

“MAKÓ – NOT ONLY *HAGYMA*”?: COMPETING HISTORIES AND NARRATIVES OF ONION PRODUCTION AND SPA TOURISM IN A HUNGARIAN TOWN

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Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to present the role that onions and spa tourism play in local identity in the Hungarian town of Makó, as well as the possible explanations that cause the two phenomena to manifest differently in the local (urban and community) self-image. What the two phenomena have in common is the economic aspect, which in the past and in the present constitutes the main sector of the town, but we can see that this orientation is also perceived differently at many points. The question is relevant from an anthropological point of view because we can witness stacked layers of meaning that in some cases support or conflict with each other, and these affect both the self-image of the locals and the image of the town. The interpretive framework of the article is the theory of competing histories, incorporating concepts of tourism, festivals, identity, collective memory, and narrative research.*

The field of research is Makó, a small town in southeastern Hungary which is primarily known for its onion production but which a few years ago was also placed on the tourist map, on a national and international scale, in connection with the Hagymatikum Spa. This study seeks to answer the following questions: (1) what is the role of onions (agriculture) and spas (tourism) in the local identity of Makó; (2) how are the narratives of the two phenomena structured socially and historically; and (3) how are they intertwined in the endeavours of contemporary identity-construction? These questions are further interpreted through the theoretical framework of competing local histories and narratives that affect the construction of the local identity.

Keywords: *locality, tourism, festivals, history, identity construction*

Introduction

The phrase in the title (“Makó – not only *hagyma!*”)¹ was uttered in this form in 2014 by a staff member of Makó’s Hagymatikum Spa after a British couple purchased their tickets for the renovated spa. With this sentence, the institution’s staff responded to the couple’s words of praise for Makó’s thermal waters (Matkovich 2014). The term, translated in a somewhat ambiguous way, became the new slogan of the town of Makó in 2012, the year the renovated spa opened in town. It was meant to express that although Makó is primarily renowned for its onions, the time had come to associate another item with the place. The mayor of the town in 2012, Péter Buzás (in office from 1994–2014), explained, but also criticized, the new slogan:

We have been working for more than a year to have more than just onions. In my opinion, Makó is still identified with the onion. [...] I think it’s important that onions are the hallmark of Makó, but also that we add even more (personal communication, 2013).

In the mayor’s wording, this brought the two “products” of the town into a “hierarchical” relationship, which also signals tensions among the locals regarding the local identity.

The slogan is not only intended to mark the change in the image of the place, but is also related to a phenomenon that may be of interest to cultural anthropological research. The sign of congruence between the onion and Makó was questioned with this slogan, and at the same time it resulted in the shift of the identity of the town. However, the self-image of a settlement is important not only from a marketing and economic point of view, but also because it concerns the self-image of a local community. The concept of local identity relevant in this case describes the phenomenon in which the basis of individual or community self-determination is tied to a place rather than to a religious or ethnic affiliation (see below). However, the issues raised in relation to the motto extend beyond the matter of local identity. The phenomenon affects the local economy, collective memory, local narratives, and more generally, the role of these factors in local identity construction.

¹ *Hagyma* means “onions” in Hungarian.

Although the abovementioned topics have been given much attention and elaboration in the literature of the social sciences, Makó has not yet become the focus of studies on similar subjects. Therefore, this study seeks to answer the following questions: (1) what is the role of onions (agriculture) and spas (tourism) in the local identity of Makó; (2) how are the narratives of the two phenomena structured socially and historically; and (3) how are they intertwined in the endeavours of contemporary identity-construction? These questions are further interpreted through the theoretical framework of competing local histories and narratives that affect the construction of the local identity.

Theoretical Framework: Identity, Locality, and Competing Histories and Narratives

As Anthony P. Cohen argues in his book *The Symbolic Construction of Community*: “community [...] is where one learns and continues to practice how to ‘be social’. [...] We could say it is where one acquires ‘culture’. [...] People’s experience and understanding of their community thus resides in their orientation to its symbolism” (Cohen 1993, 15–16). This quote refers to the phenomenon, also seen in Makó, that the local community can interpret itself along its created symbols. Further, as András A. Gergely points out: “Not only the ethnic population defined a city as a specific area, but also the ‘city’ in itself. The city is not just ‘one world’, it is a mapped public space” (1996). As the quote suggests, the urban space and the city (or town) itself can be an important organizing medium of local identity.

An integral part of this approach is not only the perception and use of urban space, but also its connection with time and community, which also determine the social relations of a particular space, since “the defining element of this relationship is history, the most intense intersection of social reality” (A. Gergely 1996). Gábor Gyáni (2008) also emphasizes this issue when he discusses the concept of “collective identity”. The connection between collective identity and collective memory (Assmann 2004) is therefore also highlighted by some of the most prominent researchers of the topic, for instance, Maurice Halbwachs ([1925] 1992), and Pierre Nora and Lawrence D. Kritzman (1996). As related to their work, Gyáni (2008) further suggests that the two aspects of collective memory and identity formation are distinguished: one is “spontaneous” or “organic” (bottom-up), created by the social group, or the local community; and the other is “created”, constructed by social and/or political power. Gyáni

further connects the notion of a constructed collective identity to the concepts of national identity, which can also be linked to Benedict Anderson's theory about imagined communities (Anderson 2006), and perceives locality in this way as a subnational identity. These subnational or local identities are then also shaped by local history and memory, which "construct history for the town and its inhabitants. They create an archive to store documents of the past, exhibit objects documenting historical time in a museum, perpetuate roles and occasions for talking about the past" (Gyáni 2008). Furthermore, written forms of stories and narratives that serve as the basis of local identity cannot be found in the pages of history textbooks; they are perpetuated instead by local history writing (often considered inferior to national history writing) (Gyáni 2008).

