

Recording One's Own Oral Culture: A Case Study of Locals' Notebooks

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ABSTRACT

Interest towards communities characterized by oral tradition has taken the form of ethnological and/or anthropological field research on this topic over the past two centuries. With the invention of the tape recorder, the difficulty of recording field information was reduced as it enabled real-time recording of testimonies provided by informants; the process became even more accessible once digital information storage became available. In parallel with the efforts of the researcher—*outsider*—to document realities considered relevant for the culture of traditional societies, some of the *insiders* became aware of the need to write down such information, which they recognized to be defining for their own social group. This article thus focuses on a particular practice in writing down ethnographic information, namely the existence of notebooks in which oral texts of different types and with different functions are recorded. To build the argument, I draw on the example of such notebooks held by the Folklore Archive of the West University of Timișoara, namely five manuscripts signed by Gheorghe Andraș, a teacher from Sânnicolau Mare, a small town in western Romania. Written in the first half of the twentieth century, these notebooks are statements of the inner calling their author felt to write down this type of ethnographic information, under the influence of national policies supporting ethnographic field research.

KEYWORDS

Private notebooks; micro monographs; folklore archives; insider's perspective; interwar Romania.



Introduction

This article centers on a particular practice in writing down ethnographic information, namely the existence of certain private notebooks containing transcriptions of oral texts. For this reason, the main method used in the article is descriptive. These personal notes are written records focusing on cultural facts specific to traditional communities, i.e., characterized by orality, in the first half of the twentieth century. Such notebooks are a statement of the inner calling their authors felt to write down ethnographic information that described cultural realities specific to their own community. It is well known that

the nineteenth century brought about an increased interest for folk culture and local history under the influence of the nation-state building movements. Mainly due to an accelerated literacy acquisition process at the time and under the influence of national policies supporting ethnographic field research (see Hedeșan 2005), such writings occurred especially among small local rural intellectuals. This paper thus aims to present a case study focusing on some short ethnographic private writings held by the Folklore Archive of the West University of Timișoara, Romania. These writings consist of five thematic notebooks written by Gheorghe Andraș, a teacher from Sânnicolau Mare. Today Sânnicolau Mare is a small town in Timiș County, situated in western

Romania, in the Banat region. Written in the interwar period, these manuscripts were preserved in very good condition. Four of them are typed, most likely after the initial recording of the information and by another person since the typed text includes corrections. However, it is sure that Gheorghe Andraş, an insider, is the one who wrote these texts based on the observations he made in the community where he lived.

Each notebook is meant to provide information on cultural facts considered specific to interwar Sânnicolau Mare. The notebooks are rather concise, briefly recording and classifying ethnographic information from the end of the 1930s. Their thematic classification suggests the author's concern for carefully organizing the information he had gathered. In addition, he constantly tried to provide details on the space and time when he found relevant information on a certain topic, as a scrupulous researcher would have done. However, his oral style and his attention to some details bring his manuscripts closer to an insider's approach, a personal notebook meant for recording the oral reality of a traditional world increasingly threatened by the social changes of the early twentieth century.

The main purpose of this study is to point out the existence of this category of manuscripts that most often remain unknown to the public. It thus aims to provide an example of recording orality and to underline the most important feature of such an approach. The analysis is useful as far as it underlines the existence of a pattern in recording cultural facts specific to oral communities. It is well known that, especially since the second half of the nineteenth century, oral cultures were considered to require a special effort to be recorded. Naturally, this current appeared and gained prominence with the emergence of nation-states. The necessity of such dedicated writings/documents derived primarily from the need to preserve some

of their specific elements against oblivion. The spread of written cultures led to the emergence of libraries as knowledge storage systems. Next, the development of economic and political systems gradually led to the construction of information storage systems. Given their administrative component, these archives grew constantly in size as the various types of information were collected according to specific needs (maps, property documents, censuses, etc.). Their creation was, generally speaking, related to the emergence of different institutions all over the world. They are therefore synonymous with official power, while oral communities functioned according to a set of unwritten, parallel rules:

Archives were developed in ancient cultures together with writing systems and bureaucratic structures of organization. In their primary function, they served the ruling class with the necessary information to build up provisions for the future through stockpiling. They also served as tools for the symbolic legitimation of power and to discipline the population. Examples of such political archives are, for example, the Inquisition files or the files compiled by the East German State Security (Stasi). Archives always belonged to institutions of power: the church, the state, the police, the law, etc. (Erl and Nünning 2008: 102).

The idea of intangible cultural heritage was not legislated until 2003. In France, the term *patrimoine*, the equivalent of the English term *heritage*, had an almost exclusively administrative use until the second half of the twentieth century. It gradually entered public discourse as officials in the Ministry of Culture began to use it to designate a general inventory of monuments in France (Heinich 2012). The early 1970s marked both the adoption of the World Heritage Convention (1972) and the first discussions on the need for measures to safeguard folk arts. These were the first official measures



taken to differentiate the built heritage from the rest of the cultural practices specific to oral cultures. Perhaps this late reaction of the authorities involuntarily determined some people from the oral communities to begin to write themselves about cultural realities that they observed, writings which are not to be found in the official archives. It seems that these people had an inner call to write down about their own culture, creating manuscripts which they could not disseminate but nonetheless ensured the preservation of information. I would like to point out that this article is primarily a careful analysis of such manuscripts which are my main documentary resource. Therefore, bringing them to the public's attention is a necessary contribution. Relying on archive documents that did not have the chance to be widely disseminated, the article has a substantial descriptive part that I believe would be its main merit. Therefore, I will frequently resort to quoting some passages that I consider relevant for understanding the author's approach. I am convinced that the author's systematic choice to introduce certain explanatory information that accompanies the basic text, or on the contrary, the omission of others, is relevant to understanding how he relates to the realities he writes about. As these quotes are extremely pertinent in the original language, the footnotes provide their exact transcription for potential Romanian readers.

