

# MARTOR



---

Title: "The Making of the Peasant in Romanian Ethnology"

Authors: Otilia Hedeșan, Vintilă Mihăilescu

How to cite this article: Hedeșan, Otilia and Vintilă Mihăilescu. 2006. "The Making of the Peasant in Romanian Ethnology". *Martor* 11: 187-201.

Published by: *Editura MARTOR* (MARTOR Publishing House), *Muzeul Țăranului Român* (The Museum of the Romanian Peasant)

URL: <http://martor.muzeultaranuluiroman.ro/archive/martor-11-2006/>

---

*Martor* (The Museum of the Romanian Peasant Anthropology Review) is a peer-reviewed academic journal established in 1996, with a focus on cultural and visual anthropology, ethnology, museum studies and the dialogue among these disciplines. *Martor* review is published by the Museum of the Romanian Peasant. Its aim is to provide, as widely as possible, a rich content at the highest academic and editorial standards for scientific, educational and (in)formational goals. Any use aside from these purposes and without mentioning the source of the article(s) is prohibited and will be considered an infringement of copyright.

*Martor* (Revue d'Anthropologie du Musée du Paysan Roumain) est un journal académique en système *peer-review* fondé en 1996, qui se concentre sur l'anthropologie visuelle et culturelle, l'ethnologie, la muséologie et sur le dialogue entre ces disciplines. La revue *Martor* est publiée par le Musée du Paysan Roumain. Son aspiration est de généraliser l'accès vers un riche contenu au plus haut niveau du point de vue académique et éditorial pour des objectifs scientifiques, éducatifs et informationnels. Toute utilisation au-delà de ces buts et sans mentionner la source des articles est interdite et sera considérée une violation des droits de l'auteur.

## The Making of the Peasant in Romanian Ethnology

**Otilia Hedeşan**

Professor,  
West University of Timișoara  
**Vintilă Mihăilescu**  
Director,  
Romanian Peasant Museum

### International anthropology or national ethnology?

In a special issue of the Nordic journal *Ethos*, Thomas Gerholm and Ulf Hannerz raise the question of “the bases of unity and diversity of international social and cultural anthropology.” “Anthropology is an interpretation of culture” – they argued. “Could it be that this interpretation is itself shaped by culture? Could some of the differences between national anthropologies be derived from differences between the cultural systems which have formed the anthropologists?” (Gerholm and Hannerz, 1982: 13) Their answer runs as follows:

“There are both cosmopolitan and local strands to any national anthropology, i.e. traits that are more or less reflexes of the major international traditions, more or less products of purely national conjunctures. (...) Although these typical orientations are found both in centers and peripheries, it may be the case (...) that a country’s position in the center/periphery model has an influence on the particular balance struck in that country between cosmopolitanism and localism” (idem: 14-15).

Let’s start with cosmopolitanism. What

makes anthropology a distinct science, what is its common international denominator? At the end of the same issue, George Stocking tries to give an answer:

“The ultimate basis for such underlying unity as Euro-American anthropology manifests – and by extension, for the unity of ‘international anthropology’ – has probably been what Kenelm Burridge has called the ‘reach into otherness’ (Burridge 1973:6). Allowing also for its manifestation in relation to the ‘internal’ otherness of European diversity, it is the fascination with the external ‘other’ encountered during the expansion of modern Europe that has provided historically the lowest common denominator of Euro-American anthropology” (Stocking, 1982:173).

Indeed, when August Comte decided that the new born science, sociology, should address only “the latest born societies,” a historical split was produced between “sociology,” having to study *our* European, modern societies, and the “anthropological” studies, having to deal with the *others*. “Thus, whereas sociology is the science of internal difference, anthropology is the science of external difference. Whereas sociology is the science of the *Self*, anthropology is the science of the *Other*” (Kearney, 1996:25). Many anthropologists would still agree that “science of

the *Other*” may serve as a good brief definition of anthropology.

But here already emerges a difference: there is more than just one “Other!” In this common ground of “the lowest common denominator,” there is a second split: the one between an external and an inner “Other.” The first, originally, signified the *Primitive*; the second one was, and to some extent still is, mainly the *Peasant*. These two main heroes of anthropology are also the products of different political conjunctures: the first was the product of what Stocking calls an “empire-building anthropology,” the second one was the invention of a “nation-building anthropology:”

“Between the Euro-American traditions one may also distinguish between anthropologies of ‘empire-building’ and anthropologies of ‘nation-building’. The character of anthropological inquiry in Great Britain has been primarily determined by experience with dark-skinned ‘others’ in the overseas empire. In contrast, in many parts of the European continent, the relation of national identity and internal otherness tended, in the context on nineteenth century movements of cultural nationalism, to be a more focal issue; and strong traditions of *Volkskunde* developed quite distinctly from *Völkerkunde*. The former was the study of the internal peasant others who composed the nation, or potential nations within the imperial state; the latter was the study of more distant others, either overseas or farther back in European history “(idem: 172).

These different types of otherness are not just physically different, one being more distant than the other. They mean different things and answer different problems. In both cases, the problem—a crucial political one—is what to do with the Other? But there are different stakes in the two cases, *empire-* and *nation-*building being two originally different “motives” for anthropological investigation to rule over “exotic” others from remote colonies is not the same as governing your own others, even if they come from dif-

ferent regions! And it is also different to study your own people, who speak the same language as you, and who struggle to be accepted by strange faraway foreigners. It is not by chance that most of the representatives of this “nation-building anthropology” never studied communities other than their own. Taking the case of Yugoslavia, for instance, “it is no accident,” Aleksandar Boskovic states, “that no research was done in the various parts of Yugoslavia by members of ‘other’ ethnic groups (‘nations’) from within the country: Croats studied the folklore of Croatia, Serbs that of Serbia, and Slovenians that of Slovenia” (Boskovic, 2005:13). The same was two in Transylvania: Romanians study Romanian folklore, Hungarians their own folklore, and Saxons do not want to interfere with either one of the two communities.

