

MARTOR



Title: "The historical role of politics in the constitution of the present Romanian market of peasant artefacts"

Authors: Bogdan Iancu, Cătălina Tesăr

How to cite this article: Iancu, Bogdan and Cătălina Tesăr. 2008. "The historical role of politics in the constitution of the present Romanian market of peasant artefacts". *Martor* 13: 47-66.

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

URL: <http://martor.muzeultaranuluiroman.ro/archive/martor-13-2008/>

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 historical role of politics in the constitution of the present Romanian market of peasant artefacts

Bogdan Iancu
Cătălina Tesar

*„anthropologists should be less concerned
to identify particular traits as traditional or
modern than to describe the political dynamics
in which such attributions are made“
(Hertzfeld: 2004, 30)*

This paper is concerned with the constitution and the functioning of the market of artefacts in present-day Romania and tries to bridge the domain of culture (to which it has been confined by the national ethnology) with the domain of economics in an approach framed by anthropological economics (Sahlins: 2004[1974]) or what lately has been called cultural economics (Gudeman: 1986).

We address the ‘market’ as a process rather than a place or a universal model, by merging the local and the global and by framing it in the historical dimension. Instead of seeing the present Romanian market of artefacts as a product and manifestation of postsocialism, and as a particular moment inspired by a rupture with the past, we will place it in a continuum of different periods which have pulled together to create its existing expression. We will examine the role and status of the Romanian peasant artisan in the „global hierarchy of value“, namely in the midst of prevailing consumer ideologies, which

overemphasize mass technology to the detriment of specific local competences (Hertzfeld: 2004). We will therefore ask how artisans survive in the market economy and what strategies they employ to fit into the new capitalist order. In other words, how do they legitimize themselves as indexes of ‘tradition’ in the new ‘modernized’ world?

Drawing on the literature on the invention of traditions (Hobsbawn: 2005) and the critics brought to it (Hertzfeld: 2004¹), we will try to answer the questions raised above by analysing loci where state institutions as well as supranational instances and practices of local actors intermingle. We will look at peasant artefacts and at discourses surrounding them as loci of economic, and cultural cum political values. This article also tackles the historical dynamics and transformations in the field of peasant handcraftsmanship, as well as the process through which peasant artefacts are extracted from their context of production, transformed into art and finally offered up as commodities.

The analysis relies on an ethnography of part of the market of artefacts in present-day Romania. The ethnographic data will be enriched with insights from some of the Romanian ethnographic literature on the subject placing the two perspectives into dialogue. We carried out

fieldwork in two localities where craftsmanship perpetuates itself in different forms, in spite of being characterized by casual distribution. On tourist maps designed during the communist period these localities were marked as ‘folk art’² centres. Horezu and Oboga became famous in the country for pottery production. Local economic, social and political as well as ecological backgrounds intermingling with global processes and factors, determined the course of the industry of artefacts in the two localities. While Horezu developed a flourishing local market of pottery and entered touristic flow, in Oboga pottery making is marginal and almost invisible.

‘High’ cum ‘Bottom’ Production of Craftsmanship: a Historical Background (17th-20th c)

Nowadays in both Horezu and in Oboga the artisans produce colourful ornamental pottery such as plates, pots, bowls or vases decorated with specific patterns. Along with various forms of manifestations of the peasant’s material culture, and in addition to peasant systems of beliefs and representations³, pottery made a vivid topic within the nationalist discourse of Romanian ethnologic literature⁴. In fact, Romanian ethnology used up hundreds of pages in interpreting the meanings allocated to each of the patterns. Valued as ‘symbols’, these patterns are usually related to pre-Christian beliefs and are a landmark in arguing the ethnogenesis of the Romanian people. As a result, the ornamental pottery produced in Oboga and Horezu became the icon of Romanian identity, largely exhibited in national museums and international exhibitions.

Nevertheless archaeological evidence dismisses the theory of national specificity attributed to ornamental pottery. Slatineanu (1938) argues that while ordinary pottery for domestic consumption has a long standing history, ornamental pottery (or „the new pottery“) started to be produced on Romanian territory only at the end of the 17th century, and the beginning of

the 18th century, under oriental influences. At that time Romanian princes and boyars brought a large amount of Turkish and Persian pottery into the country and local potters suddenly found themselves unable to satisfy the needs of the nobles. As a consequence, „driven by the new models, our potters started to improve their technique and to diversify the patterns, deciding therefore to engage themselves in a movement of rebirth of this industry“⁵ (Slatineanu: 1938, 93). Near the lords’ palaces and in the neighbourhood of the boyar courts, pottery workshops were set up in order to supply the demand of boyars’ and princes’ families. Upon establishing the monastery of Hurezu, the ex-prince of Walachia, Brancoveanu, gathered potters around it and challenged them to imitate the foreign artefacts (Slatineanu 1938): „Even if this pottery centre had been set up long before, it seems obvious that once the monastery was established, the pottery craftsmanship developed in order to supply the needs of the prince’s court and of the boyars in the neighbourhood“ (Slatineanu: 1938, 98). Similarly, pottery produced in Oboga was meant to supply the demands of the Basarabs and Brancovenus courts.

Concerned with studying issues of „autochthony, authenticity, ethnogenesis, continuity, axiological and behavioural peculiarities of the Romanian traditional folk culture and civilization“ (Vulcanescu: 1980, 10), the ethnological literature published during the communist period was silent about the external influences which contributed to the development of the so called ‘Romanian ornamental pottery’. Wherever it’s acknowledged, the ‘influence’ is judged as less valuable than the indigenous work: „the oriental imported ceramics that was spread at the boyar courts became a source of inspiration for the peasant craftsman whose artefacts were simpler *but nonetheless more beautiful (italics added)*“ (Butura, 1978: 388).

