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Hypostases of the human body in the culture of war*

For the archaic man (“primitive”, “savage”, “man of the folk”, *homo religiosus* or any other name we would use for the person who lives in a community formed both by the visible and invisible, by passing time and eternal time, and by the living and the dead and who is ruled by unwritten laws which are as strong as a “second nature”), his body is part of the familiar space and serves him when he wants to position himself, to measure or act on space, to move or advance. Classical ethnological and cultural anthropology studies teach us that archaic man has a cosmic vision upon the universe and in his vision, body itself is seen as cosmos, *i.e.* an organized world invested with intangible attributes by means of the particularly human faculty of symbolization¹.

It is interesting to explore up to what point the conception on body as metonymy of the cosmic-like space (body – house – village – country – world) is preserved and to what extent it is modified in the culture of modern war which implies dislocation, messiness, suffering and violence among other germs of chaos.

As a constant listener of Romanian accounts on the Second World War and a long time researcher of the informal culture of war, on which I have written a book and several papers,² I

* The translation of the text from page 37.

¹ See a very synthetic outline of “body representations in time and space” in “ethnographic literature” (Galiner, 1999: 172) in Pierre Bonte, Michel Izard (coord.), *Dicționar de etnologie și antropologie [Dictionary of Ethnology and Anthropology]*, 1999, Iași: Polirom, pp.172-175.

² *Narațiunile personale în etnologia războiului [Personal Narratives in the Ethnology of War]*, 2004, Bucharest: Ager; “Games of Memory. Personal Narratives of Romanian World War II Veterans”, in *Ethnologia Balkanica. Journal for Southeast European Anthropology*, volume 19/2016. Klaus Roth, Asker Kartari (eds.), LIT Verlag, Berlin, Wien, Zürich, 2017, pp. 309-322; „Primul Război Mondial oglindit în versuri țărănești” [“The First World War Mirrored in Peasant Verses”], in *Anuarul Institutului de Etnografie și Folclor „Constantin Brăiloiu”*, Academia Română, Serie nouă, volume 26, 2015, pp. 217-228; „De la manuscris la carte. Jurnale și «versuri» de

have considered two hypotheses regarding the perception of human body during war: the first one would be that war adds to body perception the burden of a “war body” which becomes an organic part of the veteran’s body. In the same way the warriors of the *Iliad* were identified by the armour they would wear (see, for example, the case of Achilles and Patroclus), the “war body” adds a new cultural dimension to the body perception which is already culturally thick in the *ethos* of archaic man. In the words of Paolo Giordano, author of a 2012 novel inspired by his visiting a camp of NATO Italian soldiers in Afghanistan (Gulistan valley): “... thirteen months after the epilogue of the mission, Egitto is still wearing his officer’s uniform. Two medals hang on his chest, right at heart level. He has thought a few times to escape among civilians but the military uniform has stuck to his body inch by inch, sweat washed out the colour of the fabric and painted the skin under it. If he undressed, he is sure of that, he would also take off his peel and as he is embarrassed enough when he is naked, such an exposure would be more that he could bear. And finally, why would he do something like that? A soldier never stops being a soldier” (Giordano: 9).

The second hypothesis (which would support the first one if it were validated) presumes that war combatants experience a kind of “de-corporality” resulting out of constant and intense deprivation (missing sleep, food and so on) and also out of identification with the suffering, dismembered body of the Other on the battlefield. In ethnographic literature, de-corporality experiences are described as familiar to members of traditional communities, shamans being the generic protagonists of such experiences. In the “culture of peace”, experiences of transcending one’s body bring balance to their actors and help them find one or more of their lost souls abducted by maleficent magicians or divine beings. Is there possible for that traditional function of de-corporality experiences to be still preserved (at least part of it) in the culture of war?