These rather political characteristics are accompanied by methodological differences as well. The empire-building anthropology “became possible starting from a triple experience: the experience of plurality, of alterity and that of identity,” all of which have to be thought of together (Augé, 1994:81). Committed rather to specificity, nation-building ethnologies are not submitted to this triple bind Augé is speaking about, and usually omit plurality and alterity in their research designs.

Finally, there are many other different “national conjunctures” beyond this main political and methodological split between nation and empire-building anthropologies. In the case of Romanian “anthropology,” for instance, one can wonder to what extent and in which way “the Romanian peasant” was indeed the “inner other” of this discipline. Our *own* other, the peasant was rather turned, in this case, into the national *Self* thus becoming the object of sociology as well, which was conceived as it was as a “science of the nation” (Gusti, 1938).

A first and preliminary question thus arises: by viewing the *Peasant* instead of the *Primitive* as an object, and a special kind of peasant at that, because of particular “national conjunc-

tures,” can the Romanian anthropology be considered an “international anthropology” in the sense discussed above? Is it part of the same story? I think not. I believe we can not – and should not – speak about anthropology (a “native anthropology,” for instance, or a genuine Romanian experience in “doing anthropology at home,” as suggested by Gheorghiu Geană in 1999). Instead, we should adopt the suggestion of the international conference of European “folk ethnographers” held in 1955 in Arnhem to use the general term of “national ethnology” when referring to all kinds of scholars of “folk culture” in the frame of a national space (see Tamás, 1968). In this way, ethnography and folk studies – the main “anthropological” disciplines in the case of Romania – can be bridged in a common approach, and their common invention of the Peasant may be better understood.

### Primitives and Peasants

In order to address this invention of the Peasant and try to understand its characteristics, one has to start from what it was distancing itself from – and, to some extent, what it was reacting to: the “primitivist ideology” (Paul-Lévy, 1986), i.e. the very backbone of modernity and the one informing the birth of social sciences in general, and of anthropology in particular. This worldview was classifying *cultural differences* according to presumed stages of evolution between the “primitive” world (of the colonies) and the “civilized,” metropolitan world of our own. “The lowest ideological common denominator of (this) Euro-American anthropology was a belief in the hereditary or cumulative environmental physical and cultural inferiority of the non-European others” (Stocking, op. cit. 173): the Primitive was thus viewed as the *weak origin of mankind*. As such, the *Primitive* was everything that *We* are not (or are no longer) and that *Man* in general should avoid becoming. In other words, the Primitive was the close-to-nature stage of humanity, and as such, the extreme origin of millenary cul-

tural evolution culminating in modern Western world.

This close-to-nature status was eventually reversed: nature is good, while civilization is perverse, some romantic voices claimed, thus reacting also to the mainstream of modernization and primitivist ideology. The *Primitive* became, in this case, a “noble savage,” a kind of model or ideal reminder rather having the derogatory connotations of the classic evolutionist discourse.

The *Peasant* was shadowing this image of the double faced *Primitive*, serving, to some extent, as his local companion: there was a bad *inner-primitive-peasant*, informed by an Enlightenment – inspired *primitivist ideology* and staging the inner cultural *difference*, and a *noble-savage-peasant*, shaped by a mainly romantic *autochthonist ideology* (Mihăilescu, 2003) and performing the own cultural *specificity*. The choices and variants depended on “national conjunctures.” In France, for instance, the *inner-primitive-peasant* prevailed, both his backwardness and his “ethnographic” particularities having to be overcome by the “national everyday plebsite.” In Germany, on the contrary, it was the *noble-savage-peasant* that was the national hero. In both cases, the opposite option was also present, in different forms and to varying degrees. What was the case in Romania?

### The peasant before ethnology

In order to answer this question, we should first take a look at the peasant before and without the discipline of ethnology.

As noted by Burguière in France, this peasant starts by being for a long time a rather “invisible” one,<sup>152</sup> largely present in the artistic imagery of the educated people by means of “pastorales” and “bergeronnettes,” it’s true, but refused of cultural autonomy (Burguière, 2000). When he starts to become an object of interest and scientific knowledge, it is initially for administrative reasons. The German case is well-known:

“As we know it for sure now, the real definition of *Volkskunde* refers, since the XVIIIth century when the word appeared for the first time in the context of administrative statistics, to the ‘knowledge about the people’ (*Kentnisse über das Volk*) and not to the ‘traditions preserved by the people’ (*Überlieferungen im Volk*)” (Brückner, 1987: 228).

Such is also the case in France with the “*statistiques départementales*” during Napoleon’s rule (Burguière, op. cit.). We may find in Romania too, after the “oriental crisis” and during the emergence of the Romanian principalities, a growing interest in general data about the people of these territories for diplomatic, administrative and/or economic reasons, a growing corpus of administrative and economic statistics and geographic descriptions that can be put together as “knowledge *about* the people.” This is the case with the “consular documentation,” and, starting with the “Organic regulations,” the “periodic records.” It is what Stahl has chosen to call “sociography” and which served as a kind of “statistics” in the original sense of a “science of the states,” including useful information about a county’s geography, economics, social organization, customs, etc. (Stahl, 2001). These “sociographers” were of two kinds. The first and most important one was made by experts sent by the surrounding empires, interested in better knowing their constituting nations in order to better control them. Such is the case of representatives of the Enlightenment such as Georg Tallar, Gerhard Van Swieten, Francesco Grisellini or J. J. Ehrler, sent to Transylvania and Banat by the Hapsburg authorities. Their approach and the kind of ethnographies they produced were close to those practiced by missionaries and public servants in the remote colonies, the Romanian countries being for them a kind of “small Americas close to us.” The second category is represented by local intellectuals, from Dimitrie Cantemir to Ionescu de la Brad or Spiru Haret, who, in addition to their personal theoretical views,

were developing detailed descriptions of their countries, i.e. a kind of *Volkskunde* in the original sense of “knowledge about the people” and for the peoples’ own interests. Although they serve as valuable pieces of ethnography, these cases are rather distant from the ethnological interest and perspective, the peasant representing here mainly a socio-political category.