After reaching its heyday in the 18th century, the production of „luxury“ pottery decreases at the beginning of the 19th century and almost

vanishes immediately afterwards (Slatineanu: 1938). Pottery craftsmanship enters a state of decline in Horezu in the late 30s⁶: „Nowadays this centre is on decline. The beauty and the art of painting is almost forgotten. The craft is worth nothing any more because of the metal and enamelled iron objects which entered the market“ (Slatineanu: 1938, 98). The author further notices that the artisans didn't garnish the objects anymore, only besprinkled them with different clay colours.

The climax of decline in handicraft production reached its peak after the treaty signed in 1875 with Austro-Hungaria whereby cheap, mass produced goods were allowed to flood the local market (Kallestrup: 2006). On this ground, increasingly deprived of local handicrafts, the narratives of nation building which informed Romanian kings (both Carol the 1st's and Ferdinand's) politics focused, more and more, upon the recycling of peasant folklore and customs. It was actually the task of the two kings' wives, both Carmen Sylva and Queen Mary to bring the rural life style back into public discourse.

These local enterprises were part of the international movement *Arts and Crafts* which was born in England as a political opposition to the industrial revolution (Thiesse: 2000, 153), aiming at the revival of craftsmanship as an alternative to the imposed officially „high culture“ (Kallestrup: 2006). The Society *Furnica* (‘The Ant’) led by Carmen Sylva used to organize craft bazaars and exhibitions meant to encourage, on the one hand, townswomen to wear the national costume for feast days and celebrations (Kallestrup: 2006). While, on the other hand, these activities were meant to help village women to earn a living in their native villages (Thiesse: 2000, 154). Later on, Queen Mary of Romania established the *Domnita Maria* (‘Princess Mary’) Society which got involved in the promotion of traditional crafts (Kallestrup: 2006) by organizing hand weaving and pottery workshops (Thiesse: 200, 154). These societies



contributed towards acknowledging „Romanian art“ outside the country and played a major role in bringing about transformations in the original production (Thiesse: 2000, 155).

Through international exhibitions, „Romanian art“ spread around the world. At that time it also became a commodity on the world market. We came across some booklets called „pamphlets“ with samples of Romanian embroidery (along with prices tags) published in London around the year 1900. One of them showed Princess Elisabeth of Romania wearing a Romanian blouse on the outside cover, while on the first page it showed Princess Marie of Romania in national costume. Thiesse (2000) argues that at the time it was a common practice for countries with an underdeveloped industrial base to make attempts to acquire international acknowledgement for their cultural production: „National artefacts meant to supply the international luxurious market represent a highly symbolic capital for countries with weak industry. Having no means to highlight their power or their modernity, these countries transform their backwardness into authentic and therefore prestigious archaism“ (Thiesse, 2000: 155).

At the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century, the *Arta Nationala* (‘National Art’) movement arose as an elite driven

political cum cultural phenomenon, whereby artefacts and customs found in ‘traditional societies’, after being carefully selected, were promoted inside the country as well as outside it, as representative of the Romanian nation. But in order to become representative of Romanian identity the patterns on peasant artefacts were altered: „the patterns peculiar to a specific kind of object are usually transferred to another kind of object: those on the *oltenesc*⁷ carpets can be found on the Easter eggs while those peculiar to embroidery are used for furniture“ (Thiesse: 2000, 155). The peasant artefacts were extracted from their context of production and promoted on stages, at national and international exhibitions and acquired the status of art (Popescu: 2002, 14): „While until that moment <the large house> of the peasant’s household contained <things> (chairs, tables, plates, mugs, icons, [...]), the peasant found himself the owner of popular art objects, or national art, and thus the creator of a world of objects. Collecting these objects started irregularly, then individually, but systematically, guided by the *colligere* principle – *select and gather*.“ Following Popescu (2002) we argue here that The ‘National Art’ movement brought changes in the aesthetics of the handicrafts and turned their utilitarian value into an aesthetic one. This was one of the points that our informants, a carpet weaver from a village⁸ near the king’s residence (Sinaia), brought into discussion:

To tell you the gospel truth... we didn’t used to make the kind of carpet you can see today. First and foremost, there was its Majesty the mat. We hung the mats against the walls to keep the house warm. Afterwards there came the runner and later on the patterned carpet that you can find today... My mum used to tell me this story... that it was Queen Mary who had taught the women to weave. She came here when they opened the power station in Dobresti. At the time everybody was eager to learn...

For the second time throughout its social history, production of peasant artefacts falls under

the influence of the elite practices and discourses. And this process of merging what we have called above the ‘high’ and ‘bottom’ production of artefacts and craftsmanship reaches its peak during the communist regime. Maybe more powerfully than ever before, state politics intrudes upon rural domestic production of artefacts. A few operations of the state worked together to exert control over the production and consumption of artefacts: the national system of cooperative production, the discipline of ethnology, the museums, the institutes of research and the festivals. Production of artefacts was dislocated from the domestic, private space of the peasant household and re-located in the public, institutionalized space of the enterprise (the cooperative). The production of artefacts was turned into mass production meant to serve as a means of legitimising the state through culture. Meanwhile, the production of artefacts was subjected to a compelling process of selection, whereby particular patterns and shapes were prioritized over others, in order to assert a public discourse revealing ideas about the ethnogenesis of the Romanian people.