I intend to check the validity of the two hypotheses by studying the expressions of body perceptions in a micro-corpus made of three documents: a frontline diary dating back to the years 1942 and 1943 and published in 1999, which belongs to a member of the Romanian rural

front” [“From Manuscript to Book. Frontline Diaries and Rimed Chronicles”], in Cristina Bogdan, Alexandru Ofrim (coord.), *Pentru o istorie culturală a cărții și a practicilor de lectură*, University of Bucharest Printing House, 2015, pp.409-420; „«Eroul necunoscut» - un profil etnologic” [“Unknown Hero – an Ethnological Profile”], in *Studii și comunicări de etnologie*, Tom XXVII/2013, Sibiu: Astra Museum, 2013, pp.72-82; „Jurnale din Belgrad” [“Belgrade Diaries”], in *Sinteze*, vol. 6/1999, edited by Centrul Național pentru Conservarea și Promovarea Culturii Tradiționale, Bucharest, 2000, pp. 28-34.

intellectual class, Mihai Bălaj³, and two ethnological documents obtained by textualization and contextualization of two oral accounts that I recorded in 1996 in commune Băuțar, Caraș-Severin district, from two war veterans named Gheorghe Găină and Bucur Opruț.

Mihai Bălaj was born in 1909 in a family of poor peasants from the village Roșiori (Satu Mare county) and after graduating from the Normal School for Primary Education in the town Oradea in 1930 he worked as a teacher in a few villages in northern Transylvania. He was called up on July 5, 1942 as a second lieutenant of 10th mountain battalion from Sighetu Marmăției, which served in the avantgarde of the 2nd Mountain Division. His battalion marched to the Caucasus mountains, taking part in the battles at Kisbrun, on Hill 910, at Nalcik, Orjonikidze, Alagir and Zran valley. During the siege of Stalingrad, the 2nd Mountain Division, subordinated since 23 August 1942 to the German 1st Panzer Army, blocked the Caucasus passes in order to secure the field for the German troops. After the defeats on the river Don and at Stalingrad, the battalion of Mihai Bălaj withdrew through Kerçi pass at the cost of many human losses and stayed on the frontline in Crimeea until 1944 but the author of the diary came back to Romania in November 1943 after an episode of hepatitis. The entries in the diary begin on 5 July 1942 and end on 21 May 1943. Back in his homeland, Mihai Bălaj served as an adjutant officer with the sedentary part of the 10th mountain battalion in Hațeg, until the demobilisation on 10 may 1945. In 1951, during the hard years of the communist regime, he was expelled from the education system because he had fought on the eastern front against the Soviet Union. He was accepted back in 1952 and expelled again in 1958. He earned his living as a chief of the supplies department of „Seineana” Yeast Factory in Seini, Maramureș county until 1962. Then he was reintegrated in the education system, he qualified as a gymnasium Romanian language and literature teacher and retired in 1966. He wrote the monographs of the school and the choir in Seini and published several articles on important figures of the Romanian history and culture (Căpîlnean and Rusu, 1999: 5-11). He passed away in 1976 without having published his front diary, which “he kept hidden at the risk of losing his freedom in the years of the communist regime” (*ibidem*, 11).

I consider that the diary of Mihai Bălaj is representative for the mentality of the “man of the folk” because the author is – by birth and family – a man of the Romanian traditional village at the beginning of the twentieth century and by education he adheres to a national war ideology

³ Mihai Bălaj, *Jurnal de front (1942-1943)* [*Frontline diary - 1942-1943*], 1999, Vasile Căpîlnean and Viorel Rusu (eds.), Baia Mare: Gutinul.

and also he is familiar with a “poetics” of writing about war which makes his discourse rather formal and “politically correct”. Nevertheless, it is remarkable to find in a document such as Bălaj’s diary deviations from the conventional tone that occur when the officer is too overwhelmed by the experience of war to filter his feelings through language and yet his writer’s skills enable him to put into words what he has seen and endured.