### The inner primitive of the Enlightenment

The first interests in the knowledge of the people do not concern the “traditions preserved by the people,” but rather their superstitions and the need to overcome them. This image of the peasant is thus the equivalent of the (bad) savage, eventually of the exotic primitive. In doing so, this kind of Enlightenment ethnology is overtaking and translating in rational terms – and for other reasons! – the Christian (mainly Catholic and Protestant) theory of superstitions as developed from Saint Augustine to Luther and Calvin. In the Romanian case, leading figures of the Orthodox Church in the 19<sup>th</sup> century such as Vasile Moga in Sibiu or Simion Popovici Datcu and Radu Verzea in Brasov also condemned the “superstitious” or “vain” beliefs of the Folk in very similar terms (Muslea, 1945: 128-129). The Church even sometimes excommunicated whole communities suspected of practicing “magical rituals” (Duma, 1995: 108-109).<sup>153</sup>

Nevertheless, the main actor in this respect is not the Church but a group of enlightened and politically engaged intellectuals in the 19<sup>th</sup> century known as the “Școala ardeleană” (the Transylvanian school). A typical example is a book published in 1808 by a leading member of the School, Gheorghe Sincai, entitled *Învățătura firească pentru surparea superstiției norodului* (Common sense lessons for undermining people’s superstitions). A handful of such “superstitions” are presented by the author in order to be “explained” in science, rational terms, and also mocked as they are interpreted by local people.

Written ten years later, Vasile Popp's doctoral dissertation on funeral practices defended in 1817 in Vienna is considered to be the very inaugural work of Romanian folklore. It is "the first scientific essay in the field of Romanian folklore, the subject and the author belonging to our folk. But its meanings are transgressing the national borders," Vasile Muslea claims, "what other modern nation had in 1817 a research on its funeral customs? None, as far as I know!" (Muslea, 1971 [2]: 46). This may be true, but Popp's intention was the same militant enlightening one, with his ethnographic descriptions current of peasant practices interded to illustrate and condemn their irrational superstitions. Later on, different kinds of social workers would follow and develop this kind of rationalist hygienic approach, interested in such knowledge *about* the people's nutrition, health, conditions of work and living, etc., criticizing them in order to try and change them (see Bărbulescu, 2006).

Nevertheless, another current ran through this main discourse: these very condemned "superstitions" may be also perceived as historical proof of the ancient origin and continuity of the Romanian people, and thus turned into valuable ideological arguments. This is what another leading figure of the School, Samuil Micu-Klain did in his 1800 history of the Romanians (Muslea, 1971[1]: 4). In a more explicit and programmatic way, such then-popular customs were compared with ancient Roman ones by Damaschin Bojinca in 1832-1833, in order to prove the Roman origin of the Romanian people (Bojinca, [1832-1833] 1978; 115-130, *passim*). Inside a still primitivist approach, the nation-building ethnology was taking its first steps.

### The noble savage of romanticism

In the German space, the specific interest for the knowledge *of* the people—as "traditions preserved by the people," and thus the second and better known sense of *Volkskunde*—appeared only later on and entered the mainstream under

the influence of "romantic literary ambitions and the emergence of a national historiography" (Brückner, *op. cit.*: 228). The local/national customs (*Sitten und Kultur*) were shared as a kind of pre-ethnological object of interest by both approaches, only from rather different standpoints.

In France, this view of the peasant frequently a cultural temptation but never succeeded in the long run:

One should wonder why the discovery of the singularity of popular culture did not engender the idea of a national culture embedded in the peasants' customs, and why neither Legrand d'Aussy, nor Dulaure, Cambry, or Lenoir have not been French Herder. In other words, why was this idea of cultural singularity, as a means of conceptualizing social practices, replaced so soon (...) by the measure of economic or moral distance? By this missed beginning, the ethnological approach to studying cultural diversity in France left an open space for (...) a sociology of France (Burguière, *op. cit.*).

Burguière also points to the complex political reasons of this different trajectory, nevertheless interfering periodically with romantic dreams about Celtic origins or about regional differences.

Romanian national ethnology is essentially a romantic one, with romantic influences coming both from Germany (mainly in Transylvania) and France, with Jules Michelet playing the role of a go-between. It is linked to the political romanticism spreading over Europe during the revolutionary times of 1848. In fact, romantic ethnology begins around 1840, with Alecu Russo's preoccupations with the ballad – involving both the collection of texts and the commentaries upon their importance from a rhetorical perspective (cf. Russo, [1840] 1942). At the same time, the flag-ship journal *Dacia literară*, (*Literary Dacia*), with its famous statement that "our beautiful customs are *interesting* and *poetic* enough," implied that the *Peasant* is now considered worth becoming a visible personage,



marking a definitive orientation towards this new perspective. Almost immediately, the first cardinal texts are configured: the collection of fairytales of the Schott brothers, *Walachische Märchen* (Stuttgart – Tübingen, 1845), a collection made in the tradition and under the direct influence of the Brothers Grimm, respectively the collection of ballads “gathered and improved” by Vasile Alecsandri. (1852).

Voicing this new representation of the peasants, Vasile Alecsandri claimed that “the Romanian is born poet.”<sup>154</sup> Fastidious as this may now sound, it was meant to explain that the Romanian people were a close-to-nature, speaking in poetical terms<sup>155</sup> as any other “natural community” and having all the spiritual and moral qualities of the “noble savage.” This marks a crucial ideological turnaway from the inferior inner-primitive-peasant to the valued noble-savage-peasant. The metropolitan “noble savage” is thus turned into the local “autochthon,” the *Peasant* becoming the very emblem of this Romanian autochthony.