In the early 1950 the *UCECOM* (‘National Union of Handicraft and Production Cooperative’) was established as a pyramidal network of village based associations of artisans, which worked as the official site of the production of artefacts during communism. This system was rooted in the 19th century international tradition of cooperative alliances. All over Romania handicraft cooperatives were established by means of gathering together artisans who would provide the initial social and material capital for their functioning, while production was centrally planned and fell under the regulations of the state. A new representation and conception of craftsmanship came into being, replacing the long standing association of the artefact with its producer and individual creativity, with anonymous production (an anonymity that stood for the „genius of the whole folk“).



The production of peasant artefacts during communism: the case of Horezu

The locality of Horezu which is situated in the county of Valcea became a well recognized centre for pottery production and, furthermore, an icon of Romanian craftsmanship during communism. Nevertheless it also became part of the greater 'project of modernization', since it was turned into a locus of entwining contradictions, such as rural elements blended with citifying constituents. A former village, Horezu then underwent a process of urbanization and intense industrialization. At the time the economy of the emergent town encompassed mining, textile production and the handicraft industry. As in other urban areas of the country, immigration from

neighbouring villages into Horezu was encouraged with the offer of employment doubled in attractiveness because of the housing potential. In the 50s the *Cooperativa Ceramica* ('The Ceramics Cooperative') was set up, and in time its personnel reached 700 persons who worked in branches as diverse as ceramics, wood carving, textile, leather, basketry etc. Blocks of flats were built in the centre of the town and their exteriors decorated with pottery, symbolising progress towards 'civilization', as well as being an index of 'tradition'.

In the 70s the festival *Cocosul de Hurez* ('The Rooster⁹ of Hurez') was established in order to offer a site to artisans for staging their 'tradition'. Like other local festivals which were spawned throughout the country during





communism and whose tradition was rooted in interwar Romania (Mihailescu: 2008), ‘The Rooster of Hurez’ became part of the national festival *Cantarea Romaniei* (‘The Song to Romania’). Born at the peak of nationalist communism, the ideology that underwrites *Cantarea Romaniei* festival evolves around the construction of the ‘new man’ (*omul nou*), as rooted in the continuity of the national past rather than in the international workers movement (Mihailescu: 2008).

This comprehensive vision springs out from every line published in the review which accompanied the festival through its existence. For example, in the review issued on the occasion of the first edition of the ‘Song to Romania’ national festival (held over October 1976 – June 1977), Miu Dobrescu, at the time chairman of the Council of Socialist Culture and Education, canvasses the role of folklore inside the „huge laboratory of national culture“. As stated by Dobrescu, for communist ideology, folklore serves as a means of testifying to the common origin of the Romanian people, a leit motif recurrent in the narratives of nationalism: „genuine folklore assets and traditional popular artistic creation are a historical product belonging to the eternal dowry of the people“.

Communist nationalism is not an unique example of ideological instrumentalization of folklore inside the nationalist *expose*: throughout Europe the discourse of C19th nationalism was built on the rhetoric of E.B. Taylor’s survivalism (Herzfeld 1987, 10). And as it hopefully became clear throughout the previous section of this article, it was also the case with Romanian nationalism at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th c (see also Mihailescu, Hedesan: 2006; Mateoni in this review).

But folklore and ‘folk art’ had to meet the requirements of the twofold nature of communism’s nationalist discourse, namely to be both rooted in ancestral traditions and to be in tune with the project of modernization. In the footsteps of the ‘National Art’ movement, the latter

imperative could be fulfilled by highlighting and promoting, in the case of pottery, excessive ornaments and decorations instead of the ordinary pottery produced for domestic consumption in the peasants households: „Folk art (...) permanently changing... now has an obvious trend towards *decorative functions (italics added)* in tune with the requirements of modern civilization. However, despite the process of renewal, folk creation essentially evolves as an inspired continuation of the same valuable traditions characterizing the *culture and creation of the Romanian people (italics added)*“ (Miu Dobrescu in *The ‘Song to Romania’ National Festival: 1979, 4-7*).

Therefore the exhibitions housed by the *Cantarea Romaniei* National Festival should include „objects which surpass the traditional scope of old folk art but are conceived in its spirit and meet the requirements of modern life“ (Paul Petrescu, Elena Secosan and Gheorghe Poenaru, in the review mentioned above). At the time the ethnological literature drew a distinction between ‘folk art’ and ‘contemporary artisan work’ („mass artistic creation by the working people“), with the latter being the outcome of a disciplined production which fell under state control especially within the confines of the ‘Cooperative’.

The artefacts produced inside the ‘Cooperative’ didn’t bear the hall-marks of their producers as individuals. Instead, they carried the name plate of the area where they were hand crafted (for example, the bowls produced in Horezu were wrapped in cartoon boxes with the specific tag *ceramica de Horezu*: ‘ceramics from

Horezu’). These artefacts underwent a process of standardization of patterns, shapes and colours. A new taxonomy was imposed in order to make a distinction between the waged worker in the ‘Cooperative’ who was an *artizan* (‘artisan’) and the *mester popular* (‘folk craftsman’)¹⁰ who inherited the skills and knowledge of the craft in the confines of his kinship network. While the *artizan* produced artefacts in series, the *mester popular* would imprint on the objects his personality and make them distinct from the others’.

Particular peasant craftsmen who made abundant use of specific patterns on their artefacts were turned into and promoted as artist-archetypes of handicraftsmen (for a more detailed discussion, see Mateoniu in this review): „...the change is also felt in the share of anonymous collective creation typical of the olden days, in comparison with the signed works, and this refer to folk art as well as to current artisan creation...there have appeared works of outstanding value and folk and amateur artists, exponents of the communities to which they belong“ (Miu



Dobrescu, in the review mentioned above).

