The Ritual of Boat Incineration on the Island of Vis, Croatia: an Interpretation

Joško Božanić and Eni Buljubašić
The Ritual of Boat Incineration on the Island of Vis, Croatia: an Interpretation

Joško Božanić
Full Professor, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Split, Croatia

Eni Buljubašić
Research-assistant, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Split, Croatia

ABSTRACT
In the fishing village of Komiža, on the island of Vis, Croatia, there is a centuries-long ritual of incinerating traditional wooden fishing boats which is linked to the celebration of a Catholic holiday. Boats are not recognised as a part of the cultural heritage of Croatia and traditional boats are not being produced any longer because they are not seen to have any market value. Therefore, the continuation of the burning ritual is seriously threatened. It is argued here that through a re-contextualisation of the ceremony within an eco-museum and through similar projects, the boats could actively contribute to the economic life of the community. This issue is addressed from the standpoints of the endangered ritual and the cultural significance of the boat. While predominantly investigating its sociological importance and the underlying semiotic implications of the ritual, and discussing the anthropomorphic conceptualisation of the boat within the Komižan community, this article also explores the origins of the burning ritual and similar practices around the world. The article aims to increase the recognition of the boat as an object of tangible and intangible heritage, namely as a product of the traditional maritime art of ship-building.

Keywords
traditional boats, incineration ritual, Komiža, St. Nicholas, Vis, maritime culture, anthropomorphic conceptualisation, semiotics

Introduction: the death of the wooden boat
Boats are products of human effort but they are not seen as being as important as other man-made structures on land. Land-based structures, when they are of historical and cultural importance, are labelled national/world heritage properties and are thus
preserved. Boats rarely gain this status and when they no longer have a commercial value they are usually destroyed. The invention of the ship’s engine has brought about the permanent disappearance of wooden sailing boats. Materials other than wood now dominate ship building, significantly changing the form of the boat in the process: boats with engines need not follow the structure of ancient sailboats which was perfected through centuries of sailing experience to enable them to reach optimal speed.

The Croatian Adriatic coastline is around six thousand kilometres long and includes one thousand two hundred islands. In Croatia there are still wooden ships sailing that were built in the 19th century. However, in Croatia the boat does not have the status of a national heritage property. Once it is no longer economically viable it is destroyed as a useless object. Regrettably, it is possible to destroy – sink, set on fire, reconstruct beyond recognition – a boat without there being any legal consequences, even when it is a unique cultural object. Wooden boats are not protected by state cultural policies. In this context, it is unlikely that the last of the traditional Croatian wooden boats – as yet unsunk, rotten or forgotten – will survive. Contemporary boats, plastic and serially produced, have completely changed the appearance of many ports. Old photographs are the last sources of information about the traditional scenery of coastal and island ports during the time when boats were made in local ship yards. The men who built the wooden ships were heirs to a millennium-old tradition.

2. A sacred tradition or the destruction of our heritage?

In Komiža, on the island of Vis, the ancient tradition of the boat funeral has survived to the present day. The life of a boat begins with a christening and ends with a funeral. On the 6th of December, the day of St. Nicholas the Traveller, the Protector of Seamen, a boat is burnt before the saint’s church every year as an offering for the salvation of all boats and as a token of the renewal of the boat which the flames have just swallowed.

For centuries, wooden boats have been sacrificed in Komiža. The old rowing/fishing types: šalala, leut and
loja boats, which sailed across the open sea to distant islands, regardless of danger in the form of tempests and exhaustion, all disappeared in flames in a sacrificial offering to Saint Nicholas the Traveller, the only saint the fishermen turned to to save them from the perils of the open sea. But over the centuries new boats were born on Komiža beaches, too. While that was the case, the sacrifice made sense and had a purpose. The flames were at once the symbolic end and the beginning. Cosmic equilibrium was maintained by closing one cycle of life and opening another. However, with the disruption of the old ship-building tradition, when the ship-building yards went silent, the equilibrium of life and death was disrupted, too – now the scales tipped in favour of death and the sacrifice of one cycle of life did not give life to another. Komiža traditional fishing boats were on the verge of complete extinction.

