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Tales of ethnic serendipity in the 2000s Romania

My article is intended to contribute to the anthropological literature of studying ethnicity with a retrospective discussion on the ways in which serendipity as a process, rather than an isolate episode, may generate important changes and reorientations of one's research strategy. Five case studies, each of them telling about different ethnic groups, will be referred as such, based on my own ethnographic experience in the 2000s Romania. Main premises of the current text claim that (1) Ethnicity is useful in thinking about serendipitous working modes of interaction with field interlocutors, and (2) Serendipity significantly allows for understanding unsteady and unexpected patterns of contemporary social life, the ethnic ones also included.

Serendipity as a topos of anthropological literature

Generally referred to what the sociologist Robert Merton has described in terms of “serendipity pattern” (1948, cited by Copeland, 2017), as when “observing an *unanticipated, anomalous and strategic* datum which becomes the occasion for developing a new theory or for extending an existing theory”, the use of *serendipity* notion has known increasing popularity in human sciences. While serendipity is still depicted as “magic” and “epiphany” in social research (see, for instance, Martínez, 2018), and invested with that “intuitive logic that transcends both subjectivity and objectivity” (Hazan and Hertzog, 2012), it is more and more approached in its intrinsic connections with either a researcher's specialization, or with the process of scientific knowing itself.

In fact, “chance” and “wisdom” are equally associated with the notion of serendipity since its very first enunciation by the English novelist Horace Walpole, who (in 1754) explained the meaning of a Persian fairy tale, *The Three Princes of Serendip*, as consisting of “making

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discoveries by accident and sagacity, of things which they [the Princes] were not in quest of” (cited by Fabietti, 2012). This balance of “luck and skill” makes of serendipity something that “is both unpredictable and yet can be cultivated”, which, in the practice of science, “can only be applied retrospectively to a discovery process, once the valuable outcome has been determined” (Copeland, 2017).

When referred to anthropological fieldwork, for instance, a serendipitous “property” of research is claimed to rely on “accumulated knowledge to make the connections” (Tilche and Simpson, 2017). Moreover, in order to diminish the hazard “variable” from doing ethnography, sagacity is urged “to be reinstated as a principal component of serendipity” (Rivoal and Salazar, 2013). Similarly, whereas the “portée heuristique” of serendipity is fully acknowledged from sociological angles as well, the same concept is claimed to foster the “stratégies actuelles” of researchers, especially in what concerns the “dimensions subjectives (affects, émotions, intuitions, etc.) sur une diversité de scènes de la vie sociale” (Namian and Grimard, 2013).

A broader regard to the relevance of serendipity in science, with its characteristics of a “process, rather than an event” and of being “more ubiquitous than momentous”, has highlighted its occurrence in relation to “epistemic limitations and expectations” and between “the outcome of a discovery process and the intentions that drove it forward” (Copeland, 2017). In anthropological research, as if contrasting with “objectivist” tendency, and models that have perhaps granted too much to the dialogical and reflexive dimension of fieldwork” (Fabietti, 2012), serendipity has ultimately been associated with a “lifelong nomadic journey of discovery”, as a “surge of creativity and inspiration” for a “fluid anthropological sense” (Hazan and Hertzog, 2012). Current approaches show a developing thematization of applying serendipity to anthropology, including lived experiences of natural disasters in Indonesia (Salazar, in Rivoal and Salazar, 2013), generational change in Post-Soviet Estonian context (Martínez, 2018), emotional encounters in Israeli-Palestinian space (Parizot, 2012) etc.

Five ethnographic references

The following text is conceived as a retrospective reflection on several fieldwork endeavors that, between 2003 and 2010, I made among five ethnic groups in Romania, including the Russian-speaking Lipovans in Jurilovca village (Tulcea County), the German-speaking Saxons from Cisnădioara/Michelsberg and Cisnădie/Heltau (Sibiu County), the Hungarian-speaking Szeklers of Korond village (Harghita County), the Romani-speaking Kalderash in Brăteiu village (Sibiu County), and the Romanian-speaking Rudars in Băbeni village (Vâlcea County) (see the map below). In each of these case studies, I initially embarked on research

agendas informed by bibliographic references, mainly on fishing (Lipovans), vicinal community organization (Saxons), pottery (Szeklers), coppersmith's craft (Kalderash), and woodcarving (Rudars). In the field, however, alongside the above-mentioned patterns of social life, I was to encounter a series of unexpected ethnographic aspects, which significantly modified my research design for all the communities under examination.