I had the chance to record on 5 and 6 April 1996 two oral accounts on war of two veterans who had served in the same battalion with Mihai Bălaj, Gheorghe Găină and Bucur Opruț, from commune Băuțar (Caraș Severin county), both of them born in 1920 (Fruntelată, 2004: 127-141). Gheorghe Găină was a chief radiotelegraphist of the 10th mountain battalion and took part in the war on the eastern front until the end of November 1942 when he was wounded at the left knee by fragments of a missile in a forest where he had hidden with his radio, during the battles in the Zran valley. He was evicted after he was wounded and traveled to a hospital in Lemberg (the German name of the Polish town Lwów) where he remained for eight weeks during which four missile fragments were removed from his leg. Then he returned to his “garrison” in Romania and after a few months he was discharged. He had a diary on the frontline and he actually wrote in it daily but I could not see it, as he said he had given it to somebody and it had not been returned to him.

Bucur Opruț, a farmer and carpenter, fought during the war as a sergeant and machine gun shooter in the 10th mountain battalion. He fought until the last Romanian soldiers withdrew from Crimeea in May 1944. He went through all the harsh battles that Mihai Bălaj accounts for in his diary and escaped “without even a bruise” from desperate situations. He reached the Romanian shore at Constanța, on 29 May 1944, aboard the German boat “Frankfurt” and because he was a qualified carpenter and he had already fought for almost three years he was called up in Hațeg area at a workshop until the end of the war.

The diary of Mihai Bălaj and the accounts of Gheorghe Găină and Bucur Opruț are comparable as samples of “close range history” because they present personal experiences from the same campaign in which they took part (Gheorghe Găină and Mihai Bălaj up to a point, Bucur Opruț until the end) as combatants in the same battalion. By reading through the three texts, we understand that the chronologically ordered and precise entries of Mihai Bălaj are completed by the memories of the veterans from Băuțar which are more diffuse but express very powerful feelings. It is as if Mihai Bălaj had drawn an outline and Gheorghe Găină and Bucur Opruț had added the colour while working all three at the same painting. Within the frame of the picture, I intend to pick just some elements which allow me to formulate a few observations upon

the representation of the body of the “archaic man” (in this case, the man from the Romanian traditional rural community of the twentieth century) in the culture of war.

War routine

The rhythm of life in the Second World War has to match the condition of combatants who are always on the road and far from home and is found in analogies with familiar situations from the soldiers’ native villages. On Friday, 25 September 1942, Mihai Bălaj writes: “Clear sky and warm. The soldiers are working in a rush to finish their shelters in the ground (*bordeie*). Of course, the ones who stay behind, for those who are in the first line have to watch out. By day, the latter get out of their shelters too, bask in the sun camouflaged in the fields of corn or sunflower, eat flower seeds and dream about their villages, about harvesting maize or picking grapes and who knows what. The enemy is giving them a break now. From time to time, a bullet whistles by their ears or a missile explodes nearby. They don’t even flinch. They remain calm. They are so used to that (...) How can you go to sleep at five thirty p.m.? (...) A few soldiers still can’t sleep. They sit around a fire, remembering their gatherings for getting corn off the cob and they sing: Oh, mountain, beautiful fir tree / Please bend down your top / For me to get up in it, / And look into my village / To see my house and my belongings, / My little children and my woman / The children would ask about me / «Mother, when does dad come home? / Write to him to come / From Caucasus, from the military camp» / «Oh, children, be quiet / For your mom will do anything for you» / «You can do a thousand things for us, mom / As our dad won’t be here / Dad takes us in his arms / And kisses our faces / And he puts us on his knee / And kisses us on our foreheads»” (Bălaj, 1999: 62-63).