2.1. The programme for safeguarding maritime heritage

Together with the boats, what has almost disappeared is the traditional knowledge of the craft of ship-building, passed on from one generation to the next for hundreds of years. It took a long time for people to realise that Croatian cultural heritage was being burnt in the flames of old boats. It finally became clear in 1986 when the Cicibela, the last Komižan falšaša boat, was shipwrecked. Soon after the event, a group of enthusiasts established the non-profit foundation, Ars Halieutica, dedicated to interdisciplinary research, reconstruction and the safeguarding of tangible and intangible cultural heritage. So far, numerous Komiža fishing and other boats along the Croatian coast have been documented – in drawings or at least in photographs - the memory of them has been saved. The mission of the foundation is, however, to construct replicas of historic Croatian boats.

2.2. St. Nicholas Day and the sacrifice of boats in Komiža

In Christian hagiography, Saint Nicholas is the patron saint of children, mariners and travellers. According to legend, Saint Nicholas, like Christ, had the power to calm the seas and to tame their fury so as to save both boats and mariners; he thus became the patron saint of all seamen.
On the night of the 5th of December, prior to the ceremonial burning, the Komižan fishermen prepare the sacrificial boat for the ritual: on the beach it is tied with ropes and pulled up the hill overlooking Komiža on top of which is the 10th century church of St. Nicholas. It was once a Benedictine abbey fortified with strong bulwarks that served as protection from pirates. At the foot of the church there is a cemetery and beneath it a plateau on which the ritual incineration takes place. Usually one boat is burned, sometimes two. It is the boat’s owner who has the privilege of starting the fire. Boats are burned in the early morning before mass is said at St. Nicholas’ church. The locals bring pieces of wood to contribute to the bonfire, piling them up to ensure that the flames go as high as possible. It is the wish of every member of Komiža to be an active participant in making the sacrificial fire. The ceremony continues with a procession with the statue of St. Nicholas and singing of the hymn ‘St. Nicholas, Pray for Us!’

2.3. Apples from heaven

The night before St. Nicholas’ day is the most exciting one of the calendar for Komižan children. They believe that on this night Saint Nicholas visits them in their sleep and leaves an apple beneath their pillows as a present. If they have been good the apple will be a big one, and if they have been naughty it will be small. In children’s imagination, on this night Saint Nicholas abandons his niche by the altar and, carrying a sack full of presents over his shoulders, he mysteriously appears by their beds to leave an aromatic, juicy, heavenly sweet apple under their pillows.

In the morning, the children find the present – it is something metaphysical, heavenly and inexplicable. Children compare the size of their apples, measuring their good behaviour and mischief. It is always strange that Saint Nicholas’ apples look a lot like those from the village shops, but the smell and taste are incomparable. Those are, after all, apples from the sack of Saint Nicholas, the patron saint of children and sailors. The smell and taste of apples from heaven thus stays in children’s memories because it was a metaphorical experience.

3. The ritual: past, present, future

3.1. The origins of boat burning

Sacrificial fire is a Slavic tradition surviving from pre-Christian, pagan times. Until the present day on the island of Biševo, five miles from Komiža, a tradition is kept of making a bonfire in front of the church on New
Year’s Day, the 31st of December. The fire marks the end of the old year and the beginning of the new. The fire is a symbol of an end that brings forth a new beginning. One cycle closes, another one begins. Fire is a symbol of a new cycle of life.

A vestige of a pagan cult and mythology, this incineration ritual was Christianised in around the 12th century in Komiza, thus linking it to the worship of Saint Nicholas who had also become the patron saint of Komiza. Through the change of meta-language, the ritual practice became more symbolic and subjective.

It was the usual practice to Christianise pagan rituals and customs: one such custom is the burning of a wood log called a badnjak on Christmas Eve (in Croatia, therefore, the day is also called Badnjak) in a domestic ceremony in which the whole family participates. The roots of this ceremony come from pagan Slavic beliefs. The boat sacrifice is connected to the celebration of St. Nicholas’ day, a celebration of the patron saint of the fishing village of Komiza. Komizan fishermen and mariners sacrifice a boat as an offering to their patron saint in the hope they will survive storms out in the open sea when they are far from home and at the mercy of the menacing elements.

