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VI. Book Reviews

Alexandra Urdea, *From Storeroom to Stage: Romanian Attire and the Politics of Folklore*, New York and Oxford: Berghahn Publishers, 2018, 210 p.



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In the mid 1950s, during the Cold War, an important number of ethnographic objects from Romanian villages arrived as representatives, exhibits, and gifts to the Horniman Museum in London, via the Folk Art Museum in Bucharest.

As all ethnographic objects are objects of ethnography, results of an art of excision and redeployment, they keep a hidden mobility and capacity for redefinition inherent in their displayness.¹ The return of traditional artefacts to their place of origin or to the peoples and culture where they originated from has become a complicated but urgent museal endeavor. The journeys of the excised objects are complex and fraught with tensions, with the always-possible reproduction of colonial power and representational relations between museums, humans, and material exhibits.²

Alexandra Urdea's book is, in a way, the result of this large trend in museum related research and financing—but it unfolds in a different cultural, political, and ethnographic landscape than the usual post-colonial one. It describes the convoluted journey of an anthropologist and a host of rapidly changing objects (and contexts), between the storages and displays of the Horniman Museum and Romanian villages, museums, craft shops, and TV studios. It is not only a complex research and interpretation of objects of ethnography—always already removed, even on their way back to origins—but also a disciplinary journey, a translation between two different ethnographies—imperial and national.

George W. Stocking Jr. (1982) introduced an important distinction between two different ways of doing anthropology: “nation-

building anthropology” and “empire-building anthropology.” The fate of ethnography in Central and Eastern Europe can be read through this bifurcation, but also through its special way of reaching a closure of discourse, an internal coherence. Even if this closure was sometimes evolutionary backed or culturally tainted, the specific element was the national one, embodied in a national state construction. The place of the “primitive” from empire-building anthropology was occupied by an even more ambiguous figure: *the peasant*.

The trope of the peasant was apt to sustain apparently adverse discourses. The discourses of modernity and modernization were thus not necessarily opposed to the one talking about the authenticity of peasantry. At the same time with its dissolution and radical exploitation at the dawn of modernity in Central and Eastern Europe, the peasantry suffered a symbolic transubstantiation. Its authenticity was removed—sometimes by means of science, other times by means of politics alone—from the real, concrete population sustaining that life, and used in the process of legitimizing social strata and political constructions totally different from the peasant ones. The nation was the idea, discourse, political setting, and global affect that kept these processes in check, the power that was creating a unifying background.

Urdea's anthropological travel that takes her across this fractured ethnographic and national-disciplinary landscape is also a personal homecoming, as the author grew up in socialist and post-socialist Romania. Not only the objects but also their human companion are travelling back, as the eth-

1) See Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1991).

2) See Clifford (1997).

nographer sets on a Cliffordian “roots and routes” ambiguous return journey.

The first chapter sets the scene for taking stock, through theoretical anthropological lenses, of the various ways in which “objects change in different settings,” and, at the same time, how they “are used to maintain the distinction between these settings” (2019: 12).

As the story starts in a museum, the author is interested not only in the movement but also in the long periods when objects are kept safe, living a “fascinating life while in keeping” (2019: 13). The second and third chapters focus on objects in store. In London, in the Horniman Museum, artefacts are collected and filed in archives just as in the “parent” villages, the related objects are kept in wardrobes and in the family’s and neighbors’ memories. Temporalities, regimes of value, and identities are part of the semiotic and material life of folkloric artefacts in both London and Romanian villages from Vrancea.

Part three of the book enlarges the perspective and attempts to bring in the history and the long series of modernization projects from the region of Vrancea. Chapter four presents, on fast forward, one of the most interesting regions of folkloric, anthropological, and sociological Romania: Vrancea, as Urdea tries to deconstruct the national(ist) folklorization and idealization of the history of the region.

In chapter five, one of the most interesting chapters of the book, Houses of Culture occupy the front stage and bring to light the ways local folklore and its artefacts played an important role in the creation of local hierarchies, while being part of the larger process of socialist nation-building. The Horniman Museum collecting practices mirror the ways in which the Vrâncioaia village House of Culture “was instrumental in the framing of ‘folklore’ as a discrete activity, able to represent ‘our culture’ and ‘our memory,’” and capable to create complex historical contexts of objects displayed, or unable to be displayed (2019: 118).

The final part marks another shift of framing, as well as topic. Folklore and its objects

are now analyzed specifically as objects on stage. Chapter seven looks, again on fast forward, at the (in)famous “Song to Romania” nation-wide socialist show, and how folklore local performances supported the large-scale socialist nationalist folkloric nation-building project, while also providing spaces for personal achievement and local contestation of the same phenomenon. Chapter eight, where the present day folklore mass media star system is presented, switches again the narrative thread to a fascinating world, where folklore artefacts function, again, in another regime value, as tokens of authenticity, especially through the negotiations of musical repertoire, personal professional trajectory, and spectacular folk dresses.

The story of the book ends with another return. The journey from modern exhibitory complexes to the authenticity of origins and local traditions has failed. But it was, apparently, a productive failure. The Horniman Museum, the origin of the story, becomes, with a new exhibition, both the recipient and the origin of at least a part of the ambiguous thing that is Romanian folklore. From London to the niche folklore TV channel and its singing stars, the

Romanian collection at the Horniman was caught up in the networks of shifting museological discourses in Britain and in Romania, the demise of cultural institutions in Romania, and the post-socialist market economy—processes that cannot be seen as separate, and that can only together account for the ways in which the folk idiom is used today (2019: 183).

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