Ferenc Tóth, a local ethnographer and historian, is the central figure in Makó history writing, and thus in the formation of local community knowledge, memory, and identity (more below). Tóth, who lived from 1928–2018, started his research and publishing activities about Makó around 1950 (Makó Híradó 2013). His legacy is notable in the town of Makó, and his results are included in museum exhibitions, publications, newspapers, and speeches. For example, as a resident of Makó – and as a folk dancer and member of the local brass orchestra – I listened to the opening speeches of countless official town ceremonies from 1996–2014: national holidays, the Day of Makó, and the Onion Festival. On these occasions, I observed a continuous reference to the work of Ferenc Tóth and Makó's agricultural past ("a glorious past of onion gardening") by Péter Buzás, the mayor of the town from 1994–2014. Éva Erzsébet Farkas, who became the mayor after him, however, builds her speeches along other rhetorics, mainly using the dichotomy of modernity and tradition, and the "civilian" lifestyle and mentality (see below). Along these lines, it can also be seen that the leaders of the town are themselves "users" of the historical narratives of Makó (many significantly created by Ferenc Tóth), but they also interpret and shape them on their own.

The common past, with its narratives and emphasis on the local community, can in this way be legitimized in the "process of making cultural heritage" (Csurgó-Szatmári 2014; Pap 2014). In the case of Makó, the onions as cultural heritage and as "hungaricum" (defined as something uniquely Hungarian) resonate with this possible interpretation.²

² The Hungaricum Act, issued by the Hungarian Parliament in 2012, defines the concept of hungaricum as "a collective term with a unified classification and registration system to donate a value worthy

In summary, the essential organizing principles of the “local identity” discussed in this paper are collective memory and common knowledge based on local history writing. Collective memories and common knowledge become collective and identity-shaping when they are recalled, or talked about: in this way, they turn into a narrative. The act of creating a narrative is organized and managed in this form, and the local intellectual elite (researchers, town leaders) have a significant role in the process. However, competing narratives often exist in this regard.

The term “competing histories” has no elaborate definition. It refers primarily to the title of a volume published by Mike Berry and Greg Philo in 2006 that examines the conflict between Israel and Palestine. Jon E. Taylor also uses the term in a similar way in his book *A President, a Church and Trails West: Competing Histories in Independence, Missouri* (2008). Numerous studies demonstrate the widespread application of competing histories as a theoretical framework in which a common point is that the research problem of the studied field is about the interpretation of two or more disparate narratives shaping particular identities and political discussions. In works using competing histories as a theoretical framework, it is common for the research problem to deal with identity (ethnic, local), cultural heritage, and their political nuances (Goodman 2000; Berry and Philo 2006; Taylor 2008; Liivoja 2013; Thompson 2017; Cook 2018). Carpini suggests in regard to the widespread application of this theoretical framework that she has “‘found’ the issues of competing history in various ways, including survey projects, mitigation projects, or public input/community engagement work. They have taken on many forms and each has presented its own unique set of challenges” (Carpini 2019).

Competing narratives appear primarily in social science studies that deal with national or local politics, and with issues of political identity (see MacClancy 2002; Dawson and Buchanan 2005; Blomqvist 2009; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2018). As in the case of competing histories, this concept does not have a uniform definition either. As Eliaz and Spiegler argue “according to this view, divergent opinions involve more than heterogeneous preferences or information: they can arise from conflicting stories about political reality. Accordingly, public-opinion makers try to shape the popular narratives” (Eliaz and Spiegler 2020, 2).

of distinction and emphasis which, with its uniqueness and quality characteristic of the Hungarians, is the top performance of the Hungarians” (hungarikum n.d.).

Competing histories and competing narratives as a theoretical framework help to interpret the question that has also emerged in connection with my own research: how do different (local) stories and narratives influence Makó's local identity, and the local community's self-image, and how are they hegemonised by political power?

Research Design, Sources, and Methodology

The research discussed in this study is the result of ten years of fragmentary participatory observation. I carried out intensive fieldwork in Makó between the years 2011–2013, 2014–2015, and 2018–2019, during which I focused on a variety of topics, but in all of them the relationship between local identity, onions, and tourism appeared. The first years of my research (2011–2013) dealt with the Onion Festival. From 2014–2015, I studied the issues of living in the border areas (harmashatarok 2014). And in the last period of my research (2018–2019), I focused on spa tourism.

Apart from the intensive research phases, I have acquired an extensive general knowledge about Makó, as I was born in the town. This kind of insider perspective has both its advantages and disadvantages. In addition to the benefits of having a knowledge of specific cultural patterns and social networks, I must also reckon with a certain degree of cultural blindness and filtering, which stems from the fact that I am a member of the researched community (Kapitány and Kapitány, 2002). However, using another approach, the person of the researcher can also be used as an ethnographic source, as pointed out by Collins and Gallinat (2010), as well as by Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2010), the latter being major proponents of the autoethnography theory: "Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience" (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2010). Accordingly, I also put my own personal memories at the service of the research, keeping in mind the objective academic approach.

The sources of my research include written, oral, primary, secondary, and historical materials. For historical research, I used press materials, archival documents, and online articles. For interpreting the local narratives, I mainly relied on local history writings, which were also largely included in the previously mentioned sources. I used scholarly, popular, and trade publications to collect academic, non-academic, and specific professional knowledge and data related to my research topic (USC Libraries 2020).

I have used questionnaires and short, in-depth interviews. In connection with the research of the Onion Festival, I incorporated 25 questionnaires, ten semi-structured interviews, and three in-depth interviews. On the topic of living in border areas, I included 40 questionnaires (representative), 16 semi-structured interviews, and eight in-depth interviews. I did not use questionnaires on the issue of spas and tourism; instead I observed social media interfaces (open-access Facebook groups, public profiles), opinion sections, and statistics from tourist sites. In addition, I conducted semi-structured and in-depth interviews with Makó residents on these topics. Social media interfaces and contemporary online press articles also offered great help in the analysis of the most recent local attitudes as related to my topics of research. In addition to local history writings, as well as the scholarly literature on identity, narrative research, and festival research, I relied heavily on my previously published and unpublished writings (Apjok 2013, 2015, 2018, 2020).