In preparing this article, I did not use a monographic approach, identifying all of Gheorghe Andraş's possible writings. Such an action would be a separate project in the extended process of the recovery of ethnographic archive documents. The current article capitalizes on all his writings held in the Folklore Archive of the West University of Timișoara. However, these manuscripts should not be considered outside the larger context of the Romanian interwar sociology approaches which contributed decisively to shaping the

country-wide monographic project. In this context, awareness of the need to document ethnographic realities appeared in and penetrated almost all societal layers. Field research campaigns led by specialists were organized as part of the ambitious monographic project that led to the creation of the Bucharest School of Sociology (see also Rostás 2016). Built around the personality of Dimitrie Gusti, several research campaigns for monographs were carried out in the 1920s and 1930s, with funding from the Royal House of Romania. Among the best-known communities investigated were Cornova, Drăguș, Runcu, Nerej, Fundu Moldovei, Șanț, Rușet, etc. The publication of several monographic volumes was the result of these interwar campaigns (see, for instance, Stahl 1940). The second important moment of ethnographic research in interwar Romania is represented by Ion Mușlea and his project to gather ethnographic information with the help of intellectuals from villages located within the borders of Greater Romania, from the result of the 1918 Great Union. In the period from 1930 to 1948, Ion Mușlea distributed a set of questionnaires by post, the answers to which remained locked in the Folklore Archive Institute of the Romanian Academy in Cluj-Napoca for the entire duration of the communist regime. Efforts to restore this important documentary fund only began in 2014 (see Mușlea 2014; Timocea-Mocanu et al. 2015).

In interwar Banat, there was no specialized higher education available in this part of Romania that could have imposed scientific research rigor. There were no specialists or researchers who could have provided training on research methods. Only Timișoara's Polytechnic University had been established by King Ferdinand immediately after the end of the First World War. As a result, the method used for research at that time would have been left rather to one's own imagination of how this process should be carried out. Despite the lack of a clear methodological context,



several research campaigns for monographs were carried out in Banat. Regarding the publication of fieldwork information, the Journal of the Banat-Crişana Social Institute published some of the studies, while only two monographs were published, dedicated to Belinţ and Sârbova (also see Negru 2013).

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Gheorghe Andraş's Manuscripts (1): Riddles

The first notebook I focus on is Manuscript no. 1850, *Ghiciturile* [Riddles]. The notebook contains sixteen typewritten pages. The first page provides a brief overview of the content of the manuscript, as well as the context of documentation. It is important to mention that the author of the manuscripts analyzed in this article tends to provide original definitions for the typology of the content he is documenting. The reason for his option remains unknown, but it was most likely due to his personal preference. Andraş's position is between that of an insider and that of an outsider. He was an insider of the creative and practicing community, understanding the mechanisms that generated certain cultural facts, since he lived in the community he wrote about. However, he also tried to adopt the outsider's perspective, that of either researcher or reader. Since Andraş understood that an outsider constantly needs explanations, he briefly described the processes that regulated the described cultural fact. Consequently, he proposed his own definitions and sometimes provided detailed descriptions. Riddles are specific to oral literature, and Andraş defines them as follows:

Riddles are short sayings usually produced by the Romanian people at claca.* Their content is based on judgment and imagination, and they are meant to be solved by the public [gathered] at these bees. Riddles are a test

for the sharpness of mind and the spirit of observation of those who take part in solving them. Riddles are didactic as they have educational content, pursuing the same goal.¹

The manuscript dedicated to riddles is the most accurate in terms of the context of field data collection. This document depicts the author more as a researcher than an amateur from the community. He thus acknowledged that the information he recorded had been gathered by his students:

The following riddles are widely known in our village. They were collected by local secondary-school students. Consequently, I would like to thank my former students, from the local school, who were in the third and fourth secondary-school grades in 1938 and 1939 and who collected most of these riddles.²

The manuscript documents over eighty riddles well-known among community members in the 1940s. They are structured according to two criteria, indicating the author's care for the source. Therefore, the riddles are classified into three categories, based on the person who documented them, and then alphabetically. There are two nominal collections: Ioan Nereianţ's, a third-grade student, and Adriana Raica's, a fourth-grade student. The third collection appears to be a collective one, containing several riddles heard by a group of pupils at a bee. The vague description of the context in which the last collection was documented does not exclude the possibility that these riddles were well-known to all members of the community, including the teacher who deemed them important enough to have them included in the manuscript. Without any other supplementary classifications or descriptions, the author wrote down all the information he considered relevant for the topic at hand. Thus, beyond the common riddles to be found in such a collection, the current notebook also contains a series of questions in-between logic and

mathematical calculation. The presence of many such hidden equations, spelling or new geographic realities can be the consequence of the students' participation in the process of gathering information: "A woman sent a boy to buy her 20 eggs for 20 lei—goose, duck, and chicken eggs. The goose egg cost 5 lei, hen, 2, and duck, 1.50. How many eggs did the boy buy from each kind?"³ "A tree is seven meters high; a snail climbs it; it goes up three meters during the day and two down at night. How many days will it take the snail to reach the top?"⁴ "How many years is a child who is one thousand months old?"⁵ "How can we travel to America without going there? (Letter by mail)."⁶ "What do day (*ziua*) and night (*noapte*) end with? (letter *a*)."⁷