Nevertheless ‘creation’ was not a phenomenon whereby the individual creator would freely express himself, as one might believe. Any act of ‘creation’ was made subject to the control of cultural entrepreneurs and promoters who would impose as ‘traditional’ only certain patterns and ‘symbols’ believed to pertain to Romanianess. Discussions about innovation and tradition were recurrent in the review ‘Song to Romania’ and directives to be followed by the artisans were made a general preoccupation of the authors,

such as Octavian Ivan: „we have to state clearly that our demarche for safeguarding the authentic values of our folklore and of our Romanian folk art does not refuse ‘ab initio’ the innovation phenomenon and does not intend to annihilate the creative fantasy. We only intend to canalize this creative fantasy towards the vein of tradition, towards the vein of national specificity so that the new values spring naturally out of the spiritual heritage, being authentic (...). One should trace a clear distinction between the rep-

resentative artefacts and the polluting kitsch“ (*Song to Romania*, no 8/ 1987: 36-37).

One way of controlling the production of artefacts was through the selection and awarding of prizes at the festivals. A festival such as ‘The Rooster of Hurez’ offered a ground for legitimizing some of the peasant artisans as masters (and therefore bearers of the traditional pottery knowledge and skills) and for institutionalizing them as indexes of ‘the real tradition’. While domestic craft production was banned and turned





into mass production inside the Cooperative, the festival was opened nonetheless to individual craftsmen (*mesteri populari*) as bearers of tradition.

The works awarded at the ‘Rooster of Hurez’ festival, by a jury made up of mainstream Romanian ethnologists, were gathered and exhibited annually in the *Casa de Cultura* (the ‘House of Culture’). This cultural institution, therefore, became a local authority in the field of tradition making. It not only validated itself as a value ‘judge’ in the field of local craftsmanship. It also objectified a hierarchy among the artisans, and became the frame of reference for the coinage of ‘tradition’. Its embodied knowledge of tradition is asserted by the very participation of nationally recognized ethnologists in the process of selection of the objects exhibited. Even if the ‘House of Culture’ and its exhibition *Galeria de Arta*

Contemporana (‘Contemporary Art Gallery’) does not represent an attraction point for tourists in Horezu, since it is closed most of the time, it is a vivid presence in the discourse of legitimation of the artisans. Having works exhibited in *Casa de Cultura* informs one’s status as an artisan and furthermore assures one a certain place in the hierarchy of ‘traditional craftsmen’.

Few artisans from Horezu became well known during communism, being awarded prizes at various festivals while their artefacts were exhibited by the national museums. Vicsoreanu, Ogrezeanu, Bascu and some others became the icons of the Horezu pottery (see Mateoni, in this review). They were hired by the *Cooperativa Ceramica* to teach pottery making to other villagers who became employees and apprentices there. The pedagogical dimension of craftsmanship was a request to be met by the

„new artisan“. The disavowal and secrecy of cultural transmission of the skills specific to any craft corporation was publicly denied. Inside the space of the ‘Cooperative’, everyone could become an apprentice and be trained in the art of pottery making. Teaching pottery was a demand imposed in order to ensure the perpetuation of ‘traditions’: „the concatenation of the terms peasant, craftsman and teacher, standing for a social status and vocation...teachers...who carry the core of traditions“ (Paul Petrescu et al, *idem*).

The present market of ceramics in Horezu

We do modernize. The world around us is caught by modernization and we must catch up with it...

At least geographically the realm of ceramics is split into two distinct areas in Horezu today. On the one hand, there are plenty of stalls and shops which sell artefacts along the main road that crosses the town from the East end to the West end. They are owned by what we will hereafter call, following our informants’ denomination, ‘street traders’. On the other hand, there is an area up the hill, the *Olari* (‘Potters’) hamlet, spatially removed from the town and not easily reachable given the hilly approach road, where the artisans live. Roughly speaking, one encounters in Horezu, following Gudeman (2001), the two realms of economy: ‘the market’ and the ‘community’, which, nevertheless, are not divorced from one another and whose practices exert a mutual influence.

Administratively at least, the hamlet belongs to the town of Horezu, making one of its streets, but at the time of our research, there was a placard pointing towards *Satul Olari* (‘Potters’ Village’) placed downtown. It served both tourist and political ends, appealing to ‘traditional’ rural life hunters, and accounting for the projects designed by the mayor to attract EU funds for rural development.

People who sell ceramics on the main road usually (re)present themselves as indexes of modernization. They conceive of themselves as *debrouillard* entrepreneurs, who quickly found convenient strategies to adapt to the market economy or as instances of the local forms of capitalism. On the other hand, the artisans living in *Olari* hamlet are regarded by the ‘street traders’ as ‘backward’, ‘underdeveloped’ and unable to adapt to the demand of the market.

Through their everyday encounters with customers, the ‘street traders’ came to an understanding of the demands of the market in ceramics. In their opinion, there seems to be roughly two main categories of customers. The real *connoisseurs* of ‘tradition’, the ‘elite’, would fall into the first category. We are making reference here to that part of the clientele, mainly highly educated, who, once capitalism took over in Romania and the market was flooded with a wide range of consumption goods, advocated ‘returning’ to a pre-modern, pre-globalization stage of human evolution, as opposed to the harmful present. The consumerist behaviour of this ‘high culture’ status group is a locus of striking contradictions, accounting both for the advantages taken from a capitalist life style, and for their rejection. Under the second category of customers, as identified by the ‘street sellers’, would fall the ‘nouveau rich’ as well as common people who look for ‘kitsch’ objects. Because of their ‘lack of culture’, understood in our informants’ conception as a deficiency in contacts with cultural institutions as value makers in the field of ‘tradition’, the latter category of clientele is thought of in terms of ‘uneducated tastes’.

