Ethnography in Romania: Hegemony, Project and the Myth of Structuralism

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Abstract: *This article is the second in a series of texts about ethnography in Romania. In the previous paper[1], I discussed the tangled history of ethnography and other social sciences, pointing out that the hegemonic project of interwar sociology in Romania had a significant impact on the development of ethnography as a scientific discipline[2]. I highlighted the fact that ethnography – understood in its broader political context was (i.) guided by the shadows of the past, (ii.) and its main role was to discipline and patrimonialize popular culture, and (iii.) it was neither synchronous nor ground-breaking in relation to other comparable cases in Europe. In what follows, I focus on the institutionalized ethnographic research agenda and on the various meanings of such research by discussing its relationships with other social sciences in the context of the national development of ethnography as a distinct branch (e.g. from anthropology) since its very beginning. Secondly, I argue that institutionalized ethnographic practice in Romania during the communist period and immediately after the fall of the communist regime significantly lacked reflective assessments and development of a theoretical corpus. I focus on the research practices developed in the context of the decadeslong project of the Romanian Ethnographic Atlas (REA), and its impact on the current status of the discipline.*

Keywords: *[history of] ethnography, anthropology, sociology, institutionalization, Romanian Ethnographic Atlas, Romanian Academy*

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[1]   See Iorga 2015.
[2]   Some ideas from the previous text are resumed and/or summed up here.

The context

A history of local ethnography – a social science trying to discipline and coagulate a national cultural heritage – is necessary in order to better understand the nature and purposes of ethnographic knowledge, the past and present modes of its production. Such issues, generally labelled as problematic and controversial, may considerably improve the corpus of knowledge on the dynamics of this branch of social sciences in Romania, and hopefully bring some impetus towards reforming and remodelling present ethnographic practices.

In Central and Eastern European countries, Ethnography and Folkloristics have been concerned with the study of local cultures, more precisely with "one's own cultural history" as Kürti (1996: 14) puts it. Kürti explains how and why this was possible by pointing out that: "many practitioners have laboured to assist national archives, institutes and museums to collect and organize artifacts (sic!) considered valuable from the vantage point of social cultural change of the country in question" (1996: 14; see also Baskar 2008). In Eastern Europe, nation-state building relied on "small national ethnologies" as an "[i]nstrument of nationalis[m]" (Baskar 2008: 65). Progressively, the concept of "culture" became, on the one hand, synonymous with "traditional", or "national", or "ethnical"; on the other hand, more and more invented (see Baskar 2008, Stocking 1982). Thus, the concept of "culture" – in Eastern European countries – tends to problematize the very scientific character of the disciplines.

It is already commonplace to look upon ethnography in Eastern Europe as always in the shadow of other disciplines, mainly of folkloristics and sociology (Stahl 1981; Čapo 2014; see also Frykman 2012). It was permanently at the borders of other disciplines, often misunderstood, and considered ethnology, folklore, folkloristics, folklore studies, [cultural/social] anthropology, ethnohistory (Zhdanko 1964; Simionescu 1984), or just a simple tool for history (Krader 1959). Its history seems to be one of the discipline's endless struggles and internal perennial crisis or stagnation.

Although intuition recommends considering ethnography in conjunction with anthropology, juxtaposed to it, in the Romanian case this relationship became possible rather late, i.e.: in post-socialism. Thus, from a historical point of view, the relationship between sociology, folkloristics/ folklore studies and ethnography is much more powerful than the one between ethnography and anthropology (see Cole 1984; Geană 1999; Cotoi 2011; Mihăilescu 2004; Karnoouh 2011; Şerban and Dorondel 2014; Chelcea 2009). Even though already established ethnographers, ethnologists and folklorists have institutionalized access (mainly through

libraries) to foreign books and a series of important periodicals[3], Romanian scholars became involved in discussing neither the local status, nor the contemporary international developments in terms of research practices and theories regarding their disciplines[4] until post-socialism.