On Wednesday, 7 October 1942, the soldiers “are digging their shelters” “barefoot and wearing only their shirts” because the time is “admirable”; “These people are worth admiring as for more than a month they have been staying more in the ground than outside, burrowing constantly as gophers do to create a comfortable shelter and protect themselves against the bullet rain falling day and night over their heads. These people are worth admiring as for 40 days they have been staying in strain and watching the enemy during day but also by nights wrapped in thick dark fog, lasting for 12 hours at this time of the year. These people eat only two times a day and actually only at night because on daylight there is no way to get to them for fear their position would be exposed” (*ibidem*, 67).

On Friday, 23 October 1942: “It is cold. A thick frost fell last night. I walked because on horseback my legs were totally numb with cold. By day it is sunny, but a «sun with teeth» as it is the saying when it is cold. The soldiers have undressed and they are shaking out their clothes and are washing themselves (...) In the evening, combatants receive chocolate, brandy and cigarettes and also reserve rations. Although it is cold, we sleep outside in the holes we have dug and over which we have put a tent leaf, sacks, corn stalks to prevent being frosted over” (*ibidem*, 76-77).

The battalion covers very long distances every day: “We had to march 43 kilometers a day. We would do the whole distance in one day. You were not allowed to sit down until you have marched 43 kilometers. We would march day and night continuously. After 43 kilometers we would have a two hour break. That was for eating, for a little rest, for changing our socks, a cold bath for the feet, we would try to find a place where we could do that. We would march by day and by night. (...) While marching on, four soldiers in the group would stay together and they would support each other’s armpits. And two would sleep and two would lead. You would march with your eyes closed, sleeping. You would dream. And these two would lead you. Then the other two would get asleep and the first two would lead” (Gheorghe Găină, in Fruntelată, 2004: 132).

Deprivation and Suffering

On Friday, 7 August 1942: “A terrible wind blows and the heat is great. The dust is raised by wind and soldiers and darkens the sky. The dust is black and covers the people in thick layers so that you can hardly recognize their faces” (Bălaj, 1999: 35).

The combatants are very thirsty but also they are starving: “during the march what I can say is that we would not receive water, we would march, there was this plain, well...; we marched as long as two weeks in a row and we didn’t find any creek, any pit. They would come with the barrel of water and bring us some, because it was very hot, in June, July. It was hot and we were given less than a shell (steel bowl) of water a day. That was all. You could just wet your lips with that. You could not hydrate yourself, nothing to eat, nothing. Little by little, we reached a place where there were pools. Pools, still water, with green cloth (vegetation) over it as if frogs were there. We would go there and we did not have place enough to stay and drink water. I thought somebody would get ill. But nothing happened. You would drink from wherever you found water, as we could do nothing else. (...) There was misery” (Gheorghe Găină, in Fruntelată, 2004: 132). “We would march for days and days and we could not find water at all. We did not

have where to drink from. There was sand. As hot as it was, we would march with our (gas) masks on because otherwise the sand got into our eyes. Even horses were put plastic sheets over their eyes” (*ibidem*, 128-129).

“I almost fainted of starvation. You could not resist. It was tragic, really tragic. At night, all night, as long as the night is, without fire because fire would have been a target, they would shoot at us. There in the snow, we were dancing there (not to freeze)... God forbid... You couldn’t do anything because a fire would have been a target. (...) at Petrovskaia, in eight days I had only four potatoes to eat. Eight days... (...) I rode my horse for three hundred and fifty kilometers (during which) I didn’t eat, I didn’t drink. I sat all the time in the saddle. I got rotten there on the saddle, my back and everything, absolutely, I could endure no more.”⁴

Mihai Bălaj writes down on Sunday, 30 August 1942: “I hardly realize it is Sunday. For a few days I haven’t even washed my face. I am dirty. I have not taken my boots off for a week and I sleep with all my clothes on and weapons by my side” (Bălaj, 1999: 51).

On Wednesday, 28 October, 1942: “There is thick fog in the morning. Last night I slept in open air, covered only with my raincoat and lying on a hay bed. Trifu puts his arms around me to keep both of us warm” (*ibidem*, 80).

