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## **Two Introductions**



# Creative Traditions and Ecology of Heritage<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Eric Hobsbawm used a distinction between “customs” (collective representations of the past experienced as present) and “tradition” (as “imagined past”, a product of modernity), while at the same time introducing the concept of “invented traditions” into the theoretical terminology of the social sciences. He thus opened the way for a nuanced analysis of the concepts that come into discussion in the analysis of the relation between the past and the present that re-uses it. Starting from this methodological distinction, the article presents a discussion of past and present by analysing such concepts as tradition, patrimony, legacy, succession, and preservation. These are the concepts that govern the relation between and regarding the cultural-identitary politics that correspond to them, and this can be richly exemplified in the case of Romania.

## KEYWORDS

Tradition, invented traditions, heritage, patrimony, creative traditions.

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## Imagining the Past: Customs, traditions and invented traditions

*“What is being performed here is experimenting with something old.*

*– Andrei Pleșu\**

**H**ow can “traditions” be “creative”? For most people anywhere, “creative traditions” sounds like a straight contradiction, an oxymoron. But is this really the case? In addressing this inaugural question, we need to start by asking what “traditions” actually are.

Introducing his celebrated concept of “invented traditions”, Eric Hobsbawm reminds us right at the outset that “‘tradition’ in this sense must be distinguished clearly from ‘custom’ which dominates so-called ‘traditional’ societies” (Hobsbawm 1983: 2). And he further explains: “The object and characteristic of ‘traditions’, including invented ones, is invariance. The past, real or invented, to which they refer, imposes fixed (normally formalized) practices, such as repetition. ‘Custom’ in traditional societies has the double function of motor and fly-wheel. It does not preclude innovation and change up to a point, though evidently the requirement that it must appear compatible

\* At the opening of the Museum of the Romanian Peasant, 5th of February 1990.





or even identical with precedent imposes substantial limitations on it. What it does is to give any desired change (or resistance to innovation) the sanction of precedent, social continuity and natural law as expressed in history.” But “‘custom’ cannot afford to be invariant, because even in ‘traditional’ societies life is not so.” “Students of peasant movements know that a village’s claim to some common land or right ‘by custom from time immemorial’ often expresses not a historical fact, but the balance of forces in the constant struggle of village against lords or against other villages” (Hobsbawm 1983: 2). On the other hand, for Hobsbawm “‘invented tradition’ is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past” (Hobsbawm 1983: 1).

Traditions, in the sense acknowledged here, thus have to be distinguished both from “customs” and from “invented traditions.” What, then, do we mean by “traditions”?

First of all, traditions are, in fact, a by-product of modernity. But is this not another oxymoron? How can (old) historical “traditions” be (recent) “social facts” of “modern” times? In order to address this further puzzling question we have to go even further and ask what we then mean by “modernity.”

### *Modernity and pre-modernity*

In *How Institutions Think* Mary Douglas (1986) implicitly provides a striking conceptual frame for this question too. At first sight, “conventions”, originating in “transactions” and framing social expectations, are sufficient to guarantee a functional state of order and make institutions work. But, as she further

argues, institutions are “legitimized social grouping” and conventions alone cannot guarantee such a legitimization: “for a convention to turn into a legitimate social institution it needs a parallel cognitive convention to sustain it” (Douglas 1986: 47). “Before it can perform its entropy-reducing work, the incipient institution needs some stabilizing principle to stop its premature demise. That stabilizing principle is the naturalization of classification” that Durkheim drew attention to many years ago (Douglas 1986: 48). “It is assumed that most established institutions, if challenged, are able to rest their claims to legitimacy on their fit with the nature of the universe. A convention is institutionalized when, in reply to the question, ‘Why do you do it like this?’, although the first answer may be framed in terms of mutual convenience, in response to further questioning the final answer refers to the way the planets are fixed in the sky or the way that plants or humans or animals naturally behave” (Douglas 1986: 46-47). The conclusion is that “there needs to be an analogy by which the formal structure of a crucial set of social relations is found in the physical world, or in the supernatural world, or in eternity, anywhere, so long as it is not seen as a socially contrived arrangement. When the analogy is applied back and forth from one set of social relations to another and from these back to nature, its recurring formal structure becomes easily recognized and endowed with self-validation truth” (Douglas 1986: 48). For social order to exist and institutions to function, (transactional) *conventions* have to be backed by (cognitive) *convictions*; there always has to be what André Petitat calls the “transcendence of the conventional” (Petitat 1998), a final source of legitimization, a kind of meta-ideology we could also term *Rationality*.

We have given this long introduction in order to say that modernity is in the final analysis an essential shift in “Rationality.” With modernity, “there is any longer an expectation of society receiving the Law

from God and it seems impossible (...) that such a Law might be restored according to an anthropomorphic cosmic order. (...) A modern society must be born, meaning a society which is no longer looking for its ideal image in the past, but in a deep splitting of it, in a future built only on rational and utilitarian bases" (Caillé 2000: 21-22). Order is no longer expected to be initiated by an external (supra)natural force of one kind or another. Man now claims to be his own Law and to be what he becomes according to this inner Law. He no longer looks backwards to the past for the legitimizing principles of his actions, but rather to the future of his becoming, embedded as it is some kind of universal principle of "evolution." In the first case, becoming is origin-oriented, needing only to *accomplish* Man's original – and thus true – nature; in the second case, Man's true nature has to *be created* by and through his very becoming. Collectively bound in pre-modern times by an original cosmic-sacred *order*, Man now strives for non-binding, free (individual) choices of *ordering*; and believes in them. Accordingly, "rationality" is no longer *retrospective*, but *prospective*. Man is convinced that he is his own origin and thus in control of his becoming; and individuals are starting to download this belief for themselves...

This is not to imply that pre-modern times, with their dominant retrospective rationality, are "unhistorical" in one way or another, but simply that changes have to find their legitimation as far as possible in an inaugural past "not seen as a socially contrived arrangement." Let us recall here only the classic example given by Jack Goody and Ian Watt regarding the change in the mythical legitimation of the state of Gonja. Records drawn up by the British administration in Ghana in the early 1900s show that Ndewura Jakpa, the seventeenth-century founder of the state of Gonja, had seven sons, each of whom ruled a territorial division within the state. Six decades later, for various reasons, two of the divisions had disappeared. The "reason" for this was

provided by altering the founder's family details: Jakpa had now had only five sons, and so only five divisions had been created (Goody and Watt 1968). Change happened, but to be accepted it had to be inscribed in a shared order of the past: it is (symbolic) disorder that is avoided rather than (social) change. The same holds true in Romania in the case of the so-called "villages that walk on ancestors" (*sate umblătoare pe moși*). In order to decide the share of the community's land to be held by certain leading families, transactions take place between kin groups and end in the establishment of a number of descent groups (*neamuri*) that are entitled to hold hereditary landed property. It is only after these transactions have been resolved that a legend of the eponymous hero will emerge in each village and legitimize them by claiming that at the point when the village was founded there were exactly the same number of ancestors as the number of currently entitled kin groups (Stahl 1959).

We may now sketch the dichotomy of pre-modernity and modernity as follows:

PRE-MODERNITY	MODERNITY
Cosmo/theo-centrism	Anthropocentrism
Heteronomy	Autonomy
Holism	Individualism
Binding customs	Non-binding choices
Retrospective rationality	Prospective rationality

This rough polarity represents rather modernity's core "conviction", its ideological belief, than the factual course of history: there is neither a complete and decisive shift from one side to the other, nor a total irreversibility of this shift.

#### *Traditions and customs*

In this respect, modernity can be considered as being "parricide" by definition: "The desire of parricide, regicide or deicide, meaning the negation of one's origin, is at the core of modern culture" (Hiyama 1994: 281). Correspondingly,

traditions are what is kept or recovered after “killing the Father”, a free and negotiated reconciliation with the rejected past. In a way, traditions are “free-binding choices”, an elective commitment to items and/or representations of the past claimed to be the expressions of one’s universal, national or local *identity*. Products of a free social choice, they nevertheless bind society to a past representative of this very choice. Shorn of its quasi-religious power as *origin*, the past is thus undergoing a selective process of re-sacralization as human or historical *value*.

This is true even in the case of a “radical parricide” such as the French Revolution and the building of the French nation. While advocating the free choice of nationhood by a “plébiscite de tous les jours”, Ernest Renan, for example, drew attention to the fact that a nation still cannot construct itself without a set of memories and amnesias of a shared past (Renan 1887) – i.e. without re-embracing in one way or another its earlier contested past. The (re)construction of “lieux de mémoire” (Nora 1997) and the patrimonialization of (some) heritages of the past generally thus involve a kind of religious fervour/sentiment a present-day public performs when it enters the modern temples of its own (or others’) “authentic” (authenticated...) past. It is relevant that MacCannell was already in the early 1970s emphasising the fact that “sightseeing is a form of ritual respect for society and that tourism absorbs some of the social functions of religion in the modern world. (...) The concern of moderns for the shallowness of their lives and inauthenticity of their experiences parallels concerns for the sacred in primitive society” (MacCannell 1973: 589-590). Decoupled from the lived past that they have killed off, moderns thus need to re-attach themselves to its “authentic” traces put on display by modern societies precisely to satisfy this need.

To cut this long story short, we will appeal to Pouillon’s imaginative description: “in

order to define a tradition one has to go from the present to the past and not the other way around, and has to figure it not as a *vis a targo* whose effects we merely experience, but as a point of view we undertake in our days in order to approach what preceded us. I definitely am not implying by this that accepting a tradition means to invent it. The past must persist in order to allow us to extract our goods – and we cannot do with it whatever we please; the past imposes only the limits, but our interpretations of it depend only on our present. (...) In fact, tradition is a *reversed filiation*: in this case, it is the son that gives birth to the father, so that he can afford more!” (Pouillon 1975: 160; emphasis mine). Traditions are thus “imagined pasts” in the way nations are “imagined communities” (Anderson 1991).

We can now better understand what constitutes the difference between traditions and customs. One easy way to suggest it is simply to think about the difference between Southern Italy’s possession ritual of tarantism and the Italian popular dance *tarantella*; or, in the case of Romania, the comparable difference between the healing ritual of the *Căluș* and the modern “folk” dance of the *Călușari*. The first thing that stands out is the fact that the ancient rituals of both tarantism and *Căluș* were performed by and in the community, while both derived dances are performed for the public or in public and have become identity icons: customs are self-performed (and sometime secret), while traditions are always staged – “staged authenticity”, to borrow MacCannell’s term (1973). On closer inspection, it is not difficult to discover that both dances, while rooted in the earlier rituals, went through a complex process of separation (starting around the 15th century in the Italian case, and the late 19th century in the Romanian one) and finally developed a kind of stage autonomy. What was initially just a part of the whole custom is now a tradition in itself: traditions are always selective and/or fragmented. Finally,

if anyone has even a minimal experience of peasant life, they will know that, if questioned about the rules and meaning of such customs, country people will give an answer of the following kind: “We do this because we’ve always done it’ or ‘because it must be so, otherwise it would not be proper’ or ‘because the ancestors told us to do so” (Boyer 1990: 11). Customs have always to be legitimated in a past and believed to reproduce the same pattern of performing over time: a custom, people will explain, has to be performed in this way because it always has been performed in this way – which can never be true! Nevertheless, even if it has been changed, a ritual will be still regarded as conforming to the “original”: there is a “retrospective rationality” at work in the background, drawing on the past to confirm and buttress the rationality of the present ritual behaviour. By contrast, in the case of traditions, the reason for performing them resides in the present, in being proud of or simply enjoying them *hic et nunc* – or even in handing them down to the future: behind this practice of traditions we find the “rational choice” ideology and the “prospective rationality” of our days.

Last but not least, Boyer points to the fact that “a notable feature of traditional discourse is the emphasis on specific situations instead of theoretical inferences, on salient examples rather than general principles” (Boyer 1990: 42). Without asking why this is so, we may limit ourselves to accepting that customs are mainly a repetition of an event, while traditions imply rather the conservation of a model.

Finally, in this sense, so-called “traditional societies” have no “traditions” at all; they have “customs.” And customs may or may not survive during the shift to modernity, they may be passed on and turned into elective “traditions” or they may not. But once turned into “traditions”, they *represent* the past; they are worshipped as being the past.

We may now schematise the dichotomy of customs and traditions as follows:

#### Custom

Repetition (of an event)  
Organic unity  
Filiation with the past  
Performing (by, in, and for the community)

#### Tradition

Conservation (of a model)  
Selective/fragmented  
Affinity with the present  
Staging (for a public)

Of course, one cannot usually find such a categorical split between customs and traditions in real life: some customs find their way through modern times by adopting new features and adapting to new needs; some traditions are closer to their source in custom than others; and, sometimes, vanished customs may be regenerated from the ashes as uninterrupted traditions. Radu Răutu reports such a case. In the early 80s, the ritual of *Drăgaica* had been almost abandoned for decades in the village of Băleni. Then, in competition with a neighbouring community of Bulgarians who were still practising a very similar ritual of their own, the Romanian teachers in Băleni decided to bring the *Drăgaică* back to life in the Romanian community. They therefore consulted a description of the ritual in an 18th century book and asked their pupils to learn it by heart. The next year, they performed it at a folk contest and won a regional prize. When Răutu visited the village almost twenty years later, he was struck by the archaic aspect of the *Drăgaica* ritual practised by the villagers. When asked about it, they explained in all seriousness that they “had always done it this way” (Răutu 1998).

Nevertheless, traditions remain a modern and free way of imagining and dealing with the past.

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These distinctions between pre-modern and modern or custom and tradition imply a particular kind of philosophy of history. In the present text we have preferred to leave this implicit and to ask instead a much more grassroots question: what do we usually do with the Past and with the traces/vestiges of it we have inherited?





## Handling the past

The vocabulary currently used when dealing with the past may be an insightful means of unfolding social classifications that have the effect of shaping patrimony policies.

Looking at this vocabulary in regular Romanian parlance, two ideas stand out: *patrimony* and *traditions*. The distinction between the two is similar to the UNESCO one between material and immaterial / tangible and intangible cultural heritage, but is, in fact, more deeply rooted in the German tradition of distinguishing between Ethnography (focused on material culture) and Folklore (concerned with oral literature, mythology and rituals). *Grosso modo*, patrimony actually refers to the material (built) heritage, while traditions concern inherited practices and knowhow (approached mainly in a folklore-style way). “Heritage” (*moștenire*) is a rather generic and rhetorical term, while “legacy” has no precise equivalent in Romanian. While “patrimony” may be both rural and urban (but usually not “industrial”), “traditions” are viewed as only the rural/peasant heritage. Last but not least, “patrimonialization”, as referring to a process, has only recently been introduced into the Romanian academic vocabulary by younger generations of social scientists (chiefly anthropologists)<sup>2</sup>. Generally, the term most people use is simply “patrimony”, to indicate something that is “out there”, a given object evidencing identity-laden value: patrimony has no becoming, it is patrimony!

### *A conceptual frame*

The current international vocabulary is more complex and nuanced. For the needs of the present argumentation we will nevertheless simplify it in a somewhat heterodox way in order to pinpoint only

the strategic lines along which “heritage” is usually approached and used.

“Heritage” is the starting point. It should be regarded as being just what it seems to be, our available past, the reservoir of material and non-material traces/vestiges we are still able to refer to. In this respect, traces are inherited “facts.” We may then turn this heritage into a “legacy”: what from the past is (electively) regarded as worth being represented in present times and consequently requires to be preserved in a “factish” way (from Latour’s terminological coinage: fact + fetish – Latour 2010). Traditions, in this sense, are simply another name for legacy. Or we can expand this into a “patrimony”: what is (selectively) promoted from the past into the present as “resources” for a better life and future. Heritage is thus considered to be relevant for just two fundamental reasons: *being* (legacy dimension) and/or *wellbeing* (patrimony dimension). Very roughly speaking, legacy is about preserving the past, while patrimony is about promoting it.

### *Preserving the Past? Legacy and the patrimony crusade*

In 1985 David Lowenthal used a famous statement as the title of his book on heritage, *The Past Is a Foreign Country*. “We are no longer intimate enough with [our] historical legacy to rework it creatively” he complains (Lowenthal 1985: XXIV). We should no longer regard the past as a “foreign country” but rather do our best to “assimilate (it) in ourselves, and resurrect (it) into an ever-changing present” (Lowenthal 1985: 412); intimacy with the past should be regained. A decade later, he was amazed – if not scared – by the “heritage crusade” that was proclaiming, all over the world, a kind of holy war in the name of patrimony. “All at once heritage is everywhere – in the news, in the movies, in the marketplace – in everything from galaxies to genes. It is the chief focus of patriotism and a prime lure of tourism. One can barely move

2. For an overview see Andreea Lazea (2012).

without bumping into a heritage site. Every legacy is cherished. From ethnic roots to history theme parks, Hollywood to the Holocaust, the whole world is busy lauding – or lamenting – some past, be it fact or fiction.” But “why this rash of backward-looking concern?” – he wonders. “What makes heritage so crucial in a world beset by poverty and hunger, enmity and strife?” One possible answer would be that “we seek comfort in past bequest partly to allay these griefs. In reconciling from grievous loss or fending off a fearsome future, people the world over revert to ancestral legacies. As hope of progress fades, heritage consoles us with tradition” (Lowenthal 1996: xiii). But this kind of “heritage crusade”, he warns us, is “subverting our will and thwarting our ability to care for common global legacies” (Lowenthal 1996: xiv). “Benign and baneful consequences are alike manifold, and heritage vice is inseparable from heritage virtue. This is little understood, though; because few realize how heritage actually functions, most are content either to admire or traduce it. Devotees ignore or slight its threats, while detractors deny its virtues and suppose that simply cursing heritage can exorcise its ills” (Lowenthal 1996: 2).

What was Lowenthal afraid of, in fact? He was accepting that “heritage, no less than history, is essential to knowing and acting” (Lowenthal 1996: xi). This kind of personalized past that he was pleading for in his first book does indeed fulfil a fundamental *psychological* need. But it is also because of this that emotional – sometimes egoistic and revanchist – values come in to fuel our perceptions of and attitudes toward the past. “Heritage the world over not only tolerates but thrives on and even requires historical error” (Lowenthal 1996: 128): it thus subverts “history” or even tries to replace it in its striving for a reasonable past. But above all, Lowenthal is sceptical about this emerging “heritage crusade” because the fragmentation and trivialization it produces prevent us from caring for “common global *legacies*.”

As we have seen, Lowenthal was cautious about both heritage “devotees” and heritage “detractors.” Christoph Brumann goes a step further in this direction by refining the meanings and implications of these two categories of approach and suggesting a third possibility. On the one hand there are what he calls “heritage believers”, “explicitly committed to cultural heritage in general or to specific heritage items of whose intrinsic value they are convinced and whose conservation they endorse” (Brumann 2014: 173-174). With post-colonial and post-modern critics, a deconstructivist trend has emerged, unmasking various instances of patrimonial fictions and other kinds of invented (old) traditions. This “heritage atheism”, as it is labelled by Brumann, “is even clearer when (...) heritage adulation is seen as a general societal ill”, as in the case of “the church of high nationalism” (Brumann 2014: 175). Brumann’s “third way” is “heritage agnosticism.” By analogy with religious agnosticism, “an ‘agnostic’ study of heritage does not posit a priori that heritage is an empty signifier, an entirely arbitrary and socially determined ascription, but takes people’s heritage experience and beliefs seriously” (Brumann 2014: 180). To this kind of dialectics I would add, keeping with the same religious terminology, two more (sub)categories: a) “heritage profaners”, for whom the past is just a dead body that has to be cleared away in order to leave room for the development of the future and b) “heritage paganism”, that is, people such as local peasants, who usually were – and may still be – ascribed as the very subjects of customs-cum-traditions, but for whom the God of “universal heritage” is simply an alien one (Mihăilescu 2015).

In the early 90s, this kind of criticism was just emerging; nowadays, it is closer to being the standard approach. We therefore need to go to the source of this “heritage crusade” and ask for its rationale. Why preserve the past, after all? And preserve what?

Many years ago, I happened upon an intriguing phrase in a book on the

Crusades that I have totally forgotten since then: *Of course we are all Christians! But it is more important to ask against whom we are Christians! Mutatis mutandis*, we may also question ourselves: of course we have a heritage, but against whom (or what) are we protecting it? The first answer that will probably come to our minds would be that we are protecting this heritage against oblivion and because we feel that we are losing our past and that something is therefore missing from our lives: “legacies at risk are cherished for their very fragility” – as Lowenthal (1996: 23) has it. We thus have to *protect* and *preserve* this heritage. But the second, less obvious answer would be that we need to prevent the past from repeating itself and bad memories from haunting our present lives: never again this past! The very idea of Man emerged in the early seventeenth century *against* the bad memories of slaughtering the aboriginals of the New World. Reason became a means for Enlightenment people in the eighteenth century to overcome bad memories of religious wars: never again this past! In a way, too, UNESCO was born in the second part of the twentieth century against the bad memories of the two world wars, with its universal patrimony policies aiming to restore global peace. And development too! The past was no longer to be merely *preserved*, but also to be *promoted* as a resource for a better future.

#### *Promoting the past? Patrimony and development*

Although heritage was a constant concern of UNESCO, which launched its World Heritage Convention in 1972, culture and the economy began to be partners only in the 1990s. The post-Second World War intuitions enshrined in the UNESCO Constitution matured in the course of the nation-building and decolonization processes that have given way to today's context of advanced globalization (Bandarin et al. 2011). The growing awareness of

limited energy resources, of concerns with the “green economy”, “recycling” and even “degrowth economy” and the promotion of a “sustainable development” credo was slowly turning culture in general and heritage in particular into a “resource for development.” UNESCO now claims on its home page that it is “convinced that no development can be sustainable without a strong culture component. (...) Yet until recently, culture has been missing from the development equation.” The UN is renewing its appeal to “all Member States, intergovernmental bodies, organizations of the United Nations system and relevant non-governmental organizations [...] to ensure a more visible and effective integration and mainstreaming of culture in development policies and strategies at all levels.” Even the World Bank has changed its approach and has decided to support heritage and culture as a major component of its development policies. In the late 1990s, its president, James D. Wolfensohn, asserted loudly and clearly that “We simply cannot conceive of development without cultural continuity. It must be acknowledged and must form the basis for the future. Serious attention to culture is basic to improving development effectiveness in education, health, the production of goods and services, the management of cities. It is at the very heart of poverty reduction as well as the quality of life. (...) The challenge is to draw on traditions, values, knowledge and strengths that can make development more effective” (Wolfensohn 1999: 1). Two years later, a complex report on “Cultural heritage and development: a framework for action in the Middle East and North Africa” was published under the coordination of Michael Cernea. This Romanian sociologist underlined that “the models of development formerly used were the expression of a narrow vision which did not integrate the cultural dimension (...) and which undervalued the driving force that the cultural sector may play in economic development. The World Bank, like many

national governments, was not interested in these issues. (...) We need to make good these deficiencies now if we want to integrate these socio-cultural dimensions in national strategies and in the World Bank's programs of development." And he later explained: "Supporting development does not concern only economic growth, but also ambitions to ensure general social development. Culture and cultural patrimony cannot be kept apart from programs that support development" (Cernea 2003: 3-4). The *Zeitgeist* was changing to match the new millennium. But it was changing chiefly by revisiting economic ideas in order to make space for culture and heritage within the more inclusive marketplace of "sustainable development."

This ideological turn also means a shift of focus from the more culture-based inherited *patrimony* toward a more and more socio-economically focused concern with *patrimonialization*. But this apparently trivial change in terminology in fact conceals a number of ideological assumptions. In this respect, "patrimonialization" obviously needs a subject: who is patrimonializing, and *why*? National and international institutions usually answer with a piece of fine-sounding discourse: "by the people and for the people." Even if well meant, such discourse leaves aside the deeper nature of patrimonialization: like any other act of social categorization, patrimonialization is a power game and its real subject is the person who has the power (and the interest...) to promote it. Economically and politically supporting patrimonialization may thus fuel patrimonial clashes and grassroots tensions between rival "heirs." UNESCO's policies, in spite of their well-intentioned nature, have produced numerous problems and conflicts "on the ground" (see e.g. Brumann and Berliner 2016). Claiming, as UNESCO does, that "our patrimony is our legacy" is noble, but still leaves open a question about "us": whose heritage? Mankind's, of course – UNESCO maintains. What then about "our" heritage? – some dissatisfied people

ask. Between universal, national and local heritage there are many unresolved conflicts. Sometimes humanity's – or even national – heritage simply has no meaning for local people and the regulations that come with its recognition go against their "traditional" way of life. Even worse, the protection of *your* heritage may be an offence to *my* identity-laden heritage.

In more economic terms, strategic patrimonialization is supposed to be empowering development and reducing poverty – which indeed it frequently does. But this is not always so for the poor and/or locals, who may instead become the victims of a kind of "gentrification of the landscape" of or around their patrimonial space. Cultural tourism also brings money, but "touristification", especially low-cost tourism, may destroy patrimonial spaces and their local populations' way of life. Promoting patrimony is certainly good, but it is not always a win-win game...

But patrimonialization may also be a means of fighting back against the government or part of a wider "struggle for recognition" (Honneth 1996). In this sense, patrimonialization implies the pride of a shared past fuelling the recognition of a dignifying present – and this is not only an act of self-promotion, but also a reaction against non-recognition (*Misachtung*) by a significant Other. In other cases, UNESCO recognition of a universal value may actually save a local patrimony, as in the case of Roșia Montană in Romania; this site has (for the moment...) been saved from destruction by a powerful international gold mining corporation by its being added to UNESCO's list of protected areas. Patrimonialization may also go hand in hand with political/liberation movements, as in the Palestinian case reported by Chiara De Cesari, where a number of patrimony NGOs managed to bridge heritage, the arts, and liberation politics (De Cesari 2010). Last but (for sure!) not least, supporting heritage may indeed deliver what it promises: a better life for (some) people.





On the other hand, rejecting *patrimonialization* and sticking to atemporal images of inherited *patrimony* means turning this into a fetish, a sacred object you do not have – and are not allowed – to question. And this may be the other side of the coin: faced with the excesses and traps of globalized *patrimonialization*, fetishizing local/national *patrimony* may fight back by fuelling nationalism and xenophobia.

As we can see, promoting the past by turning heritage into a resource for development has its “believers” and “atheists” too; “believers” may be suspected of “neo-liberalism”, while “atheists” may be treated as “leftists.” What then would an “agnostic” position on this issue look like? It is hard to say, but, as already suggested by Brumann, “agnosticism” must refrain from believing *a priori* that “patrimonialization” is an “empty signifier” and simply pursue an honest path towards it, from intentions to outcomes, both cultural and economic.

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## A prospect

### *Back to the Future: Experimenting with the Past*

At the end of the 1800s, the biologist Grigore Antipa, a student of Ernst Haeckel, started to study the Black Sea and the Danube Delta from a twofold point of view: understanding this ecosystem and the afferent biotopes, and imaging their optimal management. From a theoretical point of view, in a speech delivered to the Geographical Society and subsequently in 1909 in his book on ichthyology, he launched the holistic concept of “geonomy”<sup>3</sup>, which he further developed in 1933 by proposing two complementary disciplines, “bio-sociology” and “bio-economy.” The former is based on the finding that “sociability is a primordial quality, inherent to all living beings” and, as such, has to be the subject of a distinct discipline that makes possible

an understanding of “the social structure of the world of living beings and their utility on earth” (Antipa 1933: 6). The latter starts from the assumption that “the vital activity of every organism may also be regarded as a kind of economic activity. One may also speak about a production, circulation, distribution and consumption of products of this activity. Raw materials are the resources that each organism has to use as best it can” (Antipa 1933: 8). The same “associations of beings” thus have to be studied from both a social and an economic point of view, at the individual, local (biotope) and general (ecosystem) levels. From a practical point of view, Antipa proposed a new “Law on Fishing” in 1896 and published in 1916 his monumental opus on “Fisheries and Fishing in Romania”, which has remained a model of fishing management up to the present day.

Antipa used the approach of the social sciences to better understand natural life in order to imagine an integrated and – as we would now call it – “sustainable” management of living systems. Over a long period, Nicolae Georgescu-Roegen approached the issue from the opposite direction and used biological processes and mechanisms to understand socio-economic life. He started by studying Romanian peasant economy in the 1930s and on this basis distinguishing agrarian economies from industrial ones. Both Marxist and “standard” economists were mistaken in this respect, he argues, and the insights of the Agrarians should be revisited from a more careful and general theoretical point of view. “In a nutshell,” – he summarises – the main tenets of the Agrarian doctrine are: 1. Because of their geographical situation some communities will always rely on agriculture as a main economic activity. And since agriculture is an intrinsically different activity from industry, such communities cannot develop along identical lines with the industrial economies. 2. For the countries with an agricultural overpopulation, individual

3. This approach was later used chiefly in France, where it was introduced by Emanuel de Martonne, who knew Romania well, and developed by the geographer Albert Demangeon (1942) and the urbanist Maurice-François Rouge (1947). Although the subject later split into a number of more specific (sub)disciplines, the term “geonomy” is still sometimes used as such by geographers and ecologists (e.g. Pinchemel 1997). In Anglo-Saxon literature, “geonomy” is rarely used and normally has different historical and conceptual roots.

peasant holdings and cottage industry constitute the best economic policy” (Georgescu-Roegen 1960: 33-34). Beyond these basic statements, Georgescu-Roegen reminds us that “a complete description of how individual distribution in a peasant community is regulated must include the institutional patterns prevailing in that particular community. That is why a mechanistic schema of peasant behaviour, like the schema of Standard theory, proved to be an impossible project for all who thought of it. And that is not all. If one finally decides to study the peasant institutions so as to construct a *homo oeconomicus* to represent the peasant, one soon discovers that these institutions are almost infinitely variable, a fact that precludes any relevant classification. It is natural that such a baffling and elusive problem as the conduct of the peasant should have attracted few students and resisted being caught within a simple formula” (Georgescu-Roegen 1960: 28). Upstream, he believes, “the basis of this difference [between agrarian economies and industrial ones] is undoubtedly the fact that the living Nature imposes a different type of restriction upon *homo agricola* than the inert matter upon *homo faber*” (Georgescu-Roegen 1960: 5). Several essential parameters of the production flow are thus different here from how they appear in classical econometrics. In a complementary way, in order to include institutional patterns prevailing in particular peasant communities, he resorted to the concept of *hysteresis* and in 1950 proposed the “hereditary postulate”, in which utility is dependent on past experience – the duration and intensity of past experience and the amount of time that has elapsed since the relevant experience took place – i.e. a *sui generis* kind of “path dependence” later used in evolutionary economics. In the case of agrarian economics, the past is decisive for the way present economic systems function. Along the same lines, he further anticipated that “we should not be surprised at all if the fight of the Communist regimes against the

‘bourgeois spirit’ in reality aims at creating a ‘socialist man’ with a peasant type of conduct” (Georgescu-Roegen 1960: 38). This did indeed happen, the real product of the “proletarianization” of the peasants in most of Eastern Europe being in fact what was later to be called the “peasant-worker” (e.g. Szelenyi 1988).

It is already in these earlier works that we see Georgescu-Roegen’s views on development starting to change. In his 1960 paper on peasant economy, for instance, he stated that “economic development does not mean only pure growth; in the first place it means a growth-inducing process (...) The power to sustain growth, then, is the only valid criterion of investment in undeveloped countries” (Georgescu-Roegen 1960: 39). In 1971 he gave a fully-fleshed version of his theory in *The Entropy Law and the Economic Process*. Later on, in the foreword to his celebrated work on *Energy and Economic Myths*, he acknowledged that “the idea that the economic process is not a mechanical analogue, but an entropic, unidirectional transformation began to turn over in my mind long ago, as I witnessed the oil wells of the Ploesti field of both World Wars’ fame becoming dry one by one and as I grew aware of the Romanian peasants’ struggle against the deterioration of their farming soil by continuous use and by rains as well. However, it was the new representation of a process that enabled me to crystallize my thoughts in describing for the first time the economic process as the entropic transformation of valuable natural resources (low entropy) into valueless waste (high entropy). I may hasten to add that this is only the material side of the process. The true product of the economic process is an immaterial flux, the *enjoyment* of life, whose relation with the entropic transformation of matter-energy is still wrapped in mystery” (Georgescu-Roegen 1976: xiv – emphasis mine). He thus concluded that “undoubtedly, the current growth must cease, maybe reverse” (Georgescu-Roegen 1976: 25). It is due to this early and fully

argued warning that Georgescu-Roegen is retrospectively considered to be “the father of a new and rapidly growing school of economic thought, ecological economics” (Mayumi 2001: 1) and “incontestably one of the main fathers of degrowth economy” (Latouche 2016: 111).

He coined the heterodox approach known as “bioeconomics.” “The term” – he explains – “is intended to make us bear in mind continuously the biological origin of the economic process and thus spotlights the problem of mankind’s existence with a limited store of accessible resources, unevenly located and unequally appropriated” (Georgescu-Roegen 1977: 361). For Georgescu-Roegen this is also a different moral credo one should become aware of and be committed to: “in the past we went from ‘Thou shalt not kill’ to ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself’. The time calls for a new commandment: ‘Thou shalt love thy species as thyself’” (Georgescu-Roegen 1977: 374).

In a paper on growth versus development, Alain Alcouffe and Sylvie Ferrari consider that “Georgescu-Roegen’s analysis in this respect has some major implications: on the one hand, it is impossible to consider the evolution of the production process as being independent, and on the other, environmental entropy must irrevocably increase as a result of depletion/emissions. The economic dynamic, seated in the act of production, is inherently related to the laws of physics. To isolate any process of production by means of an analytical boundary is just formal. In actual fact, because it is rooted in the material environment it cannot be released from the laws of physics” (Alcouffe and Ferrari 2008: 16). Finally, the two commentators highlight the fact that “Georgescu-Roegen demonstrates that the only plausible course to follow is negative growth. The stationary state is a ‘myth’ rather than a solution” (Alcouffe and Ferrari 2008: 11).

In their turn, John Gowdy and Susan

Mesner note that “though Georgescu-Roegen’s two articles on agrarian economics (Georgescu-Roegen 1960; 1965) laid the foundation for the emerging field of bioeconomics and ecological economics, his lucid and profound insights into developing agrarian economies have been sadly relegated to the dusty shelves of historical curiosity” (Gowdy and Mesner 1998: 143). They further comment that “at the core of the bioeconomic approach is a call for a change in values, where decisions are made based on the idea that the earth’s supply of available matter and energy is humankind’s dowry and should be conserved to the greatest extent possible for future generations. The implications are biological, economic, and political. Georgescu-Roegen called for the principle of discounting and maximizing utility to be abandoned in favour of the more sensible principle of minimizing regrets” (Gowdy and Mesner 199: 152).

✱

In recent decades, such “forewarnings” have become a more and more widely embraced credo. One may even wonder if this is not – or will not become – a new “conviction” in Douglas’ sense. To give just one example from a mushrooming literature on this theme, this “conviction” could be described, for instance, as what Michel Serres calls “the natural contract.” “By natural contract” – he explains – “I mean first of all the recognition, metaphysical indeed, by every community, that it is living and working in the same global world as all the others; not only every political community associated as it is by a social contract, but also whatever other kind of communities, military, commercial, religious, industrial... are associated by a legal contract, and more, the expert community associated by the scientific contract. I consider this natural contract as metaphysical because it goes far beyond the usual limits of the different local disciplines, and especially beyond those of physics. It is



as global as the social contract and allows the latter, in a way, to enter the world, and it is as worldwide as the scientific contract and allows that too to become part of history” (Serres 1990: 78). Behind this “natural contract”, Michel Serres symbolically places Sisyphus. Sisyphus, he says, is Sisyphus and the boulder: “there is no human community without objects” (Serres 1990: 77). This relation between subject and object now binds humankind to the global object, the Earth. Heritage too is not out-there, it is part of us being everywhere.



### *Ecology of heritage?*

In what way and to what extent (if at all) does this *Zeitgeist* affect and inform approaches to and policies regarding heritage? I believe it does and should. It is in this context that I will briefly suggest, in the following pages, a possible approach I have labelled “ecology of heritage.”

In 1995, Singh Rana introduced a very similar term, *heritage ecology* “as the line of thought which involves multi-disciplinary and multi-code research, and is also deeply conditioned by belief about our built nature and destiny and the ways to follow the path of sustainable development. Heritage Ecology, as yoga of place, is close to geomancy, and linked to the Gaia theory and connectedness of human psyche to the earth-spirit” (Rana 1995: 195). While some of his insights and suggestions need to be borne in mind, the general approach is essentially different from ours, which is inspired, to some extent, by Bateson’s “ecology of mind.”