It’s difficult today to supply the demand of the *connoisseurs* of ‘tradition’ because contemporary artisans are believed to be alienating themselves from what was imposed by the cultural institutions as ‘tradition’. There are few craft patterns which are held to comply with the lines of ‘real tradition’, namely the work of artisans who passed away (Ogrezeanu, Bascu, Vicsoreanu etc) and whose artefacts became rare. These

objects are expensive and usually not exhibited in the shops. They are kept in some different rooms attached to the stall which are suggestively called 'exhibitions'. Most of the shops and stalls have a 'backstage' exhibition where old artefacts are assembled after having undergone a rigorous process of selection. These exhibitions usually follow the rules and stringencies of 'authenticity' as imposed by the museums and indigenous ethnographers. Through them, the trader in pottery presents himself as having a twofold nature: one driven by the spirit of capitalism, whereby profit should be made regardless of ethics; and another, which accounts for the attachment to spiritual values (asserting the peasant artefacts as indexes of 'intangible heritage'). In this way the economic activity whereby 'kitsch' objects are made into commodities is regarded as a means of subsistence and survival on the market (which can even mean profit making); and its ethics resist condemnation through the very practices of capitalising the 'really traditional' artefacts. As situated subjectivities, these people seem to be split in two divergent parts. They are driven, in Weberian terms by both substantive rationality (whereas material behaviour is shaped by ethical standards) and formal rationality (whereby actions are based on calculation) (cf. Gudeman: 2001, 16).

Our informants, bearing in mind that they were engaging in a conversation with researchers working at the Museum of the Romanian Peasant, one of the instances in the field of 'tradition' shaping, found themselves in difficult straits in attempting to vindicate their marketing strategies:

We love the tradition, meanwhile we have to survive through what we sell. And what we sell is not real tradition...

A lot of people came to offer us different stuff. But we refuse to exhibit in our stall all thingamajigs. We only have on sale objects that we like. Otherwise, people would buy everything. For example, we have on sale those cement icons which are ghastly but nevertheless they are

highly in demand. Therefore, we decided to put them on sale. They are made by some friends, Greeks who bring them to us in exchange for our pottery.

We should admit that our position as researchers at the Museum of the Romanian Peasant greatly influenced the discourse of our interviewees. One of them, while trying to expose the cultural principles behind the exhibition organized in his shop, ends up by naming the very market principles which drive such a cultural enterprise. The ethnographical exhibition, besides being a collection of items of material culture specific to the area, is a means of advertising for virtual customers:

Few years ago I gathered a lot of ethnographic objects. You can see them exhibited down here. I intend to open an exhibition here. So the ground floor will host an ethnographic exhibition with objects from our area, Oltenia. This will make me happy, people coming and enjoying the exhibition. Maybe this will be a stake in advertising the area. You shouldn't forget that this is a tourist area. In the end, this exhibition will be nothing more than a tourist attraction...

The artisans are thought about in terms of lack of entrepreneurship or of peculiar foolishness by the 'street traders'. They are stubborn in using the old fashioned wood fed clay ovens instead of replacing them with the more practical electric ones. Meanwhile they cannot afford the ecological enamel and continue to employ copper, whose use is restricted by EU regulations. In other terms, the artisans are regarded as 'backward' people who cannot adapt to the new demands of the market. What then are these new demands that the artisans cannot cater for and how are they supplied by the traders in artefacts?

First of all, there is an increasing demand for big vessels. These are bought to be employed either as decorative or functional objects in the big villas and gardens owned by the 'nouveau rich'. Big vessels, however, do not fit into Horezu artisans' ovens. Therefore these objects are usually bought by the traders from places



like Oboga or Corund¹¹ and sold in Horezu. Nevertheless problems arise when the snobbish 'nouveau rich' look for big vessels decorated with the pattern of the rooster which is specific to Horezu:

It's difficult to make these people understand that one cannot get the rooster on the big vessels. They keep on mourning about authentic things...

The solution was found when the traders in artefacts bought big vessels from places where they are produced and had them painted in Horezu. This practice can be termed innovation. In Schumpeter's analysis, innovation stands for the prime mover of entrepreneurship: the entrepreneur invents a new process, bring it to the market and holds a short-term monopoly (cf Gudeman: 2001, 112). Nonetheless these new artefacts fall outside of the categorizations designed by the indigenous ethnographers, follow-

ing area criteria, and therefore overcome the stringencies of 'traditional' artefacts.

But most of the time principles that drive the market enterprise do not overlap with the ethnographers' principles of representing 'traditional artefacts'. The indigenous ethnographic discourse, concerned with portraying the peasant as an a-historical human being, who pertains to the domain of culture, tradition and authenticity, left out of the analysis the realms of economics, politics and social life. However our informants stressed the economic reasons which underwrite the production and exchange of artefacts:

One cannot survive in the market selling only artefacts produced in Horezu. One cannot go into business with objects produced exclusively in Horezu. The same for the Hungarians from Corund, in order to be in the market, they need our objects. When we go to Corund, we can see

Horezu plates in their stalls. Not only do we exchange artefacts, but some of our artisans went to Corund to teach people over there our pottery techniques. Therefore you cannot tell anymore where a bowl was made...

We should supply a whole range of tastes. We sell and ask the artisans to produce in accordance with the market demand. The business works like this: you put some patterns on sale, see if they are sold and if they are, you order more. If they are not sold, you try with different patterns. The patterns produced should fulfil the demand.