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Gheorghe Andraș's Manuscripts (2): Songs

The second manuscript I analyze is Manuscript No. 1860. Entitled *Cântece legate de obiceiuri* [Songs related to customs] it is the poorest notebook in terms of content. The notebook's cover explains which are the songs it refers to: *Anul Nou* [New Year], *Turca*,⁸ *Bocet* [Mourning song], and *Păpărușă* [Rainmaker]. But the content provides information related only to wedding ceremonial poetry (*din poezia obiceiurilor la nuntă*): song for wedding guests (*cântecul mesenilor*) with lyrics and music, two variants for the song of the bride (*cântecul miresei*), a blank page dedicated to the song of the groom (*cântecul mirelui*), a blank page dedicated to wedding *strigături* [shouted songs], and the music score for a wedding march. It is an enigma to me why precisely a manuscript dedicated to an apparently generous topic is so poor in content. Consisting of only six handwritten pages, it includes the complete score of only one song (both music and lyrics), the lyrics for two other songs, and the melodic line for a fourth. However, it also

includes blank pages that were supposed to be filled in later with wedding songs. The current manuscript is the only handwritten notebook from the series and, even though it seems it was initially meant to include many types of ritual songs, includes only wedding ceremonial songs. In addition, its third cover ends with the mention "see my folklore collection notebook." Unfortunately, I was unable to retrieve such a manuscript so far. Moreover, the same observation is to be found on the last page of Manuscript No. 1850 *Ghicitorile* [Riddles]. Manuscript No. 1860 is characterized also by the concern for accuracy in identifying the source of the information: "Song of the bride. Lyrics version 1: lyrics and music heard from Elisaveta Petrașcu, nicknamed Cioncu, 65 years old, on May 25, 1935."⁹ "Song of the bride. Version 2 from another village – lyrics and music heard from Maria Nedelcu, nicknamed Buica, [blank] years old, heard today [blank]."¹⁰ The existence of the blanks is itself proof of the writer's desire to be rigorous, to use field research methods. On these occasions, the author looks more like a researcher than a member of the community.

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Gheorghe Andraș's Manuscripts (3): Nicknames

Manuscript No. 1862 contains a heterogeneous collection of information. Entitled *Poreclele sau supranumele din localitatea noastră* [Nicknames or bynames from our village] the notebook includes eighteen typewritten pages covering not only the well-known nicknames of people from Sânnicolau-Mare but also a detailed presentation of two customs and a satirical text. The most important part is dedicated to nicknames which are defined also as "bynames from our village."¹¹ Since the use of nicknames prevailing over the use of a person's name and surname may seem unnatural for an



outsider, the author chose to explain their necessity. Moreover, he provided a personal definition and an etymological explanation:

In our village, in addition to the family name, every family or every person also has a nickname or byname, by which the person is known better and more easily. The nickname is mockingly given to or received by a family or a person in connection with a physical or moral feature, or a physical or mental deficiency. The word *poreclă* [nickname] or *proleclă* comes from the Slavic word *Porekla*, while the word *supranume* [byname] comes from the French word *surnom*, having the same meaning. In our village, we have identified the following nicknames or bynames, in alphabetical order, with some explanations included.¹²

Following this minimal explanation meant to familiarize the reader with the ethnographic reality described, over 300 nicknames are reviewed. A list of forty local diminutives is added, also considered to be a specific element of the local traditional culture. However, the author was convinced of the importance of nuanced differences between nicknames and local diminutives, essential for the villagers when it came to identifying themselves. Therefore, he defines the local diminutives as “words created using a diminutive suffix or abbreviation. They have a note of endearment; most often they evoke a resemblance [of the person] with the original word.”¹³

In addition to nicknames, Manuscript No. 1862 provides three additional pieces of information: a practice related to Saint George’s feast, i.e., *Udatul fetelor* [Watering of girls], a traditional practice performed at the beginning of the Easter fasting period (*ali-morii-ciicii-morii*¹⁴), and a parody of religious inspiration dedicated to drunkards. The watering of the young girls on Saint George’s feast (April 23) is one of the customs meticulously described in Andraş’s notebooks. The preliminaries to

the practice are presented in detail, as well as the part where the young men searched for the young girls in order to sprinkle them with water. The most intriguing aspect related to the transcription of this custom is the corrections made. Like other manuscripts, the current one was typed and later corrected. Since some of the mistakes are grammatical and not simple typing errors, I assumed that at least one correction was made by the teacher Andraş himself, and someone else had typed the text. One of the persons who intervened in the manuscript considered that the custom was not accurately described in terms of “solemn act” (*act solemn*). Thus, the phrase was censored twice, “groups of four to five young people ... preparing to perform this practice which is a solemn act both for them and the entire village”¹⁵ being rephrased as “groups of four to five young people ... to perform these actions.”¹⁶ A few paragraphs below, for the original text “on that day they would not put on their best clothes but worn-out ones; but [they would put on the best clothes] only after the completion of this solemn act”¹⁷ two corrections were suggested. The first suggestion was to replace “worn-out clothes”¹⁸ with “everyday clothes,”¹⁹ and the second, to eliminate the structure “only after this solemn act is completed.”²⁰ I emphasize the existence of such rephrasing suggestions because I find them important in understanding how different people understood the same cultural fact and its relevance to the community. An ethnographic document, be it a peasant’s notebook, an amateur researcher’s notebook, or a professional manuscript, can overemphasize the importance of one practice over another, as an effect of the emotional involvement of the one who records. There is a risk of creating the false impression that certain practices are representative for traditional communities as a result of possibly overstating their importance. The risk increases when taking into consideration the time when the first written records