In 1972, Gregory Bateson published a collection of essays entitled “Steps to an Ecology of Mind.” The concept of “ecology of mind” was an intriguing one, so he needed to explain it right at the outset. Ecology of mind, he said, is “a new way of thinking about ideas and about those aggregates of ideas which I call ‘minds’. This way of

thinking I call the ‘ecology of mind’, or the ecology of ideas. (...) The questions which the book raises are ecological: How do ideas interact? Is there some sort of natural selection which determines the survival of some ideas and the extinction or death of others? What sort of economics limits the multiplicity of ideas in a given region of mind? What are the necessary conditions for stability (or survival) of such a system or subsystem?” (Bateson 1972: 1). He was thus expanding the initial biological field of the term, extending the meaning of ecology from nature to culture, from material to spiritual. Later on, general ecology was more and more fragmented into regional sub-systems, from urban, economic or political ecology to, say, ecology of fishing, nutrition, pollution etc. The idea of “ecology of heritage” is not inspired by Bateson’s thinking as such but may be enriched by this broader understanding of ecology. Nor is it a distinct sub-field of classical, nature-focused ecology, but rather an approach to living systems under a “natural contract.” It is ecology insofar as heritage is not a foreign country but part of a living system we may or may not call *Anthropocene*. Ecology of heritage may thus be further described as the interactions and integration of heritage facts (natural or cultural, material or immaterial) in a presently functioning social system in order to support its sustainable and meaningful functioning. What happens to be considered *legacy* or *patrimony* at a particular place and time in history are such interactions and integrations as “make system” and are part of a currently functioning social system. In this respect, ecology of heritage is just one “institution”, further legitimated by a broader (and new?) entropy-reducing “conviction” of social “order.” In practical terms, ecology of heritage is (or should be) both knowledge and management.

Ecology of heritage is methodologically holistic and morally ecumenical.

It is an integrative approach, not a subtractive one that merely takes over,

preserves and/or exploits selected items inherited from the past; legacies and/or patrimonies are not objects in themselves, but living experience in time. Ecology of heritage also implies a spatial approach (in the sense of the recent “spatial turn” in the humanities prophesied by Michel Foucault as early as 1984); it involves acknowledging and tracking the distribution and circulation of heritage items across multi-scale spaces, from general “ecosystems” to local “biotopes”, with all the subsequent interactions, selections and adaptations that make system.

In so doing, it has to be ecumenical too. This means that heritage policies should not be practised simply as a hierarchical decision, but rather as a reasonably shared “cultural intimacy” (Herzfeld 1997). In order to pursue this ideal, ecology of heritage has to face some inevitable challenges. On the one hand, it has to cope with and manage the “dissonant heritage”, i.e. the temporal conflicts and disharmonies that inevitably occur as a result of the relationship between the past and its contemporary users (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1995); in doing this, it supports trans-generational ecological “filiation.” On the other hand, it has to face up to spatial conflicts too, given the fact that patrimonial spaces are, *de facto*, divided along political, religious, and/or economic boundaries; it thus has to maintain a kind of cross-border ecological “ecumenism.”

To put it briefly, ecology of heritage has to be holistic not only for methodological reasons, but mainly because – like it or not – we are living in a global world and under the pressure of a “natural contract” that we all need: this “globality” demands such a holistic approach. Correspondingly, managing it requires an ecumenical approach that can overcome (as far as possible) inherent global-cum-local conflicts and tensions. If culture (heritage included) has to be linked with development, and development has to be sustainable, holism and ecumenism are two of the chief prerequisites.

### *Creative traditions*

For the time being, it seems that an “ecology of heritage” raises more questions than it can answer. It may nevertheless offer a guiding frame of reference for patrimonial understanding and practices. It is in this sense that “creative traditions” should be considered.

We started by making a binary distinction between customs and traditions, regarding the latter as a product of modernity. As such, traditions are an elective heritage of modern times, not now *reproducing* (or claiming to reproduce) the same event over and over again as customs do, but rather *preserving* an original model (or what is assumed to be such a model) for further public performances. By doing this, traditions are a *sui generis* link between past and present, governed by a kind of hybrid retro-prospective Rationality of a still nostalgic Modernity: parricide as it were, Modernity gives itself, via traditions, nostalgic performances of time past, which re-bind it to a past it was supposed to have rid itself of. These are what we usually call “traditions”, what we have included in the category of “legacy”, and what we have now to differentiate and re-define as “binding traditions”: conserving them binds us back to the past, even if this is only a selective one and even if it is only limited to the time and space frame of their performance; worshipping them further binds our identity to some modern kind of cult of the ancestors. A product of modernity indeed, “binding traditions” are nevertheless on the edge of pre- (or even anti-) modernity. Politically, they may fuel both patriotism and nationalism, self-pride and xenophobia.

“Creative traditions” are different. They do not set out to preserve a model but instead aim at its transfiguration. They are truly “modern” inasmuch as they are a species of “non-binding choices”: they are what we should now call “non-binding traditions.” Modern artists have frequently proceeded in this way, picking up inherited

items from “archaic” societies (their own or “exotic” ones) and transfiguring them into “creative” works of art. From this point of view, “creative traditions” are not something totally new; what is truly new is their coupling with development – and thus with the market.

Let me now illustrate the two sub-species of “traditions.”

Vasile Alecsandri’s ballad *Miorița* may stand for the first, binding type of traditions. A poet and an important figure in Romanian nation-building, Alecsandri was also among the first to make folklore collections in the *Volksgeist* tradition of Herder. It is in this capacity that he discovered a pastoral folk theme, found in different forms and under different names all over Romania (and in fact throughout the Balkans), which he published in 1850 under the name of *Miorița*, shortened, rewritten and now promoted as the apogee of Romanian cultural consciousness. More than a hundred years later, in 1964, Adrian Fochi brought together in one volume a huge number of popular versions that folklorists had managed to collect in the interim. But it is Alecsandri’s cult version of *Miorița* that has remained in the

Romanian national consciousness as our genuine “traditional” folk masterpiece that all Romanians learn in school and that many Romanian intellectuals have made the subject of veneration and exegesis.

On the other hand, Constantin Brâncuși’s “endless column” may stand for the category of “non-binding” traditions. The popular source of its inspiration is evident and explicit. But Brâncuși’s intention was by no means to preserve an original model; on the contrary, he was striving to “unbind” and liberate inherited forms from their customary usages.

What we more specifically call “creative traditions” is thus an updated version of “non-binding traditions” – meaning a

relatively recent pattern of “unbinding” inherited items, something being done not only by creative individuals and for aesthetic reasons, but in the global context of patrimony policies that link culture to development and both of them to nature, as described above. In this way, “creative traditions” are trespassing/transgressing classical boundaries of culture and/or heritage and are open to development and the market. In fact, this is precisely their (disputed) aim and novelty.

The schema below offers an outline of all these conceptual articulations and suggests the social dynamics behind them (see Figure 1).

In this respect, “creative traditions” are not a field in its own right but rather

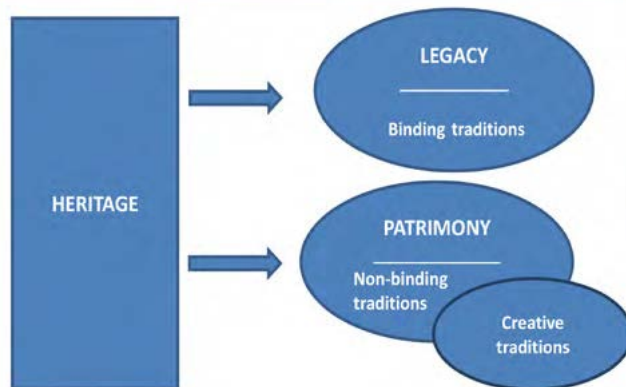


Figure 1

a means towards an emerging ecology of heritage. They are a pragmatic means of linking past and present into a sustainable and meaningful development. In practical terms, this is (or could be) the creative outcome of artisans meeting designers and patrimony organisations interacting with creative industries: neither one-way inspiration nor cut-and-paste fusion, but the shared building of a field of ideas and practices devoted to such a sustainable and meaningful development.

As such, the phrase “creative traditions” is an oxymoron. Not (yet) a concept, it is nevertheless the most comprehensive way to describe some already existing practices. “Arts & Crafts” initiatives and

organisations, for instance, have been mushrooming all over the world in the last few decades, and bridging “creative industries” and “traditions” is wishful thinking shared by many individuals and institutions. Architecture and fashion alike are reviving “traditional” materialities, from adobe to hemp. Even more complex forms of putting heritage to work through what Chiara De Cesari calls “creative heritage” (beyond the “binary vision” of national or trans-national hegemonic memories and governmentality and counter-memories of counter-governmentality – De Cesari 2010) are no longer a surprise to anyone.

Let me give just one empirical example in this regard. Some years ago, Ivan Patzaichin – a highly renowned many-time world canoeing champion and a man with deep roots in the Danube Delta region – and the architect Teodor Frolu started an “ecological” association, explicitly inspired by Antipa’s vision, aimed at bringing about a revival of local “traditions.” One such heritage item was the old wooden fishing boat (*lotca*) that no one but the very poor were still using: most people had moved to motor boats years before. From a strictly ecological point of view, this meant pollution and many other intrusions into the ecosystem of the Delta. For local people

of one of the last “marangozs” of the Delta, an old-cum-new craft, the “canotca” (*lotca plus canoe*), a light, easy to handle and “fashionable” wooden boat that nevertheless looked very similar to the old one. In order to make people in the area adopt the new craft, Patzaichin and Frolu organized a competition for local children, but initially none of them wanted to participate: it was embarrassing to take to the water in such an old-fashioned vessel! As in many other cases, “traditions” had lost their meaning for locals, and continuing to preserve them would have made you seem just a ridiculous “loser”... It took years of negotiation with both local people and the local authorities, many years of regional and international paddle boat competitions, of raising interest from tourists etc., to promote the “neo-traditional” *canotca*. It also involved a much larger project, including a revival of traditional food and traditional architecture, the promotion of eco-tourism and even turning the old local prison into a Norwegian-inspired “ecological” one. But it was only after the first householders in the Danube Delta started to become aware of the potential financial and prestige benefits that “traditions” regained a meaning for them and that the local authorities decided to back up the initiative. And all these



Lotca, the traditional boat from Danube Delta.  
Photo credit: The Association Ivan Patzaichin – Mila 23.



Canotca, a „creative tradition product”.  
Photo credit: Oana Radu Turcu.

it just meant modernity and efficiency. In order to adopt and adapt the old wooden boat to present-day technology and needs, the two started to conceive, with the help

initiatives had to be brought together to “make system” in order for them to work. For the development-poor locals of the Danube Delta, this project was also a



genuine kind of social economy.

The canotca, a typical “creative tradition” product, became the flagship of the revival project, but it was only the symbol of a much broader and self-regulating process of adopting and adapting the past and turning it into a functioning resource for sustainable development.

Of course, such “creative traditions” do not come without their compromises and side effects. They may or may not be backed up by national and/or local administrations that have convergent or divergent interests in accordance with which they will impose conditions of one kind or another. They may be – but more often are not – equally helpful to craftsmen and designers in arts & crafts projects; these are usually more productive for the designers, who have access to the market, than for the craftsmen, whose “traditional skills” may remain as anonymous as before. Eco/agro-tourism may bring much more healthy recreation to the tourists than financial benefit to the locals. Income and development generated by the marketization of such creative traditions may also be preferential and/or unequally distributed, and so on.

We may conclude that “good practice” in “creative traditions” also has its price and that this price is not always fair, people on the “creative” side usually having more to gain than those on the “traditional” side. Even if they involve a kind of symbolic empowerment of the artisan, when he competes with designers with higher educational qualifications and superior economic status, he will usually lose out... Nevertheless, especially in countries with population surpluses living in conditions of underdevelopment, “creative traditions” may be “a way to help people towards ‘making a life’”, as suggested by Peter Kelly in a public debate on a first version of this text. They may offer a paradoxical “sustainable subsistence” that can function as a kind of (temporary) “third way” between abandoning rural people to their

fate and trying to transform them all overnight into “entrepreneurs.” Or, at least, they may produce a kind of buffer zone of social economy and security for some of them – which is at any rate more than none... On the other hand, when embedded in a broader ecological strategy of heritage as suggested above, “creative traditions” hold promise for all of us.

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### Living with traditions in Romania

With about half of its population living in the countryside and one third of the working population involved in agriculture, Romania is still Europe’s most rural and agrarian society. This being so, nation-building had from its very beginning to promote the Peasant as the national icon; on the other hand, with 2.6 million subsistence-farming households possessing less than 1 hectare apiece and 55% of the rural population living at risk of poverty (compared with 28% of people in large cities), the rural space of this same peasant is today underdeveloped, a kind of second-class Romania (the “two Romania” is a common stereotype of public discourse).

One consequence is that (peasant) customs are still very much alive, co-existing and intermingling with (post) modern behaviours and values. Perceived by most people as part of the national identity, “traditions” (i.e. peasant ones) are accordingly venerated.

Looking at Romania through the reading grid of the categories mentioned above, one can easily spot a present paradox: the most frequently-held positions nowadays are those of “heritage believers” and “heritage profaners.” We proudly praise our untouchable heritage while observing with indifference its spoliation, indirectly facilitated by the lack of clear and respected rules in this field. “Heritage atheists” are few in number and “heritage





agnostics” almost non-existent. Instead, we have numerous unknown “heritage pagans”: the majority of country people, ascribed bearers of “traditions”, for whom these things are no longer their heritage but rather their burden. For them, heritage



From fairs with “traditional products” to Supermarket „Romanian tastes”.  
Photo credit: Anamaria Iuga; logo source: [www.megaimage.ro](http://www.megaimage.ro).

the emergence of small local producers and the unprecedented alternative market of “traditional fairs” at which local gastro-heritages are proudly showcased: old recipes are being rediscovered, previously unknown ones are being brought or inspired from abroad and domesticated, and all are combined in creative “fusion” ways. (Mihăilescu and Iancu 2009; Stroe and Iancu 2012; Stroe 2016). Supermarkets are fighting back and devising their own “traditional brands” (e.g. Mega Image’s “Romanian tastes”), many promoted by the smiling face of a cute granny (Dumitrescu 2015). Authenticity, fake and fusion are hard to distinguish, but “traditions” are selling again.

The same is true for artisan products sold at the same fairs. Fashion too is starting to seek inspiration in “folk costumes”, the case of “la blouse roumaine”<sup>4</sup> being only the best-known example in this regard. In a sui generis way, Romanian popular music is beginning to be combined with other styles and turned into ethno-jazz or all-encompassing “world music.” More recently, with the Subcarpați Band for instance, it is folk music itself that is informing postmodern tonalities. In the appreciative words of the critic Paul Breazu,

4. Ia, the traditional Romanian peasant blouse, was painted by Matisse and became world-famous as “la blouse roumaine”. More recently, it was revisited by Romanian fashion designers and has become highly successful in the national and international fashion market.

means an obstacle to present-day life; it represents neither pride in the past, nor a promise of a bright future. The city God of patrimonialization is indeed an alien one to them and they show no enthusiasm to enrol in a “patrimony crusade” in His name.

However, in the last few years many changes have become visible. To name just a few, one can start with the most obvious one: the promotion of so-called traditional/



From „pride houses” to the „rustic turn”.  
Photo credits: Anamaria Iuga, and Vintilă Mihăilescu.

local food products, mainly as a reaction to the sense of alienation from eating supermarket food that has also encouraged

“it is a first recent and decent attempt to assimilate folklore, not just to cut-paste two distinct forms of sound experience for

the sake of a miraculous marketing effect” (Breazu 2010).

We may observe a similar trend in the shift in homebuilding from the huge, bright and highly eclectic “pride houses” built by work migrants to the new wave of “rustic houses” erected by the same migrants in the last five years or so, which are a simulacrum of earlier peasant homes. In combination with extremely state-of-the-art modern

is pushing the pharmaceutical and cosmetic industries to hunt for old ethno-medicine practices and fill new medicine bottles with traditional herbal remedies. Traditional practices of haymaking, which have preserved one of the richest examples of pastoral biodiversity in Europe, are also starting to be reconsidered in their own right and on their own terms, inspiring appropriate agro-policies (see, for example,



„Traditional” and „creative” shingle houses.  
Photo credits: Anamaria Iuga, and arh. Mihai Nuță.

items, traditional materials (chiefly wood) are thus making their comeback (Mihăilescu 2011; 2014).

Architects and designers are also developing much more sophisticated “revivals” of past materialities and shapes.

Tourism is also benefiting to some extent from this “neo-traditionalist” trend. After a period during which rural “agro-tourism” tried to impress (mainly foreign) tourists with copycat Western-style facilities, a genuine “household tourism” has started to flourish in the Romanian countryside, trying to capitalise on real existing local resources and traditions, while when necessary adapting them to current needs and tastes.

Last but not least, “big business” is also starting to be interested in “past resources.” To take one example, the eco/bio movement

the special issue of *Martor*, issue 21/2016: “A Place for Hay. Flexibility and Continuity in Hay Meadow Management”). Decades ago,



From peasant household simulacrum to more genuine rural tourist accommodation.  
Photo credits: Vintilă Mihăilescu, and Anamaria Iuga.

Romania was Europe’s leading exporter of hemp; this resource and the associated know-how are now being revived in Salonta, currently the only place in Europe where hemp oil and by-products are being produced, and the domestic hemp economy



From hemp domestic industry to fashion design and industrial production.  
Photo credit: Anamaria Iuga; poster of Victoria Zidaru's exhibition; image source: [www.canah.com](http://www.canah.com).

is stimulating local associations and designers as well.

And other initiatives, small-scale and scattered though they may be, could be added to the list.

What we are witnessing in all these cases seems to be a process that is moving from simple revival to fusion and beyond that, potentially, to a creative taking over of past resources and know-how. The past is no longer simply being *conserved* or used as a source of inspiration, but is starting to be attractively *promoted* as a resource for creation.

\*

“Legacy”, in the sense defined above, is part of the common political discourse, recently talked up by certain populist trends. It is also exhibited, as is normal practice, in museums and at festivals, while the material (mainly architectural) heritage is protected under Romanian law – though the regulations are frequently flouted by developers. Heritage, which borders on “patrimony”, is beginning to gain “market value”, as we have mentioned above. A first step consists in simply showcasing traditions at identity and entertainment events. More importantly, an increasing marketing of tradition is seeing items selected from the national heritage being introduced on to the market as commodified traditions: handicrafts, traditional foods, plants for making herbal remedies, etc. The Astra ethnographic museum in Sibiu is even selling plans of “traditional houses” to middle class enthusiasts for neo-traditional homes. A guarantee of inherited “authenticity” now conveys added value. Additionally,

touristification is distributing patrimonial items all over rural Romania as assets of a developing “economy of experience” (Pine and Gilmore 1998) in the exotic land of the past. On the other hand, the movement for the ecologisation of heritage is attempting to conserve the natural patrimony and newly defined “cultural landscapes” (witness the Cioloş government’s 2016 project for a “Law of Cultural Landscape”) by setting up nature reserves and protected areas. In doing this, state regulations frequently protect nature *against* man, ruling out the very “traditional” practices of the rural population. Sometimes, too, these newly-created protected areas conceal the hidden agenda of private business interests that take the opportunity to despoil the natural patrimony under a cloak of legal management. A few civic initiatives, most of them led by architects, are trying to fight back by suggesting much more limited but reasonably consensual local patrimonial projects. The patrimonial space is thus becoming more and more dynamic, but remains fragmented and even contradictory.

\*

The “intellectual heritage” of pioneers such as Antipa and Georgescu-Roegen is largely forgotten in Romania, but there is still a chance for it to be revisited and transformed, in its turn, into a “national patrimony.” Not in order to proudly celebrate it as “our own”, but because, being rooted in Romania’s historical and socio-economic context, these now globally embraced worldviews may offer Romanian society some supplementary local-specific “clues” and help it to better find its own



route to what everyone is now looking for: *sustainable development*. In this respect, Romania's (rural) underdevelopment may even prove to be an asset for "good" development insofar as "Earth's dowry" is still less spoiled here than in developed countries, and the "hereditary postulate" still offers us some useful know-how for managing it.

• • • • •

## Conclusion

As already suggested, heritage is essentially about being (the identity-laden dimension of *legacy*, which has been somewhat peripheral in this text) and/or *wellbeing* (what we have here referred to and focused on as *patrimony*). Heritage can also be viewed as a valuable resource (which it indeed is), but not if it means no more than the commodification of patrimony criticised by Tunbridge and Ashworth (1995) and pursues only economic growth: in that case heritage will be exploited like any other economically profitable resource and will bring benefit mainly to entrepreneurial outsiders or, possibly, some nouveau riche insiders. This is the reason why heritage, though it may be a valuable resource, can be rightly turned into patrimony only when perceived as a *means to wellbeing*, to a more satisfying life, not mere to profit. This being so, patrimony must also have a reasonably shared meaning and bring *sustainable development* to (the majority of) its stakeholders.

In order for it to achieve this status, inherited patrimony has to be approached as an "ecological" system, i.e. a multiplicity of living experiences that "make system." In this respect, an ecology of this patrimonial system also needs a grounding in "patrimonial literacy", similar to or part of the "ecological literacy" Leslie Rush pleads for (Rush 2002), in order to make people and state alike aware of and sensitive to this reality and able to extract meaning from it. As well as this, patrimonial literacy

would help states to formulate integrative patrimonial policies that "make system" and "make sense" as well.

If this were to be done, "dissonant heritage" risks could be diminished and the past would be more easily "assimilated in ourselves, and resurrected into an ever-changing present" as urged by Lowenthal. At the same time, people would be less unsettled by the different traditions of others, allowing them to be more ecumenical and peaceable, as idealistically aspired to by UNESCO patrimonial ideology.

In pragmatic terms, traditions that are creative enough to also bring a better quality of life ("enjoyment of life", as poetically expressed by Georgescu-Roegen) will be better re-produced by their actors simply in order to give themselves this better life, as I have tried to illustrate above. Legacies of the past and their identity meanings may disappear when people are confronted with more congenial present options. Traditions cannot be an obligation, they have to make sense; but, for most of their ascribed rural protagonists, they actually do not. But they can be revived as a means to wellbeing, to a more satisfying life. This is the reason for not starting "heritage and development" projects from the "legacy of tradition" but with the prospect of "creative traditions" becoming a means towards patrimony-building; legacy and its accompanying pride may then be easier to highlight, share and celebrate along the way.

It is in this way that "creative traditions" make sense as tactical means for experimenting with the past, diffusing patrimonial literacy and inspiring the strategic aim of the broader and systematic understanding and governance of heritage herein labelled "ecology of patrimony."



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## In Brief

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The local communities of Eastern Europe, regarded up to the beginning of the 1990s as a rich reserve of peasant culture, have over the past twenty years been falling apart before our very eyes. Under the pressure of migration to work abroad and of the effects of globalisation – multiple, obvious and, in particular, subversive of the ways they functioned until not long ago – cultural alterations of all kinds have generated phenomena of hybridisation and cultural fusion.

At the same time, that which from a range of motives is felt as a need, complex and existing on different levels, to preserve traditions in their role of cultural history of local specifics, appears to be growing in importance, not only for those charged with this duty as a political project (“places of memory” institutions that society has “delegated” as keepers of cultural memory) and for cultural brokers and stakeholders but also for the local performers of those cultures that we have been accustomed to call traditional.

For countries whose modernisation in recent history was closely connected to *peasant cultures and societies*, at one and the same time as a source of higher culture and as a fount of what marked

them out as a nation, these recent cultural changes raise supplementary problems; the dramatic reshaping of traditional peasant communities brings with it a crisis in a particular way of reading and interpreting traditions. The key to this reading had been delivered *de facto*, up to as recently as the end of the 1990s, into the keeping of such disciplines as folklore studies, philology and history, these being regarded as the legitimate ways to analyse, interpret and simultaneously preserve traditions. Today, however, disciplines such as economics and political and environmental studies are staking their claims to a role in the epistemological investigation of these areas. More specifically, the territory now has to be shared with border-crossing (inter) disciplinary approaches.

Thus, light can be shed on the particularising intensity with which cultural and also socio-political phenomena, in the context of which the changes we are discussing can be seen, have made their presence felt in the socio-cultural reconfiguration of the societies and by implication of the rural communities in this part of Europe. It is not the direction of the movement – predictable, as it is – from the traditional, rural and local towards the

global that appears as dominant here but the strength and speed of the phenomenon and, consequently, the cultural and societal

Peasant (NMRP) under the co-ordination of the anthropologist Vintilă Mihăilescu – the Creative Traditions Forum. The way

Photo credit:  
Valentina Băcu.



convulsions it brings with it. The various aspects of these changes are all the more fascinating to observe in that they provide an opportunity for an empirical verification, today, of the analogous phenomenon that took place, in a different political context, in Western Europe in the last century.

The theme of this 22<sup>nd</sup> issue of the *Martor* journal, “Back to the Future. Creative Traditions in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”, has proved to be the opportunity for a discussion of the complex and frequently hard-to-formulate implications of the existence of local traditional cultures in contemporary societies. The two poles that have generated texts that have thus entered into dialogue have been, in general terms, on the one hand articles contributed in response to the call for papers for the current number of the journal, and on the other hand texts born out of the experience of a current project hosted by the National Museum of the Romanian

the texts are arranged in the journal allows this twofold avenue of approach to be seen. With the exception of the two introductory texts, the thematic articles in this issue are grouped in five sections.

The theoretical issue raised by the problematical position of old local rural cultures in the context of contemporary societies makes its appearance in the introductory text by Vintilă Mihăilescu, *Creative Traditions and Ecology of Heritage*, an article which at the same time adumbrates the subject of the general discussion that the articles in this number, taken together, comprise. Starting from the distinction made by Eric Hobsbawm between “customs” (collective representations of the past experienced as present) and “traditions” (as “imagined past”, a product of modernity), a distinction the content of which is given simultaneously with the introduction into the theoretical terminology of the

social sciences of the concept of “invented traditions”, Vintilă Mihăilescu opens up a discussion of the epistemological operationalisation of concepts that facilitate analysis of the relation between “the past and the present that reuses it” (Mihăilescu, *Creative Traditions and Ecology of Heritage*).

The articles that follow develop in a radial manner the issues involved in the dialogue concerning traditions.

Section I, *Social Usages of Traditions*, focuses on the connection between old and contemporary rural societies in terms of their functional and also ideological (by quotation, but also by reinvention) recourse to tradition. Thus, in her article *Tradition and Architectural Representation*, Marta Jecu analyses the political agendas and ideologies which, by invoking traditions, but also by instrumentalising their reinvention, produce architectural images that are making their presence felt in architecture and building techniques. In the same register, Augustin Ioan, in *Retrofuturism*.

of the architectural image of the identity of occupation: traditions in the ethnological sense, architecture in its historicity, and the religious element. David Diaconu's article, *(Re)establishing Institutions as Tradition. A Fieldwork-based Analysis of Obște's Commons' Management Institutions* presents the process of reactualisation of an old community institution, “Obște”, and the applications this form of economic and community organisation can have in rural life today. The article by Chris Baker, *Reinventing Mountain Food Traditions and Small Farm Survival in Southern Appalachia*, is a case study that handles the issue of local identity through the lens of three areas that today occupy an important place in regional development projects: food, local culinary specialities, and tourism.

In the articles in Section II, *Political Usages of Traditions*, the emphasis falls explicitly on the political dimension of the construction of traditions as an area of contemporary societies. The studies



Photo credit:  
Valentina Băcu.

*A Revisited Concept for Religious Architecture*, calls into discussion three fundamental sources for the construction

by Andrea Membretti and Pier Paolo Viazzo, *Negotiating the Mountains. Foreign Immigration and Cultural Change in the*

*Italian Alps*, and by William Westerman, *Kayaktivism: The Anthropology of Protest, Craft and Imagination*, treat situations directly connected with the wider phenomena of globalisation and migration. Aspects of the transformation into goods (commodification) of a number of areas of old rural culture, others connected with tourism that exploits traditional local cultures and, more than that, examples of features of local traditions that have been integrated into forms of political protest, make up the subjects discussed in these two articles. They thus open up the problematic issue of the most currently pressing and active kinds of appeal to tradition: those that involve socio-economic applications and socio-political ends.

Section III, *Traditions on Display*, explores the aesthetic resources of old rural cultures and poses the problems both of curatorial strategies that have traditions as their raw material – in *Forging Folklore, Disrupting Archives: Curatorial Explorations between Tradition and Innovation* by Magdalena Buchczyk, Gabriela Nicolescu and Alexandra Udrea – and of the constructing of an image of traditions as an ingenuous cultural act – in Anca-Maria Pănoiu's *A Sense of Past. Usages of Objects in Naïve Museology*.

Section IV, *Traditions in Dialogue*, is allocated to texts of a more heterogeneous nature, such as field notes, current research, and interviews. These are concerned

especially with specific experiences of cultural action that have traditions as their source and/or subject. Pride of place here goes to the Creative Traditions Forum project, under the aegis of the NMRP, as can be seen from Corina Iosif's record of interviewing the Creative Traditions Forum team and from Bogdan Iancu's *Inside the Creative Traditions Workshops*, a discussion with two of those participating in that project. The article entitled *Atelierul de creativitate. Sentimental Dossier* lifts the curtain on the exercise of initiating and carrying out cultural actions that link the idea of tradition with that of creativity in cultural projects of an educational kind. The illustrations in the current issue of the journal are of this Creativity Workshop.

The final section is, as usual, devoted to book reviews. Here we are dealing with two works: Cristoph Brumann and David Berliner (eds.), *World Heritage on the Ground. Ethnographic Perspectives*, 2016, reviewed by Vintilă Mihăilescu, and Margaret Beissinger, Speranța Rădulescu, Anca Giurchescu (eds.), *Manele in Romania: Cultural Expression and Social Meaning in Balkan Popular Music*, 2016, reviewed by Claudiu Oancea. As both these works deal with the theme of traditions in the contemporary context, they too contribute to the deepening and refining of our reading and theoretical interpretation of this disputed issue.





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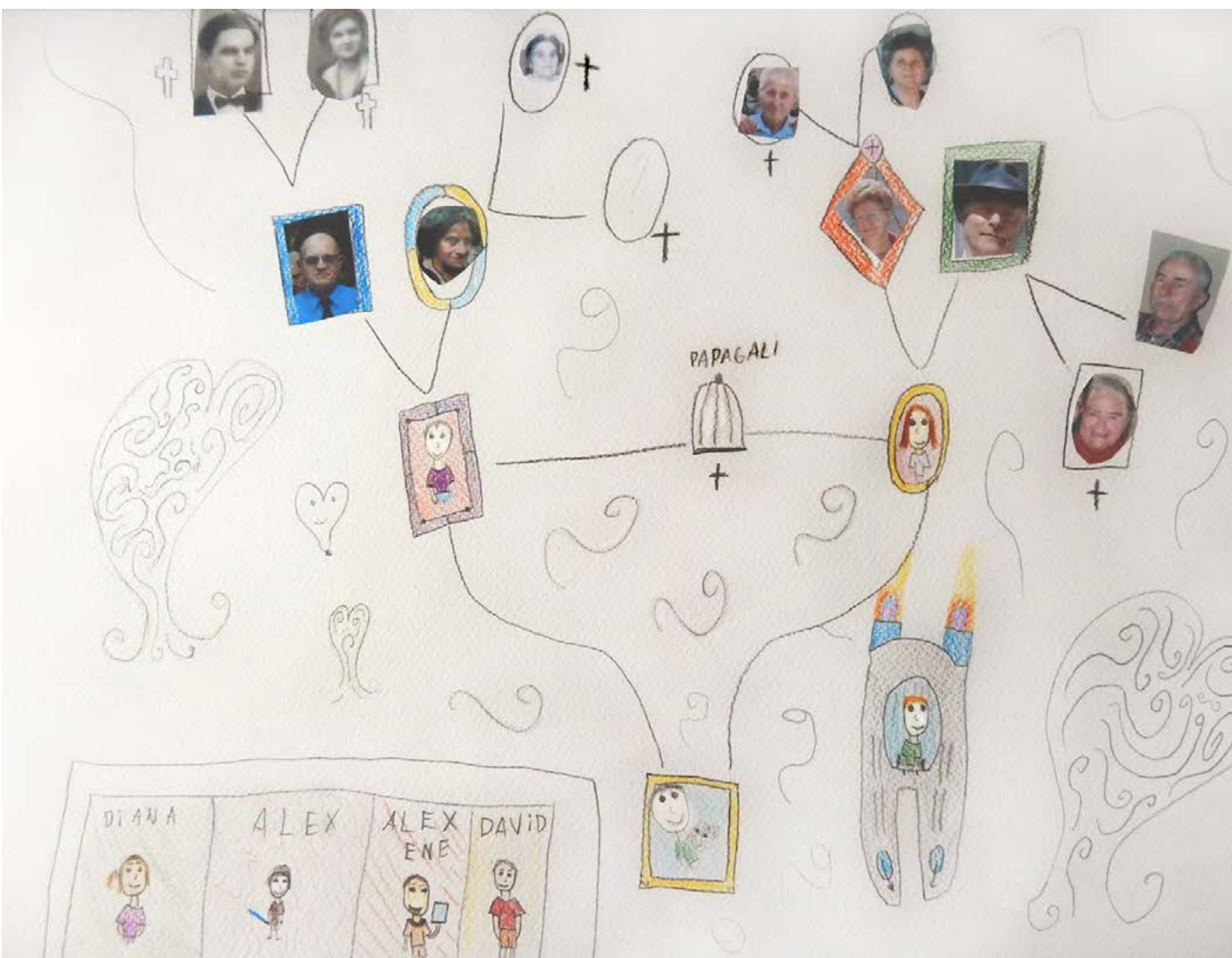
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## I. Social Usages of Traditions



# Tradition and Architectural Representation

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## ABSTRACT

Very often tradition has been reinvented in order to legitimize a certain ideology, discourse or political agenda and representation has played a crucial role in this process. Any representation is itself the product of a row of representations, and moreover a tradition – a process through which content is transported and created. For Cadava (2001: 39) the image is never closed, content and form are often based on an invented genealogy. In this article, I propose to focus on architecture and the way in which political content and ideology have been transmitted through the images architecture produces. These are intended to represent and apparently 're-produce' certain traditions. My examples will focus on both the discipline of architecture (specifically recent practices of recreation of vernacular architecture and construction techniques) and artistic approaches to architecture.

## KEYWORDS

Art, architecture, vernacular techniques, post-digital materialities, tradition.

*“But what we call time is precisely the image’s inability to coincide with itself.  
– Cadava 2011: 43*

“Everything passes in time but time itself!,” proclaims on a quite melancholic tone Eduardo Cadava (2001). For him, the present is not simply the present, but a result of the multitude of images that form it “now” and that might come from alien spaces and historical moments. Any image is for him always the image of another time.

In his enchanting book *Lapsus Imaginis: The Image in Ruins*, Cadava (2001) offers an account of why an image can never be regarded as being complete and constituted. What Cadava calls the *lapsus* of the image (Lat. for lapse, slip, missing) reveals the inherent condition of the image which is to be perpetually undergoing the process of its own constitution. For him the image exists through the dialectical relationship

between a past and a present in a historical and imagistic sense. No image is for him simply itself.

The image is always at the same time an image of ruin, an image about the ruin of the image, about the ruin of the image’s capacity to show, to represent, to address and evoke the persons, events, things, truths, histories, lives and deaths to which it would refer. Nevertheless, what makes the image an image is its capacity to bear the traces of what it cannot show, to go on, in the face of this loss and ruin, to suggest and gesture toward its potential for speaking (Cadava 2001: 36).

The fact that the past can be experienced only in terms of loss and ruin doesn’t mean that the constant need to produce it into the present is not recurrent. In fact, art and architecture are paradigmatic for the process in which the past is reloaded



into “the present image” and therefore for the way in which “traditions” are recast. These are not only formal visual traditions, but most of all ideological content that is transported and reinterpreted with every new invented representation.

Cadava talks about an image that is bearing several memories at once (2001: 39). He inspires a reading of the past that overpasses its reiteration and enactment. He advocates for *internalizing* and transforming the image of the past to suit the needs of the present. This recalls Eric Hobsbawm’s famous inaugural paragraphs in his “Introduction” to *The Invention of Tradition* (Hobsbawm, Ranger 1992), where he describes the way in which traditions imply an automatic continuity with a (*for them*) relevant past that is often fictitious. “Traditions are responses to novel situations, which take the form of references to old situations” (Hobsbawm 1992: 2).

Very often tradition has been reinvented in order to legitimize a certain ideology, discourse or political agenda, and representation has played a crucial role in this process. In this article, I will explore how architectural representation is itself the product of a row of representations and moreover a tradition of representation – a process through which content is transported and created. Following Cadava’s notion that the image is never closed (2001: 39), I will draw on a few examples to show how content and form are often based on an invented genealogy.

In the following, I will focus on artistic and architectural cases in which political content and ideology have been transmitted through the images and the imaginary that architecture produces. These are intended to represent and apparently “re-produce” certain traditions. My examples will focus both on the discipline of architecture – specifically recent practices of recreation of vernacular construction techniques – and on technological experiments with environmental architecture.

I will also refer to artistic approaches to

architecture, mainly based on case-studies recorded during my fieldwork at the 4<sup>th</sup> Marrakesh Biennale, which promoted an architectural approximation to local techniques through a decided conceptual approach. The cases I will discuss later in the article deal critically with architecture and aim to uncover political agendas that invoke what are in fact reinvented traditions in urbanism and habitation.

I will also refer to the so-called ecologic and “vernacular” architecture offices, for example the Francis Kéré Architecture office in Berlin, Germany, and the I-Studio India, in Mumbai, among others. I will consider as well critical examinations of “traditional” techniques in experimental architecture coming from the field of conceptual art in the work of artists such as Sinta Werner and Tadashi Kawamata among others.

I would like to show the fact that the critical, anarchic and reactionary tradition of conceptual art, and its preoccupations with the discipline of architecture, have not only reflected back on the discipline, but have also revolutionised the understanding and theorizing of architecture. Artistic practices have shifted in the past decades the focus from architecture as habitation, to architecture as both philosophical experience and social practice. The deconstructivism and postmodernism of the late 1980s advanced new ways of understanding architecture, which destabilized architectural traditions and the values historically associated with architecture. These paths of thinking have been continued in the past decades in often non-representational, performative and conceptual works, rendering the definition of “tradition” rather complex.