After 1989, as a consequence of re-discovering eastern national ethnographies or local traditions by western anthropologists, and because of a lack of a clear institutional agenda, eastern ethnographers, folklorists, ethnologists, historians, geographers, philologists, philosophers, psychologists etc. started to label themselves as anthropologists and/or as ethnologists[5], depending on the social and political contexts in which they situated themselves, to the knowledge products they delivered, and to their personal preferences. No matter how strange it might seem, the practice is not something new. It is rooted in the specialization by training in ethnography, ethnology, folkloristics, folklore studies, anthropology, etc. during communism; because the researchers were instructed and specialized in other disciplines and only afterwards were they distributed in order to occupy specific working positions in accordance with their graduation marks. Universities' top graduates were assigned to research institutes and centres, which were assigned in specializing personnel at a higher level and in non-degree disciplines (such as ethnochoreology, ethnomusicology, ethnography and so on). From this point of view, the Romanian Academy helped in protecting a large number of disciplines that had no other institutional background. Regardless of this situation, the institutionalized practice of ethnography, anthropology, ethnology and folkloristics or folklore studies within the Romanian Academy remains to a certain extent unchanged, defined neither by a paradigm change, nor by hoax[6].

Adopting a history of science approach and placing institutional arrangements of ethnography in Romania right at the core of the genealogy of disciplinary practice through various political contexts, my paper offers a novel contribution

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[3] The international exchange of periodicals was a vivid practice for almost 40 years (from 1970 to 2000). The periodicals and book collections hosted by the "Constantin Brăiloiu" Institute for Ethnography and Folklore's (IEF) library are remarkable.

[4] Buhociu's paper from 1966 is a very good example supporting this idea.

[5] This ambiguity based on misleading homophonies seems to have been introduced with the establishment of the European Association for Social Anthropologists (EASA, 1989-1990) alongside the opening of local ethnographies to western Anglo-Saxon anthropology. Anyhow, these mutual openings put local ethnographies under strain thus generating ambiguous relations between ethnography and anthropology.

[6] I presented a first version of this paper at the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences' (IUAES) Inter-Congress *World Anthropologies and Privatization of Knowledge: Engaging anthropology in public*, held in 2016 in Dubrovnik, for the panel "Anthropologies and ethnologies in post-communist Europe: Paradigm change or hoax?"

to rather under-documented ways of ethnographic knowledge production in Romania. Building my argument on such a genealogy of practices and knowledge production I draw on several legacies and myths that ethnography encompassed and also produced. From the starting point of early efforts to institutionalize the discipline, through the legacies created during the interwar period – when ethnography was marginalized and incorporated in the huge project of the Bucharest Sociological School, then continuing with the socialist period – when the discipline reconfigured itself, got institutionalized and thrived as a result of the project of Romanian Ethnographic Atlas, and summing up with some legacies and myths related to the socialist period – such as the proximity of anthropology and ethnography or the structuralist method used in REA`s methodology, my paper offers a critical image of the history of ethnography in Romania.

The politics of ethnography and the Institute

Ethnography and folkloristics in Romania are deep-rooted in the 19th century practices related to nation-building through gathering pieces and documents of oral and material culture. The processes of institutionalization emerged from the practices of conserving such documents and developing local and national museums. Philologists and geographers were the first interested in institutionally articulating ethnographic and ethnologic materials. In doing so, they created societies (e.g.: in 1875, in Bucharest, the Romanian Geography Society had a small subdivision of ethnology; in 1923, George Vâlsan[7] created the Romanian Ethnography Society) and museums (e.g.: in 1905, ASTRA Museum of History and Ethnography and in 1906, the Museum of Ethnography, National Art and Decorative and Industrial Art and in 1936, the Village Museum).