One of the most successful traders in ceramics, was among the very few at the time of our research to have any knowledge of craftsmanship (albeit learnt abroad). He also had an oven to be used for demonstrations in front of the tourists, behind the stall; and he invented a new model of plate, the 'crooked' one (*stramba*). He recalls the process of invention in a story which intermingles human error and chance:

The crooked ones, they fell down from our hands. And out of a bowl we made a veldschoen. Afterwards the idea came to our mind to make more crooked objects. We exhibited them in the shop and they were immediately sold out. We make the standard plates and afterwards we curve them.

Whilst the 'street traders' legitimize themselves in relation to their success on the market (and there is an obvious competition among them), the artisans living in *Olari* hamlet mainly legitimize themselves in relation to the cultural institutions. The more contacts one of them has with the museums in the country, the more he will be appreciated among the artisans and his works regarded as being in compliance with 'tradition'. Nevertheless the relationship with these cultural institutions is, in most cases, historically established. Only artisans belonging to families who were part and parcel of the ethnological discourse of the state institutions during communism, have strong links (and access to official markets and exhibitions) with the cultural insti-

tutions nowadays. It seems that through the kinship network one passes down not only the cultural knowledge of craft production, but also one's positioning vis a vis the institutions which judge the degree of alienation from, or, acquiescence with 'tradition'.

Nevertheless artisans living in *Olari* hamlet cannot be said to constitute an homogenous mass of individuals who inherited the craftsmanship within the confines of their family. Some of them acquired pottery making knowledge as wage labourers at the 'Cooperative'. Given the fact that they don't own an oven, they work, nowadays, as day labourers for the artisans who produce artefacts on order, and get paid per item. There are also artisans who only took up craftsmanship after the fall of communism. When they were hit by the unemployment provoked by the retreat of the state from the economy, they discovered pottery craft as a resource generator:



The potters have spawned. Quite a lot of them imitate, they didn't inherit this craft. They were eager to learn and they managed to do it. During Ceausescu's time, only a few families made pottery. Since 90s, they've been mushrooming...

At the top of the internal hierarchy established among the artisans in the *Olari* hamlet, there are only a few families who attend the markets organised by museums (for example, The Museum of the Romanian Peasant or The Village Museum in Bucharest, or the Ethnographic Museum of Moldavia in Iasi). They are therefore regarded as technically and aesthetically ‘good artisans’ who do not withdraw from the tradition:

Museums teach us to uphold the old patterns. If we go to a market in a museum, the first thing they would do is to check out our artefacts: „this is an old pattern, you are allowed to sell it...“. For example, at your museum, they say that the blue on our pottery is something new, it doesn't come from tradition. But I know for sure that our ancestors used the blue...

It became clear during our research that those artisans who were upheld by the state



during communism, and promoted by museums and festivals as *mester popular* (‘folk craftsman’), are still considered to be ‘tradition’-bearers. The *artizani* (‘artisans’) (see the previous section of this article), who acquired the craftsmanship in the confines of the ‘Cooperative’, have turned,

nowadays, generally speaking, into day labourers. In this way a new division of labour seems to have come into being. This division breaks with the deep seated understanding of the production of pottery as a ‘domestic mode of production’, which relies on kinship, as described in the indigenous ethnological literature. As for the ‘street traders’, the kind of knowledge required by their business is not necessarily dependent upon craftsmanship, but upon managerial competences, knowledge of the distribution of demand and supply, of prices as well as advertising, and of networking abilities.

The clientele of the artisans in the *Olari* hamlet is usually made up of networks of individuals, who are established through the agency of state institutions (local or national, such as museums or the village hall). Organized groups of foreign tourists who come to Horezu are also directed towards the hamlet by the personnel of the *Casa de Cultura*, or, of the village hall. Even if the market exchange of artefacts has visibly increased lately in the hamlet, the craftsmen would still complain about poor cash sales. Based on more than objective reality, the craftsmen’s discontentment is channelled by condemnation of the activities carried out by the ‘street traders’. The latter are seen as pure middlemen who appropriate resources which, before privatisation started in Romania, were accessible only to craftsmen. The ‘street sellers’ are not the single object of blame in the hamlet. Potters who have been only recently initiated in craftsmanship are also seen as guilty of counterfeiting ‘real tradition’.

The production of artefacts is not a task exclusive to individuals. The domestic production of pottery is underwritten by the gender division of labour: men usually accomplish the hard labour (preparing and modelling the clay), while women do the design of plates. As women were traditionally assigned mainly productive capacities inside the household and a low level of mobility, they were practically invisible outside the space of the village. It was therefore the male

potters who engaged in exchange activities in different markets, hence the public representation of the potter as necessarily being a male. Nowadays there are a few widow female potters in the village who participate strongly in the market exchange of pottery. In this case, the perception persists that craftsmanship is an individual labour activity.

The artisans living in the *Olari* hamlet advertise their artefacts conspicuously. Vessels are hung all over the external walls of a house or in trees in the courtyard. A billboard with the artisan's name near the 'potter' qualification hang on the external front wall of the houses. *This is like a label. Like an advertisement for your own work.* Very few of the artisans managed to open their own shop in the street.

Oboga or the emptiness of the pottery glass case

The commune¹² of Oboga is made up in three small linear villages laid out along a local hilly road. It is situated near the small ex industrial town of Bals, in the county of Olt. Demographic statistics show that its population halved in comparison with the 70s, when most of the people were hired by enterprises in the neighbouring towns. Unlike Horezu which lies in a mountainous area continuously flooded with

tourists, an important resource generator for the locals, Oboga is an agricultural commune with few possibilities for economic development. The dismantling of industrial units in the neighborhood, after the fall of the communism and the resulting unemployment, together with awkward conditions for practicing agriculture, had a large influence on transnational migration towards Western Europe, in countries such as Spain or Italy. During the interwar period, Oboga's production of pottery exceeded that of Horezu (Slatineanu: 1938), but, nowadays, craftsmanship here is only a thing of the past, although highly present in the indigenous ethnological discourse. We faced quite a challenging, demanding task when looking for potters' households in the village.