In addition to the field observations and face-to-face interviews, I also used the method of online ethnography. Budka and Kremser (2004) point out that online research displays three dimensions simultaneously: it describes the relationship between humans and technology, it studies technology as a means of shaping society, and it is a social forum and a meeting place. In the case of my research, the latter dimension is typical, as an “offline” pre-existing group (residents of Makó) is also concentrated in online communities. Pink and coauthors (2015) thus interpret online ethnography as an ethnographic research that gains insight into the activities and motivations of an individual or group similar to classical ethnography, while the encounters take place through a medium (e.g., social media platforms). The resulting “ethnographic text” which is thus created is not necessarily textual, nor visual, but in all cases is digital. I need to add that I was present in the Facebook groups as a passive observer, as I didn’t share content myself, and I didn’t respond to content shared by others. In my article, I mark the names of informants and users of social media platforms with the initials of their names, with the exception of public actors, for which I use whole names.

Historical Narrative of Makó Onions

In this subsection, I first describe the impact of onion growing in Makó on the local mentality and identity from a historical perspective. Following this, I briefly outline the role of the work of Ferenc Tóth (1928–2018), a local historian and

ethnographer in Makó, in light of the creation of the historical and contemporary onion narrative contributing to the construction of Makó's local identity.

The current population of Makó is about 23,000 people (nepesseg 2019). The town is located in the southeastern region of Hungary, 15 kilometres from the Romanian border and 30 kilometres from the city of Szeged. Makó is situated on the right bank of the Maros River, which has determined the socio-geographical position of the town from its beginnings (Tóth 1999). Until the end of the 20th century, Makó's main economic sector was agriculture (Tóth 1999). Its specific product is onions. Makó therefore reflects a similar pattern to other settlements in the Great Hungarian Plain, each recognized by its own locally specific agricultural or gastronomic product: paprika powder for Kalocsa (kalocsa 2020), cucumber for Méhkerék (Magyari 2011), tomato and paprika for Szentes (Imre 2020), fish soup for Baja and Szeged (Ínyenc 2020), and sausage for Békéscsaba and Gyula (Táfelspicc 2016).

In the history of Makó, onion growing was not only of economic importance, but it also contributed significantly to narratives about local social and cultural identity. Based on local history research by Ferenc Tóth, onion cultivation helped create the conditions for the social transformation of Makó in the 19th century. The essence of this transformation was a change in the way of life and mentality from the previous feudal order to the new model of Western European civil societies throughout Hungary (Kósa 1990). Based on local historical research by Tóth, it can be said that in the case of Makó, the development of a local, specific method of cultivation and the resulting economic success initiated the mentioned social transformation.³ According to Tóth, the mentioned transformation had already taken place in Makó in 1861 (Tóth 2008a), although in Hungary the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867 created the conditions for this social change in general (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica 1998). Ferenc Tóth thus writes about the mentality of the onion-growing people⁴ of Makó and the related civil-social transformation:

³ The first data on the modern history of onion growing in Makó dates from 1755, while sources suggest that onion growing took place in the Makó area even before the Turkish occupation (which lasted from 1541–1699). Onion cultivation requires an appropriate proportion of arable land, sunlight, and precipitation. Due to the low rainfall, it was unable to grow seedlings successfully from seed in Makó, so the onion gardeners of the 18th century invented a special two-year cultivation method by “folk breeding”. Thanks to this procedure, the onion in Makó has become outstanding in quality and has become known not only in the country, but also in Europe and worldwide (Tóth 1998).

⁴ Makó was not only engaged in onion growing in agriculture, there were also grain growers. At the same time, onions were the product that made Makó famous, and it also became a symbol of the



Figure 1. An artwork from 1856, by Austrian painter Joseph Böss, depicting "Makó people". Source: Hungarian National Museum – Hungarian Historical Gallery (sulinet.hu).

settlement. The research of Ferenc Tóth also points out that grain growers and onion growers, for example, were religiously separated from each other in Makó (Tóth 2008a). Due to the limited scope of this paper, I do not want to explain this in more detail.

The onion gardener arguably worked a lot, but he also lived well. He soon took off his folk costume, outgrew the small and poor (one room and one kitchen) house, and replaced the old furniture. Their celebratory dress was no different from that of the citizens, their dwelling barely differed from the farmhouses [...]. All this was coupled with a strong political conviction (Tóth 2014a, 231).

The quote suggests that the identity of the onion gardeners in Makó was manifested in both material and intellectual form. The quoted source is also important for the topic of the creation of the narrative of Makó onions because this and similar descriptions about the onion gardeners by Tóth perpetuate and emphasize the image of a diligent, hard-working, progressive, and prosperous “peasant citizen” who is active in public life, too (Tóth 2008a, 2014b, 2014c). Tóth’s writings often include nostalgic overtones, which put the image of the “ancestors” (the onion gardeners of the 19th century) in a somewhat romantic perspective. Thus, the writings of Ferenc Tóth are not only informative sources, but also “nourishing media” of the historical and recent image of Makó and its onion gardeners. The reason for this is that as a museologist and researcher, Tóth shared his research results not only with his professional circle, but also with the wider community.

From 1964–1988, Ferenc Tóth worked as an ethnographer-museologist and director of the József Attila Museum in Makó (Makó Híradó 2018a). During this period, he created two significant exhibitions presenting the history of onion growing in Makó. One has been located in the open-air exhibition of the József Attila Museum in Makó since 1992 (Tóth 2014c), while the other has been situated in the Ópusztaszer National Heritage Park in Ópusztaszer since 1981 (Tóth 2014a).⁵ Both exhibitions present onion growing in Makó through the lifestyle and material culture (residence, tools, equipment) of onion gardeners. In both cases, peasant-citizen houses, which were built specifically for the showings, provide the venue for the exhibitions (Tóth 2014a, 2014c). The József Attila Museum has primarily a regional scope (museum.mako.hu), while the Ópusztaszer National Heritage Park has a national and international outreach (opusztaszer.hu). In this way, the exhibition in the József Attila Museum in Makó strengthens the consciousness of Makó residents about local history, and thus contributes to the shaping of the local identity. The exhibition in the Ópusztaszer National Heritage Park simultaneously links the terms “onion” and

⁵ The distance between Ópusztaszer and Makó is about 60 kilometres.