During the interwar epoch, in parallel with the emergent development of a hegemonic sociology, Romulus Vuia[8] succeeded in establishing the open-air Ethnographic Museum of Transylvania, the first of its kind, in 1922–1923, in Cluj. In addition, he taught a course on ethnography at the University of Cluj and helped, alongside George Vâlsan, in developing a department of ethnography and folklore studies at the Faculty of Letters, University of Cluj, in 1926. In 1928, in Bucharest, Constantin Brăiloiu – ethnomusicologist and one of the most active and important collaborators of Gusti's Sociological School[9], established

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[7]   He is considered one of the founding fathers of Romanian modern geography and eth-
      nography and he instituted the Romanian Ethnographic Society in 1923.
[8]   He had a PhD in geography and had studied ethnography and ethnology in Berlin.
[9]   Dimitrie Gusti (1880–1955), a Romanian philosopher and sociologist who studied in
      Germany and taught at the University of Bucharest, served as Romania's Minister of

the Folklore Archive of the Society of Romanian Composers, which became the Institute of Folklore, in 1949. However, interwar ethnography was marginalized and muted as it could not "justify its theoretical existence, because it was considered a failed doublet of sociology […]. Ethnography, folkloristics and the science of popular art were sociological instruments of investigation" (Vulcănescu 1975: 44). In contrast, in 1933, Emil Racoviţă[10] established the Anthropological Society in Cluj. In 1940 the Institute of Anthropology, based in Bucharest, was inaugurated by Francisc Rainer[11], as a part of the Faculty of Human Medicine. It had no connections with ethnography. In any case, at the end of the interwar period, ethnography was underrepresented and marginalized in museums.

This situation persisted until 1954, when the Academy of the People's Republic of Romania established an ethnographic research sector inside the Institute of Archaeology, following the Soviet model of understanding ethnography as a branch of history. Later, in 1960, ethnography was moved to the Institute of the History of Art and merged with the Sector of Popular Art and Ethnography. It was an important moment because the communist regime found ethnography useful and tried to create a Commission of Anthropology and Ethnography within the Academy. A presentation brochure of the Romanian Folklore Institute, printed in English, states that: "while building up a new, socialist system, the Rumanian people are also creating for themselves a new culture, socialist in content and national in form, which is evolving organically out of their age-old traditions" (The Rumanian Folklore Institute 1959: 5).

In 1963, the ethnographic research branch joined the Institute of Folklore, under the name of the Institute of Ethnography and Folklore (IEF) with a very clear task: "the complex research of popular creation" (Vulcănescu 1975: 66). Thus, ethnography regained some institutional and political space and power. The newly created institute functioned under this name until 1974, when it was again merged with the Phonetic and Dialectological Research Centre, becoming the Institute for Ethnology and Dialectological Research until 1990. The institute functioned under the guidance of the regime's Council for Socialist Culture and

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Education, and held other important political positions. He was the head of a large sociological research project during the interwar period – later called the Bucharest School of Sociology. He guided extensive research campaigns (1925–1945) in several Romanian villages and he trained a new generation of sociologists. In a positivist manner, under the label of interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinarity, he regarded sociology as a science of the nation.

[10] Romanian explorer and biologist who studied in France.

[11] He was also a close core collaborator with the Sociological School and a friend of Dimitrie Gusti.

Education, and channelled the rise of nationalism, mainly by organising the well-known *Singing Romania* (*Cântarea României*) national festival[12].

Early communist researchers acknowledged that ethnography and folkloristics were closed off and drifting away inside museums during the last decades of the interwar period, as opposed to their reassessment under the communist regime and, again, opposed to general opinion from the early 1990s, when scholars imagined a great rupture with the socialist imperatives regarding ethnography. At the bottom line, the communist process of instrumentalization meant the emancipation of ethnography as a discipline otherwise endangered and facing the risk of demise. For example, Emilia Comișel[13] states from the onset of her paper that "the regime of popular democracy has actively created excellent conditions for scientific research [...]" (Comișel 1960: 90)[14]. In an attempt for a synthesis of the developments of social sciences in Romania, Romulus Vulcănescu wrote about ethnography:

"After the Second World War, ethnographic researches start to be re-organized in their thematic and methodological structure on Marxist theoretical and practical criteria. The re-organizing process includes the creation of the material base, in parallel with the restructuring of the scientific conceptual framework conception and, finally, the elaboration of analytic and synthetic works in order to justify the Romanian specific ethnic indigenousness, continuity and creativity" (Vulcănescu 1975: 65).