### The Peasant and the autochthonist ideology

But why did this have to be?

The fact that at the time the Romania consisted mainly of peasant societies is not a sufficient explanation. In Germany, the *Volk* was identified with the peasants in spite of the existence of an already large category of proletarians (Bausinger, op. cit.). Ideology was never limited by demography – or the *Peasant* is an ideological fact.

It was “a necessity for both the boyar class<sup>156</sup> and the peasant one – Henri Stahl briefly explains – to prove that the ‘rumâni’ are autochthons, direct heirs of the Romans, fallen into slavery only by accident and thus having the right to fight back for their autonomy” (Stahl, 2001:30). The national elites thus had the urgent task of finding “the arguments proving that the Romanian populations from all the three provinces, Transylvania, Moldavia and Walachia,

are aboriginal, that they form a single people of Latin origin, and thus have at least equal rights with the populations that moved later on in the space of former roman Dacia”<sup>157</sup> (idem:26). *Continuity* and *unity* thus became the two complementary key words of what was almost an actual stake of political survival before being one of future nation-building and development. It is this double political claim that both fueled a genuine autochthonist ideology and made it necessary.

The *Peasant* is the main personage of the “great narration” elaborated by Romanian elites in response to these historical constraints and in order to serve this political argumentation. Embodying the Romanian autochthony, the *representative Autochthon*, i.e. he stands for the *ab originem* continuity of all Romanians on their own fatherland. He thus serves as the living argument for all these national claims. As such, he will be less of a *social actor*, part of the current social life, and more of an *ideological character*, an object of political interest and spiritual devotion. In other words, the ideological model fitting the nation-building needs had to – and in fact did – prevail over the empirical image of the peasant and was used to describe him in all his acts and contexts. Before being an object for ethnology, the *Peasant* was thus a product of ideology.

### A peasant-building ethnology

We may now ask what was ethnology’s mission in this context? How did the national ethnology methodologically produce, use and abuse this personage of the Peasant, turning it into its own object?

Let’s resume what has already been said: in the 19<sup>th</sup> century *continuity* and *unity* became the main political concerns for all three Romanian countries and for all its autochthon social categories; these crucial political stakes fueled a genuine *autochthonist ideology*; that answered to the political claims of continuity and unity by staging the *Peasant* as the representative *Autochthon* of the nation. In this context, ethnolo-

gy had only to add flesh and blood to this abstract personage of national desire.

Very roughly sketched, the methodological solution was to turn continuity into tradition and unity into typology: ethnology's Peasant was a representative *Autochthon* in so far as he was the *typical traditional man*.

### **The methodological invention of tradition. The peasant as traditional man**

Continuity from ancient times was, as we have seen, a main argument. In this respect, a primary way to use (and abuse...) folklore was to turn it into an historical argument for such a continuity.<sup>158</sup> Folk studies were thus rather an historical discipline or part of history. They were turned into a discipline in its own right only by forging their own interpretations of *social facts* as *traditional facts*. The political problem of continuity was thus transferred into an epistemological one of tradition. Further on and accordingly, the Western type of conceptual frame opposing the civilized to the primitive is reshaped as an opposition between modernity and tradition.

Traditional facts are considered to be the facts of a "traditional society," i.e. of a distinct, specific one: the Romanian peasant society. In fact, they serve as methodological means to link present observable facts to their supposed ancient origins, whatever these origins might be. This is supposed to fit with the existing peasant society, where social life seems to be an eternal reproduction of such "traditional" facts. An ideological laden methodology is thus shaping the social representation of society as being a "traditional one." Consequently the insider of this society, the peasant, can only be a "traditional man". Accordingly, the origin of "tradition" is not in "traditional society" but in the minds of ethnologists and their ways of looking at peasant society!

In order to do so, Romanian ethnologists were deeply inspired (although in a confusing way) by one of the key methodological solutions

of classical evolutionism: the idea of "cultural survivals."

Romanian national ethnology is not evolutionistic, but Tylor's doctrine was adapted to local needs. Traditional facts are indeed used as survivals in order to trace back their origins, a kind of *Urtex* from which the whole contemporary society is supposed to flow.<sup>159</sup>

But this is not ideologically interpreted as their performers (the present day peasants) belonging to a primitive or former stage of evolution: few ethnologists – if any – would conclude that such surviving practices or beliefs would place the peasant close to "the negro from South Africa" as Tylor did. And no Romanian ethnologist will be ever interested in comparing cultural survivals of the Romanian peasant society with those from Africa or elsewhere, as was the main purpose of the comparative method of classic evolutionism. This methodological approach only explains *continuity* and not *evolution*. Traditional facts are thus facts of continuity and not of evolution, expressing and explaining continuity; in a way they are this very continuity. Accordingly, the *Peasant* is not supposed to "evolve" in time from an inferior to a superior state, but rather to express (more effectually and more fully) the same inborn specific capacities of the Romanian people. It is this *specific* and *perennial* character of the *Self* that ethnology has to document using available cultural survivals of a traditional nature.