“Makó” by making the exhibition known as “Makó House”, thus designating the content of the “Makó image” for tourists visiting the national heritage park.

In addition to his work as a museologist, Ferenc Tóth was a prolific author. He published his professional results not only in scientific journals and publications, but also in the form of educational journal articles. Tóth was part of Makó’s journalistic life for about 40 years. His writings for the wider community have appeared in the local press (e.g., *Makói História*,⁶ *Marosvidék*),⁷ regional journals, newspapers (*Szeged – a város folyóirata*,⁸ *Csongrád Megyei Hírlap*),⁹ and national newspapers (*Magyar Múzeumok*).¹⁰ In 2014, 120 of his previously published writings were collected in a volume entitled *In the Enchantment of Makó* (Tóth 2014a, 2014b, 2014c). Two years later, in 2016, a collection of 150 of his earlier writings entitled *Pots from Makó* was also published (Tóth 2016). Thus, the newspaper articles he wrote about the history and ethnography of Makó did not disappear into oblivion, but with their republication and systematization became available also to present and future audiences. This means that the educational writings of Tóth that had previously existed only in fragments (e.g., the lifestyle of onion gardeners) were also given a new interpretive framework by the two volumes.

The significance of Ferenc Tóth in shaping the local identity of Makó residents can be seen not only through his publishing and museological work. During his years as a museologist and even after his retirement, he was active in the professional and public life of the town. This is evidenced not only by the fact that his activities were pervasive and supported by several municipalities and political atmospheres (Tóth 2008b), but also by the popular saying in Makó that “What Uncle Feri does not know about Makó is not worth knowing” (see Korom 2013; Korom 2018; Szabó 2018; Major 2018; and personal observations). Moreover, the nickname “Uncle Feri” also refers to his special role in the community.

Furthermore, an important and symbolic element of the historical narrative of the Makó onions is that the presentation of Ferenc Tóth’s works (exhibitions, publications) has been linked to local cultural events many times. In 1995, the

⁶ Transl.: *History of Makó*.

⁷ Transl.: *Maros Countryside*.

⁸ Transl.: *Szeged – Journal of the City*.

⁹ Transl.: *Gazette of Csongrád County*.

¹⁰ Transl.: *Hungarian Museums*.

exhibition named “Onion House” (organized by Ferenc Tóth) was opened at the József Attila Museum as a part of the program of the local Onion Festival. In 1998 and 2001, the public presentations of the new volumes of the *Monograph of Makó* (editor-in-chief: Ferenc Tóth) were held at the Makó Onion Festival (Apjok 2013). The last part of the six-volume monograph, *Ethnography of Makó*, was completed in May of 2008 for the Day of Makó event (Ilyés 2008; Barna 2008; Tóth 2008b; Szilágyi 2008). In 2016, Ferenc Tóth’s publication *Pots from Makó* was presented on January 22 for the occasion of the Day of Hungarian Culture (delmagyar 2016). The series of symbolic date choices confirms that the work of Ferenc Tóth has shaped the image of Makó: on the one hand, the local community can benefit from the common local knowledge in an organized way, and on the other hand, the town communicates that the work of Ferenc Tóth is outstanding at the cultural level of the town.

The Onion Festival of Makó: From Agriculture to Tourism

In this section, I present how the onion in Makó has become a symbol, a cultural heritage, and a brand. I do so in light of historical and recent data, highlighting the role of the Onion Festival, and its purpose, structure, and touristic aspects in this regard.

As onion production was established as Makó’s main economic sector, Makó onions also gradually became a symbol of the town. In the case of the settlements mentioned at the beginning of the previous section (e.g., Szeged, Méhkerék, Gyula), the local gastronomic product similarly appears as a symbol for the village or town. Moreover, the iconic local gastronomic product (the onion, in case of Makó) also becomes the symbol of the main local cultural events, such as Makó’s Onion Festival, which has been organized in Makó since 1991.

The Onion Festival fits into the line of local gastronomic festivals held in Hungary after the political transitions of 1989 (Pusztai 2007a). During this period, various other towns from the region endeavoured to present themselves publicly in a symbolic way, and this was often achieved by finding and emphasizing some marginal, unique aspect of the local culture. This uniqueness was then staged in a ritual form of gastronomic festivals, as in the example of the sausage festival in Békéscsaba, the fish soup festivals in Baja and Szeged (Pusztai 2007a, 2007b), and the cucumber festival in Méhkerék (Hungary 2020), among others. The focus of these festivals is on a local consumable product that determines the culinary character of the events. The purpose of these

events is multidimensional, extending beyond a mere product promotion and the accompanying entertainment (Pusztai 2003, 16). These festivals therefore also establish and reinforce the central gastronomic product as a symbol of locality, which simultaneously contributes to the creation of the local identity and community of the village or town (Pusztai 2007a, 29). As Gibson and Connell point out in relation to festivals:

More generally, as officially endorsed events, festivals always have the capacity to selectively seek and represent some elements of local cultures and identities, intensifying social exclusion – inadvertently or otherwise. In various ways, local social tensions may be refracted through festivals, as much as community is engendered (Gibson and Connell 2011, xvi).