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## Deconstructed architecture

In his writings and practical collaborations with the architect Bernard Tschumi, Jacques Derrida proposed an architecture that surpasses the function of habitation.

1. See complete bibliography under Derrida, J.

Derrida theorized in a body of texts and interviews<sup>1</sup> (1997, 1997b) an architecture which is transformative and essentially structured like an event – attributes that Derrida associated with the deconstructive “architectural experience.” Derrida shifted at this point essentially the thinking on architecture, pleading for an architecture that is not necessarily subjected to the function of living and which steps out of Heidegger’s concept of “dwelling.”

For him, architecture is a philosophical and conceptual experiment (Derrida 1989a) that materializes through a temporary event. *Deconstruction*, which is connected to the evenimental nature of architecture, is not a process meant to remove or destroy something that has already been built (in a concrete or cultural sense) in order to make space for a domain that could be “cultivated” again. On the contrary, *deconstruction* is essentially what he calls a “non-Heideggerian constructing and dwelling” (Derrida 1989a: 74) – an architecture that does not find its finality in something outside itself (is non-architectural), but which also does not propose a nihilistic form of habitation.

Mainly, this new direction of thinking stepped out of the modernist attempt to restore a “pure,” “original” architecture. Derrida also saw architecture as the result of the correlation with other media and other arts. Moreover, he also regarded the viewer (or user) of architecture as being a constituent part of architecture, as being inside the architectural body. The architecture ceases to be a container, and the user becomes a co-producer of the architectural event, which emerges only with the presence of its user. His concepts of *trans-architecture* and *an-architecture* (Derrida 1997b) were formulated to designate an architecture that exists only through the presence of an audience, as an essential condition of its existence: *an-architecture* is the place of what he calls the dynamic undermining of the tectonic and housing qualities of architecture whereas *trans-architecture* is a medium for making

the user to *meet* the work, to invent it and to maintain it in the present (“*maintenant l’architecture*”) (Derrida 1997b: 324–336, section 9).

Postmodern architectural experiments transposed quite literally the deconstructive theory of Jacques Derrida into practice – with the result of non-functional and quite absurd architectural environments, which found no utility or continuation in the discipline. Constructions like the private houses (House I–IV, House X) or the “Fin D’Ou T Hou S” of Peter Eisenman manifest a disjunction in style: the fragment gains stylistic autonomy, the elements are opposed and juxtaposed into the body of the construction. These extreme “deconstructed forms” were finally criticized for ending up negating what they were standing for and hindering use. More moderate constructions such as “Folie” in Parc de la Villette in Paris (a practical as well as theoretical collaboration between Derrida and Tschumi) were integrated into the urban circuit, and the pavilions easily found uses such as restaurants, bars, cinemas, platforms, and viewpoints over the canal.

In the context of constant reinvention of architectural traditions of thought and practice, I would like to highlight what I believe to be the crucial role of contemporary art for the renovation and the critical examination of the discipline. I have argued that recent conceptual art practices related to architecture come close to Derrida’s understanding of architecture (Jecu 2016) – closer than experiments made by the discipline itself. Approaching architecture in a performative, intellectual, non-formal way, recent artistic experiments with space and place reload the philosophical legacy of Derrida and at the same time transmit to the audience a more contextual and critical take on architecture, which is rather analytic than practical.

The critical uncovering of the complex mechanisms of the discipline and its “traditions” through practices

in experimental architecture and art contributes in its turn to its constant re-invention. These phenomena are particularly evident in recent discussions and experiments around the legacy of so-called “environmental” or “neo-vernacular” architecture. Contemporary art and experimental architecture have reloaded, but at the same time critically re-evaluated, what it is in fact a reinvented continuity of ecological traditions in urbanism and habitation. Just like Cadava’s *image*, tradition remains open: it represents the moving sands resulting from plural and collective contestations and re-evaluations of legacies and their political implications.

By its nature, conceptual art is critically confronting not so much the creation of objects, but mostly the examination of social and political contexts of given objects or situations. Stepping out of the understanding of architecture in purely functional terms, recent conceptual practices are increasingly challenging the discipline by revealing complex economic and political agendas behind large-scale international programs of urban planning and habitation, involving the audience performatively in this re-evaluation of the discipline itself.

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### Sustainability and Conceptual Hybrids

In the following, I would like to present cases of artistic and low-scale experimental architectural practices which deal with “sustainable tradition” and which usually manifest a subtle *questioning – embracing* of vernacular techniques, while opening therefore new traditions inside the discipline. In these works, architecture is practised with the involvement of the audience in temporary, performative, interdisciplinary events that strongly recall the way in which Jacques Derrida envisioned the functions of architecture. Some of the works I will discuss further in the article become tools for contesting and renovating the discipline

itself. Others can be stifled by an overflow of academic debate and establish a rather ambiguous and superficial relationship to the local context.

During my fieldwork at the 4<sup>th</sup> Marrakesh Biennale, I have conducted a series of interviews on architectural works which involved local crafts and established an approximation to the local historical context by integrating performance and collective participation in the body of the work.

Aleksandra Domanović’s installation “Monument to Revolution” (2012), produced by the Biennale, represents a commemorative construction that should bring to light historical links between the artists’ context of origin (the former Yugoslavia) and the cultures of North Africa. The act of immersion and occupation of a foreign territory is often based on the creation of connecting links between the “self” and the “other.” Her monument was meant to celebrate the early adherence of both the former Yugoslavia and Morocco to the Non-Aligned Movement, as founding countries of the organization in the 1960s. For this purpose, Domanović creates a hybrid work, which applies local finishing crafts onto a typically 1960s modernist architectural profile. “The work addresses both the exoticising of local craftsmanship and the domineering influence of modernism and its supposed universalism” – we can read on the artists’ webpage at the Tanya Leighton Gallery<sup>2</sup> Whereas the work aims to uncover this Western version of architectural modernism (which was adopted also in Morocco, in the 1950s Casablanca), the work nevertheless fails to avoid relying on other models than the same “Western” clichés of representation – which it collages onto the Moroccan environment.

I came to Marrakech for the first time in December. I was walking around and discovered that there are not many public monuments here, as we understand them. Another thing that I was inspired by was a technique of ancient Morocco, where

2. See <http://www.tanyaleighton.com/index.php?pageId=498&l=en>.

limestone plaster is mixed with pigment. I had this 4,000 year-old Moroccan technique, used traditionally for hammams and palaces, in the bathroom of my hotel. It is called *tadelakt* in Berber and means literally to rub, as they rubbed it to squeeze out the air bubbles. It is a very cheap and ecological technique, but it is dying out. It started to get resurrected by the people who are buying and restoring riads in the medina. It has been imported in Europe as a extremely expensive and luxurious finishing. (Domanović 2012)

Another work produced for the Biennale was Elín Hansdóttir's "Mud Brick Spiral" (2012)<sup>3</sup>, placed in a rural area near Marrakesh. Here the interest lies rather in working with the expressive qualities of the local materials. The artist constructs an installation that is destined for both the Western and the local visitor, giving them the opportunity to experiment with the qualities and agency of brick and added mirror pieces by walking through a labyrinth-like construction.

I got very interested in the traditional Berber building technique, the mud bricks. I was fascinated by the fact that unlike us in the West, they almost use no tools during construction, it's mainly manpower and imagination. Furthermore, it is interesting that they use the soil on the actual construction site to produce the building material. This results in whole villages almost seeming to mutate out of the landscape. (Hansdóttir 2012)

"Raw brick" will create for the "Western" Biennale visitor an image of "locality," carrying rural connotations. On the contrary, for the local kids and villagers, who interact with the construction on a daily basis, it will act as "exotic" – a strange building typology made of a familiar material, which is not habitable and has no practical use.

In the following section, I would like

to go deeper into the work of Tadashi Kawamata, an influential personality in the field of experimental and sustainable architecture. The architect-artist born in 1953, in Japan, is known for his temporary extensions of historic architecture, which he squeezes like nests on already built large-scale structures, starting with the 1980s. His working method became a reference with his 1989 Toronto installation, in which he connected two neo-classicist buildings on an abandoned lot of the Colonial Tavern Park with a huge heap of recuperated woodcuts engulfing the bank edifice.

Works-in-progress that are meant to disappear, most of Kawamata's performative installations are to be activated or transformed by the audience. For his "Carton Workshop" (2010) at Centre Pompidou<sup>4</sup>, he built a series of nests all over the façade of the centre. Previously that year he had built in Berlin another series of nests at Haus der Kulturen der Welt. These are commonly referred as "social sculptures", "nests of civil disobedience." Characteristic of Kawamata's practice are recycled and transformed materials. His temporary installations are all ephemeral, and what remains are only sketches, leftovers of materials and traces. However, his Pompidou show featured six cabinets, "closets of memory," which displayed a series of videos by Gilles Coudert documenting his projects over the last twenty years.



Treehuts Berlin (2010), Tadashi Kawamata.  
Photo credit: Thomas Eugster.

3. See <https://www.designboom.com/art/mud-brick-and-mirror-spiral-installation-by-elin-hansdottir/>.

4. For details, see <http://artistes-k-l.artcatalyse.com/tadashi-kawamata-carton-workshop-et-huts-au-centre-pompidou.html>.

The “Tree Huts” remain out of reach and use. But their radical visual and poetic impact casts a doubt on the authority of institutions and representational program that are historically transmitted. At the same time his “Nests” stimulate a physical and mental re-appropriation of the building which they parasitize. Kawamata compares his interventions to “natural phenomena” in this way opposing two traditions. One tradition is that of an auratic architecture of display with its claims of durability – of which the iconic Centre Pompidou is an emblem. The other one is the “tradition of the hut”: found material in random shapes, improvised, ephemeral and precarious structures, subject to decay.

These hybrid forms, which have no functions in the urban environment, can also be perceived as establishing a continuity with non-European building techniques (inscribing themselves in the philosophy of immateriality of the Japanese historic habitation). His work recalls also Japanese contemporary architecture (which Kawamata in fact anticipates by two decades). We can think for example of the iconic and radical buildings of Sou Fujimoto (“House NA,” 2008 or “Wooden House in Kumamoto,” 2006) or of another Japanese architect inspired by vernacular traditions, Shigeru Ban. Contrary to these examples of recent habitation architecture, Kawamata’s invasive and labyrinthine principles of construction show modes of detouring reality by introducing the chaos factor: polymorphous, hybrid elements based on motion, chance, transformation, dys-functionality.

This temporary manifestation of a potentiality for change represents a principle of creativity in relation to the authoritative context: the works bring out new functions in the given system. Using the codes of “extra-European” traditions, they produce a result that surpasses what a system can actually generate, constituting an innovation in the given (actual) reality. At the same time these hybrids plead for

the incorporation of marginal cultures, habitations and cultural practices in the mainstream European culture. Exposing an exclusive and dominant capitalist cultural system, Kawamata’s art pieces have been nevertheless contested for indirectly contributing to the maintenance of the system they criticize. At one of the world’s most luxurious art fairs, Art Basel, Kawamata constructed the “Favela Cafe” (2013)<sup>5</sup>, a lounge and bar built with techniques encountered in *favelas*. The work introduces, on one hand, a neighborhood typology recognizable for its resourceful construction into the mainstream “fair,” but, on the other hand, it disregards the irony of quoting one of the most impoverished housing structures into the exclusive consumption site which is an art fair. In this sense it places itself on the border between raising awareness and misappropriation of the “unprivileged foreign.”

It can be interesting to compare Tadashi Kawamata’s conceptual practice with the works of an architectural office equally working with non-European building techniques. More linked to habitation than to the critical examination of the discipline, I-Studio ([www.istudioarchitecture.com/](http://www.istudioarchitecture.com/)) intends to reintroduce vernacular building techniques into high-class Indian living standards.

From an interview with one of the members of the office, Prashant Dupare, published in the online magazine *Matter* (Parikh 2017), we learn that the architects have drawn inspiration from both European building complexes in India and local crafts. Among his references, Dupare lists the modernist ensemble built by Le Corbusier in Chandigarh, India (designed 1953 and completed around 1968). “What interests me from modernism is the idea of democratic wellbeing,” Dupare adds.

For the work discussed in this interview, “Brick House,” 2013 (located in Wada village, Maharashtra Region)<sup>6</sup>, Dupare confesses that the starting point for the bungalow were the childhood memories of

5. See <https://www.designboom.com/architecture/favela-cafe-by-tadashi-kawamata-occupies-art-basel/>.

6. For details, see <http://www.archdaily.com/599780/brick-house-istudio-architecture>.



the client, who grew up in a small Indian brick village. In the same interview we read that brick was selected also for its “flexibility in designing” and because of its texture, which “lends itself to architecture in a way that allows one to feel close to nature. There is a sense of earthiness, tradition and age.”

The building technique and the philosophy behind are indebted – as Dupare reveals – to important architects in the history of Indian sustainable architecture, Laurie Baker and Nari Gandhi. Laurence Wilfred “Laurie” Baker (1917-2007) was a British-born Indian architect, renowned for his initiatives in cost-effective energy-efficient architecture. His designs that offered solutions for natural ventilation and light promoted the revival of regional building practices and use of local materials – inspired also by the personality and teachings of Mahatma Gandhi. He is historically acknowledged as a pioneer of sustainable and organic architecture which he associated with social and humanitarian goals, and for this he was called the “Gandhi of architecture.”<sup>7</sup> Nari Gandhi (1934–1993), another personality that inspired I-Studio, also worked for the reviving of ancient crafts, following his apprenticeship with Frank Lloyd Wright in the United States. Gandhi applied Wright’s historic idea of “organic architecture” to the Indian context and also involved local craftsmen for the completion of his works.

“Brick House” (2013) is defined by curved walls – each enclosing and opening to a space – and by the brick and stone used in multiple forms to create changing surface articulations. As the structure of the house is more complex than that of a rural habitation but the materials are the same, the stability of the building became a difficult point to solve. Nevertheless, as Dupare says in the quote above, the deciding aspect was the image that this type of architecture carries: “earthiness, tradition and age.” “Brick House” follows the modernist – and at that time revolutionary – “form follows function” Wrightian precept

(Cruz 2013), which Wright had himself adopted from Louis Sullivan. But I-Studio is nevertheless binding in also postmodern techniques extracted from the architecture of “Auroville,” namely the ferro-cement techniques. Built in the 1960s by the French architect Roger Anger, “Auroville” was another site of experimentation between Western and Asian techniques and principles, which seems to be more organic than Le Corbusier’s Chandigarh.

Another architectural studio that I would like to discuss, also bridging Western and non-Western traditions and needs, is Francis Diébédo Kéré office.<sup>8</sup> Born in 1965 in Gando, a small village in Burkina Faso, Francis Kéré not only re-implemented vernacular techniques in his projects in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, but also refused large scale projects in favour of what could be called “workshop-architecture.” In his small scale projects, like the 2001 Gando Primary School, he developed techniques that could be easily copied by the local population for private use, and he also provided courses and training to them. His practice is a statement against large scale “Western” programs, involving local techniques for costly projects that end up being unfunctional for the local population or have no continuity.

In an interview with Kéré, Alain Juppé (Juppé 2012) asks him if the NGOs active in the region support his efforts to empower the local population when it comes to building.<sup>9</sup>

“Francis Kéré: I am free and independent, I am not waiting for NGOs to offer me work in Burkina. I have openly said that big development infrastructures represent a business. Nevertheless, organizations such as GTZ in Germany create employment possibilities in Europe as well as in Africa – which is not negative. These gigantic structures devour a lot of money in order to function. If they would realize projects that would respond to the actual needs of the population, giving them the means to become self-governed, they would stop

7. For more information, consult his website: <http://www.lauriebaker.net/>.

8. For Kéré's projects please consult his website: <http://www.kere-architecture.com/projects/secondary-school-dano/>.

9. My translation of excerpts from the French original interview.

10. For details,  
see <http://www.operndorf-afrika.com/fr/focus/architecture/>.

having a reason to exist.

*Alain Juppé*: Is your project about self-development and eco-construction?

*F.K.*: I have never presented myself as politically engaged. Nevertheless, I had the vocation to learn how to build with the purpose of improving the situation in my country.

*A.J.*: In order to best understand your work, could you please explain which is the situation of architecture and of the architects in Burkina Faso?

*F.K.*: In 2007, in Burkina we had no more than 50 architects. They were all working on large scale projects in big cities. In villages the people were doing their own building. What dominates is a lack of critical reflection in the profession, which actually reproduces a Western model. The situation looks similar from the point of view of the clients, who are capable of asking you to build them a copy of the White House. My approach is different. I have started with research on a small scale, asking myself: What can we achieve in quality and in durability by using the local materials and workforce? The bet is maybe won since the inhabitants of my native village are proud of the work we did in the community. I am not the first to have used earth in Burkina, there are big projects (like that of the Museum of Music in Ouagadougou run by the CRAterre institutional group) which use this building technique. But these are not models which are reproducible because these projects are huge, and everybody thinks that they should be done on this scale.

*A.J.*: This idea of adaptation of building techniques and materials, the idea of participation, are they transposable to the European context?

*F.K.*: The social approach is always possible but it has its limitations, even in Africa. If you don't want to lose money, you need to build fast, so it is impossible to wait until the community completes the training workshops. I think that in industrialized countries, in order to make this kind of transmission work, you need to re-evaluate

the possibilities and adapt them to the global industry machine. Determining the community to participate is a very difficult task, it is absorbing, but enriching."

These ambiguous questions are reinforced also in an extremely controversial project: the "Operndorf Afrika" set in Burkina Faso – an Opera House and the attached village, not finished to date. Francis Kéré and the visionary Christoph Schlingensief, both living in Berlin, started collaborating on this project around 2008. Christoph Schlingensief, a German universal artist, was well known for his unconventional and interdisciplinary works in theatre, opera and film, political performance and activism. "Operndorf Afrika"<sup>10</sup> remained for a long time an utopia, mainly due to Schlingensief's premature death, but it is now being set into motion again. In 2008 Christoph Schlingensief asked Francis Kéré to find a physical form for a free stage on which his boundary-breaking intercultural opera could be staged. Questions were raised regarding the legitimacy of a pre-eminent elitist European institution implanted in one of the economically most disadvantaged African countries. Schlingensief was known for having staged the most provocative and grotesque Wagner operas in Bayreuth, demolishing the previous conventions of the genre, and opera was for him a *Gesamtkunstwerk* in the tradition of Wagner, which went beyond the limits of the stage and extended into an existential, universal dimension. Emerging out of this intellectual context, the Opera in Burkina Faso was meant to address the most sore points of colonization, in respect also to the German massacres in Cameroon. Schlingensief (2009) was constantly stressing the necessity to overcome the colonizing – colonized pitfalls of any European-African relationship through an essentially experimental approach. Only an artistic process or artistically understood daily interactions (between the local and invited participants), emerging



from unpredictable collaborative actions without finality, can set new coordinates for previously corrupted relationships. In the same spirit Schlingensief (2008) calls his and similar actions in Africa “official stealing” – and calls for an extreme assuming of the ambiguities of any action governed by this power relationship: “The time has come to make stealing official!” he states in this 2008 interview. For him only art can fully incorporate and assume the dimension of these scars, which cannot be healed if they are not exposed and officially played out.

After a flood in Ouagadougou, in which most of the population lost their houses, Kéré an Schlingensief developed a habitation module, which could be easily reproduced by the locals and which would also integrate all the functions necessary for the running of the Opera. The project also included a music school, a hospital, a restaurant, workshops and a community archive space, in which local population and international guests could develop their activities.



Treehuts Berlin (2010), Tadashi Kawamata.  
Photo credit: Thomas Eugster.

Schlingensief’s approach is paradigmatic for other artistic attempts to contribute towards destabilizing the authoritative and hierarchical legitimacy of architectural projects implemented and financed by capitalist structures in non-European countries. Art has often functioned as a tool for uncovering mechanisms in which traditions in urbanism and habitation have been used to legitimize non-ethical urban planning and cultural political agendas.

In Schlingensief’s discourse art is played out against the permanency, dominance, immutability of a persistent colonial tradition. Due to art’s contextual approach, and its immediate and spontaneous response to social, cultural and political realities, Schlingensief regards art as the only possibility for any effective self-analytic and critical action-taking. His utopian project is meant to subsume the impermanence of an architecture of spectacle, which can escape its historic heritage through artistic liberation (theatre) and the physical body of an Opera House, which could be locally absorbed as it is integrated architecturally in its context.

Not only in his theatrical work, but maybe in this architectural approach too, Schlingensief follows a Wagnerian Romantic tradition in which art is understood as an universal cathartic experience.

In this and in similar projects that I will mention later in this article, art encompasses as such a virtual dimension, in the sense that it determines a *becoming* with an indefinite outcome. It represents a potentiality, which expresses the power to transform, to reaffirm and to regenerate both temporal and spatial coordinates. Such a dimension of *becoming* is generally inherent in the aspirations of non-local experiences like artistic incursions and interventions in a foreign environment.

In the following section, I will discuss the phenomena of artistic and architectural residencies in “foreign” cultures, which, on one hand, represent a tradition in themselves, on the other hand, are aiming

to form a counter-culture in an ambiguous re-enactment of local heritage coupled with innovation. As conceptual art (the artistic approach that I am discussing in this article) is non-representational and non-permanent, the relation it establishes with heritage is a complex one. By its nature, it refuses a literal or picturesque reproduction of clichés of heritage and defies permanency. In the last part of this article, I will focus on the works and thoughts of some conceptual artists regarding their recent takes on traditions and heritage during residencies in what were for them foreign environments.

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### Mobility, Immersion, Intervention

*"It is not the fact that you are in a foreign country that makes your practice political."*

- Matsubara 2012

The problem of immersion and intervention in a foreign context has often produced a biased vision: on one hand, the *site* defined by sedentary qualities and, on the other hand, the guest artists, architect or cultural operator, who implement new structures, which are regarded as being mobile, interchangeable, liquid, and pertaining to a *"global flow."* I will discuss the case-study of the artistic residency at Dar Al-Ma'mûn, Morocco, which was meant to prepare the 4<sup>th</sup> Marrakesh Biennale curated by Naddim Samman and Carson Chan in 2012.<sup>11</sup> With an architectural profile, this biennale – entirely financed by the British investor Vanessa Branson – integrated the residency as a sort of preparatory platform, where some of the artists involved could study the local customs, building techniques and get immersed into the rural context. Dar Al-Ma'mûn consists of a Swiss Foundation and a non-profit Moroccan law association based in Marrakech.

"Dar Al-Ma'mûn is a unique structure in Morocco and the non-profit-making status of our activities is a powerful force in unifying the Moroccan cultural interests

and in raising its profile beyond borders,"<sup>12</sup> is stated in the general concept of the residency.

As with any structure implemented into a foreign territory and financed from outside, a contrived conflict (between what is presented to be the static local community and the promoters connected to a global movement of goods and ideas) makes itself felt in this commentary. Indirectly this statement affirms a vision of locality and place as being a container of action and social processes which should be maximized by transposing them into the global context. Deterritorialisation of cultural acts is being advocated<sup>13</sup>.

In the context of the study of post-colonial transnationality and deterritorialisation in relation to foreignness and the self, and to building up knowledge of them, Homi Bhabha talks about the *Third Space*, which he calls the "precondition for the articulation of cultural difference." Babha reinforced the notion of cultural difference as a theoretical field in itself and opposed it to the shallow notion of "diversity" (Babha 2006: 155):

The reason a cultural text or system of meaning cannot be sufficient unto itself is that the act of cultural enunciation – the place of utterance – is crossed by the difference of writing or *écriture*. This has less to do with what anthropologists might describe as varying attitudes to symbolic systems within different cultures than with the structure of symbolic representation – not the content of the symbol or its "social function," but the structure of symbolization. It is this "difference" in language that is crucial to the production of meaning and ensures, at the same time, that meaning is never simply mimetic and transparent. (...)

The pact of interpretation is never simply an act of communication between the I and the You designated in the statement. The production of meaning requires that these two places be mobilized in the

11. See <http://www.marrakechbiennale.org/previous-editions/4th-edition>.

12. General statement of the Dar Al-Ma'mûn residency's goals, see: <http://dam-arts.org/â/en/1>.

13. The term "deterritorialisation" was introduced by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus* (1972) and refers to the current global context in which human subjectivity becomes destabilised, fluid, shifting and ungrounded. The term equally refers to spatial coordinates with their political and institutional implications in the contemporary capitalist societies.

passage through a Third Space, which represents both the general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot “in itself” be conscious. What this unconscious relation introduces is an ambivalence in the act of interpretation. (...) It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew (Babha 2006: 156).

He also writes:

It is the problem of how, in signifying the present, something comes to be repeated, relocated, and translated in the name of tradition, in the guise of a pastness that is not necessarily a faithful sign of historical memory but a strategy of representing authority in terms of the artifice of the archaic (Babha 2006: 155).

Hybridity, deterritorialization and mobility are for Homi Babha producers of meaning. In recent tourism theory, mobility is seen as a form of dwelling, whereas moving is a modality of practicing space, of practicing culture through immersion in the experience of space (see, for example, Obrador Pons 2003). Place is not an individual experience, but a set of relationships, which become assembled in time, adapt to different circumstances and undergo continuous constitution. Interventionist practices, residencies and site-specific projects are symptomatic for complex relations that connect movements of travel with what is often perceived to be the fixity of a perceived “here,” enabling re-grounding and re-formulation of the delimitations of one’s own place. Subjectivity and its formulation across a nomadic “home”-space is part of this cultural capital.<sup>14</sup>

Approaches, which have emphasized continuous contamination and movement, and not separation, have also been related to a sensory approach to geography<sup>15</sup>, as a vision that is not exterior to its objects. The attitude goes back to the residencies and explorations of the Barbizonists’ artistic colonies in rural France or of other landscape painters in North Africa (mostly Morocco and Tunisia) during the nineteenth century. Both then and now the artist-explorer is effectively and affectively delivered to a sort of cultural voyeurism in a world that requires a decidedly performative approach. As a consequence of this “proximate approach” he also produces a social and economical network for the assimilation of his not immediately predictable and marketable work – the very result of his residency. This network extended from the place of origin to the adoptive place. It sustained the practical coordinates of movement and its resulting forms of knowledge production – processes that span from the nineteenth century to today.

In 1997, Kevin Hetherington (1997) described nomadic “home” places in the contemporary world as ships, or mobile platforms, formed and sustained by the folding together of spaces and the relations of difference established by these folds. Place conceived as “circulating” (Hetherington 1997: 187) connects cultural immersion with a haptic dimension of geographical exploration. Hetherington discusses construction of place and subjectivity through the role of touch, as a form of non-representationalist knowledge. Proximal knowledge is a form of unconditional acknowledgment of the immediate presence of the other, which therefore becomes part of oneself. (Hetherington 2003: 1932). In this article he explained that, through a proximal encounter with the *praesentia* of a place, which is experienced as both present and absent, the subject builds up a performative and non-representationalist knowledge.

14. The concept of a nomadic subject and of nomadism as a defining condition of contemporaneity was established by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *Mille Plateaux* (Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1980).

15. For example, works that connect psychogeography with film and the arts, see Bruno 2002.

This accent on the fluidity and universality of experience, which permits being at ease in a foreign environment and enjoying immersion in it, states an apparent non-hierarchical approach, but can be based also on a forced identification of the so-called “other” with one’s own value system and movements that equalizes in order to assimilate; for example, belonging/ participation to universal activities in global capitalism or the goal of integrating the works (as final results of a directed process) into the global market. Part of this assimilation can be also an ethnographic interest for collecting elements of the “local culture” (seen implicitly as “real” or “authentic”) and introducing them into one’s own art – since the Barbizonists’ escapades into “the rural” – as proof of integrating a certain context. Assimilating local craft techniques or elements within contemporary art practices may then pass as a “re-valorization”, a “saving” of traditional values by the contemporary artist, which runs the risk of affirming an implicitly domineering discourse or feeding a local nationalistic sensibility. This economically augmented “saved tradition/ idea/ object” is then reintegrated into the global network. This is how Dar Al-Ma’mûn directors refer to the position, in the market system, of works produced during a residency:

A residence is not a counterpoint to the market, but a time for the construction of work, and producer of works, that are possibly destined to arrive at institutions or other market participants. Although Dar Al-Ma’mûn has a non-profit status, a residency is finally a structure that rises as a market player to public recognition, and the recognition of the professional artists with whom it engages (Hamon 2012).

In the context of abstract conceptual artistic practices which imply performative knowledge of an unknown context of immersion, Kevin Hetherington’s notion of

non-representational forms of understanding and of proximate knowledge can be very helpful (2003). Hetherington’s definition of the proximal knowledge best describes the meaning production in abstract art and conceptual object production: “Proximal knowledge is (...) unsightly” and “Proximal knowledge is not necessarily representational at all, rather it is performative, multiple, and heterogeneous in its outcomes” (Hetherington 2003: 1935). Conceptual, performative and non-representational forms of art are sustained by complex, global economic networks. Nevertheless their rapport to tradition is extremely complex and layered. In the context of non-representational knowledge production, the reproduction of naturalistic environmental practices reviving stereotyped traditions cannot find its place – as will be shown in the examples below.

Hetherington’s notion of performative knowledge shifts the focus away from the dichotomy Self-Other to more inclusive practices of mappings of a specific context (2003: 1934). Immersive knowledge is fluid, processual and uncertain. It is connected to thinking processes which are continuous and “unfinished,” whereas the object of enquiry is never attained (Hetherington 2003: 1935). Hetherington opposes this type of knowledge to the so-called “distal knowledge.”



### The Political Potentiality of “Not-To-Do”

Mobility encompasses a virtual dimension, in the sense that it determines a becoming with an indefinite outcome. It represents in itself a potentiality to modify both temporal and spatial coordinates. Following Giorgio Agamben (2008), the political relevance of this dimension of becoming, inherent in all non-local experiences consists not so much in the realization of given possibilities. Agamben invests with political potential not so much the accomplished

dimension of achieved objectives as their non-manifestation. For him the political engagement lies in the potential “not to do.”

For Giorgio Agamben (1999, 2008), at stake in understanding the concept of potentiality is not the mere impotentiality, in the sense of impossibility, but rather the potentiality “not-to-do.” This is not the absence of what could be done, but that which proves that there exists the capacity to do something. The freedom to refrain from an act, proves that there exists a potentiality to act in a certain situation, which is in itself a positive/ affirmative act. Agamben understands potentiality as something real, as a constituent part of reality. The potentiality “not to” discussed in Agamben’s volume *Potentialities* (1999) and especially in Chapter 11, “On Potentiality,” is based on Aristotle, whom Agamben considers generally misinterpreted in regard to potentiality. Agamben is arguing that the essence of potentiality is not simply non-Being, but the *presence* of an absence. This potential *not to pass into actuality* is the one that interests Agamben. “To be potential means: to be one’s own lack, to be in relation to one’s own incapacity. Beings that exist in the mode of potentiality are capable of their own impotentiality, and only in this way do they become potential” (Agamben 1999: 182). The capacity, of one’s own incapacity, is that in which freedom actually exists. Agamben calls the “I can” “...for each of us perhaps the hardest and bitterest experience possible: the experience of potentiality” (1999: 178). This is because every human potentiality is in relation to its own privation. And he identifies this mechanism as “the origin (and the abyss) of human power, which is so violent and limitless with respect to other living beings” (Agamben 1999: 182). From this perspective, it also becomes visible how “the root of freedom is to be found in the abyss of potentiality” (Agamben 1999: 182).

An expression of the consciousness of the potentiality “not-to-do” is often missing from discourses that equalize difference

in order to legitimize intervention and the economic or cultural affirmation of authority. Relevant in this context is the fact that Agamben discusses the moment after a potentiality has passed into actuality and got realized. In the case of “I can,” the sentence becomes “I did,” whereas in the case of “I cannot,” it becomes “I could have not” (Agamben 1999: 187). Transposed into the context of an intervention of a subject into an environment foreign to him, this relation expresses the possibility of a politically correct act. The negation is accompanying the act, and the negation passes into the act, even when this is actualized: “I could have not” accompanies the “I did.” Only out of a relation to one’s own incapacity (“I could have not”) can the freedom of a voluntary act (“I did”) be fulfilled as a potential of which the subject is aware.

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### Digital Dunes

There has been an increasing interest amongst architectural historians in addressing the role of design and technology for the historical relationship between the built and the natural environment across the twentieth century. This has also involved correlating the shifting discourse on environment with a history of architectural transformations and disciplinary expansions. Techno-cultural developments not only produced novel designs, they also placed architecture as a mediator, facilitating novel conceptions of the relationship between social and biotic systems. Art has played an important role in the establishment and theoretical development of an environmental history of architecture. It has reloaded and reconsidered changing cultural approaches to the environment across the long twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries and permitted experimentation for larger scale projects.

Recently the idea of *post-humanism* became relevant for defining artistic and



cultural practices, in which the nature of an object is defined not by its form, but by its content in information. As nature and technology are progressively fusing, the form of embodiment in a certain biological substrate becomes less defining. We are obliged to consider the constantly transformative character of most of the objects surrounding us, interchangeable structures, prosthesis, adjustments, temporary forms, that are complementing and incessantly modifying the human body and nature itself. In the so called *post-human* era, as in the *post-human* technologies and implementation projects, there are no essential differences between bodily existence and computer stimulation, between virtual and material, between organic thinking and cybernetics.

Barkow Leibinger Architects<sup>16</sup> based in Berlin belong to what could be called an “organic digital trend,” and they can be seen as promoting a *post-humanism* in which nature and the environment of the human being suffer various enhancements. In their sophisticated designs they reproduce organic and vernacular structures, materials and patterns using high-tech means. They produce architectural structures and surfaces by inventing new materials and also the tools to produce them. Laser technology is invested in order to recreate organic membranes originating in ancient product design from varied cultures. Their credo is the reversal of the famous “Form Follows Function” – first formulated by Frank Lloyd Wright – into “Form follows Material.” The possibilities of newly invented materials dictate the emergence of architectural form, which is set to respond to the sensory necessity of their user.

With “Atlas of Fabrication” (2009), an exhibition that was developed for the Architectural Association in London, the architects map out their particular world-view. They expose mainly their architectural imagination which builds on a deep fascination with materials extracted from various traditions and cultures and their uncharted potentials – expanded with

the use of digital techniques.

Their public space installation “Loom Hyperbolic” (2012) uses Moroccan traditional cotton binding techniques and, although it is the result of complex digital algorithms, it embodies at the same time a definite attempt at site-specificity, in the sense of integrating the pieces into the surrounding landscape, involving local labour and their solutions. For this work, in which they used software like *Grasshopper* and *Rhino*, their starting point was a research on geometrical algorithms in vernacular Moroccan architecture, which they replaced with digital algorithms – therefore turning technology itself into a material of their architecture.

“The most compelling shifts in design occur when technologies and fabrication capabilities are made available and interpreted in new ways,” they affirm (Chan 2009).<sup>17</sup>

Barkow Leibinger Architects are at the forefront of a generational shift in architectural experimentation based on sustainable forms, material research, digital fabrication, and a conceptual, experimental vision of space and architecture.

Also based on a digital approach, the work of Sinta Werner “The Problem of Translation” (2012)<sup>18</sup> is concerned with landscape forms encountered in Morocco, which she intends to turn into architectural forms, using digital software. Her metaphysical search for a fixed form among the always transforming natural shapes is a search for the laws of time and movement, which she intends to incorporate into the dimension of architecture. Her work is concentrated on the shape of sand dunes. Movement, which makes a dune exist, becomes for her a principle of building, a model of architectural structure, which can only be created with computer programs.

In the following interview excerpt, she gives a deeper understanding of her focus and process:

“Sinta Werner: The idea came from making a generic form: a dune set that

16. See <http://www.barkowleibinger.com/>.

17. Carson Chan citing Barkow Leibinger.

18. See <http://www.higheratlantis.org/sinta-werner/>.



comes from the nature encountered in Morocco but that is a perfect form, made by coordinating the winds and the dunes. The dunes I animated in a program called Cinema 4D, and I transformed it back into something physical, which I built with rudimentary, basic tools and materials.

*Marta Jecu:* You animated the dunes, brought them into movement and then brought them back into a still? In this sense, you fused natural landscape with a digital imagination and with local, analogue materials and building crafts in Morocco?

*S. W.:* Yes, these connections are marked by my use of colour. I wanted the colour to look quite synthetic, like a non-colour. This yellow neon that I use to coat the installation is something that is used for street signs. It is something very aggressive and artificial. I wanted to put a contrast to the natural forms that inspired me.”

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## Conclusion

I have tried to explore in this article how architectural representation is the product of an often contradictory and politically ambiguous tradition of representation – which carries superposed images and content. I have tried to show, using various examples, how the appeal to a tradition or to the vernacular is often based on a forced identification of the so-called “other” with one’s own value system and movements that equalizes in order to assimilate. In cases such as the artworks and temporary architectures produced during the Marrakesh Biennale, for example, we witness an ethnographic interest for collecting elements of the “local culture” (seen implicitly as “real” or “authentic”) and introducing them into one’s own art as proof of integrating a certain context. On the other hand, this assimilating of local craft techniques or elements within contemporary art practices may then pass as a “re-valorization,” a “saving” of traditional values by the

contemporary artist, which runs the risk of affirming an implicitly domineering discourse or feeding a local nationalistic sensibility. In dialogues like those with Francis Kéré and Megumi Matsubara we have seen how “interventions” in foreign contexts and participatory social actions ultimately contribute less to an economic balance, but rather participate in universal activities of global capitalism and the global market.

