

DOCTORAL THESIS PROJECT (Since April 2019)

„The organised Bavarian Tracht Movement in North America“ (working title)

The Bavarian Tracht Movement (Bayerische Trachtenbewegung) instigated a new global phenomenon: the preservation and celebration of Tracht (ethnic attire) in an institutional and organisational setting. In 2023, the Movement turns 140 years. It is a truly worldwide occurrence, clubs like „D’Lustig’n Wendlstoana“, „Die Gemütlichen Enzianer“, and „D’Holzhacker Buam“ are not - as their names suggest – located in Bavaria but these are Alpine heritage clubs (Gebirgstrachtenerhaltungs- und Schuhplattlvereine) in North America that celebrate Alpine Tracht and way of living. Founded mainly by immigrants from Bavaria and Austria, there is a vivid and active Tracht movement in the US and Canada since (at least) 1914. There are currently around 70 clubs organised in an umbrella organisation – the Gauverband Nordamerika (est. 1966) – modelled after the head organisation in Bavaria (Bayerischer Trachtenverband) and they are „dedicated to preserving and perpetuating the cultural heritage of Bavaria and Tyrol“. Hence member clubs popularly wear the Miesbacher (style) Tracht and Schuhplattler and other dances are performed, especially at events such as the Oktoberfest, Steuben Parade, Oompah Fest, Wurstfest, or Gaufest. Close ties, friendships and connections exist with the Bayerische Trachtenverband, as well as clubs, individuals, and specialised (Tracht) craftsmen and women in Bavaria and Austria.

From a historical-political perspective, the development of the Tracht Movement in Bavaria is based on the establishment of the so called Gebirgs- und Volkstrachten (Alpine ethnic attire) and their (visual) markers, which were ascribed a sense of nativeness, tradition and identity. The stereotypes of Alpine culture and way of living were herewith linked with the attire and customs as cultural particularities of a region - identifiable by visual codes. The establishment of Tracht clubs (or heritage clubs) were formative in the success of the Tracht Movement: Today, the foundation of the „club to preserve the Volkstrachten in the Leitzach Valley“ in Bayerischzell/Upper Bavaria in 1883, is generally considered the kick-off point for the Organised Tracht Movement. Within decades it morphed into a booming (international) phenomenon: In Bavaria, numerous clubs emerged quickly in the last decade of the nineteenth century, and by migration of workers from Bavaria it spread to other German states and Austria. The frenzy for Tracht clubs fell on fertile ground, the Zeitgeist of the time included the movement for the protection of cultural heritage and historic monuments, the establishment of European Ethnology/Folklore Studies as an academic discipline, the (inter)national popularity of Alpine country plays and folk music, ethnological expositions at the World Fairs, the (re)discovery of the Alps for tourism, and the establishment of social clubs. By way of migration, the Bavarian Tracht Movement has become a global phenomenon: Today there are Bavarian Tracht clubs across Germany, Austria, Australia, and South and North America.

Despite the success and popularity of the phenomenon in the United States and the entwinement with Tracht preservation efforts in Europe – particularly in the Bavarian Alpine region – North American Tracht clubs have not yet been studied academically. This PhD seeks to bridge this research gap by analysing and studying the migration and (culture) transfer, development, and regional particularities of the Bavarian Tracht Movement outwith Bavaria. The regional focus is on the USA and the phenomenon is studied from a historical and contemporary perspective. Four main research topics have been selected:

1. Development of (the) Tracht (Movement)
2. Customs and practices of Tracht clubs
3. Narratives and artefacts
4. (Transatlantic) circularity and networks

A combination of methods is applied which comprises historical hermeneutic analysis, multisited ethnography and the collection of quantitative data – this allows the phenomenon to be holistically studied from its beginnings to present. Empirical sources include historic Tracht journals, German-American newspapers, club records and archival material, artefacts, and data from interviews, questionnaires and (non-) participant observation. The sampling frame is the Gauverband Nordamerika and its member clubs. This multi-facetted research approach allows a deep study and understanding of the complexly interwoven phenomenon in terms of scapes (after Appadurai) and entangled history.