To create a complex image of the settlement through a gastronomy festival, finding the symbol of the place in the form of the local product alone is not enough. It is instead necessary to build a complete brand around it, as happened in Makó when onions became a brand and registered trademark of the town in 2001 (Origo 2001). “Branding” is in this sense inherent in local-regional self-definition, and carries both an emotional and an economic factor: brands are in themselves concrete representations of value and emotion complexes that guarantee outstanding quality without trial and a value with which people can identify (Pusztai 2007a, 235). Moreover, the branding of the festival and its central product (onions, fish soup, or cucumber) can be particularly important in relation to tourism.

Tourism is a multisectoral phenomenon that includes the selling of food, transportation, entertainment, hospitality, and other services (Leaders International 2020). Due to this characteristic, tourism is relevant not only in economic terms but also in social and cultural terms. An anthropological approach to tourism can examine, among other topics, cultural and religious tourism, the host-guest relationships, the relationship between cultural heritage and local identity, festivals, and gastronomy (Bannikov 2016). From the point of view of my topic, the latter two are especially relevant.

Food is more than a necessity; it is also a determinant of human culture (think of Italy or France, which are known for their culinary culture). It plays an important role in local representation, so not only national dishes but also local specialties exist. A tourist, whose goal is to visit a destination different from their own in some way, to gain experiences, to experience Otherness, usually

wants to take part in the tasting of the culinary specialties of a given place (Pusztai 2007a). The concept of food tourism describes, on the one hand, how gastronomy can function as a tourist attraction and, on the other, how it affects local-regional identity (Everett and Aitchison 2008; Baldacchino 2015; Frisvoll, Forbord and Blekesaune 2016). Food tourism can contribute to a village or town in several ways. As suggested by Frisvoll, Forbord, and Blekesaune (2016) based on a number of studies, local food economies can stimulate rural development, and tourism, and can influence the shaping of a local identity. In their study, the three authors also highlight that, from a tourism perspective, the consumption of local food is also symbolically and culturally the consumption of the “countryside” (Frisvoll, Forbord, and Blekesaune 2016). Experiencing locality and authenticity is key for the tourist, who is usually looking for something special and characteristic of the locality. One of the forums for this symbolic-cultural consumption of the “authentic countryside” can be local (gastronomic) festivals. As will be seen, in the case of Makó and the Onion Festival, this aspect of tourism is only addressed in the last third of the festival’s history.

The Makó Onion Festival has a 30-year history. As there is no way to review the full story in detail here, I highlight the changes in the meaning and goals of the festival, in the conscious shaping of the profile of the event. The original aim of the Onion Festival was to promote onion production and agriculture. To do this, one of the principals of a high school in Makó envisioned a one-day exhibition of agricultural machinery, combined with an onion market. The idea was eventually implemented at the town level after a member of parliament from Makó embraced it (Józsefné Mágori, personal communication, 2013; see Apjok 2013). The Onion Festival is organized each year on the second weekend of September. Until 1995, the Onion Festival operated more as a professional forum where economic actors (politicians and farmers alike) discussed the present and future of local onion production. The entertainment programs consisted mainly of performances of local folklore and brass orchestra cultural groups (Apjok 2013) However, the year 1995 brought a change in this structure. In 1994, when Péter Buzás was elected mayor, he imagined the design of the event differently than in previous years, as evidenced by the following excerpt from the interview I conducted with him:

Around 1995–96 we said we wanted to elevate the cavalcade character of the opening ceremony, and formal character of whole fair, so we created a “folk festival” [...] We evaluated the festival and concluded that what could attract people there

is the cultural and popular show. [...] We figured out that there should be a parade as well, as this event can be filled with people if we take the schoolchildren and their parents there (personal communication, 2013).

Thus, Péter Buzás, the mayor of the town from 1994–2014, explained the further development of the festival, emphasizing the need for a greater integration of the local population into its programs.

The festival was a three-day event from 1996–2006. During this period, the Agricultural Workshop (orig.: *Mezőgazdasági Tanműhely*) on the outskirts of Makó provided the venue for the festival. As there was no local public transport in the town, it was possible to travel from the town centre to the Onion Festival by a small festival train. Between 2007 and 2009, the festival venue remained at the Agricultural Workshop (see Figure 2), but the duration was shortened to two days. In 2010 and 2011, the festival was moved to the downtown area and was further cut down to one day. However, many of the locals perceived the changes in a negative way. Based on the questionnaire and short interviews I made with some of the locals in 2011 and 2012, 19 of the 32 informants supported the previous Agricultural Workshop as a festival venue. The main reasons for the justification: tradition and custom, a space other than the ordinary, the atmosphere of the festival, and the very fact that you have to “travel” to the outskirts of the town to visit the festival – even with a small festival train, which to the visitors represented an experience in itself (Apjok 2013).

The reason for the large-scale change in 2011 was partly financial and partly due to the lack of a clear organizational concept. As Péter Buzás commented:

Then after a while we realized that the festival was writhing – in fact, a certain degree of wrestling had always characterized it. [...] And the last stage came, as the Onion Festival was transformed: it fell, it suffered, it stopped, the external meeting of the agricultural commission stopped, then we considered holding it only every two years, to bring it to the main square. We brought it in, it failed, it became a political forum. [...] Then we said let’s forget this professionalism [aspect]. The fish soup festival in Baja is not about when and how to lay eggs, but they cook very good fish soup and eat it. Here the future will be the same for us. We can reinvent ourselves along these lines [...] We would have pushed for tourism earlier, but it just didn’t happen. The nature and idea of the event did not make this possible. It was not suitable for it. The original concept of the festival was wrong (personal communication, 2013).



Figure 2. Above, the old venue of the Onion Festival (Agricultural Workshop) on the outskirts of Makó (photo from 2008), and below, the new venue, in the centre of the town (photo from 2019). Sources: Wikipedia.hu and mcsipos.hu.