Map of the research locations in Romania.

As I have described elsewhere what I found at the level of each ethnographic site (Constantin, 2012, 2015a, b, c, 2016a, b, 2017), I will only summarize the main traits of my research among the Lipovans, the Saxons, the Szeklers, the Kalderash, and the Rudars. Taking into account the different identities of these groups, my discussion below is not so much relevant for cross-cultural objectives of understanding ethnicity, as it may provide with comparable examples of study adjustments – just due to context particularities.

In the case of Lipovans, traditional values associated with fishing in the Danube Delta seem to be dramatically challenged by current incidence of poaching (as it is reported for recent, post-socialist, times in the area).

With regard to Saxons, to a significant extent, their community organization of *Nachbarschaft* is only “evoked” today, as a reality of the past. Something of the *Nachbarschaft* esprit is surviving within a local cooking process, one still performed today, that of the *hanklich*.

The Szekler pottery specialization is an important productive resource, but its contemporary economic relevance is rooted into the folk culture of the area, taking into account the figurative art of painting ceramics with motifs and themes inspired from the Magyar historical mythology.

As concerns the Kalderash, their inter-generationally-transmitted coppersmith’s craft is also a means of exchange with outsiders (mostly including non-Roma). This fact differs from the intra-ethnic institution of *Kris* (customary court), which is not normally allowed for non-Roma participation.

The Rudars reveal a similar disjunction between their traditional craft (in this case: woodcarving) and the sacrificial ritual of *gurbane*. In this case, it is woodcarving that mostly favors the Rudars’ opening towards non-Roma audience (within urban markets and fairs), whereas the *gurbane* is still lived as a Rudar private, somewhat ethnically-circumscribed, tradition.

As a result, along with recording data about what is traditional or “inveterate” among Lipovans, Saxons, Szeklers, Kalderash, and Rudars, in terms of their notorious crafts or institutions, my ethnographic interest also considers information that obviously does not fit within such stereotyping view on one or another of the above-mentioned ethnic groups. I argue this is to reason about a given theme (in my case: the ethnically-represented behavior) based on a serendipitous research strategy. As seen before, each of the cases that I cite in the current discussion might be “listened to” as a distinct “tale”. Narrating such “tales”, however, resembles as to the “serendipitous” way in which initial research themes have diverged into “intrigues” unanticipated at the research debut. Hence, possible regularities might be inferred in what ethnic groups unrelated with each other and living in different areas may choose to remain silent (or quite discrete) on some aspects of their lifestyle, or to openly expose some other traits.

The Lipovan case

In a text I have published on the Lipovan community of Jurilovca, I argued (in 2015a) on its “ethos of belongingness to the biotope of Danube Delta”, in terms of what I had considered it

to be “the importance of fishing for the local livelihood as well as worldview”. Basic traits of such ecological integration were found out in the ethnic representativeness and kinship structuring of fishermen’s teams, ethno-historical memory of Lipovan settlement in the area, fishing-related technical lexicon, seasonal working organization, barter exchange of fish for farming goods, and folk cookery of fish dishes. One of my conclusions was that:

“Since all these ethnographic traits are to be referred to within the administration of the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve [DDBR], the crucial issue for the native inhabitants is now that of the very continuity of ‘their lake’s [unwritten] law’ (as a vernacular representation) in contrast to the politics of renting out the local fishing areas” (Constantin, 2015a: 68).