This methodological design of the *Peasant* has some important consequences:

a) Praising continuity, one has to value the origin of this continuity too. If we are proud about our continuity, we have to be proud about the ancestor with which this tradition is bridging us. Being this lasting ancestor, the *Peasant* will accordingly be treated rather as a "noble savage," then as an inferior "primitive."<sup>160</sup>

b) Traditional facts are not just end-products of the historical process of tradition but recurrent expressions of this process itself, from



the time of its origins. As landmarks of traditional legacies throughout time they are thus *timeless*: “eternity was born in the village,” poetically exclaimed Lucian Blaga, overemphasizing what has become a common-sense representation.<sup>161</sup> Romanian national ethnology will be thus unable to or only with difficulty, replace its object in time and approach it in a historical way.<sup>162</sup>

c) Finding their full meaning as informative *survivals* of some original models or *Urtexte*, traditional facts will be approached, described and interpreted as parts of these original models rather than components of a social functional whole. Romanian national ethnology will be thus unable to or only with difficulty, replace its object in the present social space and approach it in a functional way.<sup>163</sup>

d) Interpreting social life mainly as a reproduction of *Urtexte*, it is not a surprise that the methodological approach is *rationalism* rather than *empiricism* (Leach, 1976); Romanian ethnologists more interested in “what the peasants say” and their “systems of ideas,” than “what they are doing” and their “systems of actions.” Our archives still have billions of pages about Romanian folk lyrics, but there is almost no research on kinship, for instance.

e) Another consequence of this focus on *Urtexte* is that the ideal subject of the ethnologist is considered to be an old man in a remote village: age and isolation are almost mystically considered to be the best conditions for preserving a supposed “popular memory” the ethnologist is expected to update<sup>164</sup> (Belmont, 1986).

f) Not all social facts are traditional facts, expressing the worldview of the autochthonous people, the meaningful side of continuity. There is and has to be a selection—and that ethnology has chosen *not* to be “traditional” is extremely telling as well.<sup>165</sup>

Traditional facts are thus value laden facts and ethnological description of traditions involves by definitions *value judgments*. Accordingly, Romanian ethnologists will be (almost by definition) emotionally involved in any evaluation of the peasant world and will be anxious about any rumor of its disappearance.

g) This moral and emotional relation shil of the national ethnology with its *Peasant* is essentially different from the “physical and cultural inferiority” of anthropology’s *Primitive*. That is why Romanian ethnology never had a “bad conscience” as was the case with anthropology during the so called post-colonial crisis, nor was it equipped to play this role: anthropology loved and defended its native object/people from the very beginning. Perhaps this is also one of the main reasons also for the fact that it has never questioned its epistemological and methodological foundations or was tormented by the political or ethical implications of its doings: it had a good conscience from the very beginning – and still has. What is more, the peasants loved anthropology too – and still do.

This “traditionalist” relation ship with origins and the obsession with archaic models is constitutive of ethnological thinking to such an extent that it seems impossible even now to get rid of it. Thus, after prizing the idea of “living fossils” Mircea Eliade was speaking about sixty years ago, Nicolae Constantinescu, a reputed professor of ethnology, still claims that “the reconstruction of the cultural context, of the (possible) original source of the different folk texts (...) is a path to a better knowledge and comprehension of the great unity of the Romanian popular culture” (Constantinescu, 2006). “Cultural survivals” are very much alive, indeed!

### Taxonomies and the fragmented peasant

Another main methodological choice is that of the Linné type of natural taxonomies Tylor also preferred. In this respect, he was recom-

mending the “dissection” of culture into fine “details” that can be arranged in systematic classes as in botany or zoology (Tylor, 1871/2000: 29). As a matter of fact, this approach was shared by most social scientists with positivist inclinations. The first step of ethno-folkloristic research is thus a taxonomical one too, placing the traditional facts in their appropriate classes and by removing them from their present social contexts.

In the Romanian case, this kind of classification started almost simultaneously with the first folkloric collections. Vasile Alecsandri, for instance, accompanied his collection of *Ballades* published in 1852 with an early attempt at typology.<sup>166</sup>

This approach was institutionalized at the turn of the century when the Romanian Academy founded an ambitious national program called “About the life of the Romanian people” aiming to present Romanian popular culture in all its “components:” birth, marriage, death, children’s play, festivities, textiles, and so on. A large part of the reference books of the Romanian national ethnology comprise this project. The development of the discipline is also perceived, to a large extent, as a refinement of these typologies. It is telling in this respect that, however excessive it may be seen from an anthropological perspective, this obsession with types, classes, and categories in classical Romanian ethnology is considered by a present historian of the discipline as an “insufficiently rigorous systematization of the issues according to their species” (Dăcu, 1998 : 133).<sup>167</sup>

The “life of the Romanian people,” i.e. of the peasant society, is thus fragmented into species and sub-species of traditional practices and beliefs. Exit functional or structural analysis! The idea of the “total social fact,” of typical anthropological holism is thus excluded from the very beginning, and replaced by a kind of *topical holism*: the Romanian wedding, the Romanian epic, Romanian ceramics, etc. Thus, the Romanian *Peasant* has a *patrimonial unity* instead of a

social-empirical one. As such, he becomes a source for the *Self-collection* (Clifford, 1988) the ethnologist aims to produce. Finally, what this ethnologist cares about the most are these “patrimonial scarce resources” the *Peasant* is supposed to possess, instead of what he claims to be interested in: the very life of the Romanian people.

In this respect, Romanian ethnology is much closer to “Frazerian anthropology (that) fragmented the ethnographic community into bits and pieces that were reassembled in kaleidoscopic fashion in the grand compendium,” than to “the Malinowskian style of ethnography (that) reconstructed these communities as places of human habitation” (Kearney, op. cit.: 27). Even if ethnologists always speak about “we the Romanians,” the meaning of this plural is deeply different from, say, the classical anthropological representation about “We the Tikopia”...

### What next?

In his challenging book on “Reconceptualizing the Peasantry,” Michael Kearney states that “the category *peasant* has outlived the conditions that brought it into being” (Kearney, op. cit.: 25). Not only because of the “changing realities of rural life,” but also because of the shifts in social theory and representations about the peasantry.