3.2. The ritual: underlying symbols and concepts

Mainly in anthropology, but also in other humanistic studies, the ritual has been interpreted in relation to myth, customs, culture in general, religion etc. For the purposes of this article, ritual will be interpreted as fundamental to the dynamics of ‘culture’ (Bell 1992, 13) in relation to its effects on social cohesion and equilibrium, symbolism and social communication (ibid, 15). The logic and history of ritual in itself will not be stressed so much as its poetic qualities and significance in the life of today’s Komizan community. Perhaps it would be precipitate to proceed without offering a definition of the ritual in question. But the methodology employed accords with the aim of this article: a descriptive, comparative and semiotic-sociological interpretation of boat incineration in Komiza will be given, along with remarks and guidelines about the significance.
and sustainability of both the boats and the boat burning ritual that are only seemingly in conflict.

Sacrifice is one of the primary ritual practices. Not only does it serve for religious purposes, but also as an introduction to the world of cultural symbols, and thus to the world of culture as a whole. By culture here is meant an ordered and meaningful system, i.e. the cosmos. In other words, ritual is one of the cultural practices which translate natural chaos into (re)established cosmos (the italicised words are used in the sense the ancient Greek philosophers gave them). Since Water and Earth are the two life-bearing matrices, most sacrifices are bestowed upon them in a world-creational dialogue of life and death [Pavlović 1987, 20]. The sacrificial object is an intermediary between humankind and the metaphysical, a function through which an abundance of meanings may be inferred. The plurality of concepts, associations and emotions involved in dealing with such an object that is at once a messenger to the metaphysical, a vital element of a community’s identity, an extension of one’s body, a nuclear family member and a life-sustaining tool should then come as no surprise.

Romaj (1990a, 136) argues that sacrificial practices reflect the mindset of the culture that bore them: once the civilization and/or mindset have changed it is unlikely that the ritual practice will survive. Boat incineration in Komiža is an exception to this rule, one of few in the contemporary globalised world. It could be likened to the collision of rational and poetic thought. The idea of sustaining the ritual reflects a holistic view of the world and of mankind within it, where the binary oppositions of nature-culture, mankind-forces, land-sea, life-death etc. are inextricably interwoven, and where positive dialectics between seemingly paradoxical occurrences annul the linear and the singular in favour of the cyclical and the plural. In a world of symbolic holism the universe will have man’s features and vice versa. The Komižans’ conceptualisation of the falkuša as an anthropomorphic object should be viewed in this way.

3.3. What have we done, what will we do in the future?

From the aspect of the theory of communication, involving the addressee, the addressee and with the sacrificial object at its centre as both the intermediary between the profane and the sacred and the symbolic vessel of the community’s fears and desires – the sacrificed boat stands as a prayer and a pledge, an act of thanksgiving and, most importantly, a confirmation that
communication between the earthly and the metaphysical world is possible. In this way, it is argued (Romaj 1991b, 142) the ritual re-establishes not only religious beliefs [which are not primary here] but also acts as a cohesive glue to the community and as a confirmation of the group's identity through the [re]invention of tradition. The continuity of tradition is now perceived to be at stake here. To paraphrase Shakespeare, the Komižans are facing the question of to burn or not to burn. However, it cannot be a question of what is more sacred, since the tradition of the ritual and the tradition inscribed in falkuša, the vessel which is the symbol of hundreds of years of maritime experience and knowledge, are inseparable. The Komižans care deeply for their ritual and would not do without it. Following De Coppel's (1992, 15) idea that ritual is culturally loud and vibrant even when acoustically mute and tranquil, which agrees with Durkheim's axiom that ritual is best understood as an act inherent in a group that celebrates it or itself through it, (ibid, 97) ritual is constituted as the central element of group identity, St. Nicholas' Day is the day most looked forward to in the Komižan community. On St. Nicholas Eve (December 5th) the boat is dragged from the beach on to the hill above Komiža where the church of St. Nicholas is situated. The boat to be burned is selected from a waiting list of boat owners; each year the first one on the list burns his/her boat. Usually, the boat owner is the one who sets fire to the boat. Community members contribute to the pyre by bringing pieces of wood that are placed around or in the boat. Also, the boat's mast is decorated with a bouquet of olive and/or rosemary branches. The fire is set to the boat moments before the mass starts, and the boat burns till the mass ends, which includes a procession around the site with the St. Nicholas statue and a choir singing songs to the patron saint.