related to a specific culture were created. Thus, the suggestions for corrections made to Manuscript No. 1862 provide a good example of amending the text to tone down the importance given to a practice that, most likely, the manuscript's author considered characteristic for the community about which he wrote. Nevertheless, caution should be always exercised in understanding these cultural facts, especially since such a text does not provide clear information either on the date and place of performance or the informant: "Today, this beautiful custom, so much enjoyed by the whole population of the village, is not forgotten. There are only a few grandmothers who still remember it and are proudly telling their small grandchildren about it."²¹

According to his description in this manuscript, the author seems to understand *Ali-morii-ciacii-morii* as a local ritual practice typical of the first days of Lent. Its detailed description flows naturally, focusing on the enthusiasm it generated. Unlike all the other themes discussed, this time the author showed an utter lack of interest to provide details related to the source of the information. Therefore, full attention goes to the practice of the ritual and the social cohesion it created, without any supplementary explanation:

Encouraged by the youth, schoolchildren would go about all day carrying straws, cobs, or any other sources of fuel to ensure the greatest possible success of the event. These materials were arranged on a street corner, on the eve of the beginning of Lent. During this period of childish feverish work, the rest of the village was not passive either.²²

Credeul bețivanului [Drunkard's creed] is the fourth topic approached in Manuscript No. 1862. It is a satirical text which does not seem to honor the community but is recorded nonetheless. Once again the source is not quoted. Towards the end however, the text includes notes explaining some of the

regional words that the drunkard used in his prayer. The inclusion of such a marginal text in itself yet significant for the community, along with the descriptions of the watering of the girls and *ali-morii-ciacii-morii* practice, make Andraș's approach here more akin to a peasant's perspective.

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Gheorghe Andraș's Manuscripts (4): Sayings

Manuscript No. 1861 is sixteen pages long and dedicated to *Strigăturile sau zicăturile* [Shouted verses or sayings]. Andraș defines these creations as follows:

[L]ocal fables in the form of shorter texts, consisting of two or four verses, but serving the same purpose to rebuke moral, social, and physical defects, which are uttered at times of joy during dances, occasioning a lot of fun and humor. They are associated with dancing, as they are shouted with the rhythm and background of the dance song.²³

The source of the information for this manuscript is very diffuse. The vague definition of the documentation context indicates that the author already knew this information from his previous personal experience. As a result, he provided a general description of the source of the eighty-seven shouted verses transcribed later: "I found out some of these shouted verses from the village elders, and yet others I heard myself on different occasions, such as weddings or different holidays, etc."²⁴ In addition, the manuscript dedicated to the shouted verses contains some additional explanations based on two examples meant to illustrate the feelings that these verses gave rise to among those who shouted them. The explanations are clumsy, but persevering and extremely relevant especially for a native Romanian speaker. Although they might seem childish



today, these clarifications indicate a real concern on the part of the writer for the accurate perception of the role and meaning of these verses as a practice specific to the oral culture that he was trying to record: "May the one who dances but does not shout have his mouth deformed.' With this shouted verses, its author wants to put more joy in the dance atmosphere."²⁵; "'Let's hit the ground so hard that the soup jumps out of the pot,' here the author insists on [the others] showing more energy while dancing."²⁶

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Gheorghe Andraș's Manuscripts (5): Charms

The largest one, Manuscript No. 1858 counts twenty-three pages. Entitled *Descântatul sau modul de vindecarea boalelor* [The charm or how to cure diseases], it focuses on presenting charms as magical healing practices. It begins with a reflection on what diseases meant for the traditional communities:

The way the locals would put it sixty or one hundred years ago, as well as the contributing factors to the treatment of diseases. When the human body was not afflicted by something, the man considered himself healthy. But when he felt pain in any part of the body or an organ, he considered himself suffering or sick. The disease could be mild, severe, or extremely severe. That depended on the intensity of the pain. And in this case, the man or family members would search for help quickly, resorting to different factors, which according to their faith could determine healing.²⁷

The proposed definition uses an empirical description of the pain in its physical manifestation identified as an unnatural state. According to the description, the disease is a reality understood as a

disturbance of health, and being healthy is considered the natural state. Since the disease is a disturbance of the normal state, the community should first look for an explanation for this disturbance. Therefore, the manuscript insists on making its reader aware of the existence of a general cause for the diseases, according to the beliefs of the oral community:

We ought to begin by knowing and understanding the explanation given by people to the occurrence of diseases, both in the case of humans and animals. People believed that the diseases were determined by several factors. According to people's beliefs, the determining factors which brought about or promoted either epidemic diseases, or for that matter diseases in general, were supernatural. They were either sent by God as punishment, or brought about by spells due to enemy plots, or by charms. So the people sought to cure them by using similar means, that is prayers, charms, but especially by undoing charms.²⁸