The terrible cold and deprivation of rest and hygiene are devastating: “In the month of August, a snowy and freezing weather started to get to us. What can I say, you could not undress at all. You would wear your trench-coat all the time, with your belt put tight. And we could not take off our boots and we didn’t have a place to sleep. A few of us were taken on a high ridge to defend the position and there was a lot of snow. There was snow and you could not drink water because everything was frozen. We would get lots of tree branches and we would lie on those branches not to sleep on bare snow. Lice would eat us alive. So many lice were there... During the night we would lit a small fire with forest branches and as freezing as it was, we would take off our shirts and even the officers – second lieutenants, lieutenants – who had assistants would have them put their shirts near the flames of the fire and lice would fall down and crack. Our backs were sore and scratched and our feet were frozen. We hadn’t taken our boots off for a month and a half, you did not have a place to sit down in that snow” (Gheorghe Găină, in Fruntelată, 2004: 129).

“Our soldiers often fought with bare feet, ragged, without expensive jackets and fur coats but they fought anyway. After marches of 60 kilometers we would occupy our position without a

⁴ 04.06.1996, transcribed by Ioana Fruntelată.

moment's rest. Nobody asked the soldiers if they had changed their shirts once in 6 or 7 weeks or if they had cleaned themselves of lice. All the soldiers and officers, the battalion commander included were infested with lice" (Sunday, 14 February 1943) (Bălaj, 1999: 114).

"With that freezing weather, the wounded would die and you couldn't ... at the cost of your soul to undress, to go for some privacy, you had no place, no place... Yes. It was not about the bullet or the first front line. That was a mere trifle. The misery. Yes. Very difficult. God forbid a war should come, as they don't know what war is. I have already told you. War is not about the fact that another man could kill you and all that. No. It's not that. War is misery" (Bucur Opruț, in Fruntelată, 2004: 136).

After enduring the harsh weather in the winter of 1943-1944, the survivors of the battalion made it to Crimeea: "When we were taken to Crimeea, the spring was near. March, April. Pieces of flesh as thick as a finger fell from our bodies. We couldn't march any farther and we couldn't walk at all and a plane was sent to bring us a kind of wool stockings, as we would say. We couldn't budge from there. Everything, ears, nose, feet, nails, all our flesh would peel from us as the cold had cooked it. We passed into the year 1944. (...) there was a big gathering and general Dumitrache was there. He was the commander of the 2nd Mountain Division. He told us: «You will go home, those of you who will make it. (He utters the words emphatically) You do not have words to tell what you have been through. You will not have words to tell what you've been through»" (*ibidem*, 139).

Body and death in the "hell of war"

Although it is a matter of fact at time of war, the dreadful sight of corpses spread everywhere in the front area and never prepared for burial as dead bodies should be in traditional communities deeply concerns the combatants: "On a road I see 4 dead Germans who are not buried. Their bodies have gone black. I talk with comrade Trifu and tell him: «Listen, Ioan, I wouldn't want to remain in a ditch like that. I ask of you to take care of me, irrespective the situation you are in, to make a coffin for me and bury me as a human and a Christian. I promise I will do the same for you, if something bad should happen!» He makes the promise to me" (Bălaj, 1999: 27 [Monday, 27 July, 1942; the date in the diary is incorrectly spelled as 28 July instead of 27]).

The ones who stay alive retrieve and bury the dead: "We find dead men in ravines. It is difficult to retrieve them. The dead are put on horses to be taken down to the camp. Now they are

descending with second lieutenant Tutelea. When major Busuiocescu sees him wrapped in the tent leaf, he goes and kisses both his cheeks. He was an elite officer of the Battalion and a distinguished teacher” (*ibidem*, 89 [Tuesday, 1 December, 1942]).