When he took part in the event, Mr. Thedo Frithof, EMH Secretary noted:

They made a stack stowed of three boats and a mast with a branch of a tree on the top. Then the whole stack was ready. They asked me, as a champion of the anti-scrapping EMH group, to kindle the boats! It was a very emotional moment for me, to know that this sacrifice was for the salvation of all other boats and mariners, and that from the ashes a new boat would be launched after

Plate 5
Three boats burning in front of St. Nicholas' Church, Komiža, in 1987.
Photo: Velimir Salamon.
the procession and the Mass ... Sitting in the new built type, especially developed for teaching the new generation how to handle such a boat, four boys rowed me around to the harbour in the centre of the village. I never will forget this special invitation and this very old and basic ceremony. Vis is an island where a new living maritime heritage rises from the ashes of the old one. (EMH Newsletter, April 2001).

4. The birth of a boat: a miracle at sea

To cast off is to lose the solid ground beneath one’s feet and give oneself over to the dynamic element of the sea. For Man, the boat is an extension of himself, his own body is dipped into the chaotic dangerous element/medium of salt water. Exposed to forces beyond his control, Man acknowledges his weakness and his inability to cope. But in the dramatic struggle for survival, Man also recognises that he has hidden abilities. Miracles can happen.

Setting forth to the universe of the sea, leaving behind the solid, reliable element of earth, the seaman exposed himself to whimsical forces the behaviour of which even the most experienced sailors could not rely on. Every time one had to count on the worst, each sailing was a route into the unknown and every goal reached was a victory because the possibility of counteracting the forces of nature was the premise for untying the ropes of one’s boat.

At the dramatic moment of an impending shipwreck in the vast salt water abyss, a mariner’s only reliable companion was the heavens. In faith in heavenly protection lay the only possibility of salvation, one that the laws of navigation and physics did not recognise. Those dramatic moments were times of getting to know oneself, one’s hitherto unrecognised abilities, heroic strength and lucidity that made possible the impossible. Sailing was, from the beginning of time, an adventure in which one learnt what one was made of, and gained knowledge about the inner self. The act of transcending the boundaries of possibility belongs to the spheres of the miraculous, the metaphysical and the sacrosanct. This kind of experience can be read from the faces of seamen.

Look at the serene faces of seamen in ex voto
portraits in maritime museums, in churches or in private ownership, look at the faces of captains who have survived near-death experiences in storms at sea. Those faces were, at least once, illuminated by the realisation of a hidden, uncanny, god-like force that made sure they saw their ports and homes again.

Boat burning is a sacred act, a ritual of consecration. It is also a funeral, therefore an act of personification. In maritime culture in which the boat takes part in an individual’s life, it cannot be solely an object, a means to an end – it is a person. A boat is baptised, simultaneously given a name, and when its life cycle has come to an end it is sanctified by the act of burning at a sacred place: in Komiza that place is the plateau outside St. Nicholas’ Church, by the cemetery. The cemetery of people and the cemetery of boats lie next to each other. When a boat comes to the end of its life it is made sacred on the funeral pyre.

5. The anthropomorphic structure of boats

In the maritime culture of Komiza, a boat is perceived as a person. The fact that a fisherman not only acts with the boat, but also thinks with the boat is reflected in language.

When an owner of a boat speaks about it, he uses figurative language in which the boat is conceptualised as the owner himself, i.e. as a part of his body. Several examples are listed to illustrate this:

1. A fisherman says: ‘I launched myself’ [into water]. The literal meaning is that he had launched himself into water, though actually he is speaking of the boat [Jo sam se porinula].
2. A fisherman says: ‘Peter changed his spine’. He is actually referring to Peter replacing his boat’s ‘spine’, i.e. its keel (Petar je promenil kolumbu).
3. A fisherman says: ‘My keel hurts’. In the anthropomorphic concept of the boat, the keel is its spine. What the fisherman means is that his own back hurts.
4. A fisherman says: ‘My boat is a good mariner’. Literally, he is saying that his boat is a good seaman, but figuratively, he means it is seaworthy and sails well.
5. A fisherman says: ‘I am anchored in the port’. In fact he is referring to his boat.

These examples reflect the emotional bond a person has with his boat. A man whose life is bound to the sea perceives the boat as an extension of his body and identifies with it, conceptualises it as a living creature, a person.

Figure 2
A falkuša: Drawing showing the names for the different parts of the boat. Drawing: Valimir Salamon.
Of all manufactured objects, the boat resembles its maker the most. It is an object of its manufacturer’s most affectionate identification. A boat has a spine – its keel, the oars are its limbs, the frames are its ribs, the prow is its face, the panelling is its skin and the wheel is its will.