Indeed, what I could hardly foresee while conducting my early interviewing sessions in Jurilovca about the ancestral adaptation to local ecosystem, Lipovan fishermen put what they name “the lake [customary] law” in virulent contrast with a rather recent development of poaching, as a reaction to the DDBR-patronized system of granting “rights” of fish exploitation to private entrepreneurs. As a result, I felt it necessary to concentrate my attention on poaching as an “epiphenomenon”, with its own distinct profile, within the deltaic contemporary fishing:

“The Jurilovca fishermen [...] condemn the negative implications of such illegal ‘occupation’ over the fish resources in the area; they associate poaching with encroaching upon the fishing prohibition during the season of fish reproduction, and with the purely commercial interests (as lacked of any ethics of ‘biodiversity conservation’); once again, the same fishermen describe the network organization of poachers and their complicity with some (at least) of the authorities” (Constantin, 2012: 59).

The Saxon case

Soon after beginning my work in Michelsberg and Heltau, I needed to realize that the Saxon institution of *Nachbarschaften* or traditional “Neighborhoods” actually is more a part of local cultural heritage, than an ethnographic fact of nowadays. As I remarked it,

“When asked about *Nachbarschaft*, the Saxons inhabitants from Cislădioara/Michelsberg and Cislădie/Heltau invariably situate their narratives in the past, more exactly in the postwar decades of their communities. As a result, all the aforementioned facts referring to the structure and function of the institution of *Nachbarschaft* are relevant for a retrospective inquiry of South-Transylvanian Saxons, rather than for their present-days social life” (Constantin, 2015b: 396).

At the same time, I also took into account the character of “performative memory” that the *Nachbarschaft* quite obviously proves among local Saxons, who, given own “needs of cultural survival as a decreasing ethnicity in the 2000s Romania”, usually tend “to frame it within broader accounts about their community and tradition”. During my fieldwork in Michelsberg, while I just kept searching for new information about *Nachbarschaft*, I was introduced in the atmosphere of cooking and enjoying the *hanklich*, the Saxon representative-claimed pie. Unlike the *Nachbarschaft* (apparently), the *hanklich* seems to still pertain to the present lifestyle in the village. However, such “contemporaneity” is reported to be somewhat “evocative” for what could be called the persistence of a “*Nachbarschaft* esprit” in Cislăcioara:

“In Michelsberg, the cuisine and the flavor of a *hanklich* are mostly lived as a social experience of the Saxon institution of vicinal discipline and mutual aid, the *Nachbarschaft*. [...] The gastronomic process through which a *hanklich* dish is ‘put on the table’ depends on the involvement of almost everyone: [...] alongside kinsmen, there are neighbors, acquaintances, friends... all of whom coming to sustain a custom that actually belongs to the local entire community, not only to the [given] host family” (Constantin, 2015c: 291-2).

The Szekler case

My encounter with Korond meant, first of all, an acknowledgement of the social and economic relevance that pottery has for the local community:

“According to [Korond] inhabitants [...], there would be a number of 250-300 potter families. [...] Pottery is obviously a enduring working choice of many locals, with historical antecedents of more than four centuries long, including intergenerational specialization, socialist unit organization, and (after 2000) private entrepreneurship [...]” (Constantin, 2016a: 232).

What I progressively came to admit was that, apart from formal variety of ceramic shapes and their functional uses in contemporary rural or urban contexts, the market demand of Korond pottery essentially depended on the figurative content of it. In particular, I noticed how

“The Korond ceramic representations are distinct [...] by their association with the mythology and the ethno-history of Szekler ethnic group” (Constantin, 2016a: 234).

In the Korond pottery, one might say, ornamentation is not simply a way of “making things beautiful”, as it seems to worth as a certain “memorial exercise” on a repertory of local symbols felt to be “ancestral”:

“What the Szekler ceramists do is [...] to ‘recognize’ a prestigious origin [of local community] and to bring it (with the means of arts) into present times. Such ‘memorial communion’ of the Korond pottery bearers reflects consent on their own ethos, in this case by merging and making ‘synchronic’ [motifs like] ‘Turul bird’ and the ‘Husars’, the [Magyar] ‘Royal Hunt’ and the ‘Szekler weddings’, the ‘Christian Lancer’ and the ‘Peasant Woman and her oxen-driven cart’ etc.” (Constantin, 2016a: 243)

