjavík in 1907. The number and density of monuments can also be significant. There are, for example, two central statues of Hans Christian Andersen in Odense, his birthplace, and another two statues in the Danish capital Copenhagen; one in the King's Park, close to the Rosenborg Castle, and the other one on the main square, next to the city hall. Portraits of both Prešeren and Andersen have featured on bank notes. These are now outdated but a representation of Prešeren is presently on the Slovenian two Euro coin.

Icons of cultural saints can be regarded as visual relics that society feels important to preserve and exhibit, but they can also be seen as a modern equivalence of totems and heraldic emblems (cf. Durkheim 2008: 113). Portraits of cultural saints on bank notes and coins may fur-

thermore be seen as references to a semiotic gold standard of the monetary system, which is stored in libraries and museums, rather than in the vaults of a central bank (Helgason 1995).

### 3. Shrines and Pilgrimages

Another step in the beatification of a cultural saint involves preserving his or her physical remains, personal belongings or home and encouraging people to see the relics in question. This form of remembrance mirrors the religious and political tradition of shrines and pilgrimages, including both the shroud of Turin and Lenin's mausoleum in Moscow. A collection of manuscripts and works of individual authors or artists can certainly be compared to religious relics and certain branches of libraries and museums can similarly serve as shrines. However, as indicated by some English and French examples, the analogy between religious and cultural relics is not merely symbolic. Various kings, queens and bishops are interred in the Collegiate Church of St. Peter at Westminster in London, built by the king-saint Edward the Confessor, but its Poets' Corner is also the final resting place of some important writers and artists, including Spencer, Dryden, Johnson, Tennyson, Dickens, Kipling and Hardy. The first poet to be moved to this section of the church was Geoffrey Chaucer in 1556. "In being translated to a worthier tomb in the main shrine of Catholic and Christian England he is being given the treatment normally accorded to a saint or other venerable person" (Pearsall 1995: 64). The Paris Panthéon was originally designed as a church dedicated to St. Geneviève, but during the French Revolution it was turned into a mausoleum for distinguished Frenchmen. Here Voltaire, Rousseau, Hugo, Dumas, Zola and Malraux have been buried, to name but a few. Incidentally, the bones of René Descartes never made it to the Panthéon, but as early as 1666 a part of his skeleton was translated from Stockholm under the supervision of leading French Cartesians and reburied the following year in the Sainte-Geneviève-du-Mont Church in Paris; "the model – Catholic treatment of holy bones as relics – was so closely copied in all its particulars that it isn't even right to speak of the reburial as a secular co-opting of a religious event. It *was* a religious event – an attempt to carry the scientific perspective into a world circumscribed by religious awareness" (Shorto 2008: 70).

A preserved or reconstructed birthplace or home of an author or an artist is another kind of a shrine. Such places may not only shelter important relics, such as a cradle, pair of shoes, manuscripts or a desk, but are often presented as relics in their own right, even though their authenticity may be questionable. Hans Christian Andersen categorically rejected the idea that he was born in the house that is presented as his birthplace and which makes up the core of the Andersen museum in Odense (Olrik 1945: 20-39). Likewise, the Shakespeare birthplace in Stratford “is an imaginative reconstruction of a historical building in which William Shakespeare may not have been born” (Rosenthal 2008: 36). Still, both of these places attract thousands of pilgrims every year, people who want to make closer contact with their cultural idols. Even if shrines of cultural saints are rarely reported to be places of miracles or healing, they can be instrumental for “enchantment” of nationalistic politics, inspiring “kinship, spirits, ancestor worship, and the circulation of cultural treasure” (Verdery 1999: 26).

#### **4. Saints’ Days and Liturgies**

Yet another way to beatify a cultural saint is to incorporate the day of his or her birth or death, or some important day of his or her life, into the official calendar of the state. The religious and dynastic models here include Christmas, Easter and various saints’ days, even the names of July and August. In considering the cultural saints of Europe from this perspective, the example of France Prešeren is again of interest, as the date of his death, February 8, has been celebrated as the cultural day of Slovenia since 1944. For the past two decades the day has also been a national holiday. Another example is the Day of the Galician Literature, May 17, which has been a national holiday in Galicia since 1963. It was chosen with reference to the fact that May 17, 1863, was the publication date of the first literary work ever printed in the Galician language, the poetry collection *Caltares gallegos* by Rosalía de Castro. Similarly, the Icelandic Ministry of Culture decided some fifteen years ago that November 16, the birthday of poet Jónas Hallgrímsson, should be celebrated as the Day of the Icelandic Language. It is not an official holiday, but most Icelandic cultural institutions and schools mark the day with special programs relating to the language and the legacy of Hallgrímsson.

In these examples, the role of the cultural saint is not only to help to structure time but to inspire various social liturgies related to issues of nation, culture and language. Saints' days are an optimal time to hand out awards, rename streets, put flowers next to monuments, put on performances or open exhibitions where the legacy of the cultural saint is celebrated. On these occasions, the different forms of beatification discussed in this paper may be combined and construed in a variety of ways.

### Conclusion

When a statue is erected of some writer or artist, his or her home is turned into a museum, or his face chosen for a bank note, this may or may not be an important a step in the beatification of that person as a cultural saint. These processes of canonization are complex and may vary from one country to another and one time to another. Consideration needs to be given to how many different forms of beatification the individual in question is subjected to and to what degree he or she is being formally canonized by the institutions of the state. The role of European cultural saints, as described above, can be compared to the fate of canonized literary works in a culture. In his *Polysystem Studies*, Itamar Even-Zohar points out that such works hardly ever circulate on the market as integral texts; once they have been "stored in the historical canon", they are often distributed as textual fragments, i.e. quotations, short parables, and episodes. A semiotic approach to these fragments, Even-Zohar explains, would not regard them "simply as a neutral stock, but as one which helps society maintain its *models of reality*, which in their turn govern the models of interpersonal interaction. They thus constitute a source for the kinds of *habitus* prevailing in the various levels of society, helping to preserve and stabilize it" (Even-Zohar 1990: 44).

A more extensive treatment of this topic, "Relics and Rituals: The Canonization of Cultural "Saints" from a Social Perspective" was published in *Primerjalna književnost* 34.1 (2011): 165-189.

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