First of all, the restructuring of the scientific conceptual framework mentioned by Vulcănescu never took place, and a simpler path was chosen, namely ethnography understood as ethnohistory, which was shortly followed by the disappearance of ethnography into the larger pool of ethnological sciences and/or disciplines.[15]

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[12] Started in 1976, *Cântarea României* was an annual, gigantic festival of socialist culture and education.

[13] She was an ethnomusicologist and a student of Constantin Brăiloiu.

[14] A thing generally re-confirmed by Cătălin Zamfir, who states that "anthropology and ethnography/ ethnology have experienced a peak in the communist period, especially in the difficult years (1948–1965) and in the period of liberalization (1966–1977). Ethnography had been a discipline of a special interest, as a part of the self-awareness programme of Romania. During the communist period, anthropology and ethnography received special political consideration, and in the 1950s it had represented a hideout for sociologists" (Zamfir and Filipescu 2015: 271).

[15] It is still undocumented and unclear how the term "ethnology" came into general use in Romania especially as it seems to incorporate multiple disciplines – from cultural anthropology, ethnography, folkloristics to ethnomusicology, ethnochoreology and so on – under

From the very beginning of its institutionalization, ethnography succeeded in combining forces with folkloristics by defining which parts of the popular culture each of them were to study. Ethnography appropriated the material culture – collecting, describing, categorizing and cataloguing the elements of Romanian popular culture, with the clear task of producing the Romanian Ethnographic Atlas (REA) – The Project; at the same time, folkloristics took less material subjects, considered patrimonial, and assumed the responsibility to archive them (see also Iosif 2012). As such, ethnography and folkloristics had two separate roads ahead which, as time passed, developed very few crossroads between them. Furthermore, the Marxist perspective was barely understood, deferentially treated and thoroughly avoided through defensive discursive mechanisms of citation practice in all social sciences in Romania, including ethnography and folkloristics. To sum up, during the communist period, Romanian ethnographers and folklorists did not apply the methodologies of Soviet *socialist realism,* Marxism, or the ones of structuralism, while choosing to maintain an ideological line only, and avoiding any theory and generally floating adrift[16].

In 1990, the Institute for Ethnology and Dialectological Research was reincorporated by the Romanian Academy and was separated from Dialectology, thus becoming today's "Constantin Brăiloiu" Institute of Ethnography and Folklore. The institute is now part of the Romanian Academy section for Art, Architecture and Audio-Visual. On the other hand, the centre of anthropology, established in 1964, became the "Francisc Rainer" Institute of Anthropology in 2007, and today functions as part of the bigger section of Medical Sciences of the Romanian Academy.

The project

The idea of an ethnographic atlas stimulated generations of Romanian scholars and was deeply inspired by the 19th century German *Volkskunde* tradition. After the Second World War, scholars revisited the ideas of pre-war and interwar scholars who planned[17] and some of them succeeded in completing and publishing

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its umbrella, while the entire bunch of research subjects were directed to Romania and Romanians only. From this point of view, the "diffuse ethnology" (Mihăilescu 2004: 209) and the way it became pluralized as "ethnological disciplines" is worth documenting.

[16] For instance, a quick look at the journals and publications' content from the era shows that theoretical settings and debates related to the meanings and the uses of ethnography stopped in the early 1970s. Their place was taken by more applied ones related to the REA's methodologies.

[17] Namely, the Social Atlas of Romania (*Atlasul social al României*) as planned by Dimitrie Gusti and his colleagues.

an ethnographic atlas[18]. Atlases were looked upon as a political necessity because they were deemed to represent consistent monoliths in constructing the Romanian nation-state and a ground for scientifically defining the identity and particularities of Romania and its inhabitants. It is noticeably clear from the Preface of the first volume of the Romanian Ethnographic Atlas that:

> "the publication of the linguistic atlases, closely followed up by the ethnographic atlases, started as a natural response to the standardization process of the local languages and traditions that began as early as the 19th century in western European countries" (Ghinoiu 2003: 18).