We were struck by the villagers' lack of self confidence in uttering the names of any potter except the one well spoken of in the indigenous ethnologic literature, and prominently represented in museum exhibitions. One of the civil servants in the village hall proudly told us that no less than 100 potters used to work in the local 'Cooperative' after the second World War. At present the ruins of the ex 'Cooperative' building break off from the row of the neat and well looked after households.

Villagers' knowledge of potters in Oboga is usually confined to the name of Grigore Ciungulescu (see Mateoni, in this review). The belief exists that there are more clay ovens in Oboga but the names of their owners passed into general oblivion mainly because they have never had strong links with the national museums, and, therefore, practiced pottery only as a seasonal occupation. They supply the local demand for everyday pottery at rural markets organized on the occasion of traditional feasts¹³. Nevertheless, roughly speaking, the dismantling of the local 'Cooperative' can be equated with the extinction of pottery as a large scale practice in Oboga. As a consequence, for years, the ceramics produced by Ciungulescu came to stand for 'Oboga ceramics'.



Grigore Ciungulescu is in his 80s and therefore almost physically unable to practice pottery. The aesthetics of the ceramics produced by his son and his daughter-in-law do not stand comparison with Grigore's. The family doesn't have a stall for ceramics. Their family business is confined to selling the bulk of artefacts straight from the household to customers who come from Horezu, Corund, neighbour towns or abroad. The artefacts produced inside the household range from ornamental plates, ashtrays, penny trumpets and simple pots to pots with anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures inspired by the antique ceramics produced in South Romania (see Mateoniu, this review). The tools the family employ in pottery production are age old and have not been touched by changes in the technology. Even the colours used for ornamentation are obtained from clay or copper by completely natural processes.

The potter Grigore Ciungulescu is a good illustration of the immersion of the hegemonic discourse of cultural institutions within the process of production of artefacts, and hence, 'tradition'. The potter recalls an ethnographer who brought him catalogues with photos of ceramic artefacts from ancient times to be used as inspirational sources. We could witness our potter explaining in a highly academic jargon, gratefully counterbalancing his everyday domestic language, that the synthesis of these ornamental items is what one calls 'traditional'. Grigore Ciungulescu argued that the more patterns a potter would blend in his artifacts (for becoming more 'traditional'), the more he was appreciated by the cultural institutions. Nevertheless, the logics of the market and economic strategies, in the aftermath of communism, overcome the constraints of the discourse of the cultural institutions. For some time Ciungulescus have been producing midget plates for a middleman who attaches a magnet on the backs. Afterwards the objects are smuggled out to UK where they are sold as refrigerator magnets.

In the neighbouring village, Romana, which, in the past, administratively belonged to the commune of Oboga and which is nowadays a district in the town of Bals, pottery craftsmanship is practiced inside a few households. The best known craftsmen are Stefan Trusca and Gheorghe Turcitu. While the first one has strong relationships with the museums, the latter is scarcely known. Similarly, here, just as in Oboga, there are few other potters who practice what we would call 'subsistence craftsmanship'. They do not attract the interest of the cultural institutions which manage the national and international staging of ceramics. They represent themselves through a humble discourse which place the „institutionalized“ potters on the high scale of outside recognition. They were bashful in speaking with us, regarding themselves as undeserving of the attention of any member of the museum staff. They produce what they call *ceramica de rand* ('ordinary ceramics') – simple vessels, besprinkled with different colours, with no complicated designs – which in their speech is contrasted with the 'traditional'.

The dismantlement of the 'Handicraft Cooperative' meant for the potters in Oboga and Romana, to put it metaphorically, breaking the glass case where their artefacts were exhibited during the golden age of the 'Song to Romania' Festival.





Conclusions

The two ethnographic examples discussed above testify to the role of the state actors and agencies in shaping different local markets of artefacts in Romania. Contrary to the indigenous ethnological discourse which approaches artefact production through the bias of culture and tradition, this paper argued that the 'invention of traditions' is a process undertaken by the discipline of ethnology itself and by the state. Relying on written sources, we contend that the present 'marketisation of traditions' in Romania is both an outcome of market liberalisation and of the long standing process of instrumentalising representations of Romanianess.

State agencies are an 'invisible hand' in regulating the market of artefacts, both by subsidising the process of production and by educating consumers' tastes. Different actors in the market, such as producers, traders and consumers seem to share the same understanding of 'tradition', namely the one imposed by cultural institutions. Even the identification of the category of 'uneducated' clientele (made up by what we called 'nouveau rich' and 'common people'), by

our informants, is established in reference to the judging standards of what was imposed as 'tradition'.

Meanwhile peasant artefacts found on the present-day market in Romania overcomes taxonomies designed by indigenous ethnologists following the criteria of area of production, authenticity and specificity. The economic reasoning of supplying demand in the market greatly impacts on the production of artefacts. However knowledge of the market and craftsmanship are two distinct realms whose existence determined a new taxonomy of the actors involved in the market, that is, 'traders' and 'artisans'. The communist enterprise of mass producing artefacts both displaced household production of artefacts and contributed to the emergence of a new category of artisans who staffed the post communist labour market as day labourers. Far from being the objective expression of Romanian peasant celebration in a world of symbols and of intangible values, as it has always been portrayed by the indigenous ethnologic literature, handicrafts production is consigned to the demands of the market.