A boat is not a thing among things, but a person among persons. Through its anthropomorphic structure it gains human features. A boat is all curves. There are no flat, rectangular forms. A boat is more an organism than a made object.

*Homo faber* produces rectangular forms (Pejaković 1982, 14). Unlike all other living beings, Man builds orthogonal structures. He does so to gain control over the space that surrounds him, to optimally and rationally make use of it while expending the least amount of energy. In Christian scripture, the first man on Earth was Adam; his name is an acronym of names assigned to the lands of the four directions from which God took earth in the act of creation: *Anatole, Dusis, Arctos and Mezanobis*. Therefore, Adam is the owner of a *rectangular house* (ibid, 13) and the origin of rectangular forms is directly linked to the origin of mankind. The descendants of Adam have covered the land with rectangular structures. However, when Man found himself at the waterfront, he had to abandon his preferred method of building. To be able to sail, Man had to respect the laws of the two dynamic elements, Water and Air, as opposed to making solid, ground-based rectangular shapes. His boat is thus made of curves and bends. Among predominantly tetragonal human constructions, the shell-like boat stands apart, following the principles of organic life. The stability of a boat is in the movement, not the statics; to overpower the dynamics of water, the vessel has to follow them. A boat’s hydrodynamic form resembles that of a fish. Life has rounded forms and so does the boat, one creature among many.

In *Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard argues that from the phenomenological point of view, life is round, and he provides examples from the works of famous poets and artists. An example of full roundness, an exalting emanation of life, is found in the artistic representations of J. Michelel’s bird and R. M. Rilke’s
6. The paradoxical nature of boats

The four archetypal elements: earth, water, air and fire define the boat as a being a paradox.

6.1. Earth

The element of earth carries the meaning of solidity, stability, inaction, steadiness and peace. From earth, a tree springs and grows towards the sun. The tree is itself dedicated to stillness and dominated by it. But from parts of the tree, skillful human hands create the keel, trunk and planks of a boat, designing an elegant form intended for constant movement. Metamorphosed into a boat, the once immobile tree now travels the seas. In other words, steadiness is transformed into unsteadiness, statics to dynamics, inaction to action.

6.2. Water

The element of water also carries a paradox in relation to the phenomenon of the boat. Water is the liquid element, its characteristic is penetration. No matter how closely planks are fitted to each other, water will find a way to penetrate through the joints into the inside of the boat. However, the same water that threatens to sink the boat is the boat’s salvation: the wood swells with the water thus closing the joints and preventing the water coming in. Thus the water closes its own passage into the inside of the boat, keeping it afloat.

6.3. Air

Air, the third element, is the motive force of the boat. It swells the sails and pushes the boat towards its destination. Even when the wind blows from the direction of the destination, the boat will reach it without confronting the force of the wind. Tacking into the wind, the boat turns the seemingly opposing force of the wind to its own advantage. This Zen principle of defeating the enemy with his own strength is an art incorporated in sailing practice.

6.4. Fire

The fourth and here, most prominent element is the fire. Burning the ship closes the archetypal tetrad. The paradox of fire is in its duality: it is simultaneously an end and a beginning.

The element of fire contains the principle of dissolution of entropy [Greek *entropía* – to turn, to transform]. Fire is the elementary destructive force. It separates what was joined, destroys what was created, transforms what was material. When the boat burns, the force of entropy separates, destroys, dissipates and transforms – it turns the boat into dust and smoke, returns it to Earth, Water and Wind.

Fire consumes planks and frames, the boat’s elegant form disappears and the handiwork of the old master boat-builders turns to ashes – a product of a thousand-year-old nautical, boat-building tradition forged on the shore of Komša since the time of the first mythical sea voyages across the Mediterranean. But the Fire which closes one life cycle opens another. From the ashes of the burnt boat a new one is born. Destruction is a token of preservation, survival, durability and continuation. Fire is the *dynamis* of transformation and the *energeia* of Eros.

Life and death dictate the cyclical rhythm of life. Boat-building knowledge is passed from one generation to the next. The invisible bond of experience and tradition has connected numerous generations, people who never had contact with each other except through the knowledge transmitted to them as a valuable heritage.