Following Francis Kéré, we can see how big development infrastructures are not designed to respond to the actual needs of the population, to enable them to become self-governed, otherwise the project developers would stop having a reason to exist. Nevertheless, the images transmitted through the building of these structures are meant to feed the imaginary about vernacular traditions – for the European eye as well as for the local population.

In this article I consider also the critical, anarchic and reactionary potential of conceptual art for this context. Artistic practices have shifted in the past decades the focus from architecture as habitation to architecture as both philosophical experience and social practice, until recent practices in the so-called post-humanism – which render the definition of “tradition” rather complex.

These are nevertheless by no means less controversial – for example Christoph Schlingensiefel’s Operndorf Afrika, which is paradigmatic for other artistic attempts to contribute towards destabilizing the authoritative and hierarchical legitimacy of architectural projects implemented and financed by capitalist structures in non-European countries. Schlingensiefel regards art as the only possibility for effective self-analytic and critical action-taking, which acts on a micro-level – the only possible level of an anarchic counter-action. Schlingensiefel considers art as a cathartic tool for uncovering political mechanisms which legitimize non-ethical urban planning and



cultural political agendas. In Schlingensief's discourse art is played out against the permanency, dominance, immutability of a persistent colonial tradition. His project stays nevertheless utopian and has not been finalised after his death.

I would like to end this incursion through various traditions of thought in experimental architecture with a quote from Jacques Derrida:

The architecture of the "tradition" belongs to the space of the mimesis. It is traditional; it constitutes the tradition by itself. Despite appearances the "presence" of an edifice does not refer only to itself. It also repeats, signifies, evokes, convokes, reproduces and cites. It carries towards the other and refers to itself, it divides even in reference (Derrida 1989b: 67, Aphorism 13).

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# Retrofuturism. A Revisited Concept for Religious Architecture

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## ABSTRACT

The text deals with the much debated question of renewal in contemporary Orthodox Christian architecture, a question that accompanied a wave of more than twenty years of building new churches in existing cities and villages in Romania after the fall of communism in 1989. Should they follow the post Vatican II trend of *aggiornamento* in Catholic architecture and update the traditional and regional building models? The answer the text offers tentatively is retrofuturism, a radical way of renewing the language of sacred spaces within the core prescriptions of tradition. In the process, the author gives two examples of how this might work.

## KEYWORDS

Retrofuturism, tradition, sacred space, cathedral.

Lately I have tried to etch a concept that would help me describe how we, architects, relate to yesterday (i.e. Christian tradition) when we build today churches for tomorrow. Now, for this same purpose, most resort to the (ab)used phrase "merging tradition and (post)modernism." And yet this can no longer describe the correct stand of "he who builds churches." Modernists like Richard Meier fruitfully call into question Christian architecture – as he does with his Church of the year 2000, in Rome. On the other hand, there are two categories of traditionalists: a) Catholic like Michael S. Rose (2001), who accuses the second Vatican Council not only for the ugliness of modern churches but also for the desacralization of their space, which, he thinks, may be recovered through traditionalist aesthetics (revivalism); b) Orthodox, and not just from Romania, who reject all talk about sacred architecture, treating the matter as plagiarism or pseudo-vernacular abomination. That is why the term we propose here intends to revamp

the very relationship between the extremes of Christian geography and history. I was looking for a definition of the context in which it could work when I stumbled on the words, in no way connected to the past, of Mr. Andrei Pleșu. He thinks that this "futurity of past gazing", that true renewal which makes the topic of this article, "is a *fresh feeling of the original*, it is a *free rearrangement* within the space of tradition" (Pleșu 2000: 11).

Therefore why not set out from Professor Pleșu's pithy formula with the following goals in mind:

1. To define the object of renewal (Christian religious architecture, with the stress on the church proper).

2. To assess together and judge the validity of those procedures by which the Christian past may be revisited, basically the first millennium (up to the Great Schism), with a view to particularizing the present and predicating an equally and concurrently old and new approach to tradition.

3. To give examples of how retrofuturism, once defined conceptually, can be utilized in its dual capacity: first, as interpreter of the already existing (i.e. as genealogist) and second, as a (re)generating concept.



Credit: Augustin Ioan.

As a corollary, I will dwell on the usefulness of the concept of retrofuturism via a few personal projects: the one for the Romanian Orthodox Patriarchal Cathedral that won the 2002 national contest (but did not come to be put in practice for reasons that are not relevant to this text); then two private chapels with different purposes yet similar premises; and finally the more recent project (2008) of the St. Filofteia church-necropolis, designed as a burial place for the Royal Family of Romania, in Curtea de Argeș, and which is almost finished today (2015).

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### What is a church?

A church is a strangely familiar entity implanted in the heart of a community. A place of universal religion and a pretext for bringing in tow the simplest unit of viable social neighborliness (the parish), the church is at the same time:

- I) *sacred space* containing, according to believers, the radical otherness;
- II) a (three-dimensional) *icon* of God and
- III) itself a *resonance chamber for the significance of icons* or statues, on the

background that contains, displays and spatially arranges these, which, situated in a certain place and in a certain mutual hierarchy of representation, make visible “the story” and “the iconographic contract” of the church (to paraphrase Charles Jencks’s well-known postmodern concept);

IV) both *public space* (interface of the exterior public space, the square or garden which it adjoins, and the interior public space of ecclesia, of pilgrimage); and

V) *the most private space possible*: the space where one prays in front of an icon, far from the maddening crowd and the world’s trivialities, and where one becomes intimate with God;

VI) a privileged *topos of public and individual psychodrama*, and an emotion intensifier;

VII) a place of staging/ reiterating via the cyclic rite of Bible events and characters;

VIII) *an archivist’s place* that remembers – for us, in our stead, or even against our will – a place where we remember, by confession, and where we are also remembered/ commemorated.

The church is all this and much more; for an architect it is the alpha and omega of the sacred space. Withal, it is the most difficult type of architecture. It is not easy either to design or to use a Christian worship place; let alone raise the question of rewriting the protocols and canons under which it gains flesh and, while being used, also soul(s). And yet:

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### What's the purpose of renewing Christian church architecture?

The joyous paradox of Christian architecture is that while being an expression of teleological religion it also needs to be archaic and futuristic.

To be an inspired recap of a bi-millenary tradition is one of its purposes; yet the wait for the Second Coming turns the church into a place cardinally oriented – not only in the proper sense of the term, but also

temporally. From this vantage, tradition is an archive of good practices, principles, and procedures, assumed by and immediate to the groups of producers and users of architectural spaces, all being accompanied by a justifying adjuvant narration: rites, myths, professional symbolism. Tradition is alive, or a museum object. Relaying tradition means assuming principles that can take contemporary forms and get embodied in contemporary materials, just as well as in shapes and matter validated by history. Tradition is a complex corpus, which is remembered and updated with a variable geometry.

The term retrofuturism describes that way of doing architecture; when investigation of tradition reveals things sufficiently surprising and remote in time that particularization should occur not in the sense of “invention” but of rediscovery. This style of architecture needs to be a continuous recap and a tireless (experimental) investigation. Such is the internal mechanism of retrofuturism. Situating elements featured in one’s tradition in contemporary contexts and rewriting them turns reiteration into a good composition school, and the resulting architecture into a “new old” one. At the same time, experiment has its distinct place within the territory of Christian architecture. And this because the quest of how best to make built-up matter suit the *logos* should never cease to concern us in this journey of ours, till doomsday. Particularizing is a means of drawing attention to the work of the Word in this world.

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### Retrofuturism as Interpreter

With this in mind, we may readily observe that renewal and experimenting with tradition are inherent to Christian architecture. Once we know this, using retrofuturism as an interpreter could appear a cinch. Yet, if we look carefully, and

then fast-forward the eighteen millennia of triumphal presence and observe how Christian architecture has evolved all along, we will get a clear picture of the experiment paradigm itself. We are dealing here with an ongoing endeavour to adapt to existing spaces as well as an endeavour of existing spaces to adapt to the development patterns of worship needs; a ceaseless moulding of types shifted from one geography and culture to another, an endless quest for the best spatial, ornamental/ collaboration expressions with other arts for a better representation of the Eucharistic mystery and of Christian symbolism. From the basilica to the Greek cross-in-square (inscribed-cross) church, going through the in-between examples, there was a long trial-and-error journey, with abandoned by-paths and cross-fertilization galore. An architect really involved with the destiny of contemporary Christian architecture needs to see (simultaneously!) both sides of the coin. He must work with living tradition (with archetypes, repeating them in contemporary circumstances, and with new techniques and materials) and at the same time with experiment. The church is the repository of a two-time millenary tradition that it has to clothe, creating over and over



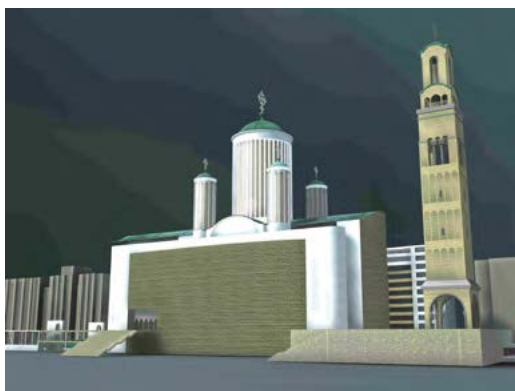
Credit: Augustin Ioan.

the perfectly appropriate garb of a bride and also a Penelope. At the same time the church is oriented to the future, anxiously looking forward to a time that “only the



Father” knows. Such is the motif in Eastern Orthodox church decoration: the wait.

Retrofuturism is one of the acceptable ways religious architecture may be “transfigured”, not in the sense of producing singular, “new” images made *de rigueur* by modernism, but in the sense of delving into one’s own tradition (i.e. its place and geography, the tradition of the community, the language, culture and especially religion) with a view to iterating it. Particularizing – induced by the permanent repositioning of traditional elements, in geo-cultural



Credit: Augustin Ioan.

instances of new materials and meaning – has always been, in fact, the very path to transfiguring architecture. This is also the source for “lay” architectural discourse to get geared to contemporaneity. Because, while rejecting tradition as a whole, modernism itself has actually revisited vernacular Mediterranean architecture, white and rectangular.

Concerning retrofuturism as generating new Christian art, I will start from an anecdote. In 2005 my wife and I lived for a while in Lyon. Not far from La Fourvière Basilica, there is the museum of Textiles and Decorative Arts that hosted then an exhibit of the most representative ceremonial attire of the late John Paul II. I found most of the items captivating, but what intrigued me most were some that came from a rather obscure Italian workshop making clothes according to a retrofuturist aesthetic design. As by then I had broadly outlined

the topic and I was already writing on it together with Archbishop Chrysostomos of Etna, California, I promptly grasped the analogy between our endeavours and those of the papal couturiers. In brief, what they did was research the history of the first Christian centuries in search of less known symbolic and/ or decorative elements to use in contemporary contexts. The result was fabulous as I hope my illustrations may prove even if modestly.

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### **The Patriarchal Cathedral: A Competition Won (2002)**

I perceived retrofuturism as the only possible approach when I designed the (winning) project for the contest for the Patriarchal Cathedral of Bucharest, in 2002. The project featured elements of Byzantine Christian religious architecture from Ravenna onward, yet the final result struck men of the cloth (and not only) as “futurist” despite its being “archaic” in the sense of introspection back to the source. Again, the references were either to Ravenna architecture (the window/ walls in alabaster), i.e. that time when Italy was Byzantine, a moment celebrated also by inter-war Romanian architects, or to prestigious local examples (Voroneț, Curtea de Argeș). Admittedly, re-contextualization also means a change in significance: translucent alabaster windows allowed Ravenna churches to get light as alabaster was the only natural source available. Used today, translucent stone would no longer hinge on natural light (glass could play that part very well) but instead spell Jesus’s effort to have man attain godliness, just as light seeps in through rock. Similarly, the frame/ bridges – double, abstract – made of over-polished Rușchița and Moneasa marble (the kind of rocks proposed reflected the diversity of texture and colours of Romanian stone and represented the only “national” element of the project) were meant as a reference to Brâncuși and his obsession with instilling

life into rock through extensive touching.<sup>1</sup> But my project also integrated an effect of marble deplored by Brâncuși: a certain translucency that actually gives the surface a milky depth, apparently of course, a sort of hypersurface. I relied on this effect in conjunction with that of total translucency noted from the inside: during the day light would penetrate the stone, the only source of natural light in a space deprived of windows (which, the design notwithstanding, would put a time stamp on any building), while at night it would go out of the inner space, streaming into the city, like a pale beacon. This effect copiously used by Brâncuși – that brings about the volatile presence of over-polished surfaces, caressed surfaces as Mircea Eliade put it – I wanted to turn into a “signal” heralding the show of light coming from inside, and passing through rock.

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### **Martyr Filofteia Archbishopric Cathedral with Royal Necropolis at Curtea de Argeș**

The construction duly began with the consecration of the site, in 2009, in the presence of Her Royal Highness Princess Heir Margareta and of Prince Radu Duda. The celebration was officiated by Archbishop Calinic of Argeș and Muscel. A collaboration protocol was signed by the Royal Family and the Archbishopric, the approved project being part of the protocol. The Royal family undertook to decorate and take care of sixteen crypts, while the Archbishopric took upon them to build and adorn the cathedral proper.

Two were the references used for this worship place. One was the Princely St Nicholas local church shaped as a (Greek) cross-in-square, with equal bays for the nave and transept, crowned by a dome or a turret over the vault intersection – noted for its elegant

proportions and one the very few such churches in Wallachia. The Greek inscribed cross represents the ultimate and most representative Byzantine contribution to the architecture of Eastern Christianity. The resulting inner space is highly capacious for a location that is actually square. The second reference is the (arch)bishopric palace and royal residence created by Lecomte de Nouy, who also restored, in the manner of his master Viollet Le Duc, the main cathedral of the ensemble, called Master Manole's. The palace was finished in exposed brick, with frames in local stone (unfortunately no longer quarried). The necropolis is the circular arc portico preceding the entrance into the church. The centre of the circle falls on the altar table, the very mystical east of the church. With each new liturgy, the living and the dead, together, look forward to the wine and the bread being turned into the blood and body of Christ, and naturally to the dreaded Day of Reckoning. Obviously so many tombs (practically four times more than in the old cathedral) could not be aligned facing the geographic east. Between the circle of the necropolis and the

1. Mircea Eliade suggests that stone itself, thus sculpted, begs touching (1973: 226).



Credit: Augustin Ioan.

2. The centre of each of the circles lies on the perimeter of the other, the *vesica pisces*, one of the oldest symbols of Christianity, being the shape resulting from their intersection.

3. At first, they were supposed to be placed in the left exedra inside the church, where the sun comes in at zenith and they could have been worshipped without disturbing the service in the cathedral.

counter-circle of the western façade, where the Judgment Day scene is featured, a *vesica pisces* relationship is established.<sup>2</sup> To the case in point, this *vesica pisces* would have been a skylight bathing the Doomsday painted on the inside of the cathedral in the light of the setting sun. The entrance to the necropolis would have been a bridge of structural glass, lit from below, the tombs at the level of the ground, and the living literally walking on light to enter the sacred space. Each group of two tombs is surmounted by a vault in golden mosaic lit by a candle. Initially, two cupolas were supposed to be built at the far ends of the necropolis, allowing southern sunlight in at some moments of the day. But the order of occupancy has changed so that the necropolis is narrower, meaning that the small chapel on the left will display the relics of Martyr Filofteia.<sup>3</sup> The southern exedra in the church would have had to feature windows just at the level of the floor, with embedded tabernacles containing the relics of the local bishops.

On the outside I wanted the necropolis to be in exposed brick with Albești stone frames, while the church proper would be in alternating stone and masonry (a typical Byzantine technique with anti-seismic virtues); and the altar exclusively in local stone to illustrate St. Maximus the Confessor's words from his *Mystagogy* (2017): "Each space in the church advancing east as firmament to the one preceding it." Mr. Drăgoi's great masons being consummate masters of the exposed brick technique, he was eventually retained for the job. Finally, this choice also evinces the connection with the initial monument of the restoration project commissioned by King Carol I, and the construction of the palace and chapel.

Any such project is one of collaboration so the commissioners readily make their own contribution, and often modify the given data of the space. Some of the changes brought to the initial project are neutral; others resulted in altering proportions, destinations, surfaces and heights. Anyway,

from the initial stage there have been successive ones. I remember one observation made by H. M. King Mihai I, about the copper cupolas in the model in front of his eyes: "Oh, they look like large muffins!"

We are now fine-tuning things in the necropolis. The inside of the church really grabbed my eyes only when the scaffolding was removed. The beauty of the exposed brick technique stood out perfectly even more so as I watched the seams being filled with coloured putty and the perfectly fired bricks being glazed. I carry loads of memories from the umpteen trips made to the site since 2007, when I had my first meeting with Prince Radu and Archbishop Calinic. The building process, the alterations – talked over or not – make up the small personal story of an exemplary collaboration with the royal contractor (represented by director Ion Tuca) and the chief of the area, a charismatic founder of many local worship places and not only. I will always have this feeling of admiration for one trustworthy constructor and exceptional human being, Mr. Drăgoi, whom I hope to have by my side in other projects in the future. Now the space is no longer ours but has been opened to receive its august guests unto eternal repose...

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## Conclusions

*New Churches after the Earthquake* (1942), the title of Petre Antonescu's book – born out of a lecture he gave on May Day 1942 at the Romanian Academy – suggests today a novelty effect that has slipped into oblivion but which still keeps awake a craving for freshness. The fact that when he started to design the Saints Sergius and Bacchus Church, for instance, Antonescu went directly to the Byzantine source, which he reinterpreted in the light of contemporaneity, proves that – in the absence of trend-setting models situated in the proximity of the church to be built – the solution is a "return to origins." As this is no

longer possible (fact indicated by the use of inverted commas), we will agree that through retrofuturism we can revisit tradition from the vantage of contemporaneity in order to propose to it what it may have forgotten or ignored, for reasons not relevant now. The mellowing of the post-Byzantine episode and the direct reference to Byzantium made possible, in the 1930s and 1940s, not only a circumvention of the historic fact that local tradition did not feature big-size quotable precedents but also a Byzantine revival of a tradition that after 1453 was oft relegated

from the original source.

Petre Antonescu's 1942 title, filtered through the words of poet Mircea Ivănescu, would become today a retrofuturist "Old Churches New," precisely the twofold take that I propose. Furthermore, the blend of local and universal Christian tradition, i.e. the numerous prestigious precedents to be quoted, turns the inventive, experimental re-visitation of the past into a long-standing enterprise meant to keep us busy until the Second Coming.



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# (Re)establishing Institutions as Tradition. A Fieldwork-based Analysis of *Obște*'s Commons' Management Institutions

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## ABSTRACT

The *Obște* is the entity which manages the commons held by the villagers or by lineage groups in a communal form of property in the historical regions known as Walachia and Moldavia. Usually, the commons managed by the *Obște* consist of forests, pastures, and common infrastructure. The aim of this paper is to present a New Institutional overview over the commons' management institutions of the *Obște*. The analysis will be cross-temporal in the sense that all the communal villages will be analyzed over three time periods: the old *Obște* (until 1948), the communist period (1948-1989, when all the communal properties were transferred to state ownership), and the new *Obște* (1990 – present; a significant moment in this third period was the enforcement of a new law in 2000, which provided the opportunity to re-establish the communal village *Obște*). The communal villages and their corresponding *Obști* that I will analyze in this paper are located in two Romanian historical regions, *Vrancea* and *Argeș*. The main difference is that while in the *Vrancea* region all the villagers have equal rights in the *Obște*, in the *Argeș* region the villagers do not have equal rights, with some individuals having more rights (called *dramuri*) in the *Obște* than others. Furthermore, there are differences in terms of the institutional arrangements that each type of *Obște* employs, with the villagers' behaviors varying accordingly. Finally, in keeping with the special issue's title, the paper also aims to investigate the evolution of *Obște* institutions over the time and their link to tradition.

## KEYWORDS

Tradition; *Obște*; communal village;  
New Institutionalism; Commons  
management.

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## Introduction

Using the title of this *Martor Journal* special issue, “Back to the Future: Creative Traditions in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” as a starting point, I will analyse the establishing and re-establishing processes that the associative forms of property known as *Obște* have undergone from a New Institutional perspective. Thus, I will refer to the *Obște* as a set of institutions – rules, norms, and regulations. From the beginning, a differentiation between those two processes must be understood. The history of the Romanian communal villages may be divided into at least three major periods. The period until 1948, which I will refer to as the period

of “the old *Obște*,” is by no means unitary and cannot be analysed as such. In fact, we can speak of several “old *Obște*” periods, according to the different laws and the local or state regulations that impacted and changed the life of the *Obște*, such as the 1786 *Orândueala de pădure pentru Bucovina* (Bukovina Forest Order), the 1881 *Forest Law*, and the 1910 *Forest Law*. In this paper I will refer to the old *Obște* as the one that has its last form (before dissolution); the communist period between 1948 – 1989, when all the communal properties were transferred to state ownership; and the period after the 1989 Romanian Revolution. This last period had a significant moment: the enforcement of a new law in 2000, which provided the opportunity to re-establish the communal village *Obște*. Furthermore, by the *establishing process* I am referring to

the emergence of old *Obște*, whereas by the *re-establishing process* I am referring to the emergence of the new *Obște*. In other words, this paper tries to provide possible answers to the following questions: first, *how did Obște institutions appear in the first place?* and second, *how can we account for the reappearance of the Obște?*

Before advancing into the next sections, it must be noted that the *Obște* is not a phenomenon unique to Romania. Similar forms of organizations may be found in South or Southeast Asia or even in Russia.<sup>1</sup> The *Obște* is the leading institution of the communal village. Its main characteristic is the fact that it is based on an indivisible type of property. Moreover, the property is communal in the sense that all the members of the *Obște* are owners, but no individual owner is allotted his own share of the property. Stahl called the villages organized on these core principles *communal villages*. He proposed the following definition for the communal village: “the communal village is neither a single household nor a simple spatial coexistence of autonomous households. The communal village is an association of family households on a jointly-owned territory, in which the collectivity has anterior and superior rights, exercised by a leading institution named *Obște*” (Stahl 1958, 2: 45).

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## Two Types of *Obște*

Given the nature of its core principles, i.e. those of *devălmășie*,<sup>2</sup> if one such principle changes, the resulting form of organization is a new one. Thus, changing the type of communality, can give rise to new types of *Obște*. In this paper, I will focus on the egalitarian and inegalitarian types of communality.<sup>3</sup> As their label shows, these types of communality refer to the relationship between the villagers. This distinction does not apply to wealth or money. In other words, while in the village *Obște* based on egalitarian communality

all the villagers (members) are equal, in the *Obște* based on inegalitarian communality the members are differentiated by the number of rights (or shares) they have in the *Obște*. Hereby, in an *Obște* characterized by egalitarian communality, the existing institutions shape the individuals' behaviours so as to ensure preservation of the commons, be they a forest, a meadow, a pasture, or something else which is owned by the *Obște* (Stahl 1946: 168). These rules or institutions are the *Obște*'s way to ensure the continuity of its property for all the present of future members. Another key element of the egalitarian communality is represented by the equal rights and benefits for each member of the village *Obște*. On the other hand, according to Stahl, the inegalitarian communality itself started as an egalitarian form. For example, if in a village there are many individuals interested in increasing their private benefits derived from the commons, they will be also interested into transforming the *Obște* into an inegalitarian organization based on shares or on any substitutes for them (Stahl 1946: 173-175). Historically, these individuals were those who collected the local taxes, namely people used to handling money as opposed to the rest of the peasants who were used to exchanging their goods for other goods, not for money.

Furthermore, it is important to note that in Moldavia and Walachia there existed a high number of both free peasants' communal villages and communal villages characterized by vassalage (Stahl 1958, 1: 7). As a mass phenomenon which comprises villages across the southern and eastern regions of nowadays Romania, their form of communal property may represent a real-life problem. Firstly, the territorial organization of a communal village had three main components: a) a group of households located in the village center; b) an area of forest and grazing ground which was used for free by all villagers. (Stahl notes that these types of field are known as “*commonaux* in French, common-fields in

1. For more examples regarding the commons and mir, *zadruga* and *obschina*, see Vasile 2010.

2. I propose “communality” as a translation for this word as I consider that it best explains this characteristic of the property being owned by more persons according to indivisibility criteria, although others choose to translate it as *joint ownership* (for example, see Mateescu 2013: 106).

3. In Stahl's words, there may be another one, the most desirable, the absolute form of communality (Stahl 1946: 160).

English, *allmenden* in German and Swiss, and as *udmark* in Danish"<sup>4</sup> [Stahl 1958, 1: 15]). In this case, the forest was not only a source of firewood and food, but also an area which could be used as pasture after clearance.<sup>5</sup> In many interviews conducted with villagers from Vrancea, they spoke about stories their grandparents had told them about the shepherds clearing forest glades in order to develop new pastures. These new pastures were used by the shepherds themselves, but at the same time were kept as commons for the use of the entire village. Lastly, c) there was a third part of the communal village organization, namely the plots adjacent to the villagers' houses, usually a field which was under the exclusive control of the owner (i.e., nowadays this may be recognized as private property). As an important detail, in this area, according to Stahl's description, "the appropriator could use production techniques which were not under the village's collective control" (Stahl 1958, 1: 15).

#### *How Did Obște Institutions Appear in the First Place?*

First of all, from now on I will refer to *Obște* as both the assembly of commoners and the set of rules in use. Because of the lack of historical documents regarding the birth of the *Obște*, I will present in this section the hypotheses offered by Stahl and by other scholars. The first hypothesis is the *theory of the eponymous hero*. This theory appeared to be one of the easiest to understand by all the stakeholders, but it might actually have no basis in fact, despite the many social monographs or even diaries according to which this and that village was created by this and that ancestor. For Stahl (1958), the theory of the eponymous hero could hold true only for those villages which are nothing else than an extensive form of one family whose ancestors had once owned all the land, i.e. a lineage. Hence, in time, as the family grew, the descendants became

the owners in equal parts of the land. In other words, this family divided among its members the property their ancestors had owned before. Hereby, it is nothing more than private property that had been divided in equal (or unequal) parts between the descendants. The assumption of the *eponymous hero theory* is that the ancestor settled on the land and appropriated an area which was not owned<sup>6</sup> by anybody. The problem, as Stahl presented it, is that such large areas not owned by anybody couldn't have existed (Stahl 1958, 1: 54-55).

Another hypothesis is that there was some initial form of social organization which in time became divided and fragmented into *Obști*,<sup>7</sup> and finally into individual households. In other words, the second hypothesis, which was proposed by Stahl states that the "nowadays *Obște*" [for Stahl, the *Obște* before 1948, the time when he did his research on communal villages] is "a disintegrated form of an older social organization" (Stahl 1958, 1: 55). The problem with the hypothesis proposed by Stahl is that there are no historical records or facts that can corroborate it; there are only the results of social archaeology, reality from the field, and the local norms. In other words, I consider that Stahl's account of the emergence of communal villages can only be tested by referring to unofficial records, reports, journals or even perceptions. In order to test this hypothesis, nowadays we can only rely on the villagers' perception. The problem we encounter if we follow this path is that their perception is based on arguments and stories told by their neighbours, their parents, or grandparents. Thus, we would not rely on arguments or actual empirical behaviours or information, but only on perceptions.

Moreover, in addition to local norms, each village may have some local legends. In this case, Stahl argued that in his fieldwork research, all the villagers considered that their village was established by one or more ancestors. Thus, each village has its own genesis legend (Stahl 1958, 1: 55). Maybe

4. Taking into account the existence of these types of communal property in other countries than nowadays Romania (the Slavic-speaking region and Southeast Asia as I mentioned in the first section of this chapter), the communal property is not an exclusive characteristic of the Romanian archaic villages, as some scholars or even villagers might believe.

5. By *clearance* I am referring to the process of deforesting an area in order to be used in the future as a pasture.

6. By "owned," I am not referring to the nowadays meaning of the term, but to the areas that were not appropriated by anyone.

7. *Obști* is the plural form of *Obște*.

the iconic example of this type of legend is the one of Tudora Vrâncioaia and Stephen III of Moldavia (or Stephen the Great). The legend speaks about how Vrâncioaia's sons helped the Moldavian ruler to win a battle and, for their bravery or, as Monica Vasile presented, "for their military merits" (Vasile 2006: 4), each of them received a mountain. The legend is still significant nowadays, given that some villages claim to have descended from Vrâncioaia's seven sons: *Spulber*, *Păulești*, *Nistorești*, *Negrilești*, *Bârsești*, *Spinești*, *Bodești*. During my fieldwork in Vrancea region, where these villages are located, all the respondents quoted the legend. In order to promote the legend, for its touristic appeal, a small house was recently built on a hilltop in the heart of Vrancea region, which they called *Vrâncioaia's House*.<sup>8</sup> It is a powerful

8. I would like to thank to George Iordăchescu for all the photographs presented in this paper.



Vrâncioaia's House.  
Photo credit: George Iordachescu.

local symbol that not only legitimates the existence of the communal villages, but it is also a part of the locals' identity.

According to both Stahl, in his monograph of Nerej village (Stahl 1939) or in his *Contributions* (Stahl 1958), and to Mocanca (n.d.: 109), the peasants from the Vrancea communal villages are very proud of this legend and they are telling it to every researcher that comes in their area. Recalling the argument of Stahl's hypothesis and of the eponymous hero theory, the issue is not the legend itself, but, in fact, the unknown source of the property. Another important detail is the time when the social organization was officially recognized. For

example, according to Aurel Sava (1929), Păulești village was attested in 1507, Valea Sării in 1523, Bârsești and Topești in 1585, Tulnici in 1648, Ruget in 1661, Naruja in 1688, Poiana in 1694, Negrilești in 1709, Spinești in 1723, Bodești in 1750, and Nistorești in 1792 (Sava 1929: XXV).

There are also other possible hypotheses or explanations proposed by researchers outside sociology or anthropology. For example, Mancur Olson put forward the metaphor of the bandits and the ascent of democracy (Olson 1993: 567). In short, his argument is that there exist two types of bandits, one type that may be described as roving bandits, and another one as stationary bandits. While the roving bandit comes into a community and destroys "all the incentives to invest and produce, leaving little for either the population or the bandit, the stationary bandit "monopolizes and rationalizes theft in the form of taxes," an action which leads to a better situation for both the bandit and the community (Olson 1993: 567-570). Similarly, Stahl argued that a group of nomads (groups that were present throughout Walachia and Moldavia) might have exploited agricultural sedentary communities. Hereby, one possible course of action for these nomad groups is to come and exploit the agricultural village in order to get all of their produce, while another one may be to come and pillage only part of the community's produce in order to allow them to live and make more produce (Miroiu 2016: 35-37). Hence, the scenario of the nomads who are exploiting only a part of the community's produce is a better one, because it allows for the development of a relationship based on trust between the two groups (Stahl 1972: 42-44). Thus, a long time before Olson's metaphor, Stahl took into consideration the metaphor proposed by Oppenheimer whose gist is the same – except that the roving bandit is a bear, while the stationary bandit is the beekeeper (Oppenheimer 1906, qtd. in Stahl 1972: 43). This metaphor came to be known as *the bear and the beekeeper metaphor*.

### Local Institutional Arrangements

Depending on the types of goods that every organization manages, different mechanisms were put into place to keep the quantity and quality of that good at the highest possible level. There are two main characteristics of goods: rivalry and excludability. Rivalry refers to the way in which the good is consumed. A good is said to be rivalrous when consumption by one party prevents the other parties from enjoying the same quality of that same good (Miroiu 2016: 38). Excludability refers to the way that the consumers may or may not be prevented from consuming a good (Miroiu 2016: 36-37). We have learnt so far that the old *Obște* manages forests and meadows. At the same time, all the villagers have a right of use for firewood or to graze their cattle on the jointly-owned meadow. Thus, the good, be it a *forest* or a *meadow*, is non-excludable. On the other hand, if a person cuts down all the trees from the communal village's forest, the other villagers are prevented from using it anymore. Similarly, if a villager brings more cattle than the meadow permits in order not to become overgrazed, the meadow will be destroyed, the worst-case scenario for the entire village. Hereby, the good is said to be rivalrous. So, using the classification of goods put forward by Adrian Miroiu (2016: 39), the meadows and the forests owned by the *Obște* are *commons*. A discussion regarding rivalry must be made here. As Mirela Cerkez (2015: 93) argued, the perception of the villagers in the old *Obște* period was that there was much more forest than they could ever use. Thus, the good was perceived as being infinite. Another point of view is related to the technology that was used by the villagers. In other words, the poor and rudimentary technology that was used made it impossible to exploit a large quantity of timber. Thus, the good remained non-rivalrous. Referring only to the two main characteristics of goods, *non-excludability* and *rivalry*, I consider that the

opportunity to exploit did exist, although there were no effective means for doing it at that time. The lack of means does not imply that a good's core characteristics are changed.

Probably one of the first most influential research papers on the commons is the *Tragedy of the commons* written by Garret Hardin (1968). In this paper, Hardin proposes the *pasture metaphor*. The metaphor assumes that there exists a pasture with a given size. And then there are two herders whose cattle are grazing on it. Taking into account each herder's personal interest in getting more profit from this activity, each of them will be interested in bringing more animals on the pasture. Individually, this action will increase each herder's profit, because the revenues for each extra animal brought on the pasture will be exclusively his, while the costs will be divided to both users of the pasture. At the same time, the other herder has the same incentive. The outcome is that the pasture is destroyed, and both herders are in a worse situation than before. Thus, there appears *the tragedy of the commons* (Hardin 1968: 1245-1247).

Since Hardin's work, there have been many attempts to solve the puzzle of this *tragedy*. One of the most significant is the one proposed by Elinor Ostrom (1990). According to her, the model of the tragedy of the commons may lead to the following prediction: "when individuals who have high discount rates and little mutual trust act independently, without the capacity to communicate, to enter into binding agreements, and to arrange for monitoring and enforcing mechanisms, they are not likely to choose jointly beneficial strategies" (Ostrom 1990: 183). The solutions proposed by Ostrom in order to solve this problem are *the Hobbesian solution*, *the free-market solution*, and the solution based on *local governance* norms (Ostrom 1990: 8-16). The first one is referring to the external imposition of rules by a Leviathan-like state. Thus, in order to avoid Hardin's

tragedy, the State is the one to decide when a herder may or may not bring another cattle on the pasture. The problem with this solution resides in the State's impossibility to know exactly all the details throughout the entire land it administrates (Ostrom 1990: 10-11). In other words, the State cannot know for sure how many pastures with the same size there are, their capacity, or at least the number of cattle that each herder brings on it. Because of these limitations, the Hobbesian solution may not be the best as it does not help to avoid the tragedy of the commons. The *liberal* solution proposes the shift from *common* good to *private* good. Thus, as Adrian Miroiu argues, promoting a good as being non-excludable might solve the social dilemma, because this transformation "is an instrument which eliminates the free-riding incentives" (Miroiu 2016: 352, note 19). Although this may seem to be a better solution than the Hobbesian one, it has its own shortcomings, such as the long time that it takes to enforce new institutions and rules, or even the impossibility of dividing the pasture. Lastly, the solution proposed by Ostrom was that of a local-based institution that governs the commons. Hereby, the communities propose and adopt their own norms of governing in order to avoid the *tragedy*. For example, in the case of forests, the local communities may propose monitoring and sanctioning measures for the villagers that overexploit.

In the case of the *Obște*, the problems that may arise in relation to the commons are various. I mention here just two of the most important ones: the potential overexploitation of the forest and the overgrazing of the pastures. The existing rules (i.e. institutional framework) influenced the way these two problems were dealt with in the *Obște*. According to Adrian Miroiu, "there were two factors that were involved in the creation of new institutions and organizations: a) capitalist relationships which changed the agricultural institutional arrangements

(plantation, grazing or deforestation) and the b) centralized state which imposed a more powerful administration and the individual taxation system" (Miroiu 2016: 53). Thus, the villagers' behaviour had changed in accordance to the new incentives provided. For example, following the ascent of capitalist relationships, the forest was increasingly exploited for money. In the old *Obște* period, both the form of property and the procedures of timber exploitation were based on local mutually accepted norms,<sup>9</sup> and not on any official rule. But, after the industrial revolution and the implementation of more effective technologies and methods of timber exploitation, the need for state regulations became imminent for all communal villages across the country. In the terms proposed by Oana Mateescu, the year 1910 represents a "crack in the history of the Romanian communal villages" (Mateescu 2013: 88). In other words, as Mateescu argued, after 1910 the continuity which had characterized the communal property as an immemorial and timeless practice is broken (Mateescu 2013: 88). Following Oana Mateescu's argument, 1910 marks the moment when some elements such as laws, communities, corporations and local habits clashed, because of the documents (and laws) that permit local characteristics to seep into the juridical notions of property right and property inheritance (Mateescu 2013: 88). 1910 was when the first modern law dealing with communal village property rights and regime was passed, namely the Forest Law of 1910.<sup>10</sup> Recalling the argument proposed by Adrian Miroiu, the 1910 Forest Law may represent the highest level of state involvement in the governing of communal villages throughout the country. The Forest Law was used by the State in order to clarify the property details and the exploitation procedures. Moreover, the Forest Law imposed the tables of rights and the by-laws. These table of rights listed all the members of the *Obște* (*Moșneni* for Argeș and Răzeși for Vrancea), who were at least eighteen

9. These norms may be understood as *informal institutions*.

10. The Forest Law can be accessed online at: <http://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliuDocument/19328>.



years old and had right(s) in the *Obște* (Cherciu 2015: 210).