Medicinal plants, in various combinations, are also mentioned as being used to treat certain diseases. Interest for the study of plants and their uses in the traditional Romanian communities begins in the second half of the nineteenth century, with the activity of Simion Mangiucă and Simion Florea Marian. However, "since its beginning Romanian ethnobotany has focused firstly on the linguistic importance (vernacular names and their origin), empirical and medicinal use, and the spiritual importance of plants (used in specific customs)" (Ivașcu and Biro 2021: 67). So Andraș's manuscript too pays much attention to the preparation and use of these plants, which is in the responsibility of some skilled elderly women in the village. The way these practices are recorded creates the impression that the community practiced a special form of traditional medicine in which massage techniques and the use of medicinal plants, doubled by the proper charm,



treated a number of diseases. However, the manuscript describes these practices as a specific, shared, independent set of healing actions in opposition with institutionalized, science-based medicine, which the patient rarely used and, most often, when it was too late:

When someone showed signs of illness or was already suffering, he went to a witch, a priest, a sorceress, and only if none of these factors proved to be effective, he went for a medical consult. In most cases, however, the doctor could no longer help: the disease had got too bad in the meantime.²⁹

These were the steps a person from the village would take to treat his/her illness. But he lists over sixty major diseases in the treatment of which charms and its associated practices were considered to be effective. Bronchitis, pneumonia, tuberculosis, rheumatism, toothache, digestive disorders, fever, skin diseases, bites, sprains, etc. are just some of the most common diseases treated with the help of charms. Andraş mentions these diseases using both their common names that the community recognized (i.e., toothache or drunkenness) and the medical terms (i.e., dental abscess or alcoholism). So in listing them, the author made sure to translate/provide the necessary explanation for an outsider. In addition, the attention he paid to their classification indicates an increased preoccupation for recording information. He thus identifies thirteen categories of diseases for which charms were considered effective: throat diseases, chest diseases, diseases of the circulatory system, digestive diseases, diseases of the reproductive organs, infectious diseases, skin diseases, injuries, diseases of the nervous system, eye diseases, ear diseases, diseases specific to children. Considering the variety of these categories, it is obvious that the community he wrote about had its own treatments for all the common diseases that could affect its

members. The effort to record and explain the symbols/meanings that the community attributed to these practices is constant and signals awareness of the cultural differences existing between communities. The writer is aware of the need to provide explanations to the outside reader to whom these cultural realities may feel strange. Given the particular nature of the subject of charms, the contextual explanations are broader in this manuscript than in the others. Of all the notebooks, the one dedicated to charms is the most descriptive. There is information related to the general context of the practice of charms at the time of writing the text. So the reader learns that the charm was used as a healing method mainly for children and less often for adults. Additional information is provided on who could practice charms and the context of the performance. "In order for the charm to be effective, people's belief was that the person who does the chanting should be an old man or an old woman. But the first condition that the woman had to fulfill was to have her menopause already, to have no contact with men, to be very clean."³⁰ The manuscript identifies three women as the last charmers of the community. Particular attention is dedicated to identifying the source and providing a description, no matter how brief, of the context of information recording: "Informant is old woman Ana Tăşculă, 68 years old. Information gathered on November 10, 1938"/ "Information gathered by Măria Drăgoi, third-grade student in secondary school, in the winter of 1938" / "The informant is the grandmother of Veronica Subota, third-grade student in secondary school, information gathered in the autumn of 1938." In addition to the chanted ritual texts, details related to the ritual practice are given: "After performing her introductory ceremony by saying a regular prayer, as a sign of receiving the gift in order to cure the sick, the woman sits behind the sick, and for the entire duration of the prayer and the charm, she gives the patient a small massage with lukewarm



water or spit.”³¹ Another example underlines even better the importance of the massage in the healing process:

Before beginning the charm, the woman says the usual prayer, then takes a chair and places it in the middle of the house for the patient to sit on, after which she goes on to perform the charm. The old woman sits behind the patient and massages his neck by pressing the tonsils, dipping her fingers in lukewarm water, or spit, throughout the time it takes her to say the charm.³²

A subsequent instance of capitalization of the information recorded by Andraș is a short folklore monograph of Sânnicolau Mare (Andraș et al. 1972) written by Gheorghe Andraș, Ion Samoilă, Elena Ilcău, Veronica Sârbescu, and Marin Popa, in the early 1970s. The idea of writing such a text occurred to the authors following a local folklore symposium organized on January 30, 1972. On the occasion of preparing this monograph, a small quantity of the primary material gathered by Andraș was used as a source. In the process, the material was improved; the writing was refined to comply with the requirements for monographs. Only two of the themes documented by Andraș in his private notebooks were taken up in this monograph: nicknames and musical folklore, with several chapters dedicated to them. Thus, the nicknames constitute a separate chapter that aims not only to list them but also offer some explanations of their origins. A separate chapter deals with the most common names of the inhabitants from Sânnicolau Mare. The names are listed and accompanied by explanations of their evolution, including clarifications about the persons who, according to tradition, have the right to choose the child’s name (mother, father, godfather, etc.). However, neither of the two large chapters is authored by Andraș, but by Samoilă. A separate chapter is dedicated to New Year’s customs, also authored by Samoilă. The musical folklore

related to rituals is described within a separate chapter, the only one written by Andraș. The texts of the wedding song he had recorded in Manuscript No. 1860 are taken up again here, together with several dirges, including *Zorile* [Dawn]. This time, however, there is no concern for identifying the source of the information. Space and time references for the documentation are missing. Unlike personal writings, the monograph is, paradoxically, meant precisely to disseminate information to the public. However, readers are faced here with one that omits important information regarding precisely the context of the research.