From its very beginning and despite the political regime, the ethnographic atlas had both scientific and political reasons and ends[19], which were never reflexively approached either by ethnographers or by historians.

The idea of an ethnographic atlas fit the communist ideology to a tee, as folkloristics, ethnography and ethnology, altogether, had the role of a supervisory body; they had the role of a guardian for the "cultural and spiritual heritage of the people" (Mihăilescu 1993: 44). Such a project became a necessity for the regime as it was meant to establish once and for all the uniquely special characteristics of the Romanian people, preserving them and thus allowing the communist modernization project of the society to start. The need for elaborating an ethnographic atlas was emphasized and methodological and theoretical sketches for the Romanian Ethnographic Atlas were presented in 1965, two years after the Institute of Ethnography and Folklore (IEF) was created, at a meeting organized by the IEF and the State Committee for Culture and Art, under the umbrella of the Academy of the Socialist Republic of Romania. After another two years, in 1967, the elaboration of REA was included in the IEF's research plan and the Project officially started. A huge amount of resources (both material and non-material) was allocated to the IEF, for many decades, in order to make it feasible. Among other things, it included over a decade of field work research (1972–1984) in over 500 villages and the expansion of the Institute's staff by employing young people from various scientific fields in order to train them in ethnography and continue work on the Project. Considering the context of general marginalization of social sciences in Romania during communism and the fact that there were no academic programs dedicated to teaching ethnography,

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[18] See Mănuilă 1943.
[19] As an example of how science was put to work and the usage of ethnographic and linguistic maps and atlases, see Case 2009.

this state of things was of great importance because most of the scholars acquired unique fieldwork experience which gave rise to specialized researchers in the field of [national] ethnography.

As Vulcănescu (1972: 10) pointed out in the first Bulletin of the Romanian Ethnographic Atlas[20], the REA was intended to be finished and published between 1980 and 1982. Despite the deadlines firmly established in 1972, the atlas' first volume was only published in 2003 and was concluded with the fifth one in 2014. This despite the fact that the REA's methodology had changed and the conceptual design of the published volumes is radically different from the one developed at the beginning of the project. This paper does not discuss the content of the REA but draws attention to two issues: (i.) the radical revisions regarding minorities and co-nationalities and (ii.) the main domains of ethnographic research. Firstly, the primary structure of the REA was designed to include cartographic methods accompanied by textual explanations, thus becoming an "integrating synthesis, on one hand diachronic – ethnographic, and on the other, synchronous – cartographic, of the material and spiritual life of Romanian people and co-nationalities" (Vulcănescu 1972: 4). However, the published volumes are the result of the reshaping of the REA's design, which occurred after 1989, and are something radically different from what Vulcănescu referred to. Although materials about co-nationalities were gathered during the very long fieldwork research, nevertheless, the data about minorities are alas absent from the REA. Secondly, the main fields of contemporary ethnography are the ones charted by the REA, namely: habitation, occupations, popular techniques, popular art, popular customs and mythology; all of them understood in terms of the atlas, as they became established and define the institutionalized practice of ethnography. It is not clear whether this reflects ethnography's closure, or it is just an aspect of the hegemony of the Project. Most likely it is both.

The atlas was a huge project which involved hundreds of scholars, researchers and associates, spanning three generations. The first generation of ethnographers – or the first core, was made of people who, in part, had previously worked with the Sociological School during interwar period and who had had experience in museums. The second generation involved young people educated in other specializations than ethnography and they were explicitly brought in for the Project. This is the second core of the Project and includes ethnographers by training due to the very fact that they learned ethnography by doing it while they worked for the methodological developments of the Project and by gathering

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[20] The Bulletin was designed for internal use only. It was published in 9 volumes between 1977 and 1982.

the necessary data and materials through fieldwork research. Nowadays, they represent the old generation. Finally, the third generation working in and for the Project is the younger generation whose merits are related to the elaboration of the final forms of the volumes in order to be published. And even though they have been published, today scholars from the third generation are still working for the Project, as the transcription of all fieldwork materials[21] was scheduled to be published in the following years in an extensive collection of series named Romanian Ethnographic Documents (*Documente Etnografice Românești*). The type of work required from the third generation bears a peculiar resemblance to armchair ethnography[22].