On Monday, 26 October, 1942 Mihai Bălaj presents an apocalyptic image: “After crossing the river, we saw a lot of dead men and horses on the road. Huge holes dug by shells. A fallen Russian is still alive. Another one has his head caught in a fence. Another one was burnt, it is hard to say that he was a human once, etc. (...) We slept buried in trenches overnight. We haven’t eaten warm food for two days. We are physically drained and consumed by emotions. We have been lit all night by the fire coming from some rig burning with fantastic flames ...” (*ibidem*, 78-79).

On Wednesday, 3 March 1943: “By 11 o’clock the village had been cleaned and piles of corpses were lying everywhere. The artillery and cannons have mutilated the bodies horribly” (*ibidem*, 124).

After a battle in Zran valley, during which he fires his machine gun until he is out of ammunition and manages to grab a magazine (of bullets) from the hand of a dead comrade, Bucur Opruț realizes that he is under shock: “If I tell you this, maybe you don’t believe me... From time to time I was looking over my shoulder to find out who is pulling my neck. And nobody was there. Who is pulling my neck? Nobody. The helmet strap. My hairs had been raised and the strap was pulling me here. Tragic. Really tragic” (Bucur Opruț, in Frunteletă, 2004: 135).

When he was wounded, Gheorghe Găină experienced physical weakness but also perfect lucidity: “I couldn’t utter a word, I was fully aware of everything, I knew what they were asking me but I could not speak. I thought that could be because I was dying but then I wouldn’t have been so aware of everything. But I couldn’t speak at all for a few minutes. I couldn’t utter a word” (Gheorghe Găină, in Frunteletă, 2004: 131).

On Friday, 1 January 1943, Mihai Bălaj writes in his diary: “We leave behind all our dead ones!” (Bălaj, 1999: 99). His lamentation might open for us a path to understand the perception of body in the culture of war in relation with the cosmic pattern characteristic to archaic mentality. On one hand, due to the military routine that helps them cope with situations beyond our worst imagining, the combatants compare the foreign land with their home land and while they are hiding in a corn field they are able to think about harvesting time in their villages. On the other hand, the blood they spill and their bodies remaining in the ground are consecrating the place where they die in the same way ritual sacrifices may consecrate a conquered land: “The fight of those who endure the misery of the battlefields, the blood of so many wounded and our dead ones

who have been taken away forever from the bosom of their mother land require for a righteous compensation” (*ibidem*, 58-59 [Thursday, 17 September 1942]). Therefore the construction of the “war body” observes the cosmic model by their physical remaining in the land of the enemy and the consequence of that sacrificial act is a symbolic “familial” relationship that is embedded in the memory of the combatants. As far as I could notice, the “obsession” of war is translated most frequently into a repertory of memories shaped in narrative form. The “body of words” makes possible for veterans to survive after the “descending in Hell” they experienced during war.

The second hypothesis that I have formulated implies exploring the de-corporality experience resulting out of feeling one’s body as an indistinct part of the mass of surrounding suffering bodies and out of repeated and intense deprivation. I think that a more complex investigation exceeding the purpose of this paper and employing concepts of (at least) medical anthropology, ethno-psychiatry and anthropology of the sacred is needed to check the validity of such a hypothesis and compare the experience of individuals facing war horrors with ecstatic experiences from ethnographic literature. At this point of my research, I can only assume that the state of “de-corporality” during war might be the result of a psychic tension similar to that experienced by the religious individual from traditional communities. From an outsider point of view, extreme violence and intense deprivation affecting a whole army seem to blow up the very mechanism which makes human beings function. Nevertheless, if we appeal to the insider’s experience expressed in the verses of poet Radu Gyr, himself a participant in the Second World War on the eastern front, we could presume that one of the “solutions” to get over the horror of war is exactly the understanding of that horror in terms of religious feeling: “Hurray! We spring out of holes and of ditches. / Hell is shaking its chains and outreaches. / Iron angels like some giant crosses / floating over the tar afternoon / pour only rocks and logs on platoon” (Gyr, 2016: 26).

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