### *How Did the New Obște Appear?*

Throughout the paper, new *Obște* is to be understood as the institution that emerged after the Romanian Revolution of 1989. Romania thus became a democracy, and opportunities to reclaim property rights over any nationalized<sup>11</sup> or collectivized goods (i.e. property) appeared. Between 1990 and today, many laws have been passed concerning agricultural land (including forest) restitution. Hence, the period after 1990 is characterized by a procedure of restitution of formerly nationalized properties. In this connection, the first law of restitution of agricultural lands, Law no. 18/1991, proved to be flawed insofar as it set a 10 hectare limit for property restitution. Although this limit may appear as reasonable, to prevent people from reclaiming large surface areas with forged documents, the associative forms of property, either *Obști* or compossessorates, could not apply to have their lands returned to them. In 1997, a new law regarding property restitution appeared, but it had the same effect for the *Obști* –they could not regain ownership of their property. Finally, the only instrument that helped the associative forms of property, especially the communal villages was Law no. 1/2000. In that period, there were many debates regarding the re-establishment of the *Obști*, even in Parliament. For example, Șerban Mihăilescu (a Member of Parliament at that time) declared: “As crazy as this might seem, in 2000 A.D., Daco-Roman and Habsburg obsolete institutions such as the *Obști* and compossessorates are going to be re-established to reclaim their forests in the third millennium!” (Mateescu 2013: 94). After this new law came into force, as shown by Monica Vasile (2008), “approximately 24% of the forested areas were returned to communal villages *Obști*” (Vasile 2008: 56). Thus, the impact of this law was notable.

Finally, although technically this law permitted the communal villages to re-establish the *Obște* institution and to recover their confiscated properties, there appeared a problem regarding the effects that all these laws had over the *Obște*. As I previously mentioned, the old *Obște* was a collection of many more characteristics than its wealth or properties. Originally, *Obște* was founded on a communal basis made of norms, rules, social capital, or even common economic activity. After re-establishment, the social capital as it existed in the earlier period disappeared due to the incentives and institutions deriving from *increasing state authority* and the economic limitations of *capitalist relationships*. Also, the norms and rules changed. Finally, regarding these two factors which changed the institutions, Adrian Miroiu proposes two more reasons that influenced the incapacity of the Romanian communal village to deal with exogenous factors: “the rudimentary characteristic of the communal village institutions and that institutions were proposed in a context characterized by sufficiency and they worked only when the goods were abundant” (Miroiu 2016: 54). Thus, the argument is that the institutional change is the result of the *Obște* institution's inability to adapt to the new challenges it faces.

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### **Methodology**

From a methodological perspective, in this paper I employed qualitative research methods. In his *Guide*, Ian Dey (1993) put forward an hypothetical situation regarding Eskimos and their perception of the colour white. Thus, if we would ask several people: *What color is snow?*, Dey argued that “to most of us, the answer ‘white’ may seem satisfactory, but to an Eskimo it would seem a joke: Eskimos distinguish between a wide variety of ‘whites’ because they need to differentiate between different conditions of ice and snow. So it is with qualitative

11. According to Mateescu, quoting Bouriaud (2008), in 1947 the total surface area occupied by communal village forests was 1,330,000 hectares (i.e. 20% of the total forested area in Romania) (Mateescu 2013: 93).

12. The included maps of Dragoslavele and Vrancea region were produced using Philcarto for Windows (Waniez 2013).

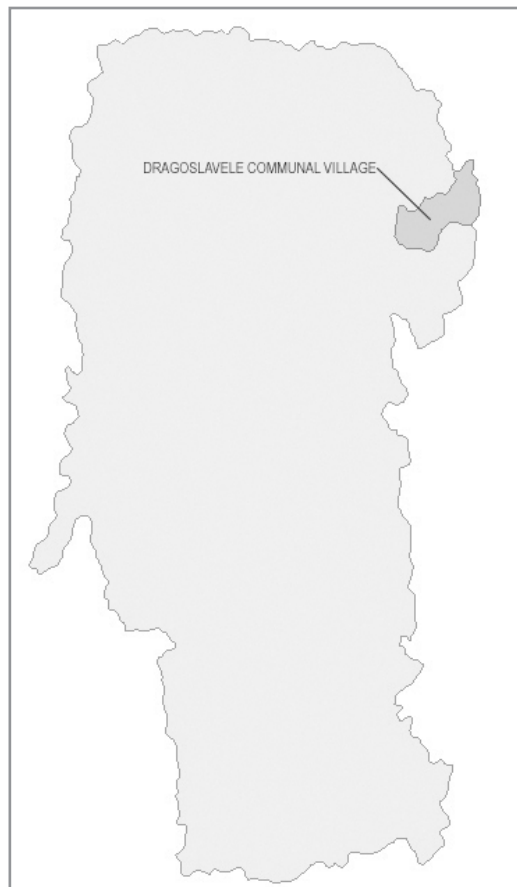
data analysis” (Dey 1993: 1). In other words, a qualitative approach allows me to differentiate between all the details coming out of the fieldwork activity. Hereby, I employed qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews and document analysis. Using the distinction proposed by Steinar Kvale between the *miner* and the *traveller* (Kvale 1996: 3-5), in this paper my approach was firstly that of a *traveller*, followed by the *miner*’s. First, I tried to obtain the general description of the *Obște*, and then I went more in-depth with the key interviewees. The choice of the methods was motivated by the advantages of the qualitative approach in this type of field study. Thus, one of the most significant advantages of in-depth interviews is revealed when participants cannot be observed directly and when they can provide historical information (Creswell 2003: 186). In other words, conducting in-depth interviews allows us to discover and understand peoples’ reactions and perceptions regarding the research subject. On the other hand, there is the limitation of the information being filtered by interviewees’ point of view (Creswell 2003: 186). To compensate for this limitation, I employed document analysis in order to retrieve details regarding the period of the old *Obște*. Furthermore, all the information resulted from the in-depth interviews may be checked against the information resulting from the document analysis, and vice versa. In terms of limitations, document analysis may be incomplete or the documents themselves may not be accurate or authentic (Creswell 2003: 187).

### Procedure

Chronologically, the first fieldwork activity is represented by the ten in-depth interviews and the two group interviews conducted by myself and Adelin Dumitru in Dragoslavele communal village. The second fieldwork activity is represented by twenty-six in-depth interviews with heads of *Obște*, and an additional twenty interviews/

discussions about issues of concern for the interviewees, with *Obște* members in the historical region of Vrancea known as *Țara Vrancei* (Vrancea Country).

In Dragoslavele communal village,<sup>12</sup> the interviews were conducted in the first week



Dragoslavele Communal village and Forested area.

of February 2016 and all the interviewees were members of the Dragoslavele communal village organization. Each interview had a maximum duration of 130 minutes and a minimum of 40 minutes, because we only asked questions about things that they said they were familiar with. As we presented in the paper resulted from that fieldwork (Diaconu and Dumitru 2017), there were some respondents who did not know all the information related to the *Obște*, for example, the issue of the legal form of present-day *Obște*. Similar to the in-depth interviews, one group

interview was conducted with three elder members of the community, while the other one was conducted with employees of Dragoslavele municipality. We considered that those persons would know in-depth details regarding the connection and the collaboration between the *Obște* and the municipality (as the State's representative in the community). Recalling the February 2016 fieldwork activity in the Dragoslavele *Obște*, the selection of the interviewees was not programmed and it did not correspond to a specific statistical step. Thus, we interviewed all the persons who wanted to respond to our questions and issues, but we had a minimal requirement, namely for them to be members of the communal village. We tried to choose respondents from the village elders because, in this case, the probability of knowing all the details regarding the *Obște* and its past was higher. Moreover, we considered that the elders have more available time and are more interested into the *Obște* activities. Last but not least, as concerns the ethical aspects of the Dragoslavele fieldwork, the respondents answered our interview questions on a purely voluntary basis. In addition, we have only recorded the persons and interviews for which we received the permission to record them. Finally, all the discussions were held in Romanian because this was the native language of respondents.

The document analysis method in the case of Dragoslavele communal village consisted of analysing the two monographs on this subject. One of them was written in 1937 by Ioan Răuțescu – the local priest who was also involved in *Obște* activities. The other one was co-authored by the members of the new *Obște* Administration Council (Mogos *et al.* 2010). We also examined the maps and documents presented

on the communal village's website or in these monographs.

Regarding the second fieldwork activity, the one in Vrancea region, it was conducted in the first two weeks of August 2016 (1 August 2016 to 15 August 2016). Some of the interviews were conducted with heads of *Obște* – 26 in-depth interviews. I collaborated with the team led by Monica Vasile<sup>13</sup> in their research conducted in Vrancea region. They used a comprehensive questionnaire about all the details regarding each *Obște*. More than that, we would interview each questionnaire respondent about additional details. After each respondent answered the questionnaire and additional questions, I filled in an interview grid, similar to the one used in Dragoslavele, with the answers provided. Similarly to the Dragoslavele communal village research, all the discussions were in Romanian, the native language of the respondents. The associative forms of property from Vrancea region analysed

13. I would like to thank Monica Vasile and George Iordăchescu and the whole research team involved in their project (Associative Environmentalty – Romanian Forest Commons Project – supported by a grant of the Romanian National Authority for Scientific Research and Innovation, CNCS-UEFISCDI project number PN-II-RU-TE-2014-4-2865) regarding the study of the associative forms of property all over Romania. More details regarding this project may be found on the project's website: <http://romaniacommons.wixsite.com/project>.

The analyzed villages of Vrancea and the forested areas.



in this paper are: *Obștea Năruja*, *Obștea Nistorești*, *Obștea Spinești*, *Obștea Nereju*, *Obștea Bîrsești*, *Obștea Herăstrău*, *Obștea Poduri*, *Obștea Poiana* (Mușa, Vetrila and Hârboca), *Obștea Topești*, *Obștea Valea Sării*, *Obștea Colacu*, *Obștea Ruget*, *Obștea Mare Vidra*, *Obștea Mică Vidra*, *Obștea Vișoara*, *Obștea Spulber*, *Obștea Muntele Frumoasele* (Vrâncioaia), *Obștea Păulești*, *Obștea Tulnici*, *Obștea Coza*, *Obștea Hăulișca*, *Obștea Negrilești*, *Obștea Vilcani*, *Obștea Prahuda*, *Obștea Condratu*, *Obștea Paltin*.

The other 23 interviews were conducted with key interviewees interested in *Obște* activities, such as local teachers, local priests, lawyers, medical doctors, fire-fighters, rangers, villagers, or even mayors. In my opinion, all of these interviews and discussions are relevant and helpful in the paper's economy because they provided more details about my research topic, the *Obște*, and an opportunity to engage in discussions with other persons who are either writing or working on the *Obște*. Thus, all the information which will be presented in the paper was verified from more sources than the interview with each head of *Obște*.

Moreover, I took daily notes about each interview and about all the connections between the observed phenomena and persons. Thus, all these details may be considered a short ethnography useful in providing details on the relationships between the members of the *Obște*.

Concerning the document analysis method, in the case of Vrancea region, I have analyzed all the published monographs about that region in the period of the new *Obște*: Cherciu (2012, 2013, 2015), Țibrea and Cherciu (2012); I have also analysed *Obște* by-laws and maps.

The main limitation of this paper resides in the number of analysed *Obști*. A comparison between the *inegalitarian* (only one analysed) and *egalitarian* (twenty-six analysed) *Obști* cannot be made. The first reason is the number of *Obști* analysed,

but there are also some other important characteristics such as their economic power, their wealth, their size, etc. Thus, both the results and the conclusions of this paper should be understood as the outcome of an exploratory research.

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## Discussion

In this section I will analyse from a New Institutional point of view the processes of establishment and re-establishment of the *Obște*. Although in the second section of the paper I have partly described the Institutional Studies theoretical framework, in the beginning of this section, I would like to broadly introduce the theoretical framework. First of all, Institutional Studies "focus on the rules, norms, procedures and formal organization and their effect on the social decision-making processes" (Miroiu 2017: 21). One of the most important researches for Institutional Studies is Douglass North's *Institutions and Institutional Change* by (1990). For him, "institutions are the rules of the game in a society or, more formally, are the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction. In consequence, they structure incentives in human exchange, whether political, social or economic" (North 1990: 3). Thus, people's behaviours are shaped by the way institutions are built. Or, in other words, if you change the rules, you change the behaviour.

As for the *Obște*, this institution is faced with a possible tragedy of the commons. Therefore, throughout time, it underwent many changes in an attempt to reduce this risk. Thus, for example, in the Dragoslavele *Obște*, the monitoring process of the commons had two distinct components: the *Obște* was either the manager of its own resources or the *Obște* outsourced the right to appropriate some common-pool resources (CPRs) (Diaconu and Dumitru 2017: 21). Taking into account Adrian Miroiu's hypothesis regarding the simplicity of the



communal village institution (Miroiu 2016: 54), in this case, the monitoring process, for example, was realized by the villagers. If analyzed from this perspective, then, indeed, the institutions were rudimentary and very simple, but for the *Obște* members' needs, they were good enough. In other words, although the monitoring institution of the old *Obște* was costly, because all the villagers had to pay attention to the other villagers' behaviour, it was effective. The monitoring institution worked in one more way: because all the villagers were paying attention to the overexploitation of the forest, they implicitly knew that all the others were keeping an eye on them. Hence, the overexploitation did not appear in these cases. On the other hand, referring to the *Obști* from Vrancea, the hypothesis proposed by Miroiu seems to be valid. I say this because the institutional arrangements of the Vrancea *Obști* were not prepared for the selling of property rights procedure.

Therefore, many privately-owned companies "used the village or *Obște* leaders in order to get the permission to exploit the timber in that area" (Cherciu 2015: 169). Hence, the so-called *bald-headed Vrancea* phenomenon: a large part of Vrancea mountains were fully deforested by foreign companies. In this case, admittedly, the communal village *Obște* were not ready for this behaviour. Their institutions were not ready to resist to such an external actor.

But, let us recall the questions proposed in the Introduction and the purpose of this paper: *How did the Obște appear in the first place?*, regarding the old *Obște*, and regarding the new *Obște*: *Why did the Obște reappear?* And also: *Is the re-establishment of the Obște (the new Obște) the result of tradition?* In the following paragraphs I will propose some potential answers.

#### *New Institutional Perspectives on the Old Obște*

The first establishment of the *Obște*, as presented in the second section cannot be historically validated. There are many hypotheses about the building process of new villages in Romania, be they communal villages or villages under vassalage. Of course, a New Institutional hypothesis cannot be historically tested, at least for the early period of the *Obște*, but I will explain next why I take into consideration this possibility. First of all, according to Petru Poni's map, "the free villages may be found in the mountain and the higher lands of the Carpathian depressions, while the villages characterized by vassalage may be found predominantly in the lower land depressions and in the plains" (qtd. in Stahl 1958, 1: 45). The choice of the higher altitude areas is not random, it is the result of an institutional arrangement. Being higher in the mountain region, the villagers could not be effectively monitored by the land-owning boyars: the villagers could easily run and hide in the forests or the caves. Thus, from a cost-efficiency perspective, there was no positive



The Old bell tower of *Obștea Spinești*.  
Photo credit: George Iordănescu.

incentive for the boyars to buy forested areas, because of the risk they might face. In addition, because of being able to escape monitoring or of the lack of rules or norms, the villagers had the incentive to run away from the hypothetical situation. In this case, the hypothesis regarding the communal villages' location seems valid. Of course, there is a limitation to this hypothesis characterized by a *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy.

Taking into account the fact that there were villages organized in an *Obște*-like manner as early as the 1500s, I assume that the villagers have had some incentives for managing their property based on a type of communality. In the case of the *inegalitarian Obște* (such as Dragoslavele) there were local norms that contributed to the villagers' behaviour of developing an *inegalitarian Obște*. One norm is represented by their propensity towards selling the timber. Given the location of Dragoslavele on Dâmbovița River, the villagers there had the possibility to transport the timber through rafting. Thus, their interest in maximizing their profit was easily achievable. Moreover, in this region there was a rule that the rights, called *dramuri*, could be inherited. Therefore, if a family owns 1 *dram* (right) and it has two children, then, after the parents' death, each offspring will have 0.5 *dramuri*. But, if a family is childless, their right will disappear after their death. Hence, because the total number of *dramuri* is fixed (another local norm), they may donate or even sell their *dramuri* to other persons. Once this happens, a new market for *dramuri* is created. The buy and sell procedures and norms are locally set: for example, in the old *Obște* of Dragoslavele, the members of the *Obște* had pre-emption for buying *dramuri*. In other words, if a villager wanted to sell his rights, he had to sell them to another member of the *Obște* (on condition that the offer of the *Obște* member was not lower than any offer made by an outsider).

Whereas in the communal villages

of Vrancea, the local norm present in all the monographs about the Vrancea *Obști* states: "the member of any Vrancea *Obște* is born with his right to membership and the right dies with him." In other words, rights cannot be inherited. Coming back to the previous example, if there is a person who has a right in the *Obște* and two children, the latter won't become members of the *Obște* upon their parent's death, because their parent's rights *die* with the parent. Thus, the children would gain membership in the *Obște* implicitly, when they started working on the communal property. Taking into account these two different core assumptions, the resulting institutional arrangements are different and the villagers' behaviours are different. The institutional arrangement based on local norms thus led to two different forms of communal property: the *egalitarian* and the *inegalitarian Obște*. Furthermore, another difference deriving from this is in the level of investments in the community. In the case of Dragoslavele, the old *Obște* did not invest in the village assets, because these investments were deemed expenditure. The higher the expenditure, the smaller the profit for each *dram*. Thus, there was no incentive to invest into the community. On the other hand, in all of the Vrancea *Obști* where I did fieldwork, the *Obște* invested into the common assets used by all the villagers: the church, the school, or even bridges over the rivers.

In the adjacent picture is the bell tower from Spinești village, which was built by the old *Obște* of Spinești. There are many such examples throughout Vrancea region.

Last but not least, from a legal point of view, the associative form of property known as *Obște* (including the communal village) did not appear as a result of local norms prevailing, but as a result of the state's imposition. Hereby, whether we research the establishment of an *Obște* in Argeș, such as Dragoslavele *Obște*, or of an *Obște* in Vrancea, they were legally created following the enforcement of new laws.





The Dragoslavele communal village was formalized after the enforcement of the first forest regulations in Romania (1881). On the other hand, as mentioned in the previous section of this paper, in the case of the Vrancea *Obști*, they were formalized after the enforcement of the 1910 Forest Law. With the growing authority of the State, there appeared the “crack into the history of the Romanian communal villages” that Mateescu talked about (2013: 88). Finally, this archaic form of property only became officialised after the enforcement of the laws mentioned, because, in the case of the Vrancea *Obști*, they didn't need such formal arrangements before. Their existing institutional arrangements, consisting of local rules and norms, did not need to be ready for incorporating these laws. They were not firstly developed for that, and yes, they were too rudimentary and simple to solve simpler problems.

#### *New Institutional Perspectives on the New Obște*

Between 1948 and 1989, there were no associative forms of property because of the collectivization and nationalization processes started in 1948 by the Romanian government. Although the formal *Obște* had officially disappeared, the relationships between the former members remained essentially the same since they continued to be neighbours. Consequently, they kept their documents regarding the *Obște*, all the table of rights and by-laws. Moreover, the former *Moșneni* or *Răzeși* were transferred to work for the state-owned companies in their region or for the administrative apparatus. Thus, in the case of Dragoslavele, most of the *Moșneni* were employed at the Câmpulung-Muscel cement factory. On the other hand, in the case of the Vrancea *Obști*, the villagers were employed at IFET, which was the state-owned company that exploited the *State's* forests.

In 1990, Romania became a democracy, and as I previously stated, a key moment

was the enforcement of Law no.1/2000. The law granted people the right to re-establish their *Obști*, but on condition that they provided the tables of rights. Hereby, the re-establishment process was linked to the existence of the old documents such as by-laws and tables of rights. As a consequence, Dragoslavele village was one of the few such organizations that succeeded to re-establish their *Obște* in 2000. In the case of Vrancea, not all the communal villages were re-established in 2000. So how are the two cases different? Which were the incentives that contributed in the case of Dragoslavele to the more rapid re-establishment of the *Obște*? One possible answer is *the institutional arrangements*, the fact that norms were kept by the community and transmitted given the inheritable nature of the rights (*dramuri*) in the *Obște*. As an inegalitarian associative form of property, Dragoslavele *Obște* had a positive incentive to save all the documents in order to keep record of each person's wealth, because of the differences in the number of *dramuri* that each member owned. On the other hand, in the case of Vrancea, although the norms remained embedded in the community, the norms stated that the *rights of the Răzeș of Vrancea die with him*. Knowing that, the people alive at the time of the 1948 reforms did not have any incentives to preserve the documents. More than that, the local norms of this area were quite to the contrary: they hadn't adopted the provisions of the 1910 Forest Law, because they had no use for them. Therefore, they had no reason to consider the possibility of re-establishment after 1948 based on *documents they had no use for in the past*. The legal process of re-establishing the Vrancea *Obști* started from a Prefecture's employee who developed new sample by-laws based on the by-laws of the old *Obște* that he had found in the local archives. In time, all the re-established *Obști* accessed their old records kept in the State's Archives. Nowadays, fifteen years after the birth of the new *Obște*, some *Răzeși* of Vrancea consider that “this is not



14. This is not the only point of view about this subject. For example, Monica Vasile considers that "the idea of community and 'collective' property is not important in the instrumental sense, as community returns, but in respect to common, shared identity and traditions" (2007: 127). Thus, there is also an attachment to the Oblă

our *Obște*! It is theirs!"<sup>14</sup> – referring to the rangers, employees of the State, and to their links with the political power (Mateescu 2003: 121). In the interviews conducted in Vrancea region, there were persons who said the same. For example, the head of Condratu *Obște* said that "the *Obște* is not free, it is dependent on the State!"

To conclude, the re-establishment of the *Obște* after the enforcement of Law no.1/2000 permitted the preservation of the core principles of the old *Obște* institutional arrangements. For both types of *Obște*, the state intervened in their institutional arrangements imposing stricter laws and procedures. For example, now the monitoring and the sanctioning is done by a Forest Range, which employs rangers and which is paid by each *Obște*. Referring to the same laws, present-day *Răzeși* or *Moșneni* villagers are forbidden to use the resources of their forests, even for firewood. Therefore, although it preserves the core principles and rules of the old *Obște*, the new *Obște* is different. The differences arose from the changes made into the institutional arrangements. Those changes influenced the villagers' behaviours, being a possible reason for their reticence regarding the future of the *Obște* institution.

Coming back to the title and topic of this *Martor* special issue, I deem it important to define "tradition." A good starting point could be Hobsbawm's statement in the "Introduction" to *The Invention of Traditions* (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) that "traditions" that appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983: 1). Moreover, by "tradition"

Hobsbawm understands "a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past" (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983: 1). Hence, in Hobsbawm's view, tradition is based on accepted rules or norms. With the creation of "the new *Obște*," all the old norms and rules – *institutions* – were understood and observed by the members, because they not only accepted them, but agreed with them and their effects. They knew what the institutions were, how they worked, and how to refer to them. As I previously mentioned, many of the institutions of the old *Obște* were updated in the new version of the *Obște*, but their core stays the same.

To conclude, in the case of the analyzed *Obști* of Argeș and Vrancea, *institutions matter* in shaping the villagers' behaviours. Institutions even matter in the relationship between the villagers and their local traditions.

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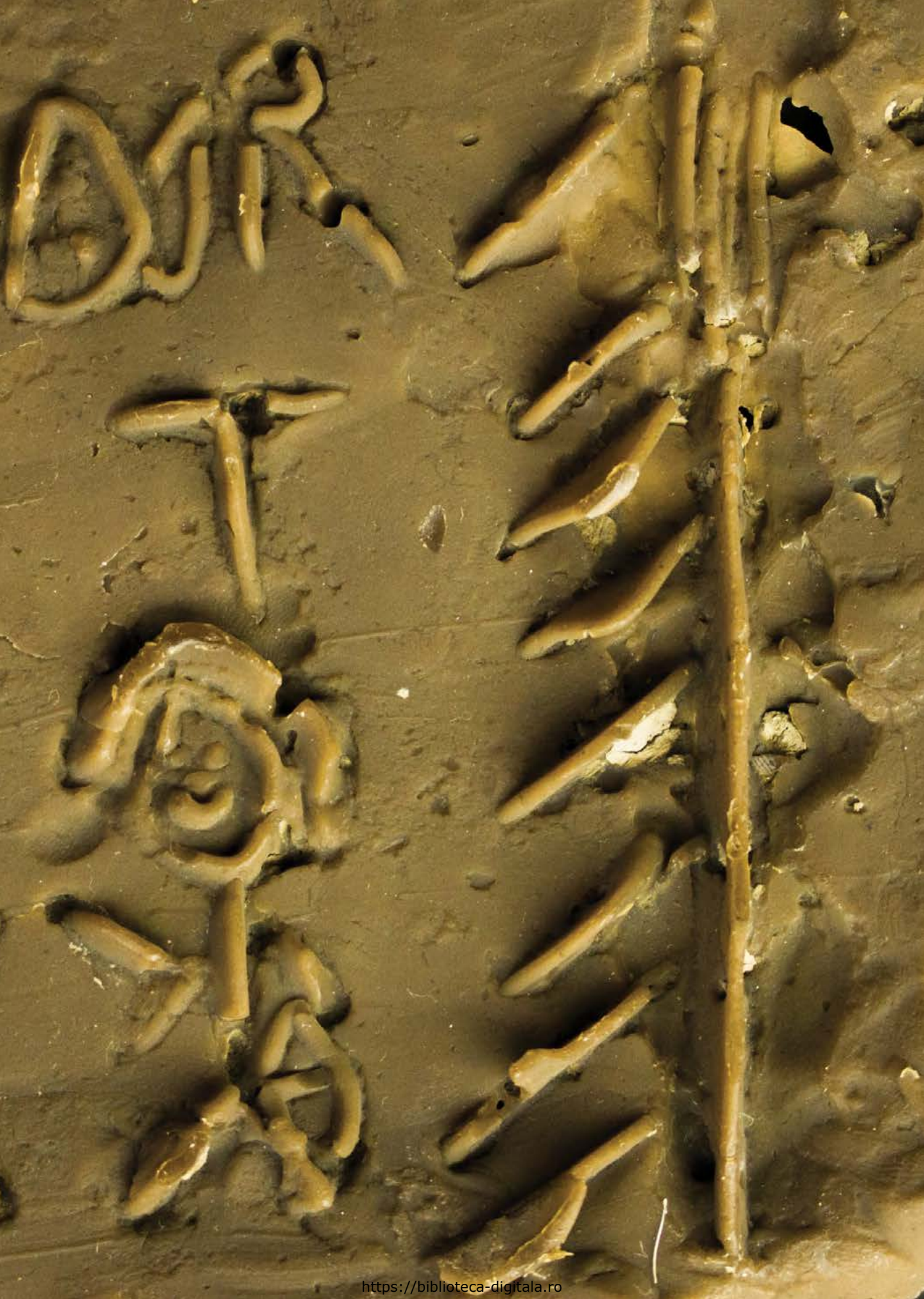
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# Reinventing Mountain Food Traditions and Small Farm Survival in Southern Appalachia

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## ABSTRACT

For over four decades, social scientists have addressed the relationship between development strategies and Appalachia's highland cultural traditions. Historically, mountain foodways and diversified agricultural practices were defined as aspects of primitive folkways legitimating resource extractive industries and centralized development strategies. Today, the region contains many of the nation's remaining family farms. The processes of globalization and growing demand for local foods are introducing highland farming traditions to new audiences. This case study looks at the emerging role family farms in the East Tennessee valley are playing in development and the social construction of the region's foodways. Drawing on multidisciplinary perspectives, I focus first on the historical roots and continuity of the region's culinary tradition. Highland foods represent the core of mountain culture grounded in the ecological and economic experiences of its rural communities. Next the paper discusses the emergence of markets for place-based foods focusing on community development, tourism and a local foods-based culinary renaissance.

## KEYWORDS

Sustainable agriculture, tourism, farming communities, culinary renaissance.

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## Food Studies and Cultural Identity

Food studies provide important insights into cultural identity and social change (Mintz and Du Bois 2002). Anthropologists point out rural foodways give people a sense of distinction within a community – knitting together material and nonmaterial cultural practices or what Naccarato and Lebesco (2012) call culinary capital. Food is an essential component of the transformation of the identity of regions undergoing the processes of globalization. Ethnographies exploring regional responses to globalization document how communities incorporate global foods into local foodways. Relocating migrants also draw on food symbolism in

new environments by appropriating foods into their existing traditions (Crowder 2013).

Recent studies on Romanian mountain agricultural systems are highlighting the persistence of traditional knowledge and indigenous farming practices and their role in cultural preservation and maintaining biological diversity (Akeroyd 2016; Page and Popa 2013). Fieldwork on hay is increasing our understanding of traditional knowledge and its relationship to heritage preservation and land management (Iuga, Iancu and Stroe 2016). Iuga (2016) chronicles how haymaking is interwoven with preserving and perpetuating the collective memory of the community in the village of Șurdești in Romania. Social scientists looking at traditional Appalachian foodways are



taking similar approaches to documenting mountain food and agricultural practices as an alternative to the contemporary industrial food system (Baker 2016; Lundy



Highland  
Family Farm.  
Photo credit:  
Chris Baker.

2016; Sohn 2005; Veteto, 2014). The work includes documenting mountain food varieties and heirloom seeds. Bill Best's fieldwork exploring his ancestral foods provides an introduction to the region's heirloom beans and tomatoes (2013). Veteto et al. (2011) found 1,412 place-based foods in the region. As we increase our knowledge of indigenous mountain food traditions, emerging markets for local and place-based foods raise questions around their future. Drawing on interviews and secondary sources, this paper chronicles Appalachia's agricultural and foodway tradition and the emerging markets supporting family farms in East Tennessee.

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## Appalachian Foodways and Regional Development

Appalachia's agricultural tradition represents small-scale diversified farming practices in one of the world's most diverse



Grainger County  
Tomato Festival.  
Photo credit:  
Chris Baker.

ecosystems. Many of the region's folk traditions directly reflect traditional farming practices. Representing rural lifestyles and distinctive forms of music, dance, crafts, and culinary practices—mountain folklife is part of a collective lived experience grounded in the southern mountain ecosystem. Historically, mountain folkways were portrayed as primitive cultural traits, part of a larger negative stereotype of the region. Between 1880 and the Second World War, journalist or color writers, social scientist, and social reformers often depicted the region as a backward culture made up of contemporary ancestors and "Yesterday's People" (Frost 1899; Shapiro 1978; Whisnant 1983). Cultural studies scholars point out Appalachia's experience was not distinctive. Definitions of primitive mountain culture were also part of the colonial strategies exploiting the region's old world British highland ancestors (Cunningham 1987). In reality, diversified farming practices and folkways were essential to mountain life. Highland foodways are the product of subsistence strategies lasting through periods of rapid social and economic change. As they come into the spotlight as solutions to industrial food systems, re-examining their historical roles and contemporary options is becoming an important component of development strategies.

The view of Appalachian society as an example of premodern Anglo-Saxon heritage played an important role in the commercialization of its traditions and the organization of society around large-scale industrial development strategies (Becker 1998; Davis and Baker 2014; Eller 2008; Gaventa 1980; Lewis, Johnson and Adkins, 1978; Shapiro 1978). Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century highland farming communities adapted to what James Scott (1998) calls late modernist "large-scale interventions." Mountain foods and folklife have been used to adapt to the changing conditions of life for Appalachian highlanders for two centuries. Appalachia's everyday foodways helped

mountain cultures adapt to deforestation and other large-scale land use patterns.

The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), for instance, represents one of the largest development projects in modern history. The outcomes of TVA and other centralized planning shaped highland land use around resource extraction, hydroelectric dams, federal parks, and urban growth centers (Cole 1948; Eller 2008; Whisnant 1983). While focusing on improvements in farming, depression era federal programs promoted crops supporting industrial agriculture and market integration. Rural communities, on the other hand, continued to produce ancestral foods as they struggled with outmigration and the declining conditions of diversified farming (Walker 2000).

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### Highland Foodways and Mountain Life

Located in the valley of Southern Appalachia along the base of the Great Smoky Mountains, East Tennessee's rural communities continue diversified farming on ancestral land into the modern era. Unlike many of the nation's family farms lost to corporate agriculture, these operations survived with roots spanning generations. Located in tight-knit communities, full and part-time mountain farms continue to raise poultry, pasture-fed beef and heirloom varieties of among other things-greens, apples, beans, pumpkins, corn, potatoes, and tomatoes (Lundy 2016; Best 2013; Sohn 2005). Highland farming heritage includes subsistence strategies from forest farming and hunting and gathering to mixed agriculture and commercial truck operations. Appalachia's agricultural family and community systems continue ancestral practices of food preservation – passing down skills for pickling, drying, preserving, and canning herbs, meat, and vegetables (Davis 2000; Eliot 1972; Lundy 2016; Sohn 2005). The origins of highland foodways are diverse. Sohn (2005:4) states: "Mountain

food may not have a homogeneous style, but it is distinct. It is distinct because the region's people were independent. Its mountains offered an abundance of natural resources, and because its settlers mixed with the Native Americans."

Corn became the main food in the American South. Both fresh and dried, corn provided grain for bread, silage, whiskey, and was used as a form of currency. Livestock husbandry practices emerged from highland terrain. Frontier farms raised sheep, cattle, and hogs on hillside and mountain pastures. East Tennessee frontier farms raised hogs utilizing forging techniques. Frontiersmen spent most of their time cutting firewood, canning, slaughtering and curing hogs, tending crops, and distilling corn whiskey. A typical family raised bees, chickens, and almost every vegetable. Households needed cash for taxes, coffee, and sugar. They engaged in selling and trading butter, eggs, nuts (walnut and chestnut), animal hides, honey, and whiskey (Davis 2000; Dunaway 1996).

Illegal whiskey or moonshine became a distinctive southern mountain foodway beginning with settlement in the early 1800s. The Scots-Irish brought their pot still tradition to the new world making illegal whiskey from Native American corn using old world recipes. Originally part of mountain culinary folkways, the whiskey trade evolved into a defining feature of highland life during national prohibition in the 1920s (Dabney 1998; Pierce 2003).

Forest gathering practices includes



East Tennessee Pasture.  
Photo credit:  
Chris Baker.

herbs, poke, ramps, mushrooms, and ginseng. Settlers introduced European grains – wheat, barley, rye, oats, and flax. Early Spanish traders introduced peaches, okra, sorghum (for molasses), sweet potatoes, watermelon, and livestock. Settlers flourished by using both native and European plants – corn, squash, beans, tomatoes, potatoes, cabbage, peas, turnips, and a host of other vegetables. Northern Europeans changed the ecosystem by introducing old world honeybees, onions, turnips, cabbages, livestock, and a broad range of beans (Davis 2000). The rudimentary diet that evolved in the region incorporated forest products, fish, and wild game. Often seen as peasant foods, early Appalachian culinary practices were a rich community and kinship experience of harvest and heritage festivals, church revivals and Sunday dinners. Providing a strong attachment to land and culinary heritage, many of these practices have lasted into the modern era (Dabney 1998; Dykeman 1955; Eliot 1972).

Landownership and the quality of soil dramatically affected farming in Appalachia. Large plantations thrived while others on eroded soil and near deforestation struggled to sustain families (Dunaway 1996). Modern East Tennessee's commercial farms emerged as part of regional poultry, pork, and vegetable canning industries in the 1920s. Cash from tobacco farming maintained home steads for retirement (Eller 2008; Kingsolver 2011).

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### Corporate Food Systems

Modernization and the introduction of industrial food systems transformed rural America in the 1960s. The move from farm to factory work meant local seasonal food began to compete with national food distributors introducing processed, frozen, or pre-packaged foods (Pillsbury 1995). Declines in farming and home production have given way to convenience foods

followed by contemporary fast food. While fresh food continued to be raised locally, the loss of tobacco and crop diversity led to fewer farmers and less support for small-scale farming (Nolt 2005). Many East Tennesseans began to farm part-time to supplement low factory wages. James Scott (1998) suggests that in many places in the world 20<sup>th</sup> century centralized planning strategies have simplified diversity and ignored local knowledge. Scott's central argument is that grand development schemes are unable to address local realities where local knowledge and practical skills are adaptations to constantly changing human and natural environments (1998).

Like many modernist development schemes around the world, America's post war industrial food system has had a similar negative impact in Appalachia. Ecologist John Nolt suggests the replacement of local food in rural Appalachia has been especially destructive in terms of the region's health outcomes. Outside of rural communities many people no longer grow food or even prepare meals. And what has replaced local foods has become socially destructive. He writes: "This food is mostly junk: highly processed, fattening, low in quality, of little nutritional value, and expensive. Thus it helps reinforce the familiar cycles of poverty, disease, and dependence" (2005: 173).