Notes:

¹ Herzfeld considers that the weakness of Hosbawm's approach „lies in the privileged position it accords elite movers and shakers“ and in its „not recognizing that all traditions are in some sense invented“ (Herzfeld: 2004, 18). In addition, Herzfeld argues that „one benefit of this literature is the awareness şit raisesş that the very idea of tradition is a modernist one“ (Herzfeld: 2004, 18).

² In Romanian, *arta populara* (for a discussion regarding the employment of the concept of 'art' in the indigenous ethnologic discourse, see Mateoniui, in this review)

³ In the footsteps of the German tradition, ever since their birth, Romanian social sciences have been operating the distinction 'culture' (systems of ideas, believes) vs 'civilization' (material culture)

⁴ Beck (1986) states that the birth of social sciences and of ethnological research in Romania coincided with the formation of Early Modern Romania and that they were therefore put in the service of the politics of nationalism (see also Mihailescu, Hedesan: 2006)

⁵ Throughout this article, translation of Romanian texts into English is done by the authors

⁶ Slatineanu (1938) notes that there were only 30 craftsmen and 10 pottery kilns in Horezu, while there were 200 craftsmen and 120 pottery kilns in Oboga at that time

⁷ In the indigenous ethnologic literature, a category of hand weaved carpets whose patterns are believed to be specific to a peculiar area in South Romania

⁸ Besides pottery which furnishes the main interest of this article, we also carried out research about hand weaving in the commune of Pietrosita in the county of Dambovita. Given the limited space of this paper, we choose not to discuss in detail the data regarding hand weaving even though they would fall under a similar theoretical framework, being part of the same process of 'marketisation of traditions' in present Romania

⁹ The rooster is a common pattern on the pottery produced in Horezu. Although it can be found on the pottery produced in Oboga as well, the rooster became the symbol of Horezu pottery

¹⁰ In English, there is no semantic distinction between the two terms.

¹¹ Locality in Transylvania inhabited by a majority population of Hungarians, well known for pottery production

¹² Rural administrative unit in Romania made up of few villages

¹³ In rural areas in Romania clay bowls are still used in ceremonial alms gifts, though on a decreasing scale lately, starting to be replaced by mass produced goods.

Acknowledgements

This article is the outcome of research carried out by a team made up of employees of the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant, Bucharest during the period March 2007 – September 2007. The research was part of the project *Patrimoniul taranului recent: radiografiere, valorificare si expunere* ('The heritage of the recent peasant: survey, analyses and exhibition') funded by the AFCN (Administration for the National Cultural Funds). We are grateful to our colleagues who took part in the research and vigorously participated in debating the data collected

(Antoine Heemeryck, Petre Popovat, Maria Mateoniui, Cosmin Manolache, Dan Turcu, Ciprian Voicila). Some of the interview extracts used in this article were made available to us through their kindness and some of the ideas sprang out from common discussions. Last but not least we are especially grateful to Vintila Mihailescu who was at the heart of this research from its beginning to the end, guiding both its methodology and theoretical framework. He also had the patience to read this article and made useful comments before its publication.

References cited:

- BECK, S.: „Indigenous Anthropologists in Socialist Romania“, in *Dialectical Anthropology*, no10, 1986
- BUTURA, V.: *Etnografia poporului roman*, Ed Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 1978
- GUDEMAN, S.: *The Anthropology of Economy*, Blackwell Publishers, Massachusetts & Oxford, 2001
- Economics as culture. Model and Metaphors of Livelihood*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London& Boston, 1986
- HERZFELD, M.: *The Body Impolitic: Artisans and Artifice in the Global Hierarchy of Value*, Chicago University Press, Chicago & London, 2004
- Anthropology through the Looking Glass. Critical Ethnography in the Margins of Europe*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1987
- HOSBAWM, E.: „Introduction: Inventing Traditions“, in E. HOSBAWM & T. RANGER (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2005 (1983)
- KALLESTRUP, S.: *Art and Design in Romania, 1866-1927: Local and International Aspects of the Search for National Expression*, East European Monographs, Columbia University Press, Columbia&Princeton, 2006
- MIHĂILESCU, V.: „A New Festival for the New Man: The Socialist Market of Folk Experts during the ‘Singing Romania’ National Festival“, V. Mihailescu, I. Iliev and S. Naumovic (eds.) *Studying Peoples in the People’s Democracies II. Socialist Era Anthropology in South-East Europe*, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle Studies in the Anthropology of Eurasia, 2008, pp. 55-80
- HEDESAN, O.: „The Making of the Peasant in Romanian Ethnology“, in *Martor*, no 11 (*Museums and Societies*)/2006, pp 187- 2003
- POPESCU, I.: *Foloasele privirii*, Paideia, București, 2002
- SAHLINS, M.: *Stone Age Economics*, Routledge, London, 2004 (1974)
- SLĂTINEANU, B.: *Ceramică românească*, Fundația pentru Literatură și Artă „Regele Carol II“, București, 1938
- The „Song to Romania“ National Festival. The all-country exhibition of amateur fine arts, photography and folk art, 1977* (annex to the Romanian edition of the volume *Festivalul Național „Cântarea României“*. *Expoziția republicană de artă plastică, artă fotografică și artă populară de amatori – 1977*) Meridiane, București, 1979
- The „Song to Romania“ Național Festival*, no 8/ 1987
- THIESSE, A.M.: *Crearea identităților naționale în Europa. Secolele XIII-XX*, Polirom, București, 2000
- VULCĂNESCU, R.: „Introducere“ in R. Vulcănescu (coord), *Introducere în Etnologie*, Ed. Acad. Rep. Soc. Rom., București, 1980