At different times in various western societies, the Peasant was turned by bourgeois population and taste into an object of entertainment: a peasants’ life is an attractive opposition to capitalist work (e.g Bausinger, 1993). In this respect, the “Romanian peasant” is starting to be approached and dealt with in this way too, “traditions” being turned to commodities and peasant way of life being hailed as *loisir*: the phrase “traditional houses for tourists,” sounds like advertising. Nevertheless, the discourse about the Peasant of these very “managers” is still about archaism and authenticity.

Another main dimension of change is em-

bedded in the views and policies of development. During the Cold War, the Peasant was re-emerging as the representative insider of the “third world” that both “first” and “second” worlds were struggling to dominate. In this political context, the Peasant was the updated version of the very primitive *Other*. He was the one to be “civilized,” and much more importantly, to be “developed.” The third world peasant is the underdeveloped primitive. And this is what happens to our noble peasants too: with European integration and from the standpoint of local and regional development projects, the Romanian peasantry is a social category in a rather underdeveloped stage. In as far as this “underdeveloped Other” becomes the central figure of post-modern anthropology (Sabelli, 1993), the Romanian Peasant is theoretically becoming the object of this new anthropology as well.

But national ethnology still does not want to set him free! A very recent text by professor Nicolae Constantinescu serves as but one example in this respect. In (at least seemingly) pleading for “context,” the renowned Romanian folklorist reintroduces, somehow through the backdoor, the defining reference of folklorism to the *Urtext*.

“Coming back to the relation of the folkloric text to its cultural (or genetic) context, let’s say that the first is an extremely important source in restoring the other, that folklore, popular literature, primarily, but music and popular dance as well, represent a sort of a ‘diary of the childhood and adolescence’ of those peoples that have no history (Cl. Lévi-Strauss). Or, in the words of an African poet and philosopher, dance, which has become nowadays “the most profane of arts,” represents the “warm ashes” of certain rituals, myths, archaic behaviours, maybe long gone (Leopold Sedar Senghor, *From Negroeness to the universal civilization*, 1986). So has Mircea Eli-

ade argued in an article written sixty years ago in *Speology, History, Folklore* in the volume *Fragmentarium* (1939), where the concept of ‘living fossils’ appears, borrowed from the language of speology” (Constantinescu, 2006 : 3).

Here we are, back in the dawn of evolutionism, captive in Tylor’s visions of “*cultural survivals*” (translated into Romanian as “cultural fossils”). Romanian national ethnology cannot give up, it seems, the obsession of reconstructing a paradigmatic origin, even if, for this purpose, it will use devious and somehow more.... “modern” means. The folklorist from Bucharest confesses this as clearly as possible at the end of his article : “The operation of *reconstructing* the cultural context, the *primary* (possible) source of various folklore texts (...) is a path to a more precise acknowledgement and understanding of the *great whole* that popular Romanian culture is” (idem, our underlining). It seems that Stahl was truly accurate in saying that folklorists do not cease hoping that they will end up restoring these origins of national culture on the basis of their present folklore texts. It is no surprise then that they do not know how to approach and describe the “Romanian peasant” alive today.

What about “new” Romanian anthropology? It seems to be interested in the “peasant” only as a subject of development and/or as one of migration—and as such something with almost no connections to the former “Romanian peasant.” This opposition and lack of dialogue between the two approaches (disciplines?) produced a lack of *continuity* as well as a lack of *consistency* of the very character of the Peasant. Consequently, academic discourse seems to be unable to give a coherent and comprehensive answer to the simple question: what are we referring to when we (still) speak about the *Romanian Peasant*?

## Notes

<sup>152</sup> See also Șerban Angheliescu in this volume for the Romanian case.

<sup>153</sup> Local priests used to be much more indulgent with such “superstitions,” sometimes also being accused by their superiors (Muslea, op. cit.: 128).

<sup>154</sup> “The Romanian was born a poet. Gifted by nature with a brilliant imagination and a sensitive heart, he releases the mysteries of his soul in harmonious melodies and in improvised poems. If smothered by yearning, if caught by joy, if astounded by a great deed, he sings his pains and satisfactions, his heroes and history and thus his soul is an endless spring of beautiful poetry” (Alecsandri, [1852]1965 : 99).

<sup>155</sup> Giambattista Vico largely diffused the idea that savage people think in poetical terms. Romanticists largely shared this view. In this respect Jean Cambry, for instance, was claiming at the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century that “the customs of the people are those of nature in its very simplicity. It is imagination that prevails; their language is figurative, full of metaphors and imaginative tricks (...) poetry was born before prose. It is the burning expression of emotions of terror, surprise, admiration or love the nature man feels in a much deeper way than the civilized man” (apud Burguiere, op. cit.).

<sup>156</sup> Especially after and because of the century long Phanariot governance, when the local aristocracy (*boierii de țară*) lost her hereditary rights, the Romanian boyars were interested in stressing a common autochthony with the peasants. It is not by accident that a main representative of this category as Alecu Russo, for instance, has worked out a historical narration of fundamental similarities between real boyars (i.e. the local ones) and “real” peasants (the free ones, the *răzeși*) (see Birlea, 1974).

<sup>157</sup> There are some similarities, in this respect, with the Greek case. “By identifying with the absolute values of European romanticism, Greek scholars sought to gain admittance to Europe as cultural as well as political equals” - Michael Herzfeld explains (Herzfeld, 1987:52). The same was true with Romanians scholars playing the card of Roman origin, what Vasile Pârvan calls the founding “myth of Rome” (Pârvan, 1921).