Besides the corporatization of food production, another important trend effecting rural areas and agriculture is urban sprawl, pushing up land costs and taxes. Since the 1970s, the transformation of rural society in the South reflects a "bulldozer" revolution led by a growing middle class and urban sprawl (Cobb 1999; Nolt 2005). The resulting loss of farmland has reduced the number of farms in Appalachia. The negative impact on health is only one of the key challenges created by industrially produced foods. Declines in small farms are due not only to increase in land taxes and costs but also to a lack of policy support connecting small farm produce to markets and institutions.





## Appalachian Foodways in a Global Economy

More than any other aspect of culture, food continues to define mountain communities identifying with the agricultural landscape and a sense of “food place.” An irony of these patterns of development is that as communities face pressure to sell farm land, the people buying the land are behind the growing number of farmers markets, equestrian farms, and consumer demand for rural foodways and ornamental plants centered on fresh, pick-your-own, seasonal, organic, and local foods. Local mountain foods are driving a culinary renaissance introducing Appalachia’s farming and culinary traditions to a new audience. The state leads the nation in the growth of farmers markets (Chesky 2009; Green 2014; Lalone 2008). How the region and nation addresses these issues will have important impacts on the future of rural areas (Byrne 2001). In both rural and urban Appalachia growing support for regional food heritage is giving voice to small farms. Fred Sauceman has documented how foodies are behind a return of food trucks, small local food venues, diners, drive-ins, and ethnic restaurants to rural East Tennessee (2014).

Urban centers are incorporating farm heritage in farm markets, restaurants, brewpubs, and distilleries in redevelopment. Known as the “Scruffy City,” downtown Knoxville, north Knoxville, and the Old City are reinventing a vibrant arts and culinary community with upscale pubs, book and record stores, art galleries, theatre, and music venues. Fueling the growth is the redevelopment, historical preservation and investment in public space in neighborhoods like Fourth and Gill, the Tennessee and Bijou theatres, Southern Railroad Station, and South waterfront. Driving efforts are businesses dedicated to sustainable foodways with farmers markets, food festivals, diners,

restaurants, food trucks, pubs, and wine bars. The city has an International Biscuit Festival and cafes like the Wild Love Bakery which incorporates ingredients from several local farms into a new southern cuisine.

Once a regional commercial and distribution center for surrounding wholesale and truck crops, Market Square in downtown Knoxville became as Jack Neely points out the “Most Democratic Place on Earth” (Neely 2009). Today downtown Knoxville advertises 100 restaurants within a one mile radius. The return of indigenous food includes Soul Food in east Knoxville serving chitlins, “hot chicken,” greens, and macaroni and cheese (Perkins 2017). The area advertises M.A.M.A. or Magnolia Avenue Marketing Area. New foodways here coexist with traditional barbeque and soul food representing cuisine from North Africa, Hispanic, Philippine, and Asian. Food has emerged as central to the identity of Latin American migrant communities in East Tennessee. With many of its new arrivals originating as agricultural workers, the region’s Hispanic population is introducing new uses for local foods. Part of the region’s growing international community, Central Americans are redefining the use of local produce. In town centers like Morristown and Johnson City they support poultry processing and have established Mesoamerican foodways with small-scale tortilla factories, restaurants, and tiendas. Here migrants from Michoacán, Chiapas, Jalisco, and Oaxaca follow family recipes using East Tennessee foods (Sauceman 2012; Baker 2012).

Regional tourism draws on the 11 million yearly visitors to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park (GSMNP). Designated a UNESCO World Heritage site, the park is an important refuge for many of the nation’s plant and wildlife species. Sevier County hosts many of the parks’ visitors at general stores, retail shopping, waterparks, resorts, mega hotels and dinner shows. In migration to the area represents almost every continent – including retirees and



a large Hispanic and Eastern European workforce. With most of the attractions selling rural farm lifestyles and food products, the county supports over 18,000 jobs with \$1.7 million in revenues (Grainger 2014).

Another important example of mountain symbolism is the growing legal whiskey industry. More than 40 new distilleries statewide now sell corn whiskey or “moonshine” (Gibson 2013; Pierce 2013). In downtown Knoxville, Knox Whiskey Works partners with Riverplains Farm in New Market and Valentine Mills in Dandridge. Drawing on corn whiskey has its origins in East Tennessee’s agricultural heritage. Knox Whiskey Works uses non-GMO heirloom Hickory Cane and Tennessee Red Cob corn strains from Riverplains Farm. Not mass produced, Valentine Mill’s corn is ground on a traditional water powered stone arriving on demand in small batches. Other distilleries like The Old Mill in Pigeon Forge grind their own grain on century- old 4,600 pound mill stones. The growing use of local

foods for tourism and urban redevelopment is connecting family farming with new development and cultural diversity.

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### Mountain Farming in a Global Economy

Appalachian foods are still fostered by family labor, hand preparation, and heirloom varieties of plants and livestock. Rural counties still have agricultural fairs and farmers cooperatives, unchanged since the 1920s. Appalachia continues to operate many of the nation’s part-time farms with operators often retired from industry. A key challenge for local food producers is accessing new markets (Grigsby and Hellwinckel 2016). Farming households lease land to other fulltime farmers, sell hay for cattle and equestrian markets, or raise their own cattle to survive. Others engage in wholesaling commercial or truck crops. Truck farming consists mainly of the small-scale marketing of vine-ripened tomatoes. Grainger County’s farms are

one the largest producers of tomatoes in the nation. In 2010, the state was tenth for the number of farms (10,900) and 44<sup>th</sup> for farm size at 139 average acres. The county has a yearly tomato festival. Farmers send produce to urban areas and several states. Grainger County has 400 farms of which 70 percent produced less than \$10,000 in value (Department of Agriculture 2011; Kennedy 2008). Local vine ripened tomatoes taste like historical farm fresh produce providing the opportunity for urbanites to relive part of their heritage. For many who have left for jobs in urban areas, fresh foods are a potent symbol of rural childhood for the area’s baby boom generation (Dyer 1999; Kennedy 2008; Ritter 2013).

Appalachian  
Truck Farms.  
Photo credit:  
Chris Baker.



Rural communities provide the labor force for urban growth centers as migrant workers and family members support the truck farming of seasonal crops. Interviews with farm families reveal a strong connection between farming and family cohesion: “I can see my entire family from the hill where we live. Our church has 200 people with 60 attending regularly. There are 30 children. I am kin to everyone one of them.”

Other interviews suggest local knowledge contributes to sustainable landuse practices. Gary Strange has revived the two century old wildflower honey tradition in Del Rio, a rural community on the North Carolina and Tennessee border just outside of the Cherokee National Forest. His 1,200 hive operation thrives on the area’s pastoral mountain ecosystem: “They ate me alive. We made a living on the land. This was my first fulltime job. Local farms use very little pesticide. We have lost a lot fewer colonies. Out West the pesticide used by big farms are a major killer of bees. We don’t have big farms” (Baker and Sanyal 2017: 5).

Along with beekeeping, mountain apple orchards have survived and are thriving in the area due to tourism. Carver Orchards in Cosby sells 126 varieties of apples with 40,000 trees. The family makes fried pies, cider, and apple fritters at their family style farmhouse restaurant. The southern food renaissance is taking hold at premiere resorts and hotels. Blackberry Farms in Walland sells frontier life turning mountain farming practices into luxury cuisine and outdoors recreational activities. Blackberry Farms incorporates an inn, restaurant, farm, and wellness center into a high end remake of past mountain life. Along with traditional farm practices such as grubbing are yoga and horseback riding. On over 9,000 acres, the farm makes its own apple butter, beer cheese and honey on land once used to hide moonshine stills. Where mountain families once lived, today you find thousand dollar whiskey, wine and cheese tastings with hillbilly Nouveau food parings (Severson, 2016).

Traditional mountain livestock practices are part of the culinary revival. Pork remains an important food for Southerners (Lundy 2016; Sohn 2005). Working class populations continue to embrace foods such as scrapple or corn meal and pork offal at local IGAs. On the other end of the class spectrum, however, pork curing has become an elite culinary art. Known internationally, Allen Benton, of Benton’s Smoky Mountain Country Hams smokes and sells tradition country salt cured ham and home style pork products (Edge 2017). Other small venues like Swaggerty Farm processes pork exported to several states. While grassfed beef and ham are exploding in popularity, small dairies have declined. Limited examples of success include Cruze Farms which operates a dairy and sells their own pasteurized Jersey cow products in south Knoxville. Cruze sells traditional farm products – whole milk, chocolate, butter milk, and herb seasonal flavored ice creams to urban markets. Their operation spans farm stores, coffee houses, restaurants, and high end specialty stores in Knoxville, Nashville, and Chattanooga.

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## Rural Food Challenges

Appalachian communities face a number of challenges related to food security and food deserts. As tourism and urban redevelopment generate farm markets, food insecurity remains a challenge for a large number of people in poor communities (Billings and Blee 2000; Nolt 2005; Saslow 2013; Smith and Willhite 2017). In urban areas, minorities more often suffer from limited access to healthy food in the contemporary food system. Knoxville contains 20 food deserts (communities with less access to healthy foods) mainly in low-income minority neighborhoods (Alapo 2017). Historically Black neighborhoods in east Knoxville lost their last grocery store, Walgreens in 2014. Poverty and job loss in former coal mining counties are key



challenging shaping access to healthy food. In rural areas, social problems are being accompanied by the loss of traditional foods and knowledge of traditional customs (Nolt 2005). Re-establishing local foods is becoming central to community activism addressing food insecurity. With 32 chapters, Berea College's Grow Appalachia program addresses the loss of farming practices in former coal counties. Established in 2010 with an emphasis on community-level education, Grow Appalachia works with partners in the region in 32 chapters to address local knowledge and grow summertime and fresh foods (Smith and Willhite 2017).

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### Theoretical Reprise

Food defines mountain communities more than any other aspect of culture. In contrast to urban America, Appalachians continue to identify with the agricultural landscape

and a sense of "food place." This research helps us begin to address an alternative food narrative based on indigenous and traditional knowledge of mountain foods. Anthropologists in the region point to a need to increase the role of local voices in conservation and heritage preservation (Howell 1994; 2002). Today even in the face of health epidemics linked to mass produced and fast food, narratives of the importance of foodways offer a blueprint to supporting rural areas. New markets for local food must be accompanied by policies supporting investment in small-scale farming and its potential for place-based change addressing healthy communities and land conservation.



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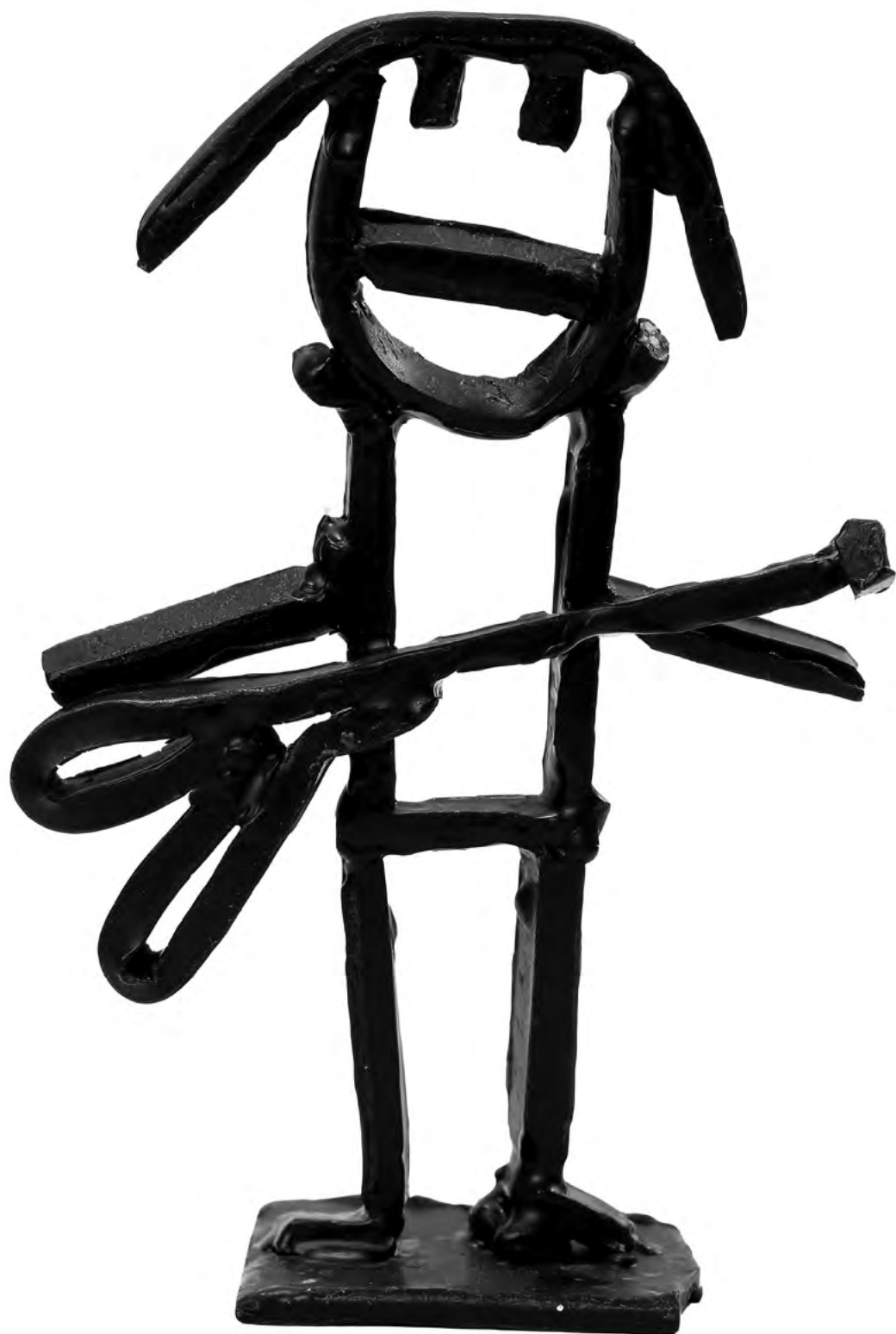
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## **II. Political Usages of Traditions**





# Negotiating the Mountains. Foreign Immigration and Cultural Change in the Italian Alps<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Severely affected during the twentieth century by depopulation and neglect, the Alps also suffered an erosion of their cultural heritage. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, population has begun to grow in many areas, mainly due to the settlement in the uplands of both “highlanders by choice” (largely youth dissatisfied with city life) and “highlanders by necessity” (economic migrants). In recent years, however, the Alps have been increasingly hosting also asylum-seekers and refugees (“highlanders by force”). This article concentrates on the Italian Alps and on the number and distribution of foreign migrants. It provides quantitative and qualitative data, also considering some specific local cases of immigration, and addresses the following questions: What are the effects of Alpine repopulation, and notably the impact of foreign inhabitants, on local cultures? Should repopulation be seen as an opportunity for social innovation and cultural creativity or rather as a threat to “indigenous” cultures? Is demographic discontinuity precluding cultural continuity? Will foreign immigration, especially if directed to demographically depleted areas, favour over time the emergence of new forms of identity and “tradition,” as a result of the re-invention of the territory? We argue that the “new peopling” of the Alps should not be considered a priori as a threat nor as an enrichment, and that the interactions and negotiations between the locals and the migrants should be studied in-depth and with attention to the local contexts.

## KEYWORDS

Italian Alps, repopulation, foreign immigration, asylum-seekers, negotiation, cultural change, social innovation.

1. A shorter, slightly different version of this article is forthcoming in the Italian journal *Zapruder*. Although the article is the outcome of close collaborative work, the first two sections have been written by Viazzo, the third and fourth sections by Membretti, and the concluding remarks jointly by the two authors.

## The Alps: closed to the outside world or open to socio-cultural innovation?

As late as the 1960s, the Canadian anthropologist and historian Harriet Rosenberg aptly noted, the image of mountain societies in the past as “illiterate, passive, isolated and poor” continued to be virtually unchallenged (Rosenberg 1988: 3). Since then, decades of research – including Rosenberg’s own study of Abriès, a village in the French Alps – have overturned this notion. The archival research showed that, far from being politically passive, Abriès had for centuries been able to negotiate its

fate with the central powers, and, like many other Alpine communities, it had been anything but isolated, poor and illiterate: the higher the altitude, the stronger the tendency for increased prosperity and literacy (Viazzo 1989: 121-52). As shown by a spate of studies published in the 1990s, this unexpected tendency can be mostly credited to a predominantly seasonal emigration, more pervasive in the upper valleys and the high-altitude Alpine communities open to the outside world, which favoured the circulation of ideas and knowledge and stimulated innovation (Rosenberg 1988; Audenino 1990; Albera 1991; Fontaine 1993; Siddle 1997; Radeff 1998). Instead of mitigating their allegedly atavistic poverty and inescapable backwardness, modernity

had the paradoxical effect of making the mountains “archaic” and transforming them into marginal places, the living space – restricted and fossilized – of cultures that lowland societies expected to be “primitive” and, as such, resistant to any attempt at change. In a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy, the identities and practices of the highlanders finally complied, especially during the late twentieth century, with this highly reifying model, thereby reproducing in fact the residualistic stereotype that had been imposed on them (Camanni 2002: 53-94; De Rossi 2017).

Much emphasis was placed in the studies mentioned above on the openness to the outside world displayed by Alpine socio-economic and cultural systems in the pre-industrial past. As Luigi Lorenzetti (2003) rightly pointed out, however, this opening was accompanied by strong demographic closure. To be sure, Alpine communities have never been hermetically closed, or just open enough to allow their inhabitants to leave the mountains: cases of migration towards the high valleys are attested throughout the early modern age. Yet, for a long time mining towns and villages, which often attracted skilled labour even from distant European countries (Viazzo 1989: 153-77), were the only high-altitude localities to experience flows of immigrants of some significance, followed in more recent times by tourist resorts. After the initial peopling of the Alps in ancient and medieval times, settlements of “new highlanders” in upland communities were rare events: measured at the municipal level, the high levels of endogamy to be found all over the Alpine region until relatively recently are the clear indicator of a modest rate of population turnover. For a variety of reasons, ranging from the development of means of transportation to the demise of agro-pastoral economies, which eroded the significance of endogamous marriage strategies aimed at keeping property within the community’s territory, in the course of the twentieth century endogamy rates

collapsed. With the only exception of tourist resorts and industrial locations in the lower valleys, however, this exogamic opening was mainly a matter of in-marrying spouses from neighbouring communities, which generated a moderate amount of short-range mobility mostly within the same valley, in a period far more dramatically characterized by an exodus to the plains that was hardly balanced by migrations in the opposite direction, from the plains to the mountains. This is a point of fundamental importance for understanding the socio-demographic and cultural dynamics which have been changing, starting with the beginning of the new millennium, the face of the Italian Alps.

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### **Whose Alps are these Demography, identity culture**

After more than a century of massive demographic decline – roughly from the 1850s until the 1950s or even later in the twentieth century – many sectors of the Alpine crescent are now experiencing a trend reversal, which is leading many an observer to talk of a “new peopling” of the Alps (Corrado 2010; Perlik 2011; Viazzo 2012a; Mathieu 2015; Zanini 2016). This recovery was particularly unexpected in the Italian Alps, where depopulation had severely hit especially the eastern and western ends of the mountain range (Bätzing 2015) and appeared unstoppable and irreversible. Of course, local situations may be quite diverse across the Italian Alps: between 2003 and 2013, in 42.1% of Italian Alpine municipalities, the growth rates of the resident population were equal to zero or negative (Alpine Convention 2015: 38). Nevertheless, over the past fifteen years or so, the overall population has begun to grow, at first along the axes of the Aosta and Adige valleys, in peri-urban municipalities closer to the plains, in the main ski centres, but also in some “inner areas” (Löffler *et al.* 2011; Bartaletti 2013; Corrado *et al.* 2014)<sup>2</sup>. The rate

2. In Italy this label designates, also in official parlance (<http://www.agenziacoesione.gov.it/it/arint/>), territories that are far away from large agglomerations and service centres and are characterized by unstable development trajectories and serious demographic problems. “Inner areas” represent a large part of Italy (about three fifths of the total territory of the country and just under a quarter of the total population) and are very diversified both between and within them, but they are mainly mountainous.

of natural increase, however, still remains negative or steady almost everywhere. This means that population growth, or even mere stability, is predominantly due to a positive net migration which is entailing for the local communities a far more rapid and intense population turnover than in the past, with highly significant implications (Bender and Kanitscheider 2012).

By questioning the canonical image of the Alpine communities as not permeable to migration from outside, the current changes prompt us to face an issue provocatively raised some years by Camanni (2002: 123-31) and subsequently by Varotto and Castiglioni (2012), namely: Whose Alps are these? Who is entitled to claim rights in the tangible and intangible resources of the Alpine territory? Just answering that the mountains belong to the mountaineers unduly simplifies a very complex situation. As recently pointed out by Barbera (2015: 39), the arrival of “new populations” in the inner and mostly mountainous areas of Italy generates a set of problems that appear to be worthy of reflection:

Among these, the most relevant one regards ownership regimes and property rights: What does the action of protection and conservation promoted by local communities in terms of property rights exactly imply? Are well-designed individual rights sufficient? Or is it necessary, as these are common goods (land, water, landscape, local knowledge), to establish collective property rights?

Even if we narrow the focus on the transmission of intangible cultural heritage, such as “local knowledge,” it is inevitable to wonder in what sense and to what extent one can take it for granted that intangible cultural heritage is “transmitted from generation to generation,” as stated in Article 2 of the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the safeguarding of intangible heritage<sup>3</sup>. How is local knowledge transmitted today in Alpine communities whose demographic makeup

is rapidly changing? And, above all, who is entitled to knowledge and transmission of Alpine cultural heritage and subsequently to promoting and valorising it?

A second issue has indeed to do with local identity and the cultural implications of the new peopling of the Alps. The case of the many linguistic minorities in the Alpine region, and especially of the “alloglot islands” studding the Italian Alps<sup>4</sup>, is in many ways extreme, and yet uniquely useful to highlight these questions. It is significant that the scholars to whom we owe the most comprehensive studies of the current processes of demographic recovery in the Italian Alps – the team of geographers led by Ernst Steinicke at Innsbruck University – have paid special attention to the demographic evolution of linguistic minorities (Steinicke 2008; Steinicke *et al.* 2011a; 2011b). It is no less significant that these researchers, instead of delivering an unquestionably positive judgement, see repopulation as posing a “threat” to these minorities:

The preservation of the linguistic minorities in the Italian Alps has been complicated by “diffuse ethnicity” and by decades of depopulation of mountainous areas. Furthermore, the present demographic shift threatens the ethnic diversity. New immigration in the form of amenity(-led) migration now adds to the minorization of the smaller linguistic groups [...] in their own territories (Steinicke *et al.* 2011a: 3).

It is worth noting that Steinicke and his colleagues are not simply worried about the fate of minority languages. Indeed, they refer in the first place to the political consequences of current demographic changes, as they fear that because of repopulation these groups may risk to be overwhelmed, or at least to become minorities, in their own territories. Such a loss of political weight would impinge not only on the vitality of the language, but more generally on the whole cultural sphere by paving the way for

3. [http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=17716&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=17716&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html).

4. The Italian Alps are host to a variety of linguistic minority groups: Provençal and Franco-Provençal in the Western Alps, Alemannic in the Western-Central sector, Tyrolean-Bavarian and Rhaeto-Romance in the Eastern Alps.

what they call “diffuse ethnicities,” grounded not so much in linguistic competence as in subjective assertions of belonging by “new highlanders” eager to claim the right to promote and enhance local culture. Recent ethnographic investigations have indeed shown that the new inhabitants are very often the ones who prove most active in negotiating or even manipulating social processes— dealing especially with the use and re-invention of memory – that are not so much concerned with the “traditional” behaviours in themselves, but rather with the political rhetorics of production of traditionality (Zanini 2013).

Finally, another important and vexed question concerns the potential for innovation offered by new inhabitants to the territories in which they settle – and vice versa. In this regard it is useful to note that the Alpine region, and more generally the mountains, especially if compared to the cities, appear as almost empty spaces. Italy suffers the effects of a serious imbalance in the geographical distribution of its population: although less than a quarter of the total land is flat, 48.7% of the population is concentrated in this small portion of the peninsula, with only 12.4% in the mountains. The 1,749 Italian municipalities that fall within the perimeter of the Alpine Convention<sup>5</sup> account for 21.6% of Italian municipalities and occupy an area of 52,000 square kilometres (17.2% of the total territory of Italy), with only 4,364,538 residents (7.3% of the Italian population), i.e. a density of just 84 people per square kilometre compared to a national average of 198<sup>6</sup>. While primarily due to the morphological characteristics of the Alpine region, this lower density has undoubtedly been accentuated by the mountain exodus of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which resulted not only in empty spaces, demographic imbalances and a shrinking and weakening of social relations, but also in an erosion of local cultural heritage. If these were the effects of depopulation, is it reasonable to expect that repopulation

can now bring innovation and cultural enrichment?

In this connection, it may be useful to note that stimulating and partly divergent hypotheses about cultural creativity, and the conditions that favour or hamper it, have been recently advanced by two Italian anthropologists. Mostly relying on his own research in Polynesia and on a large body of literature on Oceanian societies, but also offering a few sketchy comparisons with the Alpine world, Adriano Favole has conceptualized creativity as “a process arising with particular force out of encounters, relationships, situations of cohabitation, sometimes even out of the clash between different cultures and societies” (Favole 2010: 36). While recognizing that they can hardly emerge if people and ideas do not move and meet, Francesco Remotti has nevertheless contended that social innovation and cultural creativity “need space to express themselves” (Remotti 2011: 281-301) and that emptiness – an impoverished culture or a weak social structure – would therefore favour them more than a “thick” culture or a strong social structure (Remotti 2011: 281-301). This general hypothesis appears to be supported by evidence from the Western Alps, where several cases have been documented of heavy depopulation which allowed the “new highlanders” to fill the empty slot caused by many years of emigration and to start entrepreneurial activities both in the economic and the cultural fields (Cognard 2006; Viazzo and Zanini 2014).

It does not seem therefore foolish to surmise that disadvantaged areas may paradoxically be advantaged by their greater demographic weakness, as wider “creative spaces” may be produced just by depopulation. This is a hypothesis that appears to strengthen the widespread, if often superficial, idea according to which, precisely because they are mostly empty areas, the Alps (and other mountain regions) lend themselves particularly well to welcoming new inhabitants, and, as a sort of

5. The Alpine Convention is an international treaty for the sustainable development of the Alps signed in 1991 by the Alpine countries (Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Liechtenstein, Monaco, Slovenia, and Switzerland).

6. Data from ISTAT (Italian National Institute for Statistics) as of January 1, 2013 (www.istat.it). It should also be noted that 90% of Alpine municipalities have a population of under 10,000 inhabitants and 24% of them account for less than 500 inhabitants.

corollary, that the new highlanders almost automatically bring these areas back to life by stimulating socio-cultural and economic innovations. Things are actually far more complex than this. Indeed, this hypothesis invites for extra caution when assessing the extent to which the mountains are emptying out and urges us to identify more accurately the characteristics of the local social structures with which those who intend to settle in the highlands are bound to come in contact and interact. Even in places that have largely been emptied by depopulation it must be expected that conflictual dynamics may arise about the ownership of tangible and intangible resources. And we have seen that there are scholars who consider the “new peopling” of the Alps to be not so much a panacea as a threat: “cultural heritage [...] is threatened by the assimilation processed triggered by new inhabitants who usually come from urban milieus”; but they “may even originate from other cultures,” and this can prove especially insidious (Bender and Kanitscheider 2010: 240). These opposite position may look appealing, albeit for different reasons, but they are both simplistic. In fact, the new inhabitants of the Alps, whatever the proximity or the distance of the “cultures from which they originate,” should not be considered *a priori* as a threat nor as an enrichment. This is what we learn from a wide literature on intergroup relations that stems from Fredrik Barth’s famous intimation that the critical focus of investigation should be “the ethnic *boundary* that defines the group, not the cultural stuff it encloses” (Barth 1969: 15; emphasis in original). As Andreas Wimmer has accurately remarked, Barth’s approach “implied a paradigm shift in the anthropological study of ethnicity: researchers would no longer study ‘the culture’ of ethnic groups A and B, but rather how the ethnic boundary between A and B was inscribed onto a landscape of continuous cultural transitions” (Wimmer 2009: 250-251). This also implied a change

in the definition of ethnicity, which was no longer synonymous with objectively defined cultures, but rather referred to the actors’ subjective views and to the strategies they adopt to establish group boundaries by pointing to specific markers that distinguish them from ethnic others. Wimmer himself (2013) has rightly argued that Barth’s insight that boundaries are not given but *made* through negotiations may have encouraged hyperconstructivist stances. But the lesson remains valid. In the case of the “new peopling of the Alps” this means “diffuse ethnicities,” to use the term coined by Steinicke and colleagues, which should not be seen as synonymous with “loss” or “destruction” but rather as the outcome of interactions and negotiations between locals and migrants, which must be studied in-depth and with attention to local contexts.



### **Foreign immigration in the new peopling of the Italian Alps**

In recent years, the distinction and almost opposition between “highlanders by birth” and “highlanders by choice” (Dematteis 2011) has become increasingly popular in Italy. The latter have been mainly identified, especially in the media, as youth dissatisfied with city life, seeking a new lifestyle in the mountains. For some years it has been taken for granted that in Italy the repopulation of the Alps was mainly due to internal migration, from the cities to the neo-rural scenery promised by the mountains (Zanini 2016). However, the growing awareness that it is not only “highlanders by choice” that settle in the Alps but also “highlanders by necessity,” pushed to the mountains by economic reasons rather than ideological ones, is now drawing attention to the significant role of foreign immigration (Bartaletti 2013; Machold *et al.* 2013; Membretti 2016; Membretti and Viazzo 2017).



7. So called because they were the stage for many of the events of the 2006 Winter Olympic Games.

Positive foreign migratory balances were recorded in the past decade almost everywhere in the Alps: on January 1, 2013, there was at least one resident foreign citizen in 98.2% of the Italian Alpine municipalities. Most foreigners who migrate to the Alps come from other Italian municipalities, but they often come directly from outside Italy, usually through networks of coethnics who are already present in the places of arrival (Corrado *et al.* 2014). It is thus possible to

to metropolitan ones; the chance to escape the chaos of the metropolis (often foreign immigrants come originally from rural areas and seek similar contexts for themselves and in which to bring up their children); and of course the job opportunities on site or in nearby areas, which include pastoralism, agriculture, forestry and mining in the primary sector, crafts, small industry and construction in the secondary sector, as well as the tourist industry, cleaning and family

Region	Resident population			Foreign residents			Foreigners /100 residents		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Piemonte	369,658	384,821	754,479	22,876	28,420	51,296	6.19	7.39	6.8
Val d'Aosta	62,564	65,734	128,298	3,894	5,181	9,075	6.22	7.88	7.07
Lombardia	639,873	661,638	1,301,511	49,375	54,356	103,731	7.72	8.22	7.97
Trentino Alto Adige	518,348	537,586	1,055,934	44,660	51,489	96,149	8.62	9.58	9.11
Veneto	330,551	346,712	677,263	25,983	30,102	56,085	7.86	8.68	8.28
Friuli Venezia Giulia	238,304	255,482	493,786	19,734	20,979	40,713	8.28	8.21	8.25
Liguria	234,047	248,381	482,428	16,100	18,776	34,876	6.88	7.56	7.23
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,393,345</b>	<b>2,500,354</b>	<b>4,893,699</b>	<b>182,622</b>	<b>209,303</b>	<b>391,925</b>	<b>7.63</b>	<b>8.37</b>	<b>8.01</b>

Foreign residents in mountain municipalities of Northern Italy (regions with Alpine territories). Source: UNCEM (National Union of Mountain Communities - Italy); SNAI elaboration on ISTAT data (demographic balance, 12/31/2013)

8. ISTAT and Alpine Convention 2014 (data reworked by the authors).

9. SNAI is the national strategy implemented by Italian local governments in the last years in order to support local development in remote rural territories, the so-called "inner areas." As already remarked above in note 3, in Italy these areas are mainly mountainous.

notice concentrations of certain nationalities in particular territories (which can be defined as "spaces of ethnicization") such as, in the Western Alps, the Chinese in the Pellice Valley (engaged in marble quarrying for tombstones) and the Romanians in the "Olympic Valleys"<sup>7</sup> near Turin (employed in the touristic sector of skiing) or, in the Eastern Alps, the Macedonians of the Cembra Valley (employed in porphyry mining). Among the main factors that attract foreigners to Alpine areas are: the availability of affordable housing (that allows the renting of vacant second homes in low mountainous and unattractive areas, as well as the renovation or even the purchase of old and poorly maintained houses in the historic centres of abandoned villages); the lower cost of living in rural areas compared

care in the service sector (Membretti 2015).

According to data provided by ISTAT (the Italian Institute for Statistics) and by the Alpine Convention<sup>8</sup>, on January 1, 2014 the number of foreign residents in the 1,749 Italian Alpine municipalities amounted to about 350,000 people, almost equally divided between males and females, and mostly coming from non-EU countries (mainly from Eastern Europe, North Africa and Latin America): in the mountains, the percentage of foreigners in the total population is in line with the national average, or, in many cases, even higher. Indeed, according to calculations made by the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI)<sup>9</sup>, in 2013 the foreign residents in the mountain municipalities of Northern Italy (excluding asylum seekers, as well as those illegally present) were nearly 400,000 (see Table 1). If we look at Italy as a whole, we find that 36.5% of foreign subjects have immigrant visas issued or renewed in

the North-West of the country, in regions with substantial Alpine portions in their territories. Children account for a quarter of all foreign residents: this data is particularly significant in view of the pronounced aging of the Italian population, especially in mountain territories (CENSIS 2016).

If “economic” immigration appears by now to have become a structural feature of Italian economy and society<sup>10</sup>, in recent years Italy has increasingly become a land of arrival also for new migration flows, mostly made up of people fleeing war, natural disasters or intolerable socio-political conditions: a point worth stressing is that the refugee phenomenon is more and more affecting mountain areas, as a result of national policies aiming at scattering this population outside metropolitan areas<sup>11</sup>. On January 1, 2015, the number of foreign immigrants officially present in Italy with a residence permit issued for humanitarian reasons, asylum or protection was 117,820 (100,138 men and 17,682 women); in October 2016, the overall estimate exceeded 150,000 people<sup>12</sup>. As it is very difficult to give a realistic picture of the distribution of these subjects in the Italian Alpine municipalities, we can only quantify the presence of residence permits for humanitarian reasons in the regions which have Alpine areas: 24,053 in the North-West and 17,892 in North-East, for a total of 41,945 people, overwhelmingly male<sup>13</sup>.

As concerns the reception of these people, the analysis of good practices and the widespread opinion among stakeholders (Dematteis and Membretti 2016) point to a successful model of social inclusion (related to a mostly temporary but also, in some cases, more stable settlement of the refugees): this model is promoted by the SPRAR network (the Italian Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees), structured (in 2014) at the national level into 432 projects, involving 381 local authorities (municipalities, unions of municipalities and other territorial bodies). Within this network, the activism of mountain villages

– which have launched, especially in the North-West of the country, many hospitality projects – appears to be remarkable. For the provinces of Northern Italy whose territory is at least partly Alpine, the overall number of stays by immigrants as part of the SPRAR system in 2015 was 2,820, whereas in 2016 the places available in the system were 1,723 (it should be noted that every place can be occupied during the year by more than one person in rotation)<sup>14</sup>.

If we consider only purely Alpine municipalities, we find that those belonging to the SPRAR system recorded in 2015 almost 800 requests from asylum seekers, against a total availability of 473 places: in absolute terms, as well as in relation to the total number of arrivals, this figure is not very high, especially if we think of the wide availability of empty spaces and abandoned buildings in the Alps, in contexts often characterized by extreme social rarefaction. However, this is an interesting finding for at least two reasons: primarily because it indicates that the reception of refugees in the highlands is adding – in an increasingly structured way – to the historical phenomenon of “economic” migration; secondly, because the dynamism of Alpine municipalities in designing and implementing welcoming paths for refugees reveals intentions (and sometimes a budding strategy) envisaging a possible role for foreigners in the repopulation of territories in socio-economic crisis.

In order to discuss this potentiality, but also to pinpoint some critical aspects of the phenomenon, we will briefly present and analyze in the following sections two case-studies, located in Western Alps and chosen as representative of important differences in terms of resident foreign population (economic migrants/asylum seekers, nationality, socio-cultural aspects, process of settlement, etc.) and its impact on local society (self-segregation/resilience). Information was collected in 2015/2016 through personal interviews (with mayors and other institutional actors), direct

10. “Economic migrants” are part of a wider phenomenon of “poverty induced migration” (Membretti and Perlik 2017), including legal and illegal employed or unemployed migrants and poor or unemployed local people who move from urban to rural settings as they cannot afford life in the city. Poor people may move to upland regions to work seasonally in mountain economies (like agriculture or tourism), but also to find affordable housing (urban processes of gentrification and displacement push them towards the Alpine foothills, where real estate prices are lower).

11. It is worth noting that since the 1951 Convention, “NGOs and UNHCR have broadly followed the line that ‘refugees are not migrants’ as a means of protecting asylum space, despite a broad recognition that the line between a ‘refugee’ and a ‘migrant’ is often relatively arbitrary. However, the result is that a humanitarian discourse intended to protect refugees has in fact strengthened many states’ restrictionist migration agendas, and prevented refugees being included within migration-development discourses” (Long 2013: 5).

