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Keywords: peasant, tradition, folklorism, socialist Romania, festival

The Peasant in Socialist Romania. An Ethnological Perspective

Summary

This paper aims to analyze the construction of the peasant's image in Romania, during the socialist period, focussing on "Cântarea României" ["The Glorification of Romania"] National Festival, which took place between 1976 and 1989. The paper is structured in two parts. The first is a theoretical approach, based on main concepts of ethnology, such as tradition, folklore, folklorism. This theoretical perspective is reported to a subjective one, which belongs to some insiders, performers at the festival. The study case proposed is based on a field research conducted in Hășdate, a village from Cluj County, Romania.

The Peasant in Socialist Romania. An Ethnological Perspective

1. Peasant - singular and plural

When we talk about the *peasant*, we have in mind a concept, a ready-built image, maybe not just once sweetened. The peasant is often a construction, based on concepts such as tradition, national identity. „C'est le cas du Paysan Roumain qui [...] a été construit comme figure identitaire centrale et incontournable de la nation. C'est une identité à l'image du *Paysan*, de *l'Homme traditionnel* et de *l'Autochtone*, c'est à dire une identité «spécifique» à notre peuple et à notre peuple seulement. Une identité qui, certes, nous a valu une nation et une place dans l'histoire moderne. D'une manière plus ambiguë, c'est une identité à l'image de la tradition, qui a donc une origine très ancienne, qui s'est reproduite à travers une très longue durée et qu'on considère encore comme étant l'image fidèle de Soi, tout en la poussant de plus en plus hors-de-soi.”¹

This perspective changes when we move beyond stereotypes, to a contextualized understanding. In fact, “reality has a multitude of peasants and a huge variety of villages which we usually do not keep in mind .We like to say «the Romanian does, the peasant does», but, if you take a look through the villages, even if you only go by car, what do you notice? Enclaves of traditional life, deserted villages, villages of commuters who no longer have where to commute, villages absorbed by cities, tourist villages, empty villages as those of the Saxons. [...] Peasants are various, villages are various. I am among those who believe that there still are villages and peasants.”²

2. The peasant during the communist era - an ideological construction

The simplistic perception is influenced by image built during the communist era: the peasant on the stage of the “Cântarea României”³ National Festival. The figure promoted at the festival, invested with the ideological charge of totalitarianism, was a hybrid product, resulting from a process of changing the tradition, by picking out some elements from the folk culture and translating them into a show with political intentions. Through this mutation, as well as through other measures, the communist power affected the core of traditional culture, consisting of holidays and customs.⁴ The folklorism affected the music, dances, customs, transposed onto the stage and transformed either into instruments of political propaganda or entertainment.

3. Folklorism

From a theoretical point of view, the folklorism practiced during the communist era is a form of artificial reconstruction of cultural heritage, a means of ideologization, manipulation, rewriting and marketing folklore during the communist regime. Hans Moser⁵ defines folklorism as

¹ Vintilă Mihăilescu, *Quelle anthropologie pour quelle société? Société postpaysanne et ethnologie postantagonale en Roumanie*, in “Anthropologie et Société”, Université Laval, Quebec, vol. 32, no. 1-2, 2008, p. 223.

² Irina Nicolau, *Niciodată nu e așa ca să nu fie cumva [It's Always Somehow]*, in “Revista 22”, July 22, 2002, <http://www.revista22.ro>

³ „The Glorification of Romania” National Festival.

⁴ The majority of folklorists consider customs and rituals as stable, fixed elements of culture. Frequently, the definitions of culture place customs on one of the privileged positions.

⁵ Hans Moser, *Vom Folklorismus in unserer Zeit*, Zeitschrift für Volkskunde, 1962, pp. 178-179.

transposing the original folk tradition by one of three ways: the reproduction of acts prescribed by tradition outside the local context, mimicking the elements of the traditional culture and incorporating them by play or fashion in the culture of a different social class, creating all the elements of a traditional custom outside of any known tradition.

Extending the analysis, Konrad Köstlin considers folklorism as a form of saving therapy: we revalue and glorify our present life by reference to a better past. For this, we select certain features of past life, put them in the present and reuse them on our behalf.⁶ These are mechanisms alike the invention of popular cultural heritage, participating to building national identities.

But the manipulation of traditions for political purposes is not an invention of communism. Even at the time of the “discovery” of folklore in the nineteenth century, it was invested with an ideological content.

After the Second World War, the communists imposed the Soviet model in Eastern Europe. The new politic power had led a fight against what they called, “old nationalism” and “bourgeois culture.” There had to be created a “mass culture with socialist content”, however, leaving it with some national color. For this the popular tradition, in fact the old peasant culture, had to be mobilized. But they could not retain all the features of this culture, as at the same time they were trying to eradicate it. From the traditional culture were selected only the attractive aspects, features that were easily appreciated by any audience, capable to entertain members of a society undergoing urbanization and industrialization, many of whom remained close to their peasant origins. Performing traditional songs and dances became a common entertainment, a show regularly offered in any political meeting.”⁷

After the fall of communism, the new created *traditions* have lost the support they had before.