<sup>158</sup> The series of Romanian ethnological texts dedicated to demonstrate the continuity of a practice, of a custom, of a character from very old times up to the moment of its collection is impressive. It begun during Enlightenment by a series of small studies in which information regarding traditional life was converted into arguments that could prove roman continuity. For example, Samuil Micu-Klein does this in 1800 in *Short Account of the History of Romanians*, than in 1801, in *Dictionarium valachic-latinum* (Mușlea, 1971 [1] : 4). The most repre-

sentative case is, however, that of Damaschin Bojincă, whose *Antiques of Romanians Now Written in Romanian for the First Time* constantly refers to the facts of Roman civilization described as Romanian customs (Bojincă, [1832-1833] 1978 : 115 – 130, *passim*). In the Romantic age, the pleading for continuity is not removed from the ethnological discourse, but slightly shifted: “the revolt of our non-latin spirit” Hasdeu was promoting, brings the Dacian element to center stage. Romans or Dacians, Pelasgians or Slavs, Christians or Pre-Christians, according to academic school and political ideology, are all invoked to explain the *archaism* and the *continuity* of various folklore elements. And this approach seems to be still en vogue: a year ago, the distinguished critic Mircea Mihăieș wrote about Otilia Hedeșan’s volume on calendar customs that it is a book that should exist in all libraries as it refers to our “archaic customs!”

<sup>159</sup> “In a very real sense, the attempts to reconstitute *Urtex* expressed metonymically the programs of national regeneration they were intended to serve” (Herzfeld, 1996:236).

<sup>160</sup> One can say that there is almost a “canon of the Peasant” in Romanian ethnology, describing and prescribing how is he to be conceived. In a pioneering text, Alecu Russo writes for instance: “I have long researched the oldest of literatures and the works of the most eminent poets, and I did not come across such a marvelous and beautifully told idea. Such an idea is the result of human wisdom, a display of the sense of immortality, expressed through the voice of the people. *Vox populi, vox dei!*” (Russo, [1840] 1942: 221). This kind of representation follows, as a pattern, a great part of the researches of Romanian ethnology, functioning as a real Procrustian bed for what is usually considered “the right/correct/real image” of the Romanian peasant. There are but a few exceptions, the most illustrious being Ovid Densusianu (Densusianu, [1909] 1966), Ion Mușlea (Mușlea, [1935] 1971: 299 – 301) and Henri H. Stahl (Stahl, 1983). In this respect, Densusianu, for instance, wrote at the beginning of the XX<sup>th</sup> century: “Under the influence of some nebulous conceptions and of an enthusiasm that had degenerated into Romantic rhetoric (...), the simple man, from the countryside or from elsewhere, has been presented to us as a being endowed with numberless qualities, with a soul harvested by nature with an abundance of good thoughts and feelings” (Densusianu, 1909 [1966] : 46). It is telling that this kind of statement was generally left besides in spite of the high reputation the philologist-folklorist’s enjoys between folklorists.

<sup>161</sup> Henri Stahl was mocking in the thirties this obsession: “Any direct researcher of folklore can regretfully see that there is no standard text, as there is no pattern of

## 198 Otilia Hedeșan Vintilă Mihăilescu

belief, custom, rite or ceremony, known by everybody and repeated identically, there are only themes and expressions generally known (...). In almost all cases, such texts cannot be found. Nevertheless, folklorists cannot help believing that they existed and they do not lose their hope that they will end up restoring them. When such 'texts' do not seem to be possible, as in the case of 'ceremonies,' they continue to believe in a ritual scheme that must have existed in clear and perfect forms, that survived in a damaged form up to our days" (Stahl, 1983: 237 – 238).

<sup>162</sup> It is not by accident that almost all historical "winds of change" in Romanian society had to refer to the Peasant in one way or another. "We don't want any longer to be the eternal peasants of history!" Constantin Noica was claiming, for instance, in the name of his 1940 generation (Noica, 1943). Post-communist changes are also accompanied by the adagio of the "death of the Peasant."

<sup>163</sup> We are not referring here to functionalism, but to what all anthropologists would share as the "functionalist method."

<sup>164</sup> The sociologist Henri Stahl is strongly criticizing this doctrine of a "social amnesia" that the ethnologist is supposed to bring back to life (Stahl, 1983).

<sup>165</sup> There is not an ethnological interest in sexual practices or licentious jokes, for instance, and one will never see a peasant's toilet in a peasants' museum.

<sup>166</sup> "These poems are divided into three distinct categories: ballads, *doine* and *hore*," Alecsandri claims and offers a rather impressionistic description of each of them (Alecsandri, [1852] 1965 : 99).

<sup>167</sup> Further re-working of folk-typologies is even considered at the core of what a leading folklorist calls "a second life of folklore" "Folkloristic has a great responsibility mission in the first and most important stage of what we called 'the second life of folklore:' the re-grouping of the material in scientific collections in a different environment than the one genuine folklore exists in. It should be discovered firstly, then recorded (collected), processed, archived, preserved, *systematized in a typological form*, anthologized, and, last but not least, offered as a *model*, through its most representative facts in a scientific usage. Through all these activities, the genuine message should not, under any circumstances, be distorted" (Ispas, 2003 : 31, our underlining).

### Bibliography :

ALECSANDRI, Vasile: *Poezii populare ale românilor adunate și întocmite de...*, 1, Ediții critice de folclor – Culegători, [București], Editura pentru Literatură, [1852], 1965

AUGÉ, Marc: *Pour une anthropologie des mondes contemporains*, Flammarion, 1994

BAUSINGER, Herman : *Volkskunde ou l'ethnologie allemande. De la recherche sur l'antiquité à l'analyse culturelle*, Editions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, Paris, 1993

BÎRLEA, Ovidiu: *Istoria folcloristicii românești*, Editura Enciclopedică Română, București, 1974

BOJINCĂ, Damaschin: *Anticele romanilor*, în *Scrieri. De la idealul luminării la idealul național*, Studiu introductiv, selecție de texte și note de Nicolae Bocșan, Timișoara, Facla, [1832 – 1833] 1978, pp. 115 - 130.