The Kalderash case

Within the museum-hosted fairs in cities like Bucharest and Sibiu, Kalderash craftsmen from Brăteiu village do address their copper-made artefacts to a heterogeneous clientele of customers coming from different Gypsy communities in Romania (such as in Craiova town), but also from abroad (including, among others, American and Danish people). In Brăteiu, I was introduced into a series of ethnographic details about the Kalderash society and cultural identity, such as their ancestors’ experience of Russian deportation (during the WW II), their own perspective towards further Roma subgroups, and their nomadic lifestyle. The customary-law institution of *Kris* also contributed to my larger, although unforeseen, perspective on the Brăteiu Kalderash:

“Lawsuit was not initially included into the agenda of my interview themes in the field. As a result, my research on the *Kris* practice in Brateiu is not exhaustive, but it is rather an unanticipated development of dialogues I conducted with the local Gypsy craftsmen” (Constantin, 2017: 90).

Within their narratives, the Kalderash in Brăteiu describe what appears to characterize rather a past practice of the *Kris* institution, with the prominent role of *Bulibasha* traditional leader and his “court” of “five-to-twenty respected elders”, their “normative” and “conciliatory” mission in the local community, especially in cases of marriage-related disputes etc. Insofar as it is evoked today, the *Kris* customary court is claimed to have included only Kalderash “judges”, with a weak judiciary presence of other nationals.

“In Romania, *Kris* appears to constantly be associated with Căldărari and further Romani-speaking groups, with no evidence of possible influence from non-Roma coexisting ethnicities. [...] When mentioned [in Brăteiu], the majority nation of Romanians only play the complementary role of witness within such ‘trial’ debates, with no more involvement or contribution to the decision making process” (Constantin, 2017: 93-94).

The Rudar case

Rudar craftsmen from Băbeni village are committed to making wood-carved artefacts, insisting on their somewhat “innate” woodcarving skills, which they argue to be inherited from times of their community’s past nomadism and itinerant use of wood resources. They claimed to me that the same dexterity would still depend on endogamous marriage within local community. Vernacular terminology suggests Rudar self-identification with their traditional handicraft:

“The Rudari prefer to relate their cultural identity to the craft of woodcarving, which (they stress) would possibly explain ones of their ethnonyms like Albieri as deriving from *albie*, trough, and Trocari, namely the ‘makers of *troci de pâine* or bread wooden shapes’” (Constantin, 2016b: 153).

The Rudars’ wooden-made objects are distributed to a larger, urban, clientele in cities like Braşov, Bucharest, Constanţa, Sibiu, Târgu Mureş, and Timișoara, with such production also “reinterpreted in accord with new customer tastes”. At the same time, while conducting interviews with local artisans in their home-located workshops, I was shown their deep and enduring attachment to what is reported to remain a native ceremony in either public or private circumstances:

“Customarily performed on St. George’s Day or (when this day coincides with Easter lent [...]) on the Ascension Day, the *gurbane* is mostly lived as a sacrificial-and-healing ritual meant as an illness treatment and also as plenary community feast” (Constantin, 2016b: 161).

Argument for a heuristically-guide research

My text argues for approaching ethnicity through ethnographic heuristics, instead of collecting ethnic traits and framing them into classical or “modern” interpretive schemes. The implication of such a research strategy is that it makes it possible to better recognize and follow themes appropriate for ethnic self-identification and, equally important, for today’s concerns of people under examination.

As seen before, poaching seems to express Lipovans’ problematization of risks for their livelihood in a much more acute manner than the simple, picturesque, perspective of local traditional fishing. In the Saxon context, *hanklich* is what the local community still maintains alive, instead of the solely memorial character of *Nachbarschaft* institution. Among Szeklers, ethnic mythology provides the ornamental content for local ceramic artefacts, which suggests the

representational function of pottery in the area. The Kalderash development of coppersmith's work, as well as the Rudar woodcarving craft appear as cultural scenes locally felt to allow for more effective interethnic relationships than it is the case of Kalderash *Kris* tribunal and Rudar ceremonial of *gurbane*, respectively. All such issues are "serendipitous" in that they have not only been unknown before my introductory contacts with the ethnic groups in discussion, but also – "after the fact" – they leave open room for "sagacious" debate on what is, or it is not, relevant for ethnicity thus looked at.