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Conclusions

From an analysis of these notebooks, I will draw some general conclusions related to the methods used in recording orality starting from several questions: *who, where, when, how, and why* is writing. Firstly, *who* is the person who does the recording? And what is his relationship with the community he writes about? While writing on these topics, Gheorghe Andraș was a teacher in Sânnicolau Mare, his hometown. He was therefore an insider, but an insider who aimed to distance himself in such a way as to make his discourse objective. He was therefore neither a completely lay person nor a researcher. He could be best characterized as a self-taught in-between who, under the influence of context, decided that he must use his position and knowledge in order to record in writing the reality of his community. This *known* reality—which used to be called *tradition*—seemed to be no longer in harmony with a *new* one, brought about by the interwar period together with modern institutions and a new lifestyle. In fact, this was the reality of written culture(s) that threatens the oral one(s). Despite his strong emotional connection with the world



he was writing about, the author made efforts to adopt a *regard éloigné*. Similar to a researcher, he constantly tried to provide explanations for some of the described cultural facts, most likely under the effect of studying a minimum bibliography. As already shown above, the explanations for the practice of charms are perhaps the most illustrative in this regard: "Charms are very old vestiges preserved from the most ancient times when civilization had not yet formed its first cradle, so they can be considered to be of an anthropological nature. They originate in people's belief that diseases are of supernatural origin ..."³³

The next questions are *where* and *when* was the text written and the cultural fact practiced? Manuscripts provide clear information on the spatial and temporal context of practice: (our) *village* and (x) *years ago*. If the spatial element remains constant, time seems to be constantly changing. It is obvious that the author documented all these realities at the end of the 1930s, as he sometimes mentions. While the exact time of gathering the information is missing, the author provides details about the time of the most recent performance or about the frequency: "about sixty or seventy years ago, on St. George's Day this custom was still practiced."

The next question is *how*. Considering *how* the research was made, it seems that the author himself was taking into consideration that his research methodology was likely to be questioned later. Therefore, the author was always careful in what concerned the identity of his informants and the context in which the information was gathered. In addition to direct observation and participation as a member of the community, he also relied on his students to gather information, and he openly admitted it. Several examples were given above. However, when he mentions his informants he acts like a field researcher. The written information thus appears to be more reliable than if the author had relied only on his memory. The collective source(s)

he mentions several times may be seen as proof that the author knew the facts he was describing in his capacity as an insider. When asking *how* the selection of the themes to be recorded was made, or *how* was the text written, there are several aspects to be taken into consideration. The author focuses on recording information related to cultural facts considered to have a high degree of local specificity, such as local nicknames. The author provided a description as detailed as possible. Priority was given to those that seemed threatened by extinction: charms, shouted verses, different customs. It may not be a coincidence that most blank pages are to be found in his "Lyric" manuscript, which he had yet to research. Living in the investigated community provides a certain advantage while writing about its culture. The author's access to information is almost unlimited in terms of describing the reality; thus, it may create the impression of completeness enclosed in a notebook.

Nevertheless, when it comes to understanding *why*, what motivated the author, I would also take into consideration the exterior cultural context, as well as personal motivation. In the opening of the article, I reviewed the cultural context that led to an awareness of the necessity of recording information related to oral cultures. Despite this exterior element, there was an internal drive that determined people from traditional communities, either literate peasants or rural intellectuals, to record information they deemed relevant for the community. They gathered all these pieces of information in manuscripts kept in personal or institutional archives, with almost no chances to be used and widely disseminated. The initiators of such endeavors had a certain level of education and cultural background that differentiated them from other members of their communities, which nevertheless did not make them researchers, despite their attention to detail and sincere passion for writing. For instance, in his notebooks, Andraş always tries to explain

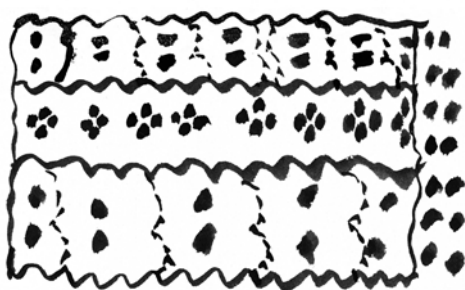


what a certain cultural fact symbolizes, how it is understood, what its deeper meaning is. Sometimes he tries his hand at etymologies and classifications. Yet other times his texts flow naturally reflecting the participant's emotions, e.g., Manuscript No. 1862. Given their thematic mix, teacher Gheorghe Andraș's writings resemble rather field research notebooks. Without a detailed thematic classification, they record a variety of facts specific to a particular community. While not elaborated enough to be understood by the public, they could be the raw material for another researcher willing to do more in-depth fieldwork.

These notebooks focus on some cultural facts that classical Romanian ethnography failed to record as they were at the time of their collection. The Second World War and the difficult years of the communist regime led not only to a change in the priorities of individuals and institutions, but also to a radical change in discourse, under the impact of censorship. A few years after the 1989 Revolution, several projects were launched to bring certain ethnographic information collected in the interwar period or even earlier to the attention of both professionals and the public. Some of these records are preserved in institutional archives (as in the case of the present manuscripts), or in personal archives where they are still waiting to be (re)discovered by researchers

as topics of individual or group research projects. In addition, the years following the 1989 Revolution also saw the resuming of an older national project to recover various ethnographic information, namely that of the Romanian Ethnographic Atlas.