BOSKOVIC, Alexandar: „Distinguishing ‚self’ and ‚other’”. *Anthropology and national*

*identity in former Yugoslavia*“, *Anthropology Today*, vol. 21, no. 2, 2005

BOURGUIÈRE, André: « La centralisation monarchique et la naissance des sciences sociales. Voyageurs et statisticiens à la recherche de la France à la fin du 18e siècle », *Annales*, 55 Année, nr. 1, 2000

BRÜCKNER, Wolfgang: „Histoire de la Volkskunde. Tentative d'une approche à l'usage des Français“, Isac Chiva et Utz Jeggle (essais réunis par), *Ethnologies en miroir, La France et les pays de langue allemande*, Edition de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, Paris, 1987, pp. 223-248

CLIFFORD, James: *The Predicament of Culture. Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge and London, 1988

CONSTANTINESCU, Nicolae: „Memoria culturală și socială a textului folcloric“, *Datina*, Anul XIII, nr. 42, 2006



DATCU, Iordan: *Dicționarul etnologilor români*, 2, Saeculum I.O., București, 1998

DENSUSIANU, Ovid: *Folklorul. Cum trebuie înțeles*, în *Flori alese din poezia populară, Vieața păstorească în poezia noastră populară*, Ediție îngrijită și prefață de Marin Bucur, București, Editura pentru Literatură, [1909]1966, pp. 35 - 56

DUMA, Mihai: *Cultură populară și spirit iluminist. Vampiri și administrație în Banatul secolului XVIII*, în „Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai. Historia“, XI, 1-2, 1995, pp. 105-122.

GEANĂ, Gheorghită: „Enlarging the Classical Paradigm: Romanian Experience in Doing Anthropology at Home“, *Anthropological Journal on European Cultures*, ed. C. Giordano, I.M. Greverus, and R. Römheld (special edition), 1999a, 8 (1), pp. 61-78.

GERHOLM Tomas and HANNERZ Ulf: „Introduction: The Shaping of National Anthropologies“, *Ethnos*, volume 47, I-II, 1982

GUSTI, Dimitrie: „Știința națiunii“, *Enciclopedia României*, vol. I, Imprimeria națională, București, 1938

HERZFELD, Michael: *Anthropology through the looking glass: critical ethnography in the margins of Europe*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1987

HERZFELD, Michael: „Folklore“, Alan Barnard, Jonathan Spencer (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*, Routledge, London and New York, 1996, pp. 236-237

HOBBSAWM, Eric: „Introduction. Inventing traditions“, Eric Hobsbawm, Terence Ranger (eds.), *The invention of tradition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983

KEARNEY, Michael: *Reconceptualizing the Peasantry. Anthropology in Global Perspective*, Westview Press, Boulder, 1996

ISPAS, Sabina: *Cultură orală și informație transculturală*, Editura Academiei, București, 2003

LEACH, Edmund: *Culture and Communication. The logic by which symbols are connected. An introductory to the use of structuralist analysis*

*in social anthropology*, Cambridge University Press, 1976;

LENCLUD, Gerard: „La tradition n'est plus ce qu'elle était“, *Terrain*, 9, 1987, pp. 110-123

MIHĂILESCU, Vintilă: „Omul locului. Ideologie autohtonistă în cultura română“, Octavian Groza (volum coordonat de), *Teritorii. (Scrieri, dezscrieri)*, Paideia, București, 2003, pp. 167-212

MUȘLEA, Ion: „Academia Română și folklorul“, în *Cercetări etnografice și de folklor*, I, Ediție îngrijită cu studiu introductiv, bibliografie, registrul corespondenței de specialitate, indice de Ion Talos, Minerva, București, [1935] 1971, pp. 295 - 302.

MUȘLEA, Ion: „Practice magice și denumirea lor în circularele episcopești și protopopești de la începutul veacului trecut“, *Anuarul Arhivei de Folklor*, Cluj, VII, pp. 128-129.

NOICA, Constantin: „Ce e etern și ce e istoric în cultura românească“ (1943), Constantin Noica, *Istoricitate și eternitate*, Capricorn, 1989, pp. 20-40

PAUL-LÉVY, Françoise: „A la Fondation de la sociologie: l'idéologie primitiviste“, *L'Homme*, 97-98, XXVI (1-2), 1986, pp. 269-286

PIPPIDI, Andrei: *Cotidianul*, 18 iunie, 1993

POUILLON, Jean: „Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose“, *Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse*, 15, 1977, pp. 203-211

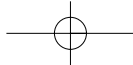
RUSSO, Alecu: *Poezia populară*, în *Opere complete*, Comentate de Lucian Predescu, București, [1840] 1942, pp. 220 - 228.

SABELLI, Fabrizio: *Recherche anthropologique et développement. Eléments pour une méthode*, Editions de l'Institut d'Ethnologie, Neuchâtel, et Editions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, Paris, 1993

SCHOTT, Arthur și Albert: *Basme valahe, Cu o introducere despre poporul valah și o anexă destinată explicării basmelor*, Traducere, prefață și note de Viorica Nișcov, Polirom, Iași, [1845] 2003.

ȘINCAI, Gheorghe: *Învățătură firească spre surparea superstiției norodului*, în *Școala Ardeleană*, I, Ediție critică, bibliografie și glosar de





200 Otilia Hedeșan Vintilă Mihăilescu

Florea Fugariu, Introducere de Dumitru Ghișe și Pompiliu Teodor, București, Minerva, [1808], 1983

STAHL, Henri H.: *Eseuri critice*, Editura Minerva, București, 1983

STAHL, Henri H.: *Gînditori și curente de istorie socială românească*, Editura Universității din București, 2001

STOCKING, George W. Jr.: „Afterword: A View from the Center“, *Ethnos*, 47, 1-2, 1982, pp. 172-186

TAMÁS, Hofer: „Anthropologists and Native Ethnographers in Central European Villages: Comparative Notes on the Professional Personality of Two Disciplines“, *Current Anthropology*, 9 (4), 1968