Having explained the unanticipated situations reported in the abovementioned ethnic "tales", my approach principally relies on ethnographic interaction with field interlocutors, accordingly reflected into findings somewhat "revealing" for supplemental comprehension of cultural identities in their own, ever flowing, "narrativity".

Of course, it is possible that the "intrigues" I noticed would not be consistent, as it is also possible that they would launch further reflexive themes of pathways equally valid in characterizing one or another community. I argue that the strongest quality of a "serendipity-inspired" fieldwork methodology resides in its open interface between what a researcher momentarily arrives to know about his/her object of study, and what s/he happens to re-discover, hear, be helped to rethink... about that "object" etc. Serendipity, therefore, resembles much to equating participant observation to a "practice of correspondence" between the anthropologist and his or her "master-collaborators", rather than passive "natives" and "informants", from the field (Ingold, 2006).

Another layer of methodological relevance in discussing such "tales" is the comparison of the way(s) in which, from one field site to another, experiencing serendipity in anthropological research would prove to be really efficient for further work of theoretical synthesis on ethnic behaviour. The scope of such comparison is not (in this case) any cross-cultural interpretation of minority groups that, as described above, are different in their ethnic identity. Instead, mirroring case studies such as seen before in their relative coherence attained in a heuristic manner (in lieu of simply testing home-produced working hypotheses), could contribute to refining the means in which anthropological understanding is given birth.

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AUTHORS' PHOTOGRAPHS ON THE ETHNOGRAPHIC SITES



Fig. 1 - Ioan Rusu from Jurilovca
fishing on the Lake Razim



Fig. 2 - Calistrat Gurei from Jurilovca
repairing a fishing net



Fig. 3
Emma Henning
from Michelsberg
cooking hanklich
alongside one of her
neighbors



Fig. 4 - Michael Henning from
Michelsberg with one of his kacheln
ceramic plaques representing
the Kreutzritter

Fig. 5
Agoston Pall from
Korond with one of
his ceramic artifacts
representing
the Turul
mythological bird



Fig. 6 - A ceramic artifact by
Josza Laszlo from Korond
representing the Husar motif





Fig. 7 - Victor Căldărar from Brăteiu with one of his copper-made artifacts

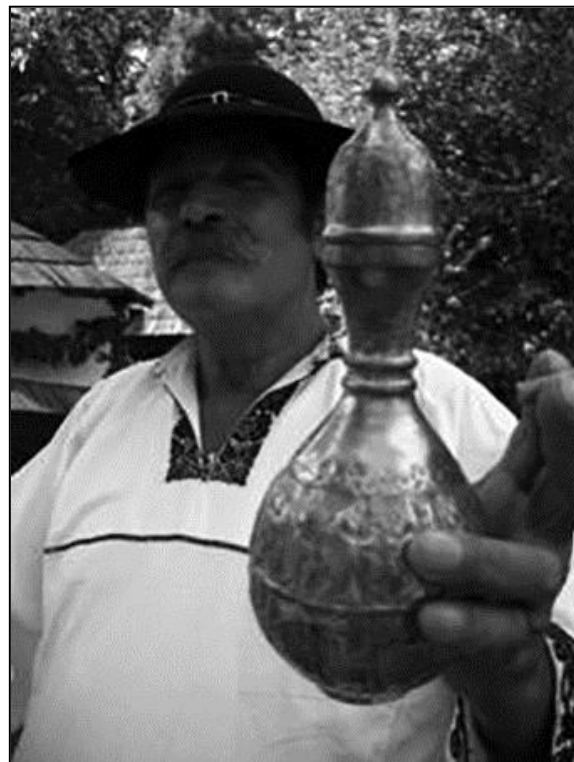


Fig. 8 - Emilian Căldărar from Brăteiu with one of his copper-made artifacts representing a Kris customary court



Fig. 9 - Ion Drăgan from Băbeni with his wooden artifacts
when exposed within the “Astra” Museum
of Folk Civilization in Sibiu



Fig. 10 - Iordan Lepădatu and Vița Lepădatu from Băbeni together with their daughter in the framework of their home-based woodcarving workshop