The idea of change expressed in the quote above took shape in 2012. The Hagymatikum Spa opened in Makó in January 2012, so the Onion Festival held in September of that year further emphasized the tourism aspect, as it was pointed out to me by Péter Buzás (personal communication, 2013), and was mentioned in the local press, too (delmagyar 2012; Németh 2012; Szabó 2012; delmagyar 2013). In 2012, the festival moved to the main square of Makó, placed around the onionflower-shaped fountain, a few steps away from the above-mentioned spa. In 2013, the local press emphasized the gastronomic nature of the festival and its tourist significance (delmagyar 2013; Makó Híradó 2013). Afterward, the Onion Festivals of the period 2012–2020 have been consciously designed with a pronounced tourist profile, emphasizing the gastronomic image of the festival (mako 2016; Makó Híradó 2018b). The presentation, tasting,

and joint preparation of onion dishes became an element of the festival that strengthened the idea of “consuming the countryside” mentioned in literature (Frisvoll, Forbord, and Blekesaune 2016). This culinary incorporation of onions clearly refers to the gastro-tourism aspirations of the Onion Festival. Furthermore, the fact that the festival was placed at the heart of the town was meant to communicate that the Onion Festival and Makó are inseparable and that they form a common identity in this way. In addition, tourists visiting the Hagymatikum Spa can also take part in the festival, and the other local attractions (the museum, and Makó’s historic buildings) are in this way also easily accessible for tourists coming to the Onion Festival. Those informants, who preferred downtown as the venue for the Onion Festival over the Agricultural Workshop, and the entertainment profile over the professional one, also highlighted the tourism opportunities that appeared with these changes:

There will be professional and entrepreneurial forums every day. Given that it has been called a festival since the beginning, it is indeed reasonable to create a real festival atmosphere with several stages and lots of concerts. If it were just a professional part, I think the event would attract very few Makó residents. So with concerts, thousands of people can make a huge party (KZ, personal communication, 2018).

We live in the time of gastro festivals. It is not possible to organize a tourism event successfully with professional programs. I think it’s an attractive program that moves all walks of life, bringing liveliness to town year after year! There is a need for this kind of community forging events (FT, personal communication 2018).

At the festival, exhibitors, artisans, and downtown restaurants and cafes and the spa can benefit from local visitors and tourists, since it is more a community event in the main square than a professional one at the old venue (NN, personal communication 2012).

Spa and Tourism in Makó as a “New” Breakout Point of the Town

Makó’s spa-oriented tourism aspirations became tangible in the mid-2000s, especially after Hungary’s accession to the European Union in 2004 (europa n.d). The aim of the town management at that time was to make Makó an attractive tourist

destination nationally and internationally by modernizing its existing thermal spa and supplementing it with additional infrastructure (Kovács Istvánné 2008). In 2012, the Hagymatikum Spa centre opened in the area of the existing thermal spa, which had opened in 1962 but underwent significant alterations afterwards (see Figure 3; Apjok 2018). The plan to renovate the spa has resonated greatly in the town, and the project has been the scene of many political battles (Illyés 2007; Szabó 2007, 2008; delmagyar 2008; Bakos 2010; Magyar Narancs 2017; MN 2017; Rényi 2017; MTI/hvg 2018). The development, which was largely carried out with EU support and through self-sufficiency, also caused resentment among the locals, which was based on the idea of “tourism as a foreign body in Makó’s organization”. The following contrasting thoughts from my interviews and from social media also express these attitudes among local populations:

Makó is an agricultural town. We should deal with onions because this has a tradition here. The spa does not have it (KJ, personal communication, 2012).

It would be necessary to teach people about this new industry, because you cannot become a good tourism professional by yourself. [...] People do not understand tourism here (KG, personal communication, 2013).

The spa is not ours either. There is no swimming pool anymore. Instead of tourism, we should invest in a pool where locals could swim (VL, personal communication 2015).

The people of Makó will also realize that none of the useful investments will take place in their town (TIR, personal communication, 2019).

I don’t believe that because of one spa we will be at the top of tourism. There are many farmers and workers. There are still onions from Makó. Agriculture should be preferred (HIA, personal communication, 2020).

These few opinions also show that tourism is considered foreign for many of the Makó locals for various reasons. The main counter-argument against the renovation of the spa and the introduction of spa tourism is that in the case of Makó, it is not considered traditional in cultural and economic terms. These opinions refer to Makó’s agricultural past, justifying the role of the Makó onion narrative in local identity construction.



Figure 3. Above, the old thermal spa (photo from the 1960s) and below, the new Hagymatikum Spa photographed from almost the same angle (photo from 2019). Sources: delmagyar.hu and tripadvisor.hu.

Local opinions heard during my fieldwork in 2014 led me to examine the differences between the competing narratives of Makó’s onions and Makó’s spa tourism. I wondered whether the aversions formulated in connection with spa tourism could be linked to the historical narrative of spa tourism in Makó. Seeing

how the Makó onions as a local heritage was incorporated into the local identity thanks to the narratives surrounding it, I was interested in whether aversions to spa tourism are caused by the fact that the narrative of spa tourism is fragmentary and does not span decades in urban history, like the onions narrative does.

According to my historical ethnographic research, the idea of spa tourism first appeared in the local press in 1936. The article in the daily newspaper *Makói Ujság* entitled “Why Does Makó Not Have Tourism?” explains that the banks of the Maros River, which runs next to Makó, would provide an excellent basis for local tourism due to its unique natural environment (as the Maros’s riverbank is surrounded by ancient trees). This, as the author of the article writes, would require not only creating accommodations and restaurants, but also reprogramming the Makó mentality. This article alone would base tourism on the Maros’s mud, which it considers to be a feature for which even Swiss and Danish guests would choose Makó (gy.m. 1936). A reader’s letter received in response to this newspaper article sees the issue of spa tourism in Makó as unresolved due to infrastructural deficiencies. The letter draws attention to the fact that although domestic tourism increased significantly after the signing of the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, not all cities and towns in Hungary were able to adapt to it, despite its favourable effects (Lantos 1936).