12. Individuals with long-term visa, residence cards and unaccompanied minors are excluded from this count (ISTAT). discourse intended to protect refugees has in fact strengthened many states’ restrictionist migration agendas, and prevented refugees being included within migration-development discourses” (Long 2013: 5).

13. Stock data as of January 1, 2015 (ISTAT).

14. [http://www.sprar.it/progetti-territoriali?sort\\_order=id+asc](http://www.sprar.it/progetti-territoriali?sort_order=id+asc).

observation (several spells of fieldwork in the autumn of 2015) and informal talks with local key actors (migrants, association leaders, etc.).

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### **“Economic migrants” and “forced highlanders”: the space of foreigners in two Alpine communities**

*Bagnolo Piemonte: ethnic economy and housing of a Chinese community*

Bagnolo Piemonte is a municipality in the province of Cuneo, in north-western Italy, at the foot of the mountains crossed by the Grana creek. For several centuries one of the main economic activities of this area has been the extraction of a fine building stone (known as “Luserna stone”), even if some tourist attractions are also present, generating in recent decades a certain development of the village as a summer and winter holiday destination.

Out of a total population of 6,120 inhabitants, officially there are 822 (13.4%) foreign residents<sup>15</sup>. The largest immigrant community is the Chinese one, which consists of about 500 people all coming from the same district of China and having established their residence in Bagnolo a long time ago: adult males are all employed in local quarries. In a very good illustration of the “substitution effect,” the Chinese have taken the place of Italian internal immigrants from Sardinia, who had arrived in this area in the 1970s, also attracted by job opportunities in the mining sector. The Sardinian miners had occupied the old houses of the historical centre, partly restructuring them. Twenty years later, when the Sardinian community had already left the local mines in search of other employment opportunities, the same houses were rented by the Chinese (in the beginning all men), who have adapted to living in overcrowded and, often, very poor conditions.

With the passage of time, thanks to the

gradual stabilization of their work position (today largely characterized by permanent contracts and, in some cases, by forms of independent entrepreneurship) and to the increase in available financial resources, a family reunification process has begun. With the arrival of women and children, the way of life of Chinese immigrants has been changing, especially as far as living arrangements are concerned: Chinese families are now looking for larger homes, more comfortable and located outside the historical centre, in areas with new residential buildings. This settlement process, in its different stages, has exerted a significant impact on the local housing market, at first by allowing the reuse of old, long-time vacant houses, and later by favouring the renting of the newer ones on the edge of the village, which had been erected in the years of the building boom of the late twentieth century and had subsequently proved overabundant in relation to the demand for accommodation from “historical” inhabitants.

Despite family reunification and a new focus of the Chinese on the housing dimension, however, in terms of social inclusion the indigenous population and the immigrants remain largely divided: the Chinese community leads a parallel existence to that of the Italians, mainly structured along the home-quarry axis, with rare exchanges and relationships outside the work domain and, for the young people, the school environment. The fact that almost all the Chinese residents of Bagnolo, despite having sufficient economic resources, continue to resort to the rental market, instead of turning to the real estate market, confirms their lack of investment in local rooting: the goal of those working in the quarries appears to be, for the vast majority of cases, to accumulate enough money before returning to China, where they will start a “real life.”

In recent years, moreover, because of the effects of the global economic crisis on the mining economy, many Chinese (often the younger ones) are leaving the Piedmontese

15. ISTAT 2014.

village to return to their country of origin, or to migrate to other places that may offer better job opportunities, thus emphasizing the temporary nature of their presence in the territory of this Alpine community.

*Pettinengo: hosting refugees as land-care providers*

Pettinengo is a small Alpine municipality in the province of Biella, also in north-western Italy. Until a few years ago, it was economically characterized by the historical presence of a prosperous textile industry (knitwear factories), which offered plenty of local employment opportunities and had ensured for a long time the demographic vitality of the area. Over the past two decades, however, largely due to the gradual closure of the manufacturing plants, the territory has entered a deep socio-economic and identity crisis, highlighted, on the demographic side, by the persistence of a negative natural balance and a related process of aging of the population.

It is worth noting, on the other hand, that in the last decade net migration has been positive, primarily because of the arrival of foreign immigrants. Today, out of 1,462 inhabitants<sup>16</sup>, there are 70 resident foreigners (4.8% of the total population), mostly from sub-Saharan Africa and Romania. Even more sizable is, however, the number of asylum seekers, housed in the village thanks to the work of *PaceFuturo* (PeaceFuture), an NGO founded in Pettinengo in 2001, which has since then been engaged in the cultural sector and in the social inclusion of “disadvantaged” people, focussing in recent years its activities on welcoming refugees.

Very attentive to the care of the territory, *PaceFuturo* has launched in 2008 the project *Sentieri, oggi e domani* (Pathways – yesterday, today and tomorrow). This initiative, undertaken in collaboration with the municipal administration and with the active involvement of the local community, is aimed at bringing back to life more than 10 kilometres of old “factory workers’ paths”

(the walkways that connected the farms and the larger neighbourhoods of the village and were trodden by the peasant-workers to reach the sites of the now-abandoned factories). It is also a way of valorising the natural beauty of the woods and of the cultural landscape crossed by these pathways. The project goal is therefore to promote the responsible transformation of an area undergoing a socio-economic and identity crisis, by combining cultural growth, tourist development and social solidarity.

Since 2014, *PaceFuturo*, through an agreement with the prefecture of Biella, has welcomed a group of applicants for international protection from Africa; in 2016 over one hundred refugees (almost all young males, with different nationalities) were hosted in Pettinengo, in buildings rescued from abandonment or previously underused. Most of these migrants have been progressively involved in the restoration of pathways and rural architectural artefacts: they have been enrolled as members of the NGO and contribute, with volunteer work, to the care and maintenance of the territory. At the same time, immigrants are also active in cleaning the woods, collecting firewood (which is then delivered free of charge to the elderly inhabitants of the village), and in other socially useful activities such as clearing snow, or pruning in the parks.

Today *PaceFuturo*, thanks to its commitment for the welcoming of refugees, is the most important “company” of Pettinengo: indeed, about 30 people – all “historical” residents in the village and all hard-hit by the collapse of local production – are employed in various activities of management, entertainment, education and support addressed to foreigners (including Italian language and textiles courses, beekeeping and pottery classes, etc.), as part of an initiative whose explicit goal is to use the arrival of foreigners as a lever to revitalize the whole area.

16. ISTAT 2014.



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### **Treating the Alps as a common good: the importance of negotiation between old and new highlanders**

Historically, migration to the Alps from the surrounding plains has not been substantial: since at least the late Middle Ages, the opening of Alpine communities to the outside was rather the outcome of a circulation of people, ideas and commodities across the Alpine space and even more of massive seasonal emigrations that could drive Alpine workforce to distant European countries, as far away as Spain, England or Russia (Viazzo 2009). Very frequently open to innovation, mainly resulting from their relationship with the outside and urban world and especially spurred by returning emigrants, Alpine communities were on the other hand usually closed from a demographic point of view. If it is true that no people were born Alpine – as the historian Luigi Zanzi used to repeat, “they all made themselves highlanders” through processes of adaptation to high altitudes (Zanzi 2004: 153) – it is no less true that today’s migration to the highlands represents a significant novelty for the Italian Alps, because of the numbers that characterize it, the speed at which it is taking place, and its internal diversification. The new inhabitants of the Alps range, in fact, from mostly Italian “new highlanders” escaping the cities and seeking alternative ways of life to refugees and foreign “economic migrants,” passing through a variety of other kinds of newcomers, including pensioners going back to their place of origin and commuters who settle in foothill towns or villages but work in nearby metropolitan areas.

Foreign immigrants are making a significant contribution to this process of re-peopling of the Italian Alps. The data we possess show, in the first place, that they are by no means all “forced highlanders”: at least 350,000 of them (the “economic migrants,” who have often been living for years in

mountain communities) have to some extent chosen – even though it has often been a choice dictated by necessity – to live and work in the Alpine areas, attracted by the availability of local resources: primarily housing and jobs, but also better socio-environmental conditions than in urban areas and a lower cost of living. The data also tell us that a high proportion of them come from areas that are geographically and culturally very distant from the Alps, such as North Africa and Latin America. Finally, we know that the recent influx of refugees is bringing into Alpine communities growing numbers of foreigners (mostly male, from Africa and the Middle East), whose temporary presence is adding to the more settled “economic migrants.”

In these respects, the two case studies that have been outlined above reveal some common traits, but also an essential difference. Both in Bagnolo and in Pettinengo the cultural distance of the foreigners (Chinese and Africans, respectively) from the “historical inhabitants” they have encountered in the contexts of arrival is clear. In both cases, the foreigners’ impact on housing, in terms of renewal or reutilization of abandoned or underused buildings, is also evident. Not least, in both cases there is a definite economic impact related to the foreign presence, in response to local needs of workforce with special skills (Bagnolo) or in terms of employment opportunities that are created for local inhabitants and stem from the management of welcoming projects (Pettinengo).

Housing and work, however, do not automatically produce social inclusion, let alone intercultural dialectics between immigrants and natives, even if the settlement of foreigners is of long standing. On the contrary, secure access to these basic resources can paradoxically foster the closing off of the new inhabitants whenever significant larger scale relationships fail to develop. The case of the Chinese community in Bagnolo confirms the relevance of “empty spaces” (in terms of both available jobs and



unused buildings) as factors of attraction for immigrants, but the outcome was the creation of an “ethnic niche,” socio-culturally divided from the historically resident community. The difference between the two cases is neatly brought out by the immigrants’ relationship with the territory: in Pettinengo, refugees are involved by the NGO *PaceFuturo* in many activities aimed at safeguarding a cultural landscape which is emotionally treasured by the residents but is progressively falling into a state of abandonment owing to population aging, the emigration of young people and the prevalence of manufacturing activities over the agricultural and forestry sector. An object of care and at the same time the domain of both physical and social re-production, the territory of Pettinengo comes up as a meeting ground for the newcomers and the pre-existing population. Through daily maintenance and the valorization of those features in the territory that are most significant for the identity of the local population, foreign immigrants get therefore involved in a negotiation of meanings with the residents and with the historical memory of the village, inscribed in the places and in landmark artefacts.

It is precisely the emergence of this process of negotiation that raises questions about who can or should be considered a “highlander”, the witness and promoter of a certain cultural identity. The issue is complex and delicate. Especially in the anthropological literature, cases are well attested of newcomers who prove far more active than the old inhabitants in keeping alive and reproducing, not always without tension or conflict, traditions of which they claim to be heirs. However, these are usually Italian “highlanders by choice”, with definite life-projects with respect to their settlement in the mountains (Viazzo 2012b: 191-93; Bertolino 2014; Turrone 2017). One may wonder whether foreign immigrants (either “economic” migrants or refugees) can be equally interested in taking charge of this cultural continuity, since they are unlikely

to be equally driven and fascinated by the symbolic aspects of traditional heritage: they can rather be expected to fluctuate between camouflage and innovation, between conflict and negotiation. On the other hand, one might more radically ask those who fear the risks the new peopling would entail for the survival of Alpine traditions whether cultural continuity is always desirable. Again, anthropological studies (Bravo 2005; Viazzo and Bonato 2013: 18-25) have demonstrated that these traditions are often a modern invention and, largely, an urban product. To what extent, then, does it make sense to insist on their necessary preservation? For whom, and for what purpose, are these traditions functional today? To what extent, one might also ask, do present-day challenges require instead innovation, and therefore cultural creativity and resilience? And who can bring innovation, if not, first of all, “strangers”?

In her book *A Negotiated World: Three Centuries of Change in a French Alpine Community*, mentioned at the beginning of this article, Harriet Rosenberg (1988) showed that Alpine villages, which in the 1960s were nothing more than depopulated, economically backward and politically passive peripheries, had been able in the past to thrive economically and to negotiate their local policies with the central powers. One major effect of the current process of repopulation is that the Alps are becoming once again a “world to be negotiated – *between* the Alpine communities and the outside, as well as *within* the communities themselves – given the diversification that is increasingly characterizing these communities and their populations. Since both ecosystemic reasons and general social interest today are increasingly suggesting that the Alps should be considered a common good – the object of multiple negotiations – then, in asking “Whose Alps are those?”, we must shift the focus from ownership to use. It thus becomes of the utmost importance to ascertain who is actually taking care of these territories, or



who may do so under certain conditions, in order to reproduce (and, to a certain degree, transform) a cultural landscape which is the outcome of centuries of anthropization and is now at risk of quickly disappearing. It seems more appropriate and urgent than ever to move from proprietary individualism to an approach centred on the actual use that is made of these common goods and their management with social and productive purposes. What John Emmeus Davis has called “an ethic of stewardship, in which land is treated as a common heritage” (Davis 2010: 4) appears therefore consistent with an open attitude to immigration and the new peopling of the highlands. It is crucial, however, that the new inhabitants, both Italians and foreigners, should be directed towards and supported in caring for the territory, and that this work of care should be shared with the natives. There can be little doubt that this sharing, which may foreshadow the traits of a place-based governance, will decisively rely on the negotiation between the actors involved, all the more so if they come from markedly different socio-cultural contexts.

Much remains to be learned, however, about the “margins of manoeuvre” that are allowed for negotiation between different categories of inhabitants in mountain regions. A recent anthropological study of changes and continuities in pastoral economies in a cluster of valleys in the western Italian Alps has shown that the actual or potential role of “new highlanders” largely depends on local socio-political configurations and may be subject to several structural constraints (Fassio *et al.* 2014). Although the institutional background appears to be largely the same across the Italian Alps, fine-grained investigation reveals that the policies adopted by different municipalities may nevertheless vary as a result of local debates and compromises (Bailey 1973), and indicates that these variations may in turn significantly affect the chances of prospective new inhabitants to settle in the highlands. In the specific case examined by

this study, the exclusivist emphasis placed by some municipalities on the residents’ preemption rights over agro-pastoral resources is the main reason why livestock farming continues to be practiced only by local families, or by “new highlanders” who have “grafted” themselves through marriage onto these families. Immigration of herders or shepherds from outside is severely hindered, or indeed virtually prevented. The situation looks quite different in neighbouring municipalities which have adopted more open and welcoming policies.

This is but a tiny example. Yet, this small-scale divergence between adjacent valleys or municipalities bears intriguing similarities with the much larger scale contrast between the structurally closed communities of the Swiss and especially Austrian Alps and the more open communal structures of the Italian Alps, whose significance has long been underlined (Viazzo 1989: 258-85; Mathieu 1998: 129-48). This suggests, on the one hand, that a multi-scalar approach is required that pays attention both to the micro-variations ethnographic investigation is especially apt to pinpoint and to regional and macro-regional differences. No less importantly, it also points to the need for comparative research that extends to the rest of the Alpine space the exploration of the cultural and social structural features of the processes of migration and negotiation discussed in this article.

Comparative analysis should actually be extended not just to the whole Alpine space, but in a broader perspective to other European upland areas, where repopulation is also underway. After all, as Jon Mathieu (2016) has recently reminded us, Fernand Braudel once famously wrote that historically the Alps are in many ways “une montagne exceptionnelle” – an exceptional range of mountains (Braudel 1975: 33). Was Braudel’s remark pertinent? And if it was, which were the causes and which the effects? Mathieu is urging his fellow historians to put Braudel’s bold argument to the test as far as the past is concerned.

It seems no less important and timely for anthropologists and sociologists to turn to the present and look at commonalities and differences between the Alps and the other mountainous areas of Europe when it comes to repopulation, foreign immigration and cultural change.

The results of research conducted in other European mountain areas do indeed suggest that such a comparative exploration is likely to prove fruitful. As we have seen, there are scholars working on the Alps who have warned against the risks cultural heritage may run because of population inflows (Steinicke *et al.* 2015; Bender and Kanitscheider 2012). Focusing especially on amenity migrants and tourists, some studies have argued that the urban or even foreign origin of “outlanders” can pose a threat to local cultures, as they might consecrate as “authentic” a set of lifestyles and values that

are alien to the local traditional context. Yet, it would seem that the penetration of urban lifestyles and the commodification of locality need not end up in the annihilation of local traditions and cultures. On the contrary, the local culturescape might be rejuvenated in mutually creative processes that bring together local old timers, new residents, and tourists alike. The heterogeneous “outlanders,” with their professional and existential projects, may emerge as promoters of territorial and socio-cultural transformations that are capable of overcoming local tendencies towards self-referential isolation.



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# Kayaktivism: The Anthropology of Protest, Craft, and the Imagination

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## ABSTRACT

This article concerns the re-fashioning of traditional small, hand-powered boat craft – namely canoes and kayaks – into instruments of nonviolent protest and civil disobedience. This has recently been termed “kayaktivism” by participants in these actions. The protests can take the form of civilian blockades or sites for making statements of opposition, whether in visual or verbal form, or both. The most common targets originally were weapons shipments, but since the turn of the millennium such protests focus on fossil fuels and nuclear power vs. sustainability as an ethic. Five examples of this are briefly sketched: 1) canoe blockades of Pakistani weapons shipments leaving the northeastern U.S. during the Bangladeshi Liberation War of 1971, 2) the Bay Area Peace Navy in San Francisco that protested militarism, nuclear power, and weapons shipments to Central America, 3) the South Pacific Climate Warriors canoe action in Newcastle, Australia to blockade and protest coal shipments, 4) actions in the northwestern U.S. to block a Shell Oil vessel from drilling in the Arctic Ocean, and 5) river protests in New Jersey, U.S.A., against a new power plant and a natural gas pipeline under the Delaware River. The conclusion of the paper considers this in the context of other civil disobedience, and why the image of the canoe or kayak is so effective, including the centrality of the David and Goliath motif. Finally it looks at how protesters use, adapt, and build upon canoe traditions and the relationship between traditional craft and value systems.

## KEYWORDS

Creative forms of protest, nonviolent civil disobedience, social activism, kayaktivism, tradition, craft, the David-and-Goliath motif.

Protest includes both the potential for blocking (short term) or preventing (long term) unwanted, usually dominating behaviors, and the expression of discontent, sometimes in creative ways. Social protest can involve shared or community beliefs, and can also involve an educational function, to inform and win over new allies.

New threats to our survival or livelihood, which is to say not just new regimes but threats that put our lives at risk, can require new forms of protest. After all, if old protests have not been successful there needs to be an adaptation of tactics, and likewise if they have been successful, those in power will have altered their response accordingly or lose their power, so the same tactics are less likely to work again. A new regime may face

an age-old tactic like street demonstrations. But a new behavior or a new policy – or a new understanding that these or previous practices are detrimental to well-being – requires a response suited to the task.

This includes social protest that is not just symbolic and aesthetic, but also that which involves direct action to block or prevent oppressive, unjust practice. When that involves active nonviolence, especially in violating laws that are seen as unjust or legal but immoral behaviors sanctioned by such laws, this builds on the tradition of civil disobedience, first articulated by the 19<sup>th</sup> century naturalist and antiwar activist and writer Henry David Thoreau. This paper concerns such protests that have been grouped under the neologism, *kayaktivism*, which I define as protests that

involve small manually powered water craft for the blocking of action or blockading of transported goods by large sea vessels, and aquatic protests that use such small craft as sites for visual or verbal statements of opposition to policy or the assertion of power. I use this term for convenience to describe such practice whenever such protests include hand-powered, and often handmade, boats, including canoes and other rowboats, and not just kayaks *per se*.

This article began as a way to investigate a seeming paradox in the study of folk protest, the connection of two ideas that can also seem to be in conflict, namely whether and in what ways traditional culture can be a progressive force. Of course tradition can be used in multiple ways, and as is well established not only is it continually re-invented, but it can be invented (Hobsbawm 1992), and may not necessarily literally reflect the way things once were. But a deeper question lies in what ways traditional culture can be drawn on in reserve for progressive, life-sustaining purposes. Though we are led to believe that tradition is by definition rooted in the past and backward-looking, there can be a progressive dimension of tradition, particularly when traditions can be drawn upon to reinforce connections to the ecosystem that are sustainable. After all, it is the twin forces of colonialism and the Industrial Revolution that began our unsustainable exploitation of not just labor, but resources, and an economic system devoted to profit and efficiency rather than the flourishing of all life. For indigenous and native peoples, the idea that respecting nature and life is in accord with lifestyles that are traditional and sustainable is not contradictory. But for most Western people with a linear view of history, economics, and culture and a detachment from living sustainably or even cyclically with the Earth, there is an apparent contradiction between progress and tradition. This needs to be examined further.

For the purposes of this article, I include only protest against states or corporations. I

do not include acts of piracy, seizing goods or personnel; breaking through blockades for the purpose of delivering humanitarian aid; or any acts that involve actions by larger, heavier-powered ships against smaller or equal-sized crafts – preventing rafts of refugees from safely reaching shore, for example. This is not to say that there is not a continuum of protest actions; Greenpeace's work disrupting whaling, overfishing, or oil drilling with large ships such as their *Rainbow Warrior*, *Arctic Sunrise*, or *Esperanza* is certainly environmental activism, but of a different scale as that of kayaktivism. While the David-vs.-Goliath motif (Moyer 2015; Yousuf 2016) is a quality shared by, indeed exploited by, the underdogs, I would regard these other actions as a separate phenomenon.

The term "kayaktivism" itself is derived from the realm of folk speech and word play. In English and in some other languages, such as French, there is what is known as a "*portmanteau*" word. A *portmanteau* is a combination of two words into a single, blended or combined word, that takes on the meaning or aspects of both of the original terms. This is not only an example of linguistic wordplay, but it symbolizes something new emerging out of two older concepts – using old materials to develop something innovative. It is in itself an adaptation of linguistic traditions. In this particular case, the first word, "kayak" comes from the Inuit term, *qayaq*,<sup>1</sup> referring to a boat that is paddled in a forward direction by a two-bladed paddle. The word "kayak" first appeared in English, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, in 1757, although it was quoted as a Greenlandic term nearly a hundred years earlier, in 1662. In comparison, the word "canoe," which also comes to English from native American languages, via Spanish and Dutch, appeared a century earlier, in 1555, and was used by Walter Raleigh in 1618, after which point it was more continuously part of the English language. Both of these forms of boats were unknown in Europe,

1. There is no equivalent, written or oral, in English to the original unvoiced uvular stop in native languages of the Arctic, represented by the International Phonetic Alphabet as /q/, so the letter 'k' is the next best thing.

according to John McPhee (1975), so they did not enter European languages until the colonial encounter in the Americas and hence remain words derived etymologically from Native American roots.

The second word, “activism,” comes from Latin and the Greek and is, perhaps unexpectedly, a much newer coinage. The words “activism” and “activist” were not used to refer to a social reformer or someone involved in direct action until 1920, even though other meanings for the word existed a few years earlier, and even though the root of the word, “active,” had been part of English for nearly six hundred years. This means that the concept of social activism, at least in the English language, is just under one hundred years old.

What is interesting also about the word is that it is one of at least four other *portmanteaux*, coined around the same time, that combine “activism” with another word that includes the sound /-æk/, and all four are products of their times. The most used and recognized of these is “hacktivism,” first seen in 1995 (Townsend 2017)<sup>2</sup> – the practice of computer hacking for the purpose of advancing a social agenda and creating a positive social outcome, and neither mischief nor profit at the expense of others. The others – “slacktivism,” “fracktivism,” “craftivism,” “clicktivism,” and even “artivism” – have not caught on to the same extent as “kayaktivism” and “hacktivism” in English usage, perhaps because their coinage is not so logical or their meanings intuitive.

In truth, though, the first printed uses of the term “kayaktivism” actually had to do with activism on behalf of the rights of kayakers, literally. Though Townsend puts the origin of the term at 2015, a discussion board from 2011 (stripersonline.com), and a *New Yorker* article from 2013 (Paumgarten 2013), both used the term but in the course of describing protests to protect the rights of kayakers – not insignificant, yet the term has taken on a much broader meaning in the last five years. The first use of the term as

a tactic for direct action came on the radio and television news program *Democracy Now!* in 2011, and the incident they described had to do with the flotilla bringing humanitarian aid to Gaza in defiance of the Israeli blockade. That flotilla was blocked by the Greek Coast Guard, and so kayaktivists deployed into the Aegean to prevent the Coast Guard ships from blocking the flotilla. In this multilayered action then, the Israeli government had imposed a blockade against Gaza, the flotilla was trying to break that blockade, the Greek Coast Guard was trying to block the flotilla from getting to Gaza, and the kayaktivists were attempting to block the Greek Coast Guard from reaching the flotilla, or block the blockers in other words. This is significant because according to the working definition that I have adopted, kayaktivism is always about blocking, never about penetration. That blocking can also be metaphorical, through a primarily visual protest that seeks to block construction of a power plant, a pipeline, oil drilling etc.

The organization Greenpeace appears to have begun using the word on its websites as well, sometime between 2012 and 2014, so we know there was at least some in-group usage of the term in the years between prior to 2015. But it was really in 2015 that the term came to light in American parlance, as the term was first used in *The New York Times* during the May actions in Seattle (Johnson 2015), and most widely perhaps when used by Nobel Laureate Al Gore in an interview on the national cable news network MSNBC when Shell decided not to pursue drilling in the Arctic. “First of all,” Gore said, “I would like to express my thanks and give due honor to all of those activists and kayaktivists, as they call themselves, that helped to build resistance to drilling in the Arctic” (Hayes 2015). The beauty of this particular *portmanteau* is that it needs no explanation, as both words are fully stated in the combination. Yet as of this date, “kayaktivism” has not been officially added to the Oxford English Dictionary (while “hacktivism” and “slacktivism” have).<sup>3</sup>

2. Although the OED puts the date at 1998.



\*

I will briefly discuss five examples of kayaktivism of significance. While no doubt there have been others which research has yet to uncover, incidents for example that were performed under the radar of press coverage (although with search engines like Google is it becoming less likely that no traces of a protest show up if it is at all newsworthy), I focus on these because two are historically significant, two are part of larger movements, and the fifth is thus far purely visual as opposed to obstructionist.

1. *The Philadelphia blockade of weapons to Pakistan (Baltimore and Philadelphia, U.S.A., 1970)*

The first documented example of kayaktivism I have found so far<sup>4</sup> took place in Baltimore and Philadelphia in 1970 during what is now known as the Bangladeshi Liberation War in which that new nation, at the time known as East Pakistan, fought for secession and independence from then-West Pakistan. Local American canoe activists from the Philadelphia area attempted to prevent shipment of weapons from the U.S. to Pakistan, as authorized by President Nixon and Henry Kissinger. This action is described in detail in the book *Blockade* by Richard K. Taylor (1977) and the documentary motion picture of the same name directed by Arif Yousuf (2016). The original idea, as Taylor relates in the book and motion picture, was put forth by Quaker social worker and activist Bill Moyer (1933-2002)<sup>5</sup>, and was picked up by other non-violent peace activists from the greater Philadelphia community. This canoe activism was intended an act of nonviolent civil disobedience to prevent even greater violence against millions of innocent civilians. Phyllis Taylor, in the motion picture (2016), says this was an attempt both “to speak truth to power,” and “to create the visual” imagery in order to make an impression. The protestors were aware of the power of the David-and-Goliath

imbalance, or as described by Sultana Alam, who participated in generating support for the action but who was not herself one of the boaters, each canoe was akin to “a little moth trying to live against all odds.”

The risks to the protestors involved certainly included arrest and the police were on site, although few arrests were actually made, according to Taylor. But a bigger risk was to the protesters’ life and safety, since the wake of the much larger ships could force the canoes to capsize or, worse, be sucked down into the current and into the propeller. Or, of course, larger ships cannot stop quickly if a small craft crosses their path.

Part of the challenge, which is an ongoing concern for kayaktivists, is that the arrivals, lanes, specific whereabouts, and even occasionally the identities, of the ships involved can be closely guarded secrets or even, in the case of commercial ships, proprietary information. The Philadelphia activists read *The Journal of Commerce*, which had the shipping news, and they could try to deduce which ships were coming and when, but this involved a lot of detective work which could not always accurately predict where they needed to be, or more importantly, which ship might be carrying munitions. The first ship arrived actually in Baltimore Harbor, so the group termed themselves the Francis Scott Key Armada (Yousuf 2016).

The question also arises how effective such blockades are, since millions of civilians were killed during that war and millions more became refugees in India – some of whom never returned to the newly liberated Bangladesh. The protestors did raise awareness of the issue, and that awareness led to stricter congressional oversight and eventually banning all weapons going to Pakistan during that time. In the digital age, one protest can be covered by local and national media, the protestors can also broadcast their own channels of publicity far beyond press releases, and through social media such protests can

3. Nor can I speak to its existence in other languages, especially Romance languages in which its translation would be literal and predictable since the -ism morpheme has direct correspondents in those languages.

4. Nor can I speak to its existence in other languages, especially Romance languages in which its translation would be literal and predictable since the -ism morpheme has direct correspondents in those languages.

5. Not to be confused with the more prominent American journalist Bill Moyers (born 1934).

go viral. The fact that their protests could attract the attention of the U.S. Congress, during the height of the Vietnam War and bombing of Cambodia and the much larger antiwar movement, speaks to the potency of the visual imagery.

A similar canoe action, protesting the War in Southeast Asia, took place off the coast of Leonardo, New Jersey, with twenty-two canoes attempting to block weapons shipments to Vietnam from the Earle Naval Ammunition Depot near Colts Neck, New Jersey, and then a smaller flotilla trying to block an aircraft carrier at Norfolk, Virginia, in 1972 (Hartsough and Hollyday 2014:91-98; Cushing 2015b). The organizers referred to it as a People's Blockade, while the press called it a Peace Flotilla. Similar actions followed with other groups in Bangor, Washington, and San Francisco and Seal Beach, California (Hartsough and Hollyday 2014: 96-97). David Hartsough, one of the leaders, writes in his memoir that the success was largely due to the forged "comradeship" that kept all the rowers and their supporters together, and to the fact "that courage is contagious" (Hartsough and Hollyday 2014:98), while also mentioning the same "David-and-Goliath" visual impression of such protests.

*2. Bay Area Peace Navy, blockade of weapons to Central America and other causes (San Francisco, 1983-2015)*

In the 1980s, a group in San Francisco, California, known as the Bay Area Peace Navy, founded by members of the Quaker social organization, the American Friends Service Committee, blockaded U.S. warships scheduled to ship munitions to the government of El Salvador in its war against rebels who had taken up arms against the government, with significant attacks mostly in the form of bombing against civilian peasant populations. The U.S. also provided military aid to the U.S.-backed counter-revolutionary guerrillas in Nicaragua, known as the *contras*, although at various

times that was prohibited by Congress. Members even sailed down the Rio San Juan in Nicaragua in 1985 to protest the *contra* war (Tributes 2015). Over the next fifteen years, the Peace Navy espoused a number of causes, many related to militarism and nuclear testing at sea, and formed a coalition with Greenpeace on some of their larger actions on behalf of environmental protection (Cushing 2015: 40).

While their initial technique had been direct action in the form of blockades – and they were not limited to kayaks and rowed boats, often joined by sailboats and larger craft – their protests also took the form of guerrilla theatre, satire, and water-borne visual protest, so that the protests themselves conveyed an anti-militarist message even when they weren't physically trying to stop business (Heifetz 1998). When I interviewed him in 1990, Bob Heifetz emphasized that humor and absurdity were an important technique in getting the message out beyond the "convinced." At one point they staged a mock invasion of Angel Island in San Francisco Bay to satirize the U.S. invasion of Grenada – and had to perform it a second time on command for an arriving television crew. The annual counter-demonstration during the naval Fleet Week became a prominent event. In one famous case, songs and banners used in a protest during Fleet Week in 1987 were blocked by the U.S. Navy, who created a security zone that prevented the demonstration from being seen, and the peace songs of a children's chorus from being heard from shore. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) brought the case, *Bay Area Peace Navy vs. United States of America*, to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 9<sup>th</sup> Circuit, successfully challenging that the Peace Navy's act of protest was constitutionally protected free speech and could not be legally blocked by the U.S. military (1990). The Peace Navy's position was a combination of direct action, but also a visual campaign against the issues of militarism, U.S. intervention, and, later on, the environmental damage caused by

exploitation of natural resources at sea and in the Arctic. The year after winning the case, they took on more absurd costumes and brought an “outrageous” boat to poke fun at ongoing U.S. militarism (Heifetz 1990). The Fleet Week protests, with explicit opposition to the ongoing history of American imperialism, continued at least until 2015 (Cushing 2007, 2008, 2015a).

Like the Philadelphia protestors, the San Francisco activists adopted the Quaker theme of “speaking truth to power,” but molding that idea into performed events that could be seen by the general public as the protest was taking place. (The actions in the Pacific to stop nuclear testing were less performative in this sense.) While the act of a nonviolent blockade remained a powerful action, even when unsuccessful in the moment – though on occasion part of a more successful movement in the long run – the transition into an emphasis on symbolic performance enabled the visual to have broader impact, something that would only become more enabled with the rise of social media.

### *3. 350 Pacific blockade of coal ships (Newcastle, Australia, 2014)*

One of the most interesting manifestations has been the work of Pacific Island activists, who organized through a branch of 350.org, the organization founded by writer and activist Bill McKibben named for the goal of keeping the carbon dioxide concentration in the air under 350 parts per million. These activists created 350Pacific.org, using Facebook as a means to communicate and organize across the thousands of kilometers that separate their islands, as their islands are threatened with rising sea levels from climate change. Tuvalu, the Marshalls and Kiribati are the most immediately threatened populated islands, but Enewatak Atoll has radioactive waste deposits which would be dispersed if the atoll is flooded over, so the dangers surpass just those which affect island

residents.

In 2014, 350Pacific organized the Climate Change Warriors to converge on Newcastle, Australia and block a ship that was transporting Australian-mined coals from Newcastle. They arrived in their own native canoes and flotilla of boats designed each according to the traditional style of the island from which they came and made on their own home islands. As seagoing people, many of the islands had been settled by people who explored and migrated in hand-rowed boats, over vast distances. For this action, kayaktivists came from the aforementioned countries, as well as Fiji, Tonga, Kiribati, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Samoa, Tokelau, and others, as well as Australia. The photos on their Facebook pages show the core group in handmade canoes and other boats, joined by dozens of supporters in commercially bought, usually plastic, kayaks. The Climate Warriors also took great pains to participate in traditional dress as well as with their national flags, which also added to the visual impact of the protests. In the months leading up to the action, and the years following, they have made use of clothing, banners, traditional crafts, in their photographic documentation of protests and actions on each of their islands. These have been uploaded through social media, particularly Facebook, and have formed the basis for building a movement.

More than simply visual or obstructionist, the protests also contained the message that energy based on extraction of natural resources – in this particular case coal – was the root of the problem, and that meeting the goals of climate agreements, indeed working towards keeping the Pacific habitable, depends upon the replacement of fossil fuels with renewable resources. And they signaled that traditional arts are a source of strength as well as knowledge and beauty. After all, they took the David-and-Goliath motif one step further, because not only were their boats significantly smaller, they were hand-carved and reflected the

specific culture associated with each island. This took the idea of uniform canoes and kayaks a step further by actually using works of art as instruments to save their own cultures from extinction.

#### 4. *Blockade of Shell Oil driller (Seattle, Washington, and Portland, Oregon, U.S.A., 2015)*

The protest campaign receiving the most press coverage was the work of kayaktivists in the U.S. who attempted to stop Shell Oil from deploying a rig and supporting fleet to drill off the coast of Alaska in the Chukchi Sea, one of the most remote drilling sites in the world (Johnson 2015). The first part of the campaign took place in a series of protests from May 7-18, 2015 in Seattle, nicknamed “The Paddle in Seattle”<sup>6</sup> partly in response to the Obama Administration’s granting permission to Shell to drill in the Arctic, and partly because the largest rig, the *Polar Pioneer*, had arrived in the Port of Seattle and was waiting to deploy along with some 25 other vessels (Garnick 2015), some of which would be departing from Portland.

Two months later, in Late July, activists dramatically suspended themselves from the St. Johns Bridge in Portland, Oregon for over 24 hours to block departure of the icebreaker *Fennica*, and blockaded the port with kayaks as well to prevent the Shell vessel from sailing to the Arctic to begin exploratory drilling for oil (Hauser 2015, Brait 2015). By jamming the waterways with their kayaks and blocking the ship from passing by suspending themselves from the bridge in midair, millions of people learned about Shell’s intentions who had not paid attention before. The *Fennica* departed anyway, but whether directly related or not, Shell abandoned their Arctic drilling plans in September, though this may have been as much a response to the low price of oil at the time as it was to public pressure and concern for the environment (Hayes 2015).

This multi-sited campaign in the U.S.

Northwest was part of a network of actions in seven cities, many built around kayaks, led by Greenpeace and the Backbone Campaign. The latter was co-founded by an activist whose name happens to also be Bill Moyer – no relation to the Bill Moyer who suggested a canoe blockade back in 1970<sup>7</sup>. The second Moyer is in the process of developing strategy and also providing training in nonviolent kayaktivism, which he outlines through his organization, the Backbone Campaign, which actually staged its first kayak protest in 2009, blockading a construction barge. Moyer, like his namesake, is involved not only in single actions, but in movement-building, and developing nonviolent water-borne protest as a tool in this campaign. He also informed me he is writing a book on kayaktivism, which would indicate this is a tactic that proponents expect will grow over the next few years. The earlier Bill Moyer saw this as but one tactic in a full and varied array of nonviolent actions, but there are two reasons why more kayaktivism could be more effective today. First, the availability of social media makes any visual that much more visible beyond the local news outlets. The earlier Moyer anticipated that, writing that symbolic action was important in social movements, as was breaking the monopoly of corporate media control (Moyer 1987). Second, in the 1970s and 1980s, the shipment and extraction of fossil fuels were not challenged as they are today, because the understandings and impact of climate change were not high-priority issues, even for environmentalists, as they are today.