7. The tradition of boat burning elsewhere in the world

According to Westerdahl (2005, 10) the boat is a *liminal agent*. He argues that the antagonism between the elements of sea and land is deeply felt in maritime cultures and that this primordial opposition gives rise to all other binary oppositions in the human conceptualisation of the world.

All the well-formulated and well-ordered thoughts created by Man in mythology and religion are presumably based on subconscious cognitive structures. One of these, certainly one of the most important, perhaps a primary one, is the contrast between sea and land.
Liminal agents are those that remove antagonism, make space for dialogue and the victory of cosmos (land) over chaos (sea). The boat is the liminal agent par excellence. And what is its position in incineration, sacrificial and funerary rituals? Liminal objects have great potential as sacrificial objects (Westerdahl 2005, 10). It is possible that the use of boats and boat-like forms (cradles and coffins) in burials may derive partly from recognising this characteristic of the boat.

7.1. Ancient Egypt

The ancient Romans had the tradition of boat burning which they presumably inherited from the ancient Egyptians. The Egyptians worshiped Isis, the goddess of the feminine principle, who had the key to the secret of life and from whose blood every living creature got their blood. In Egyptian religion she was the symbol and the magical source of fertility, metamorphosis and rebirth. Sacrifices were offered to her, just as boats were sacrificed in her honour as tokens for safe sea voyages. The Egyptians would build a barka (meaning boat, the same word is used in Croatian and in other Mediterranean vernaculars as well) which, in preparation for the sacrificial offering to the hearth goddess, was ceremoniously cleansed with fire. The boat was subsequently set adrift down the Nile, towards the sea with the sails up. At the mercy of winds and waves, crewless, it would crash and sink – a token of hope for reincarnation and safe sailing.

Egyptian culture also knew the practice of funerary boats: it was believed that the gods used them for transportation in the underworld, and the most famous example is the one discovered in 1954 and exhibited near Cleopatra’s pyramid. In various cultures the boat is connected to the afterlife. Just like in Egypt, it is the vessel of transcendence, a means of transition into the world of the dead and a means of communication with it. One more of many examples is the boat of Charon, in Greek mythology.

7.2. The Vikings

One of the most famous Viking heritage festivals is Up Helly-Aa which is held in Lerwick, in the Shetland Islands, in Scotland. The present form of Shetland’s fire festival was established in 1873 (Fjell 2007, 138). The Lerwick festival itself does not have a long tradition, but the underlying beliefs and rituals do. It dates back to about the 10th century. This is Europe’s oldest fire festival (ICH in Scotland, 2008 report) to which boat burning, now its central manifestation, was later added, as were the torch procession and disguises. The traditional wooden Viking longship and falkusas fulfill in flames destinies that are similar but not the same. Boat burning in Komiža, as has been noted earlier, has a centuries’ long tradition and is a ritual, whereas in Shetland it is a recently established custom within a festival, a re-enactment of it. Komižan ritual is an enduring continuation, related to symbolic cultural super-structures and religion. It is not done primarily for entertainment although it does present an impressive spectacle. On the other hand, both events are important in shaping the identities of their respective communities. While this festival is the most spectacular manifestation of the Shetlanders’ perception of their identity, it is by no means the only one (Morrison 2000, 399). Also, both have a strong potential for establishing themselves as developmental strategies – indeed, Shetland sets an example for Komiža to follow.

While considering the Vikings, another thing is worth mentioning – the boat burial. Regardless of the function of burying the deceased with his/her boat, which is still a matter of scientific disagreement, the practice confirms the strong ties the peoples of maritime cultures have with their boats (Christensen 2000, 88-91).

7.3. Montijo, Portugal

The boat burning ritual of Komiža has its sister ritual in Montijo, Portugal. Connected to Lisbon by the Tejo river, Montijo is a small fishing town whose maritime culture significantly resembles that of the island of Vis, notably in the fact that both have boat burning practices connected to the festival of their patron saints. In Montijo, it is Saint Peter in whose honour the festivities commence on the 29th of June, lasting several days. The festivities originated from the religious ceremony in honour of St. Peter promoted by the fishermen’s fellowship of Aldeia Galega, which was founded in the 16th century. St. Peter’s Day celebrations include street processions, the traditional procession of fishing boats on the Tejo river, blessing the boats, the bull corrida, concerts, fireworks, a culinary programme (including an all-you-can-eat sardine buffet!). The boat burning which
takes place on the last day of the festivities is also of ancient pagan origin and a very interesting ritual. The most celebratory part is the closing event which takes place at night and is followed by fireworks. It is a spectacle that dazzles the audience. However, there is the depth of a long-standing tradition behind this spectacular show. A five hundred year old tradition has also resulted in a song that accompanies the boat burning. This is the song, with an English translation:

Lá vai o batel a arder,
"Como manda a tradição";
E à volta, em grande prazer,
Canta e dança a multidão.
De repente, e com surpresa,
Rebenta o fogo da chama!
Quadro de intensa beleza
Que as almas todas inflam!
Arde o fogo, arde o batel,
Num sentido bem profundo;
Ficam cinzas em tropel,
Como acontece no mundo...
É a saudade perene
Dos primitivos amores.
É a alma da luta infrene!
É a alma dos pescadores!

The boat catches fire,
'As tradition dictates.'
Circling around the boat with great pleasure
The crowd sings and dances.
Suddenly and surprisingly,
The fire bursts into flames!
A sight of intense beauty
That ignites all souls!
As the fire burns, the boat burns,
With very deep meaning;
Ashes whirl in a frenzy,
As happens in the world...
It is the perennial melancholy
Of primitive love.
It is the soul of the struggle unrestrained!
It is the soul of the fishermen!

8. Conclusion: the fate of the last falkuša

The ancient fishing culture – ancient in structure and general patterns, not in details modified over time – has survived up to our own times in marginal zones where it has existed since antiquity. Isolated but populous fishing settlements have withstood modernisation following in the steps of agriculture, high culture and industrialisation. In particular, maritime fishing villages have preserved their continuity [Åke Hultkrantz in Westerdahl 2005, 3].

The understanding of tradition seems to be the key. The relationship of ritual and tradition, adhering to the past and presently under threat, with a rationalist and market-oriented future, need not be one of conflict. Deeming tradition to be a loosely connected yet consistent set of structures whose elements are subject to reinterpretation and re-contextualisation, softened to absorb revitalising elements, [Bell 1992, 123] the answer emerges as follows – the falkuša has to be reinvented with each new one manufactured, a process already initiated in 1986 with the Comeza-Lisboa. The new falkušas will have lives that suit their anthropomorphic nature within the Komiza community – at once marking the continuity of a tradition but within the setting of an eco-museum (presently in development) and assigning a new function to the boats through which they will become active participants in life of the community, sustaining themselves economically and thus enabling the incineration ritual to continue in its original, essentially unchanged, form. Appropriated and re-contextualised, yet still deeply rooted in the identity and consciousness of the community and symbolically intact, the ceremonies can continue. They are an important part of Croatian culture and they also now have a part to play in the development of tourism and thus in the economic life of the country. Moreover, as Bell [1992, 120] states in the finity of ritual’s structure lies the prestige of tradition and in this prestige lies its power.

All traditional Komiza fishing boats of the gajeta falkuša type have been ritually burned, one after another – all, that is but one, since the last one, the Cicibela, had a different fate: it was shipwrecked in a storm on the 26th of August 1986, in Porat Cove on the island of Bišćevo. The Cicibela was, on the other hand, lucky in that someone had recognised it was the last of its kind and a salvage venture was organised. The following year its wreck was reconstructed in the Fishing Museum of Komiza. Ten years later, through a project organised by Ars Halieutica, a replica was made just in time for EXPO 98 in Lisbon. The newly built falkuša was christened the Comeza-Lisboa by Simonetta Luz Alonso, the director of the
Portuguese exhibition at EXPO 98. The name Comeza-Lisboa connects Komiža’s old name with the Portuguese capital. Significantly, on St. Nicholas’ day, December 6th 1997, the director of the boat festival at EXPO 98, João Filipe Galvão de Carvalho, set fire to the sacrificial boat, thus symbolically opening the 100th World Exhibition in Komiža as well – that boat’s ashes were later taken to Lisbon, on June 7th 1998, and scattered into the Tejo river from the stern of the Comeza-Lisboa. It was a part of a ceremony blessing all boats and mariners around the world. The little gajeta falkuša boat representing Croatian maritime heritage was world news that day. There was a message of hope in the salvation of the historic boat which was about to be reborn from the sacrificial flames. From that moment until today, around fifty projects of traditional boat (re)construction and several traditional boat festivals have been initiated.
REFERENCES