The issue of spa tourism in Makó was also on the agenda of town management after the Second World War, in the communist-socialist era (1945–1989). The tourism goals of the town management of that era are clearly reflected in the minutes of the Executive Committee of the Makó Town Council from 1950–1990.¹¹ One of the goals of the Executive Committee was to make Makó a “spa town” in the late 1960s. The title of spa town was awarded to those Hungarian settlements that had not only a spa but also extensive infrastructure and tourism plans built around it (Makó Archive decree No. 34/1969.VB; Michalkó-Rátz 2011). The concept of a spa town in the communist-socialist period reflected the nationwide concept of spa towns between the two World Wars (Jusztin 2015), but there is no reference in the minutes of Makó’s Executive Committee to the idea that came up in the press in 1936. The basis of the spa town concept during this time was the endowments of the Maros’s riverbank and its natural environment, the Maros mud, and the thermal water of the downtown spa.

¹¹ Makó Archive – Hungarian National Archive, Csongrád-Csanád County Archive: “Minutes of the Executive Committee of the Council of Makó”, 1950–1990.

It is clear from the minutes of the Executive Committee that the tourist attractions were envisioned on the Maros's riverbank. To transform the space for tourism purposes, several areas of the coast that were previously dedicated to agricultural cultivation have been declared recreational areas (Makó Archive decree proposal No. 1968.02.20). In order to establish the tourism profile of the Maros's riverbank, the Executive Committee set up the Maros Riverbank Management Committee, which continuously consulted with the Szeged Tourist Office and the Hungarian Urban Society about the necessary arrangements (Makó Archive decree proposal No. 1968.02.20). The spa town concept was also built on health tourism. To this end, the thermal spa in the downtown area of Makó, which was built primarily for hygienic purposes, was intended to be transformed into a rheumatism hospital based on the plans of Dr. István Batka (1896–1971), a chief rheumatologist of the Makó hospital (Dehelán 2012; Medgyesi 2012). Batka prepared an 83-page draft in 1968 in which he explained that based on Maros's healing mud (which was declared medicinal in 1961) and Makó's thermal waters (which were later declared medicinal after Batka's death), Makó's future lay in spa development (Dehelán 2012; Medgyesi 2012). Batka's plans for a rheumatism hospital and his research, focused on medicinal mud and thermal water, were well known in Makó in the 1960s and 1980s, as many of my informants indicated in their recollections (personal communication, 2018–2019).

Just as the initial idea of spa tourism from between the two World Wars did not appear in the spa town aspirations of the second half of the 20th century, there is similarly no apparent reference to the plans of the communist-socialist era or the pre-WWII era in the concept of spa tourism as developed in Makó in the 2000s. However, an interesting parallel is that although the 2008 booklet about the spa development of the municipality led by Péter Buzás includes the slogan "Let's make Makó a spa town" (the same slogan that also appears in the minutes in the 1960s), there is no indication that the core of the current tourism idea is derived from the communist-socialist era (Kovács Istvánné 2008). However, the current plans reference the work of István Batka, regarding his research results on medicinal mud and thermal water. This is also evidenced by the fact that Batka's memory lives on to this day in the local community (Dehelán 2012; Medgyesi 2012). In honour of Batka, a statue of him was erected in 2014 in Makó's main square by the town management, with the support of the spa management and the local medical community. The statue was symbolically placed in front of the Hagymatikum Spa's medical wing in 2014, alluding to the

doctor's rheumatism hospital plans, with the label "The explorer of the Maros medicinal mud" placed on it (O.N. 2018).

Just as the narrative of the onions in Makó can be considered continuous, the narrative of Makó's spa tourism can be interpreted as fragmentary, based on disparate and discontinued sources listed above. The idea of tourism that first arose in 1936 has always been communicated by each different town administration as a "new breakout point" in each era (either in the communist-socialist period, or in the period of mayor Péter Buzás, from 2004–2014, and after 2014, in the time of mayor Éva Erzsébet Farkas). Given that each of the mentioned periods is linked to radically different political trends (far right for the pre-WWII era, communist-socialist dictatorship for the years 1945–1989, social democracy for the Buzás period, and the nationalist conservatism / Christian democracy of the Fidesz party for Éva Erzsébet Farkas's mandate), it is logical that the political colouring of Makó's tourism appears in both the town's managerial communication as well as in the community's interpretations of it. The fragmentary nature of the narrative is thus confirmed by the fact that the current town administration sought to legitimize its own activities by referring to tourism as a "new breaking point". Based on my sources, it can be assumed that each town's management was aware of the spa tourism aspirations of the previous eras, although these developments have evidently been disrupted and hampered by historical events and political changes (World War II, political transition in 1989). The new representative body, set up in 2014 under the leadership of the new mayor, Éva Erzsébet Farkas, directly carried forward the spa developments started in the previous era by Mayor Péter Buzás and his team. In view of these facts, it is particularly interesting that local political leaders are constantly referring to the idea of spa tourism as a "new breakout point"; however, this rhetoric can backfire if reservations among the locals about innovation are taken into account. Acceptance of change and innovation is more difficult the less the local community connects with them through its own history and through the local narratives. This tendency relates to the power of historical narratives in community-forming and identity construction, as outlined in the theoretical chapter above. The effect of such fragmented and disjointed historical narratives about Makó's tourism, as my interviews and social media communication have shown, is that many Makó residents do not see tourism as a traditional economic sector; they see spa development only as a political act.

The political interpretation of spa tourism also appears in the local community. Opinions from social media contain political criticisms of both Péter Buzás and Erzsébet Éva Farkas:

I like it so much that the Fidesz people are beating their chests in Makó due to the development of tourism, while, as can be seen from a former article in *Délmagyar*, investments made with EU money were previously considered stupid by them (LK, personal communication, 2019).