All in all, there is a huge gap between the second and the third generation in terms of age[23], knowledge and openness to new theoretical trends, contemporary issues and to critical self-assessment. "What does it mean to know or do ethnography?" and "What is ethnography about?" are general, cynical queries addressed to the scholars of third generation by those from the second. Since they feel that they have to some extent a monopoly over the discipline, they are self-assured in saying to them: "although you read books about ethnography, you are not an ethnographer".

Final Remarks

The embeddedness of institutionalized ethnography in the Project of the REA generated hegemonic strategies and closures. Ethnography's current status is tangled, mainly because it lacks theory, an articulated agenda and an internal critical assessment. Let me offer just two examples. Firstly, Lévi-Straussian structuralism was embraced by Romanian ethnographers and it was included in their discourse mainly due to its, at that time, trendiness, and not because its thinking structure was fully comprehended. As *Anthropologie structurale* was translated into Romanian in 1978, it was the basis on which normative practices regarding the ordering of the disciplines (ethnography, ethnology, and anthropology) were made available. Not even mathematicians, who were open to interdisciplinarity

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[21] REA's archives comprise approximately 8000 questionnaires with an average volume of 80 pages per questionnaire.

[22] The annual plan of the institute mentions fieldwork research in order to enrich the archives and to update the existing information, but there are no funds for such an activity. No ethnographic fieldwork organized by the institute was conducted in the last decade. So, the simple question is: if the formation of ethnographers is by training and fieldwork research, the absence of fieldwork research means the impossibility of becoming an ethnographer?

[23] An intermediate generation is absent.

and promoted structuralism, fully understood it, or at least they did not produce any studies based on structuralism that would prove their accurate understanding. During the last 60 years, ethnography in Romania came to be massively infused[24] with methodologies from geography, sociology, history and archaeology in order to fulfil the atlas' project – a project which, after three generations, was finally rounded up; but with no comprehension of the theory behind it[25]. Secondly, there is a dilemma among the researchers in the IEF that speaks for itself, namely: "Whom do I cite?! We are ethnographers, but we do not document topics that we know about and that are undocumented, and we do not write ethnographies and monographs".

In Romania, ethnography is constantly "borrowing" methods and discourses, but not theories, and it is contextually shifting identities in order to fulfil its proposed objectives. How and why does this happen? What are its objectives, its status quo and its relationships with other disciplines? By trying to find answers to them we might understand ethnography's constant ambiguity in relation to its objects, subjects, and methods of study. This ambiguity did not lead to a clear-cut disciplinary path. Instead, ethnography fell prey to a perpetual return to the past when its essential role was to provide profitable "traditional", "specific", "archaic", "surviving", "local", "descriptive data", etc. elements that could constitute potent weapons in the struggle to affirm a national identity. But, in doing so, it seems that the taxonomical method unhappily turned into a cultural taxidermy method, based on coloured dots on coloured maps. However, this is not surprising, since the very beginning of ethnography is rooted in establishing museums of ethnographic artefacts while the study of non-material culture and processual transformations was left to folkloristics and other humanities. Through a complex process, the institutionalized ethnography in Romania became an instrument of patrimonialization; a closed and retreated ethnography.

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[24] Again, folkloristics got remarkably close to philology and letters, but without embracing their precision, except for a formalist approach in categorizing the elements of popular culture and establishing typologies.

[25] And it seems that this was the trend in Soviet ethnography as well: "the concentrated interest in diachronic problems has two facets: continuities ("survivals") and transformations. The rejection of synchronism and structuralism is in part ideological, based on the attack against formalism and synchronist studies in general" (Krader 1959: 155).

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