Țărani la arat; foto: Felician Săteanu

⁶ Konrad Köstlin, *Folklorismus als Therapie? Volkskultur als Therapie?* in Edith Hörandner, Hans Lunzer, *Folklorismus*, Neusiedl-See, 1982, p. 92.

⁷ Jean Cuisenier, *La tradition populaire [The Popular Tradition]*, 1995, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, p. 102.

4. Folklorism and the “Cântarea României” [The “Glorification of Romania”] National Festival

In Romania, Nicolae Ceausescu launched the “Cântarea României” National Festival, in October 1976. Occasioned by the anniversary of 100 years since the proclamation of the country's independence, the festival is meant “to mark the achieving of a turning point in the mass cultural, political and educational activity” and refers to “training billions and billions of people, gaining the strong character of mass movements. There can't be any commune, school, institution or enterprise without artistic and cultural groups, without the creative circles in different areas of activity.”⁸

“Cântarea României” National Festival was defined as a “festival of socialist education and culture [...]; ample educational event, politico-ideological, cultural, artistic, creative and interpretative, aiming to enrich and diversify the country's spiritual life, to enhance the contribution of the creative genius of Romanian people's national and universal cultural heritage.”⁹ Any artistic creation, any cultural event, amateur or folk show, theatrical representation, etc. had to obtain the approval of “activists” responsible for the “Cântarea României” National Festival, in every enterprise and every village. The principle that regulated activities was: there can be no cultural or artistic creation lacking a “revolutionary” message. Each show, each cultural or artistic event was subordinated to the imperatives of propaganda.¹⁰ Thus, among the festival's purposes there are mentioned “raising the ideological level” regarding the induction of “materialistic beliefs about the world and life” and “fighting against mystical and religious concepts”, aimed at building the “new man” of socialist Romania. Another purpose was to build an image of the peasant, perfect creator and interpreter, emblematic figure of the nation and communism.

The festival produced a series of changes: instructors from the cities came to the villages, in order to create a whole set design, direction and specific properties, taught the villagers how to play “traditional” music, how to dance like “peasants” with precise choreography, aligned and organized according to the rules of the show, how to wear clothes that they have never wore outside the festival, then organized vocal groups and dance groups, planned hours of rehearsals, special bus travels in different regions of the country for performances, competitions, awards, etc. “Therefore, for a very long time, those occasions which, obviously, delighted people, who seemed to genuinely enjoy them, were ordered by communists and were quite far from the old mentality of the peasant.”¹¹

5. The insider's perspective

This theoretical perspective will be reported to a subjective one, which belongs to the actors directly involved. The case study I propose is based on a field research conducted in Hășdate, a village from Cluj County, Romania.¹²

Even since 1976, in Hășdate a vocal feminine group was formed, who performed until December 1989 under the frame of the “Cântarea României” National Festival.

⁸ Nicolae Ceaușescu, *România pe drumul construirii societății socialiste multilateral dezvoltate. Rapoarte, cuvântări, interviuri, articole* [Romania on the Way to Building a Multilaterally Developed Socialist Society. Reports, Speeches, Interviews, Articles], vol. 13, Bucharest, Politică Publishing House, 1977, p. 504.

⁹ Vladimir Tismăneanu, *Raport Final* [Final Report], Bucharest, 2006, p. 602.

¹⁰ Vladimir Tismăneanu, *Raport Final* [Final Report], Bucharest, 2006, pp. 602-603.

¹¹ Irina Nicolau, Op. Cit.

¹² Eleonora Sava, *Folklorism și autoreprezentare. Un studiu de caz: satul Hășdate, județul Cluj*, [Folklorism and Self-representation. A Case study: Hășdate village, Cluj county] in Anuarul Muzeului Etnografic al Transilvaniei, Cluj-Napoca, 2009, pp. 221-230.

The interviews conducted in 2008 support the idea that, for many villagers, the vocal group had an important function of representation, making their place known throughout the country, through the songs and the artistic performance of the singers. Even now, my interlocutors consider this group an identity badge of their community.

Group members relate their experience on stage in a highly subjective manner. Participating in the festival means to them, first of all, maximum emotional involvement: *There were some emotions as children have - when they have exams.* (L.B. 59 years).

Their memory valorizes the artist-audience relationship. The admiring reaction of the public reinforced the informant's belief regarding the originality and beauty of their music: *Yeah so we had some songs! Not just saying boast. They were old and very beautiful!* (L.B. 59 years)

Regarding the repertoire, the views are stating that all songs performed were from the village. In order to demonstrate their value, the argument was that the songs were old. *Yes, there were old songs! They were doinas¹³ that only an old woman knew how to sing. Yes the old woman could sing them well! That old woman was also in the vocal group.* (L.B. 59 years)

Motivations to participating in the "Cântarea României" National Festival are multiple:

1. Preservation and promotion of tradition: *It was a struggle as it is now. To promote the old songs ... and to carry on the tradition* (L.B., 59 years).
2. Enhancing the prestige of the local community and the individual: *Commune was proud! [...] The city hall was proud to have a group that won [...] the village could be proud. [...] The teachers were proud: we gathered at school, they trained us, they practiced with us.* [L.B., 59 years]



Țărani la scos cartofii; foto: Felician Săteanu

¹³ Doina – Romanian traditional song. "Doina is poetic and often melancholic, sometimes compared to the blues for that reason. In the Romanian folkloric tradition, "doina" was played mainly orally or accompanied by a single instrument, being the song of elegy, played for self comforting and not intended for festive events because of its sober nature." From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.