Still, the manuscripts remain an indisputable proof of the existence of various beliefs and practices specific to traditional communities. A series of minor private writings, such as the one analyzed within the current study, can therefore contribute to the defense of small oral cultures, bearing witness to their diversity. Some of these writings have been silently waiting in some institutional archives for the appropriate social and political context to be finally put to good use. The Folklore Archive of the West University of Timișoara is itself an example of an institution that in recent years has been trying to reorganize and digitize its documents. But the project of the Romanian folklore archives is a separate and long discussion, especially in the context of the lack of a national strategy in this regard (see also Hedeșan 2015). The classification of the document holdings and making the data accessible is a task to be solved by the institutions that own them. Just like some oral cultures failed to be recorded in writing because of neglect, others were saved by the involvement of conscientious members.



NOTES

* Translator's Note: *Claca* is a type of voluntary collective work usually performed in Romanian villages as a form of reciprocal farm labor and followed by a party.

1. [Romanian]: *Ghiciturile sînt produse scurt spuse, de obicei de poporul român, la clăci. Conținutul lor se bazează pe judecată și imaginație, care să fie ghicite de auditorul prezent la o șezătoare. În ghicituri se arată ascuțimea minții și spiritul de observație al celor ce iau parte la deslegarea lor. Ghiciturile sînt de gen didactic avînd conținut educativ, urmărind același scop.* (Ms. 1859, p.1)

2. [Romanian]: *În localitatea noastră se cunosc următoarele ghicituri a căror circulație este foarte cunoscută, colectată de elevii școlii secundare din localitatea noastră. Țin să mulțumesc pe această cale foștilor mei elevi ai claselor III și IV gimnaziale din anii 1938 și 1939, de la școala gimnazială din localitate, cari au colectat cea mai mare parte din aceste ghicituri. (Ibid.)*
3. [Romanian]: *O femeie a trimis pe un băiat să-i cumpere 20 de ouă cu 20 de lei. Ouă de găscă și găină. Cel de găscă a costat 5 lei bucata. Cele de găină, 2 de un leu. Câte ouă a cumpărat din fiecare? (Ms. 1859, p. 9)*
4. [Romanian]: *Un pom are 7 m înălțime; un melc se suie pe el; 3 m se urcă ziua și 2 m coboară noaptea. În câte zile va ajunge în vârf? (Ms. 1859, p.15)*
5. [Romanian]: *Un copil de 1000 de luni câți ani are? (Ms. 1859, p. 10)*
6. [Romanian]: *: Cu ce putem merge în America fără a merge acolo? (scrisoarea prin poștă). (Ms. 1859, p. 7)*
7. [Romanian]: *Cu ce se termină ziua și noaptea? (cu litera a). (Ms. 1859, p.15)*
8. A custom practiced on the occasion of Christmas and New Year which involves the performance of dances by a young man disguised as a goat.
9. [Romanian]: *Cântecul miresii. Variantă ca text I: text și melodie auzită de la Elisaveta Petrașcu, zis Cioncu – în etate de 65 de ani, în ziua de 25 mai 1935. (Ms. 1860, p. 2)*
10. [Romanian]: *Cântecul miresii. Varianta II dată în alt sat – text și melodie auzită de la Maria Nedelcu zis Buica – în etate de (spațiu liber) ani, auzită azi (spațiu liber). (Ms. 1860, p.3)*
11. [Romanian]: *poreclele sau supranumele din localitatea noastră. (Ms. 1862, p.1)*
12. [Romanian]: *În localitatea noastră fiecare familie sau fiecare om, pe lângă numele de familie, își are și un supranume sau poreclă, după care este cunoscut mult mai bine și mai ușor. Se dă sau se primește mai de multe ori în bătaie de joc, unei familii sau unei persoane în legătură cu o caracteristică fizică sau psihică fie un defect fizic sau psihic. Cuvântul de poreclă, local proleclă, provine de la cuvântul slav Porecla, iar cuvântul supranume provine de la cuvântul francez surnom, având însă același înțeles. În localitatea noastră am putut însemna următoarele porecle sau supranume aranjate alfabetic, la unele și cu explicația lor. (Ibid.)*
13. [Romanian]: *Cuvinte spuse cu ajutorul unui sufix diminutival sau prescurtare. Este o notă alintătoare, mai de multe ori și mai ales în cazul de față este o asemănare evocând o asemănare cu cuvântul de bază. (Ms. 1862, p. 8)*
14. The name of this practice is given by the exclamation *alimori* that the group utters around a big fire lit on this occasion.
15. [Romanian] *grupuri de câte 4 – 5 tineri (...) formându-și planul desăvârșirii acestui act solemn pentru ei și pentru întreg satul. (Ms. 1862, p. 10)*
16. [Romanian]: *grupuri de câte 4-5 tineri (...) pentru a face aceste acțiuni. (Ibid.)*
17. [Romanian]: *în ziua respectivă nu se îmbrăcau în haine de sărbătoare – numai după săvârșirea acestui act solemn, ci în haine uzate. (Ibid.)*
18. [Romanian]: *haine uzate. (Ibid.)*
19. [Romanian]: *haine de toate zilele. (Ibid.)*
20. [Romanian]: *numai după săvârșirea acestui act solemn. (Ibid.)*
21. [Romanian]: *Azi, acest frumos obicei și atât de mult savurat de toată populația satului, nici nu se mai cunoaște, doar câte o bunicuță care-și mai aduce aminte cu multă mândrie de acest eveniment și-l povestește nepoțelilor. (Ms. 1862, p.12)*
22. [Romanian]: *La îndemnul tineretului, copiii de școală în ziua respectivă, toată ziua cu un du-te vino cărau cu brațele paie, tulei și alt material de ars, pentru a putea da o reușită cât mai mare acestui eveniment, ce se aranja la un colț de stradă, cu o zi înainte de începerea Postului Mare de Paști. În această perioadă de muncă febrile copilăresc, nici restul satului nu era pasiv. (Ms. 1862, p. 15)*
23. [Romanian]: *fabule locale, mai mici ca text, formate din două sau patru versuri, dar urmăresc același scop: biciuirea moravurilor urâte, defecte morale, sociale și fizice, arătate în momente de veselie în timpul dansurilor, producând mult haz și umor. Sunt însoțite de dans, fiind spuse în ritmul și fondul melodiei dansului. (Ms. 1861, p. 1)*
24. [Romanian]: *O parte din aceste strigături le-am cules de la bătrânii satului, iar parte le-am cules și auzit eu la diferitele ocaziuni: nunți, diferite sărbători etc. (Ibid.)*
25. [Romanian]: *“Cine joacă și nu strigă,/ Facă-i-se gura strâmbă” Aici, autorul, în această strigătură, vrea să pună mai multă voioșie în atmosfera dansului. (Ibid.)*
26. [Romanian]: *“La pământ cu talpa goală,/ Să sară și zama din oală.” – aici insistă la o mai mare energie arătată în joc. (Ibid.)*
27. [Romanian]: *Cum s-au exprimat localnicii acum 60-100 de ani, precum și factorii contributori la vindecarea boalelor. Atunci când organismul omului nu suferea de ceva, omul se considera sănătos. Dar atunci când omul simțea o durere în oricare parte a organismului sau a unui organ, s-a considerat suferind sau bolnav. Boala putea fi considerată mai ușoară, gravă sau foarte gravă. Asta depindea de intensitatea durerii. Și în acest caz, omul sau membrii familiei căutau cât mai repede să apeleze la diferiți factori, care potrivit credinței lor puteau determina vindecarea. (Ms. 1858, p. 1)*
28. [Romanian]: *De la început trebuie să știm și să cunoaștem care era credința omului asupra ivirii boalelor apărute la om, chiar la animale, în acel timp. În popor era credința că ivirea boalelor sau aducerea lor era determinată de mai mulți factori care provocau sau aduceau omului și chiar animalelor boala. Factorii determinanți care aduceau sau promovau fie boalele epidemice, fie în general orice boală, erau în credința poporului de natură supranaturală, fie că sunt trimise de Dumnezeu, ca o pedeapsă; fie trimise prin vrăji datorită uneltirilor dușmane, sau prin farmece. Deci poporul căuta ca tot prin mijloace adecvate, adică prin rugăciuni, prin descântece, dar mai ales prin desfacerea farmecelor, să fie vindecate. (Ibid.)*