Debt, because the government has taken everything away from the municipalities. The government distributes the money of the people, NOT its own. [...] Anyway, can anyone tell me what the current mayor did for Makó? Even the money from the old tenders has just gotten here. How many jobs did this woman create? [...] We are surrounded by career politicians as well (OL, personal communication, 2019).

The communists forget that there are many entrepreneurs in Makó, and Buzás brought the trenchers from Szabolcs when he worked public workers for pennies for four and six hours. Let's not faint from the big spa program. That's all he's done in 20 years (HJ, personal communication, 2019).

Selling a building (dormitory), taking the town's TAXPAYERS into debt of 170 million HUF a year [for the spa] is glorious? (TI, personal communication, 2015).

The fact that since 2014, Mayor Éva Erzsébet Farkas and Makó's member of Parliament, János Lázár, have built their communication around the dichotomy of modernity and tradition may also contribute to the local perception that tourism does not have a historical continuity. In their statements, and in their greetings on Makó's website (mako.hu/koszonto), the onion equals tradition, and spa tourism equals modernity. In addition, they repeatedly emphasize that Éva Erzsébet Farkas and her colleagues in the Fidesz party ushered in a "new era" to the history of Makó. The above examples are also consistent with those described by Jeremy MacClancy in relation to the conflicting narratives surrounding tourism efforts:

The predicaments of tourism can be drawn in the stark terms of good versus bad, of the upright against the voracious, of locals versus developers. However, closer examination reveals that the encounter with organized tourism cannot always be portrayed in black and white: far more often, the picture must be painted in diverse shades of grey. And it is here perhaps that social anthropology can make its greatest contribution to the study and understanding of tourism and its effects (MacClancy 2002, 421).

As this quote, as well as the opinions included above, suggest, the image of spa tourism in Makó is also discursively painted in black-and-white terms, although the phenomenon cannot be captured in such sharp contrasts. In political communication, tourism is new, and onion growing is old and traditional – yet they complement each other. In the perception of the local community, the spa involves financial loss, tied to political parties, while the onion symbolizes stability and security. However, while onion growing is in decline, tourism appears as an emerging economic sector in Makó.

Conclusion: Competing Histories and Competing Narratives of Agriculture and Tourism

In this paper I attempted to present the role of Makó onions and spa tourism in shaping local identity as constructed along different historical narratives. I aimed to present the possible explanations that cause the two phenomena to manifest differently in the local place and community self-image. What the two phenomena have in common is the economic aspect, which represents the main sectors of the town, but these manifestations carry different perceptions at many points. The question is relevant from an anthropological point of view because we can witness stacked layers of meaning that in some cases support each other or compete, and these affect both the self-image of the locals and the image of the town.

This study attempts to answer the following questions: (1) what is the role of onions (agriculture) and spas (tourism) in the local identity of Makó; (2) how are the narratives of the two phenomena structured socially and historically; and (3) how are they intertwined in the endeavours of contemporary identity-construction? In the following section, I answer the questions based on the analysis carried out in the paper.

The Makó onions are integral to the local identity. The role of onions in the local lifestyle, also built into the collective memory, gained its role in the shaping of local identity with its constant positive emphasis on local public narratives. This was created mainly by Ferenc Tóth and his work as an ethnographer and local historian, but also amplified by local public figures. The onions became an integral part of Makó's self-image, so that onion growing is no longer merely the main economic sector, but is also the symbol of the place, a brand and cultural heritage connecting both the historical past and the present. For the local place and community, the image of onions has been strengthened since 1991



Figure 4. “Makó. — only onions.” Makó downtown. Photo by Vivien Apjok, 2012.

by a festival organized around them, which tried to promote both the agricultural product and the town of Makó. The Onion Festival enabled a common experience of local identity, while for the locals it also positively confirmed the legitimacy and importance of onions as a product and a symbol of Makó. This legitimacy was strengthened by the fact that in 2001 Makó onions became an official local brand and in 2014 an officially designated cultural heritage of the town. However, there was a shift in the construction of local identity and self-image at the town level in 2012, when the Hagymatikum Spa opened. Then the slogan of the city became “Makó – not only onions!” With this, the creators of the slogan (the current leaders of the town) endeavoured to expand the identity of the place to include the tourist profile of the town. However, this did not represent an undivided success among Makó residents, as my interviews and social media posts show, and as the image below also demonstrates (see Figure 4). With the word “not” removed, the sentence can be read both physically and semantically as a clear expression of the conflict between the agricultural and touristic aspirations of Makó residents.

The difference between the narrative of Makó onions and the narrative of spa tourism is clear. The narrative of onions is continuous and primarily positive, while that of spa tourism is fragmented and thus gives way to political conflicts. The fact that spa tourism is repeatedly referred to as a “new breakout point” by local political actors makes the image of spa tourism unstable in terms of whether the local community can connect to it or not. My research shows that the lack of historical continuity in the narrative of spa tourism makes locals distrustful of it, while interpreting the spa development as a political act.

Given that the onion is the strongest symbol of the town (as a brand and cultural heritage), it is logical that this symbolism is also used in communications about local spa tourism. The best example of this is the name “Hagymatikum” itself, which includes the root “hagyma”, meaning “onions”. The competing and overlapping narratives of the onion and the spa are therefore outlined also in Makó’s tourist manifestations. This can also be seen in terms of what the town wants to communicate about itself to tourists visiting Makó, and in terms of how the various tourist websites represent Makó. The most important cornerstones of this communication are the presence of onions, medicinal water, and medicinal mud (mako n.d.; szallas n.d.; szentgellertborhaz n.d.; datekla n.d.; makotel n.d.; termesztjaro n.d.; univcoupon n.d.; szegedtourism n.d.; hotelcorvus n.d.; hungarycard 2019; programturizmus 2020; magyarorszagom 2020).

My research currently suggests that collective memory, local knowledge, and a coherent narrative play a significant role in making onions an integral part of Makó’s identity, and for the same reason, in making spa tourism not (yet) successfully integrated into the local self-image. Only time will tell if this will change.

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