3. A moment of respite, liberation from daily duties, an opportunity to escape from the everyday monotony, to visit new places: *“Lord forgive him and rest him [Ceausescu] where he is! If it weren't for him, we wouldn't have seen this country [Romania] ever! Cause I would've never let my chores and go, but like this I did go! [M.B., 63 years] I would leave home all my worries ... and go! I'd lock my worries behind the door! [L.B., 59 years]*

4. It was fun: *It was also an opportunity to have fun! Ye, of course! [L.B., 59 years]*

5. A means of social networking: inside the group, the women tied close friendships.

6. A form of initiation for girls: some mothers brought their daughters to the group. For the young girls, it was rather a way to start the tradition (they would learn old songs, wear they're grandmothers' clothes) than a chance to leave the village, because some of them were already learning in schools in the cities.

7. The interviewees do not perceive the ideological component of the event, nor their participation as a form of manipulation or falsification of tradition. However, there are two periods in the dynamic repertoire: at first, all songs were authentic; then, in a later stage, and the group would perform productions made on command, under pressure from communist ideology: *Mr. D. [musicologist from Cluj-Napoca] would make the lyrics and he's just attaching them to the music and we sang. Otherwise, he wouldn't have let us in the festival. [M.B., 63 years]*

The repertoire was not performed in a traditional manner, but that imposed by the instructor(s), scene and performance requirements: *we would enter in groups from two sides and only one side could start singing, otherwise, our voices wouldn't match. [L.B., 59 years]*

Because communism promoted “scientific atheism”, any contingency with the sacred component of cultural heritage was completely prohibited: *Even carols - that was with God - those were not allowed! [M.B., 63 years]*

The last public appearance of the members of the voice group from Hășdate was in December 1989. The revolution has caught them on the way from one show to another. After 1990, they did not sing together anymore. The main reason seems to be the disappearance of the atmosphere that originally animated them: the fever of competition, the challenge of exciting activities, the desire to see places and people, the pleasure of teamwork. Without this environment, the women did not gather anymore. However, after 1990, the group has reunited twice: once on the anniversary of a bard from Hășdate, and the second time in occasion of the organization a local festival: *The sons of the village*. These were the only contexts of group performance of local, traditional music that had been promoted within the “Cântarea României” National Festival.

7. The “peasant” (invented) and the people (alive)

Joining the two perspectives on the studied phenomenon - the objective and subjective - highlights the overlaps and contrasts. On the one hand, there is the image of an invented peasant, created in the context of the festival, ideologically and politically manipulated: the members of the group wear stage costumes, not clothes from real life, they interpret *Horea curunii* [song in harvest], although never attended a harvest when this would be performed *in vivo*, only sung in the show. On the other hand, the songs are from the village and the group's elderly members [who are no longer living, being evoked with love by the more younger colleagues that are still alive] have performed them in ceremonial and ritual contexts have wore peasant clothes as young girls etc. In this particular case of Hășdate, folklorism has the function of representation and self-

representation in several periods. Between 1976-1989, in the “Cântarea României” National Festival, the members of the vocal group present with moving sincerity, in front of a public from various parts of the country, the songs considered representative for their zonal culture and identity: *I believe that there weren't better songs in the area.* [L.B. 59 years]. In 2008, the locals performed, again, this repertoire, considered representative. The group has now six women, aged between 40 and 68 years. The youngest performs songs that had no longer been performed in a ritual or ceremonial context even before her arrival on the world. The other women as well, have only performed them as part of the show, but have heard them sung by their mothers or grandmothers. The interviews show that, in this case, the existence of a vocal group extended the life of traditional songs for some decades, even if they were removed from their original context.

The two perspectives, often contradictory, uncomfortable and tense, measure the distance between the reductionist communist ideology and plural, living reality, a static image of “peasant” invented and countless concrete human instances, between the project of the “new, communist man” to just people, people in the time, but who “translate” the facts in accordance with their cultural code, adapt them and understand them according to their own horizon of expectation.

Although “its function of package for a communist lie”¹⁴ was achieved, the “Cântarea României” National Festival failed precisely in its focal point: it couldn't manage to accomplish the major purpose that Ceausescu had proposed and which he constantly repeated: the creation of the “new man” of socialist Romania, and implicitly, building a “new peasant”.



Țărani mâncând la câmp; foto: Felician Săteanu

¹⁴ Irina Nicolau, Op. Cit.

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This work was supported by CNCSIS – UEFISCSU, project number PNII – IDEI 942/ 2009, code CNCSIS 2424.