29. [Romanian]: Când omul dădea semne de îmbolnăvire sau era deja suferind, mergea la o vrăjitoare, la un preot, la o descântătoare, și numai în cazul când niciunul dintre acești factori nu au dat semne de îndreptare, se recurgea la un medic, adică la consultarea medicului. Dar, în cele mai multe cazuri, ajutorul medicului, în acest caz nu mai putea fi de folos: boala fiind de cele mai multe ori prea învechită. (Ms. 1858, p. 3)

30. [Romanian]: Descântatul, ca să aibă și leac, credința în popor era ca respectivul sau respectiva să fie om bătrân sau femeie bătrână. Dar, ca primă condiție de îndeplinit era ca femeia (baba) să fie trecută de periodul lunar, adică menopauză, să nu aibă contact cu bărbații, să fie foarte bine îngrijită. (Ms. 1858, p. 7)

31. [Romanian]: Baba descântătoare, după ce își făcuse ceremonialul de introducere, prin rugăciunea obișnuită, ca semn al primirii darului pentru a putea vindeca bolnavul,

asezată în spatele bolnavului, neîncetat adică în decursul rugăciunii și al descântecului face fricțiunile obișnuite cu apă călduță sau chiar cu schipeți (...). (Ms. 1858, p. 13)

32. [Romanian]: Înainte de a începe descântecul, baba descântătoare își face rugăciunea obișnuită, apoi ia un scăunel pe care îl așează în mijlocul casei unde stă bolnavul, apoi trece la practicarea descântecului astfel. Baba, așezată la spatele bolnavului îi face o fricțiune la gâtul bolnavului apăsând gâlcile – amigdalele, înmuind înainte degetele în apă călduță sau cu scuiat, atâta timp cât durează descântecul. (Ibid.)

33. [Romanian]: Descântecul sunt rămășițe foarte vechi păstrate încă din cele mai îndepărtate timpuri când nici civilizația nu-și formase încă primul ei leagăn, deci pot fi socotite și considerate de natură antropologică. Ele pornesc de la credința omului că boalele sunt de origine supranaturală (...). (Ms. 1858, p. 3)



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