#### 5. *Sierra Club protests of power plant and natural gas pipeline (Delaware River, New Jersey, U.S., 2015-16)*

The East Coast of the U.S. has seen some kayaktivism in the past few years, although without the proximity to Alaska or the Pacific the environmental and military pressures do not have the same urgency that perhaps the issues do on the

6. Which itself was a reference to the 1999 “Battle of Seattle,” when anti-globalization activists protested the World Trade Organization’s Ministerial Conference in that city. That involved blockade of streets and prevention of delegates from attending the meeting, mostly non-violent although there were factions that engaged in vandalism and property damage.

7. Bill Moyer, personal communication, 2017. Because of the extreme unlikelihood of two people, both leading movements in kayaktivism, having identical names, I double-checked, contacting the “later” one through Facebook, and a close friend of the elder one who confirmed that the elder one, who grew up in the New England section of the U.S. and settled in San Francisco, did not have a family in the U.S. Northwest where the younger one was born. According to the younger Bill Moyer, the two actually met once, and someone who had worked with the elder one now also happens to serve on the board of the younger’s organization, called the Backbone Campaign (personal communication). To make matters even more confusing, both were not just activists, but also theorists of activism, and both published. Remember the first Bill Moyer died in 2002, while the second did not begin to be publicly active until 2003, reaching his strike in the 2010s. In this text, I will distinguish between the two as needed, but in the event of any possible confusion, I will refer to them as Bill Moyer (I) and Bill Moyer (II).

8. That said, there is no significant difference in participation rates between Atlantic and Pacific coastal states, New England states or Great Lakes states, although there is lower participation along the Gulf Coast and inland Plains and Mountain states (see Coleman Company and Outdoor Foundation 2015).

West Coast<sup>8</sup>. Nonetheless, there have been at least three mid-Atlantic groups involved in kayaktivism. The New Jersey Sierra Club has carried out several actions to protect the Delaware River, which separates New Jersey from Pennsylvania, from environmental damage caused by the overheated and polluted waste water from a Public Service Electric and Gas (PSE&G) power plant (Comegno 2015) and from the installation of the PennEast pipeline to transport natural gas from fracking (Gibbs 2016), kayaking on both the Delaware River itself and the Delaware-Raritan Canal. All the protests include signage and other visual elements in addition to canoes and kayaks, which are without fail recorded by photographs and video in local media. In addition, at least two other local protests have received some news coverage in the Eastern states: kayaking on the Hudson River near Albany to protest a planned crude oil pipeline (Grondahl 2016) and on the Petuxent River near Solomons, Maryland against a liquefied natural gas plant in a residential neighborhood which poses environmental threats from the process itself, as well as from spilled polluted bilge water (Meador 2016).

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More than most, kayaktivist protests are literally about power. By this I mean not just the power of corporations and the state to impose their will – dominant power in the sociological or anthropological sense. Nor do I refer only to contested power in the metaphorical sense of the Davids in the rowboats going up against the Goliath sea vessels and the cargo or weapons they hold, power in the sense of imbalance between the two, although that motif is repeatedly cited across time and space. Rather the protests have been about power in the sense that every protest discussed here has been more commonly about the power derived from the extraction of fossil fuels vs. sustainable power, as embodied symbolically by human muscle; and less commonly about the power of military might, the most terrible

form of which are nuclear devices, which also depend on the extraction of uranium for fuel. Where kayaktivists are united it is around the beliefs that humans have a responsibility to safeguard the environment and live harmoniously with it, and around the technique of using human muscle and hand-powered, sometimes hand-built craft. They believe that, in contrast, there are powerful parties who act as if exploiting the natural world is our birthright and can be undertaken no matter the cost. The activists believe furthermore that energy should be sustainable with minimal waste and disruption to the environment whenever possible; that militarism, especially in the service of an empire, runs counter to ideals of sustainable livelihood; and that technology needs to be harnessed not just to make a profit, but to serve human needs as well as those of the environment itself. In short, every one of these protests has involved a response to extraction, destruction, and pollution, or some combination thereof.

In her book on climate change, *This Changes Everything*, journalist Naomi Klein (2014: 169) develops the concept, borrowed from political science, of “extractivism,”

which she defines as a term originally used to describe economies based on removing ever more raw materials from the earth, usually for export to traditional colonial powers... Though developed under capitalism, governments across the ideological spectrum now embrace this resource-depleting model as a road to development, and it is this logic that climate change calls profoundly into question.

Extractivism is a nonreciprocal, dominance-based relationship with the earth, one purely of taking. It is the opposite of stewardship, which involves taking but also taking care that regeneration and future life continues.

While each of the protests discussed above were organized independently, the



majority of them involved the attempted prevention of extraction without regard to the effects of the extraction itself, the combustion or processing of those materials, and the damage associated with their waste and disposal. The materials to be extracted primarily include oil and coal, but also natural gas and uranium, and the associated damage is to water, air, and the ecosystem. The antiwar actions confronted military firepower used against civilians, mostly in Central America and Bangladesh, but also the collateral damage to Pacific Islanders and others from the testing, and possible use, of nuclear weapons. Though not technically protests against extraction *per se*, they did make metaphorical use of water as a life-giving force as opposed to the destructive power of fire and metal, which of course is mined. Bay Area Peace Navy member Lincoln Cushing says, in fact “you *can* fight fire with water” (2015b: 52). And, rarely reported, military operations are among the greatest sources of carbon emissions worldwide (Bélanger and Arroyo 2017) and depend on fuels from petroleum to uranium, though extraction *per se* may not have been a motivating factor in those protests in the 1970s and 1980s.

That said, although kayaks and canoes traditionally have been made of organic materials, protestors of course would concede that metal canoes and plastic kayaks used today are also products of mining and drilling. Still, it is no accident that the first person to write about civil disobedience as such, Thoreau, while not indigenous himself, did show an affinity for the use of the handmade bark canoe with native guides in *The Maine Woods*, as observed by John McPhee in his study of the survival of the birch bark canoe (1975). At one point in the narrative Thoreau expresses, “I made a faithful study of canoe-building, and I thought that I should like to serve an apprenticeship at that trade for one season, going into the woods for bark with my ‘boss,’ making the canoe there, and returning in it at last” (1896: 165-6). This is not to say that

Thoreau’s canoe journeys as such have been direct inspirations for today’s protestors; he is not known for them as he is for civil disobedience. But neither is it an accident that civil disobedience is deeply connected not just to the maintenance of natural materials but to their exercise in defense of the earth and the idea of its stewardship. At the same time, to argue that this is due primarily to Thoreau’s writing would also be to overlook the deep cultural influence and integrity of native and indigenous peoples in resisting extraction and the destruction of their world for profit, from Maine and the Arctic to the South Pacific, for centuries really.

This can erroneously be seen as resisting the modern world, or all things modern, but only because we who are raised with the Western worldview (and increasingly the industrial powers of East Asia) have conflated the idea of the modern with the industrial, which depends on raw resources to function by turning natural materials into wealth, and then equating wealth with improvement. To McPhee, though, “for canoe-making nothing modern is an improvement” (1975: 53) and that’s an important pause lest we equate everything 1147<sup>9</sup>. There is a limit to that, and the question to be asked is at what point and in what ways the modern ceases to be by definition an improvement, or in what ways the modern never has seen an improvement in the standard of living for those, as Klein points out, from whom labor is extracted or who are pushed aside, as social burdens and impediments to the generation of wealth (2014: 169).

So for those like McPhee and Thoreau, but even more widely and profoundly for native peoples, the idea of actual “improvement” is not measurable by purely economic indicators (about which there is disagreement anyway) but must be defined in other terms. I would suggest there are two ways this idea can be recognized. The first has to do with decent survival: respect for human life, but also equally the lives

9. American schoolchildren – I can’t speak for the rest of the world – are indoctrinated with the belief that things are always getting better, owing to the fact that rights are always expanding, and we recognize past mistakes (e.g. slavery, genocide of Native Americans, hunting to extinction, etc.) and now we know better than we used to. I put this in a footnote only because it speaks to the experience of one country and its educational ideology (whether or not that is in fact carried out in policy, or faces reaction) though not necessarily to the educational systems in the wider world.

of animals and even certain plants, for whom we as the human species uniquely have to exercise care or they will be lost. This improvement, then, is moving toward existence (co-existence, mutual survival) on the extraction-stewardship axis. Klein says these ideals involve “those things that most of us cherish above all – a decent standard of living, a measure future security, and our relationships with one another” (2014: 88). Earlier, a 1970s Ford Foundation-funded study of energy needs identified “first priority to the fields of medicine, education, the arts, and sciences, and to basic human needs such as decent housing, adequate nutrition, livable cities, a clean, attractive, healthy environment,” as Edward Abbey reported (1977: 185). In this line of thinking, “mutual assured destruction” is no improvement in human life – quite the opposite, though national security has been the paradigm we have all been effectively living under since the 1950s.

The second axis of a better life is an aesthetic one. Whether bark-canoe builders, carvers and islanders from Tonga or Vanuatu, or kayaktivists in the U.S. Northwest, all refer to the beauty of the protest experience. The Pacific Warriors protest, in particular, garnered admiring responses on social media in relation to the boatcraft themselves. But aesthetics are rarely defined in only one dimension. Even celebrating the beauty of the craft refers to such elements as the visual design, movement, functionality, traditionality, implicit knowledge embodied in the fabrication, skill in handicraft, seaworthiness and durability. The accompanying protest signs can be physically attractive or clever, sometimes humorous. At the same time, the vision of dozens or hundreds of craft together can form a collective beauty which is more than simply functional. The younger Bill Moyer (2015) speaks of how

It’s powerful to be on the water, where the collection of colorful kayaks creates a mosaic, a giant, floating piece of art. There’s the experience of people paddling together; there’s the opportunity to participate in nighttime actions with luminary objects attached to paddles; there’s the music – ranging from hip hop to Coastal Salish drumming – echoing off the waves; there’s the ability to witness people looking out for each other.

This is an aesthetics that transcends the individual object, including the process and the interplay between multiple actors and their vessels, appreciating one person’s craft contribution as well as the manifest glow of the community on the water together and the implicit beauty of those working together in the background to prepare for the event. This then becomes an aesthetics of the collective, and of the folk, a shared experience of individuals and cultures, working in community.

But the question of what the modern world will become is a nagging one. The paradigm of capitalism is that growth is essential, and unending. To this day our ruling paradigm is still that the economic health of a people can be best measured by the central defining factor of growth in Gross Domestic Product. Thus the policy, and specifically energy, choices governments have made over the past several decades prioritize economic growth over environmental stability (Klein 2014: 84-87). Especially in China and India, this has led to an increase in carbon emissions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, even after the scientific community recognized that a decrease is necessary for human survival (Klein 2014: 80). Growth and better conditions of living are not, in the long run, linked, nor are expansion and progress. Yet it is imperative to recognize as anthropologists that these are core, unquestioned (or seldom questioned) tenets in the society in which most of the world lives. The embodiment of these ideas are part of the human condition, but



they are cultural constructs, not empirical science. In fact the cultural worldview of cutting-edge climate scientists is now at odds with the worldview of governments, corporations, and most working people who need to put food on their tables and a roof over their heads – today, not twenty years from now. The nature of energy, including whether it is sustainable, clean, dependent upon mining or drilling, is the battleground of ideas and blueprints for the future. Hence the importance of kayaks and canoes, which have the power to block but which moreover depend on human power rather than extraction and combustion, fuel and exhaust.

Human society can, in fact, choose the economic system we want to live in, unlike the bodies and laws of nature we are born into. Though neatly dividing the two views into opposing camps – given that we all contain contradictions to some extent – this division between an economic worldview of sustainability, and an economic worldview of growth and progress, is a useful contrast in trying to understand how the battle to prevent catastrophic anthropogenic (which is to say, human-caused) climate change and mass extinction, including possibly that of our own species, will play out. These worldviews are culturally shaped, by us the folk as well as by corporate institutions of a much larger scale. Our cultural patterns of sustenance, production, consumption, and daily life are based on these belief systems though, in effect, circumscribed by a variety of factors and actors. The traditional indigenous view, expressed by Inuit elder Elijah Nowdlak in Zacharias Kunuk and Ian Mauro's film on indigenous knowledge and climate change (2010), is that you take from nature only what you need to survive, not, by implication, what you need to get rich. American essayist and poet Wendell Berry has articulated, in contrast, the extent to which economic dominion over the natural world has come to dominate our mindset when he writes that, "We have assumed increasingly over the last five hundred

years that nature is merely a supply of 'raw materials,' and that we may safely possess those materials merely by taking them" (Berry 2002).

Moreover, we are in danger of being so lost in consumption that we are little more than economic actors. While Bill McKibben, not only the author of such seminal works as *The End of Nature* but also the founder of 350.org as an organization to prevent climate change, has written about the extent to which we have become, starting in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, *homo economicus*, a being whose existence is defined by economic thought and practice, which separates us from other species that have come (and gone) before. While no one is purely an economic machine, the fact that the modern world conditions us to think that what makes the world modern is the fact that decisions – societal and individual – are primarily economic, as opposed to connected and life-sustaining. In an essay about Kerala, India, and the fact that it has roughly the same standard of living and life expectancy as Western industrialized countries, despite much lower *per capita* income and economic activity, McKibben (1995: 162-3) writes in defense of the cultural practices we engage in – practices reflective of our traditional folklife preferences – even when they are not economically either the most profitable or efficient:

Bake bread, say, or buy good bread from a baker we know, even though the same loaf would cost less at a supermarket. Knit, grow vegetables, play in a softball leagues, act in amateur plays or learn the violin... In fact most of us probably get our greatest satisfaction from such things. But the way we've set up our lives and the manner in which we worship convenience mean that we simultaneously practice all the environmentally and socially ruinous behavior of the modern, economic world. We ride our bikes for exercise<sup>10</sup>; but when we have any special place to go, we drive our cars. We look for bargains

10. In fact, around 9% of Americans canoe every year and 9% kayak, although the study does not suggest how much overlap there is (Coleman Company and Outdoor Foundation 2015).

on everything except that special loaf of bread, even if it means putting farmers out of business.

The issue of how to know we have improved human life and social relations then becomes much more complicated than just an economic calculation.

The “progress” fallacy becomes central at this point. The word “progressive” is a very tricky one, at least in the English-language context. It is a work that is almost impossible for Americans to define, particularly students. In the U.S. the term has come to represent the left-most end of the mainstream political spectrum over the past century or more, since what was called The Progressive Era, but how we actually define and measure “progress” remains unarticulated. The concept is part of their Americans’ anthropological cultural worldview in which they are so deeply steeped, they cannot step out of the own culture enough to define and analyze it. Overall, Western culture, particularly American culture, thrives on this idea of “progress,” of moving from one condition of being to another that is not only new, but better, and in a way that implies detachment from, or leaving behind, the past. Progress by definition implies moving further away from the state we were in before as opposed to regression or retrogression, so that in the case of technological progress, we are forever moving to a more sophisticated, and by implication, *complex* system of technology, from handmade, to industrial/mechanical, to post-industrial/electronic or digital. What is not implied or often understood is that this precludes the idea that progress can lead to more sophistication in the criteria of elegance, simplicity of design, efficiency, and particularly sustainability. Though we may be moving towards greater complexity in technology, we can also at the same time be moving towards more efficient and minimal use of natural resources, energy, and waste for expanded output. This becomes a key dichotomy.



Progress is getting *away from*, in our Western worldview, a discrete change, *not* in connecting to the continuity of generations. Progress has therefore become synonymous with consumer capitalism – extract it, build it better, buy it, use it, discard it, move on – with its emphasis on the new and therefore abandonment of the old. At the same time I believe in the communist model progress was also built upon an economic evolutionary model, getting away from economic systems and belief systems that were considered backward, reactionary, oppressive, unscientific – from feudalism to capitalism to socialism and then communism in the classic Marxist formation – in short, a “great leap forward” that implied making a break with past practice. Moving from the agrarian to the urban and centralized is also part of this, in both capitalist and socialist understandings of progress.

Also in the American context, since the 1900s, the meaning of the term “progressive” has become entrenched as a left-leaning social liberal, social reforms that stand for taking care of the poor and politically marginalized. This would be the very opposite of a “conservative” who wants to maintain the older social structures of 19<sup>th</sup> century and promote free-market capitalism coupled with a social conservatism that supports the old social orders, dominated by a religious worldview, and that circumscribes the liberated and equal powers of women, Blacks specifically, and gays and Lesbians. So when young people are asked to define “progressive,” they think of advances in technology and science, getting to a place with a lifestyle of greater ease and sophistication, faster transportation and communication, and broader social equality.

Implied in that without question in a capitalist-dominated world is economic growth and with that, the unquestioned assumption that life is getting better because as our technological knowledge expands, this gives us better tools to solve

social, health, and economic problems. The role that extraction plays, and especially the extraction of resources like oil that, once chemically altered through combustion, can never be returned or recycled to their previous state, is not questioned in the formulation of what is “progress.” Students and other Americans do not think of any social values that they are progressing *towards*, such as minimizing economic inequality, safeguarding the environment and protecting endangered species, giving equal opportunities to people of different genders, ethnicity, who were historically excluded, or any measurable criteria by which you can know how well you are progressing, such as life expectancy or literacy levels or availability of sanitation or eradication of diseases. And those are just human outcomes; that says nothing about a harmonious relationship with other, biologically diverse living beings, plants and animals and their well-being.

Progress, then, has become a motivation without a measurable goal. How do we know we’re progressing? It can be measured by distance (to the Moon, to the outer planets), or by production and accumulation of wealth, or perhaps eradication of disease. But it can also be measured by goals that are sustainable, that minimize disruption of natural cycles, that provide better quality of life for all of Earth’s beings. The spectre of catastrophic climate change has caused us to reassess which of those two paths towards progress we choose.

We cannot return to where we once were in terms of economies and scale. No one is calling for regressing, but rather moving forward to a society in which the challenges of a sustainable, satisfying life, when the world population is more than double what it was fifty years ago and less agrarian, more urban than ever in world history, have to be an anthropological and evolutionary problem of the most urgent order. But the understanding of time among agriculturalists, peasants, and pastoralists – including many indigenous

people who have resisted the spread of both capitalism and colonialism – is that life is cyclical based on the seasons and the return and regeneration of crops, usually products of the plant kingdom, and the animals that pollinate them. For thousands of years humans have labored under known or expected cycles with the faith that next growing season will be recognizably similar to this year’s and those in the past.

But two interlocked conditions have intervened and thrown the generally predictable cycles of agricultural life into uncertainty. The first is, as I have mentioned, the unquestioning necessity for capitalism to have growth in order to remain viable. The writer Edward Abbey (1977: 183), a critic of extraction long before that stance was popular, wrote

The assumption is that we must continue down the road of never-ending economic expansion, toward an ever-grosser gross national product... “Expand or expire” is the essence of this attitude, exemplified in the words of President Ford... “Man is not built to vegetate or stagnate – we like to progress – zero-growth environmental policies fly in the face of human nature.”

But a child can perceive that on our finite planet there must be, sooner or later, a limit to quantitative growth.

Thus capitalism itself is not cyclical, except perhaps on small farms. It depends on expansion and on processes that are neither cyclical nor reversible: mining from the ground, combustion to run engines, shaping raw materials into tools and artifacts that cannot be put back into the earth once they have been altered. The Industrial Revolution was built on that premise, and the promise of transformation of raw materials into sources of wealth. But, once underway, few people even dreamed of a way to turn that around, even to leave coal and oil in the ground where they are.

The subsistence cycle was broken, from a system that regenerated itself with every

crop cycle, usually annual, and turned into a system that mandated linear growth that was purposeful and unidirectional. That was a change, not in human biology, but in human civilization more than 150 years ago, disrupting forever cycles of rural traditional life that had been “human nature” for thousands of years. Humanity has never been the same since. We went from an ecology of cycles and repetition, based really on astronomical factors that influence the seasons, to a system of growth and expansion with no return to the original, a deep shift in human organization and the workings of agriculture, an 8.000-10.000 year-old system of living and subsistence, changing just in the last two centuries to an industrial, manufacturing system that is not restricted by or to the cycles of nature and the seasons. Not only did the rift between the two systems widen, but more and more of the people whose lives and livelihoods are based on natural cycles crossed over paradigmatically to the culture of those whose lives become validated only in the service of growth (see also Thompson 1967).

The other change that will not be reversible in our lifetimes is the climate change provoked by that industrialization and the burning of carbon-based fuels. We may be able to bring the rate of emissions down (although Naomi Klein cites the work of several scientists and economists who suggest that it would take a monumental shift in planning and lifestyle, and indeed the world economic system, to accomplish this). In the meantime, as of this publication, farmers have already observed shifting climatic conditions and the impact upon crops. Even turning around the rate of emissions will take time before the effects on climate are slowed. Just as cycles have become replaced by proponents of linear growth, so have climate cycles and weather patterns become disrupted by the changes in the earth’s atmosphere. Like the big ships confronted in Baltimore or Newcastle harbor, they cannot be turned around immediately.

What kayaktivism accomplishes metaphorically, then, is to create a break in the association of progress with extraction, technology, and profit. Using dual symbols of craft on water – the means of transport on literally the flowing and sustaining requirement for all life on earth – kayaktivism asks us to think of motion and regeneration as life forces, and of creation over profit. For this message to take root requires a re-examination of the concept of progress and to ask what role there is for tradition on progress to a better life.

Kayaktivism is one of a number of activities that asks us to reframe tradition as an activity opposing the dominant economic model not because it survives from the past or is residual, to use Raymond Williams’ term (1977). Nor does it function as an “invented tradition” per Hobsbawm’s formulation, solidifying group allegiance, deferring to and thus reinforcing the legitimate authority of the state, and imparting among all the values of the state by demanding loyalty to state and, in the post-World Trade Organization era, corporation (Hobsbawm 1992: 9). Instead it draws its power from rebuilding severed temporal discontinuities – the disuse of meaningful technologies, artisanship, and artistry, or practice that had meaning beyond the generation of wealth, and abandonment of hand-power in transport – and creating new connections across space and borders through shared activities, communications, and the not incidental free flow of water and ideas. Moving towards a world in which continuity is again valued, including the continuous cycle of regeneration, life and death in the natural world, is progressive, as we also recognize and denounce the discontinuity inherent in the meaningless practice of extracting, purchasing, consuming, and discarding<sup>11</sup>. The former is progressive because it builds on accumulated knowledge leading to wisdom, while the latter is just replacement, a way of life that values the generation of wealth over (and at the expense of) a

11. In a 2011 newspaper interview, the folk musician, Martin Carthy, part of an English popular folk band known as “Steeleye Span” that starting in the late 1960s revived tunes and recorded them with more contemporary arrangements, defined tradition as being rooted and concerned with the continuity of life cycles. “I regard tradition as progressive,” he said. “A traditional song is a progressive force, because it is concerned with the continuity of things. ... You come from somewhere, ... I’m not interested in heritage – this stuff is alive, we must claim it, use it” (Vulliamy 2011).



more fulfilling existence for more living beings. After all to be fruitful – productive, creative – is a higher commandment than to accumulate wealth and consume. Oscar Wilde's famous definition of a cynic ("one who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing," from *Lady Windermere's Fan*) is fully realized in the extraction and exploitation of natural resources for energy. For generations our society led us to believe that to be modern is to understand and partake in economic activity and be a participant in the economic system, rather than understand the idea of *value*, which may in fact require the retreat from economic activity, as Thoreau demonstrated so well.

It is indeed this idea of economic growth that has been equated with progress, and still is the dominant marker of economic health of national and global economies. Without growth, we are in recession or depression, and the tax revenues needed to fund the common good dry up. It is that relationship between "progress" and "growth" that has been called into question by the sustainability and environmental movements. Given the dominance of the world capitalist system as the sole viable economic organizer since 1991, "growth" has thus become the *sine qua non* for measuring economic health and progress.

But the challenge from the environmental movement has been to look at the available resources on the planet, the ability to feed an expanding population, and the energy demands and use of non-renewable resources, in order to ask whether economic growth is environmentally sustainable and culturally desirable. To this movement, "progress" becomes a move towards a more sustainable future, in terms of economics, energy, and resources. It is wrong to say "back to" this lifestyle, because the nature of climate change and the urbanization of the world population, which is much larger than ever, are novel situations that have never existed before and thus call for new solutions in agriculture, diet, housing, and

of course energy. Ironically progress has to be a move towards a lifestyle closer to a more traditional, *cyclical* one, one more connected to the generations that came before and will follow. The dominant, urban culture has to move away from a time orientation that is linear, ending up at a different place from where we began when we hand things off to the next generation, toward the cyclical practice of time, handing off to the next generation in a way that they can continue the cycles of cultivation and sustenance that have safeguarded the people for generations. In short this is a way more similar to the lifestyles and worldviews of peasants and indigenous peoples, without the concept of "going back" to an imaginary lifestyle. The challenges of producing enough food alone will require significant problem-solving. I acknowledge, taking the long view, that this cyclical concept in the macro view of humankind is somewhat of an evolutionary heuristic, given that human agriculture originated only 8-10.000 years ago, and the cycle of human existence underwent another radical break around the time of the Fertile Crescent. That said, we must for our own survival abandon the manic need since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to burn and deplete fossil fuels such as coal and oil, non-renewable, single-use, non-cyclical, and involving non-reversible chemical reactions that leave a residue that effects all living beings. This is because the cycles of climate that have existed for hundreds of thousands of years, if not longer, have just within an astronomical moment become linear – or linear enough to provoke the sixth major extinction of life on Earth from which our species is unlikely to emerge.

Getting back to sustainable traditions, then, becomes the progressive option; or put another way, we have to move our linear conception of progress forward enough to engage it in a cyclical pattern of sustainability across generations to come. In this way, they were using elements that cannot truly be described as residual though they were traditional – traditional in the

progressive sense, I would argue, in that the intention is to connect the techniques of generations with those coming in the future. But this is at the same time, what Raymond Williams (1977) calls an emergent tradition. Its strength is in its imagination of new possibilities for culture and tradition and viewing tradition not as something static but as something, in fact, progressive. It is in this contradiction and conflict between the traditional, the imaginative (in the sense of imagining a more equitable and sustainable world), and the progressive, in turn returning to the cyclical and sustainable that a new expressive politics can emerge.

But unlike the technological optimism of the twentieth century, what those envisioning this new movement now realize is that it is going to take a kind of progression/return towards simpler – or perhaps a better term would be more elegant and aesthetic – technologies that is going to make this possible. It is not new machines that will make our lives more convenient, it is the new employment of reliable, energy-minimal technologies, including growing our own food, bicycling and walking (and paddling, when necessary, but hopefully not in floods), reducing our energy use and consumption and making sophisticated choices about which technology we have to use while lowering our so-called carbon footprint overall. McKibben (1995), for example, is a proponent of the Internet and mobile phone technologies, even conceding their energy demands, because the benefits of expanded and accessible communication

and the potential for organizing worldwide movements outweigh the energy spent by them. After all, these are not purely Luddite, anti-technological movements, rather movements to scale down the technology to the job at hand, and an attempt to take the means of production (and profit) away from disembodied, distant corporations and put them back into local hands – literally, hands, arms, legs, minds, all working, like paddlers, in tandem and with imagination.

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### III. Traditions on display





# Forging Folklore, Disrupting Archives: Curatorial Explorations between Tradition and Innovation

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## ABSTRACT

This article describes how artists, scholars and curators have used folkloric collections and exhibitions as tools to explore the relationship between tradition and innovation. Contemporary art practice has seen a growing interest toward the use of folkloric material. With this in mind, in our curatorial work on the *Forging Folklore, Disrupting Archives* exhibition, we experiment with new methods of ethnographic representation. The article highlights the importance of animating folkloric and traditional objects through experimentation with collaborative, participatory and visual approaches.

## KEYWORDS

Curating, ethnography, folklore, creativity, archive, United Kingdom.

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## Introduction: Working and Reworking the Folkloric Material

The *Forging Folklore, Disrupting Archives* exhibition organised in 2014 at the Constance Howard Gallery in London brought together artists and anthropologists to encourage different areas of scholarly enquiry and curatorial practices; the aim was an enquiry into how the notion of “the folk,” its objects and stories, are archived and displayed

historically and in the present time. According to the Oxford Dictionary, to forge means to shape, to create something enduring, or to produce an imitation or a copy. The project was an attempt to think through the notions of forgery as a device to explore the complex spectrum between the traditional and the innovative. By moving away from notions of authentic copy, accurate representation or a master curatorial narrative, the project aimed to interrogate ways in which archives can be re-ordered and re-contextualised, and collections rejoined with their creative and everyday counterparts. The project was situated in the

practices of combining material exploration of folklore with curating while digging into archives and museum stores. Buchczyk, Nicolescu and Urdea were inspired by projects in which curators and contemporary artists have assembled and drawn on “traditional” material.

In recent years, the curatorial innovative reinterpretations of traditional material have been proliferating across Europe. For example, the permanent display *The Mechanisms of Collective Memory of Tito and Yugoslavia* at the Museum of Yugoslav History set up in 2015 in Belgrade offered an innovative way of interpreting museum collections, archive material and documentary video material, linking them to the present. Arkhipov's *Home-Made: Contemporary Russian Folk Artifacts*, published in 2006, explored contemporary Russian folk artefacts as utilitarian objects and the personal stories behind these collections. Perhaps one of the best known examples of contemporary artists drawing on and curating folk art practice in the UK has been the work of contemporary artists such as Grayson Perry, Jeremy Deller, and Alan Kane. In the 2006 project *The Charms of Lincolnshire* project he curated at Victoria Miro Gallery in London, Perry assembled historic items from Lincolnshire museums – embroidered samplers, threshing sticks, duck shooters, eel stangs, wax dolls, minutely stitched smocks. Deller and Kane's *Folk Archive* (2005) has been a collection and documentation of contemporary folk and popular art in the UK at the turn of the century, situated in the rich seam between art and anthropology. There was also David Littler's 2014 performance and public engagement work which combined his fascination with people, print, pattern, textiles, sound, music, folk, machines, collective-making, sampling, games, and gifting. He devised Yan Tan Tethera (2014) as a brand new English Folk Dance and Song performance for Cecil Sharp House, the home of the English Folk Dance and Song Society.

Increasingly, the interplay between tradition and innovation has been showcased by major institutions. The V&A exhibition in London,

*The Power of Making* (2011), presented new forms of lingerie made by Polish folk producers, and the *Extreme Crafts* (2007) exhibition at the Contemporary Art Center in Vilnius, featured work by Severija Incirauskaite-Kriauneviciene whose embroidered car doors used folk motifs on discarded junk. In Warsaw, the Zachęta Gallery in a 2016 exhibition, *Poland – a Country of Folklore?*, revisited the early decades of living in post-war Poland, telling a complex story about the centrally-fostered national folk culture and alternative artistic fascinations with folk-art motifs and their caricatures. In London, Tate Modern's *British Folk Art* exhibition challenged the distinctions between art and artefact, presenting folk art within an art historical context. The proliferation of such initiatives demonstrates a range of new opportunities stemming from innovative archival explorations, challenging the boundaries of tradition and creativity and reconnecting the seemingly traditional material with new work. *The Forging Folklore* project responded to this resurgence of interest in folkloric expressions to address the way in which folklore, through its “neutrality,” adaptability and efficacy, constitutes the nexus between people and the changing cultures, politics, practices, aesthetics and skills of the twenty-first century.



### **Situating Three Threads of Folkloric Forgeries**

The curatorial concept of *Forging Folklore, Disrupting Archives* arose from the pre-existing collaboration between Buchczyk, Nicolescu and Urdea. In 2008, Nicolescu started her doctoral research in Goldsmiths, University of London on the politics of display in the Romanian Peasant Museum and its predecessors. As a doctoral student, she also helped identify the provenience of two Romanian folk collections donated to Horniman Museum in London. Based on that preliminary research and outreach funding, Buchczyk and Urdea were appointed

to research these collections and organise an exhibition in the Horniman Museum, London. The Goldsmiths exhibition functioned in parallel to the *Revisiting Romania* exhibition at Horniman Museum (for a discussion of the exhibition, see Buchczyk 2015). A dialogic relationship was established between *Forging Folklore, Disrupting Archives* and the *Revisiting Romania* museum representations of folklore, allowing the group to explore multiple forgeries of folklore, and to interrogate how value travels not only through folkloric objects, but through the forms of assembling such objects into stores and archives. The authors' motivation for this exhibition came from exploring alternative ways of exhibiting "folklore" in a gallery, but also from juggling ideas of value, order and archival work, among different institutions, time-frames, disciplines, and last, but not least, curators.

For the *Forging Folklore, Disrupting Archives* exhibition, Buchczyk, Nicolescu and Urdea used two collections from Goldsmiths' Special Collections. The first one was the Balkan textile collection, where the three anthropologists found stitched and decorated blouses collected by UK-based artists in the 1970s and 1980s. This set of objects predominantly served as a handling collection used by Goldsmiths tutors in textile and practice-based courses. The second collection was made up of texts and images which belonged to Albert Lloyd, a self-taught ethnomusicologist, journalist and folk singer, who travelled to Romania, Bulgaria and Albania in the 1960s and 1970s. Lloyd's affiliation to communism in Britain allowed him access to folklore festivals, as well as to folklore specialists in these countries (for a detailed account of his life and work, see Arthur and English Folk Dance Song Society 2012). Through the parallel examination of these holdings, the project aimed to bring new life to the collections by digging into their past and inviting creative experimentation in response to the objects and the broader theme of Balkan folklore. This proliferation of ethnographic objects and archives, both in Horniman Museum and in Goldsmiths, revealed different approaches to

understanding and appropriating folklore. For the *Forging Folklore* exhibition, we decided to focus on three entangled threads. The following section of the article presents the three key curatorial directions in more detail, along with the presented work and the conceptual underpinnings of the multiple forgeries presented in the exhibition space.



### First Thread: Objects of Value

Urdea's display was prompted by her fieldwork in Romania, in 2011, where she was researching the origins of the Romanian ethnographic collection at the Horniman Museum. At the time when it arrived in London, in 1955, the collection was considered to be representative of the "folk art of Romania." Using theoretical perspectives on the social life of objects (Appadurai 1988) that have determined a turn in the museological understanding of artefacts, Urdea visited villages where these objects were made, in the hope that she would reconnect them with the families of the people who made, used and eventually sold them or gave them to the museum. Although only two of the objects found their family, her fieldwork revealed more and more layers accruing onto the objects whose social life she sought to illustrate. The research made her reconsider the quest for the path of an object all the way to its origins, which the new museological turn proposed (Thomas 1991, Peers and Brown 2003), as well as the politics behind the "authenticity" label demanded by museums (Starn 2002).

On her return, Urdea found herself in possession of her own folk collection, made up of gifts from some of her interviewees, or of objects that she had felt compelled to buy. Each of them mediated different relationships with the people involved in her research. At first glance, a curator of ethnographic objects – in Britain or in Romania – would have qualified her collection as inconsistent and not particularly valuable. Indeed one British textile specialist put it to her that one of the shirts



she had received as a present from a village may have some “personal value,” but little else beyond that. Ethnographic museums such as the Horniman Museum had little interest in the items, which were either duplicates of what the museum already had in their stores, or were considered unrepresentative of Romanian traditional crafts. From the point of view of the museum in Britain, value was measured as authenticity,<sup>1</sup> but also intricacy of labour that produced them, as well as personal attachment of the giver (Joy 2016). Despite the claims of rationality and modernity of the museum as institution, the way value is ascribed and produced (Foucault 1986) by the museum raises questions on the politics of archives and collections.

The objects that Urdea had brought with her – a few woven bags, two frocks, a few overskirts (*catrință*) and a few wall hangings (*ștergar*) – were not hers in the same way as if they had been bought from the market. Indeed anthropologists have long been debating over the nature of the gift, which incorporates a part of the giver, and which is never an object entirely possessed (Mauss 1990, Weiner 1992, Strathern 1988). This way, the gift places an obligation and a responsibility on the receiver to reciprocate. In some cases, the gift cannot and must not be returned in its entirety – instead the receiver remains with a debt that can never be repaid (Graeber 2009). The intricacy of the gift meant that the objects in Urdea’s collection were more in suspension, rather than in her full possession. Urdea knew many of the givers would have liked to see their objects on display in London. This is where her intention to do an exhibition started, from objects whose former possessors were proud of, but whose value and presence in a museum was put into question.

Institutional settings change the meanings of objects, and add layers to their social life. Stewart (1984) comments on the distinction between collection and the souvenir, noting that only the latter maintains connections to the time and place where it was found. Whereas the collection makes sense as a whole, the object loses its historical traces. Urdea decided to link up the objects she had with

ones from two other personal collections that had become part of institutional collections, the Lloyd collection and the Goldsmiths Textile collection. She wanted to bring to surface biographic details of the object owners, along with various symbolic uses of “folklore” in Britain and Romania<sup>2</sup>.

### *Lloyd’s Collection*

Goldsmiths’ Special Collections hosts part of Bert Lloyd’s impressive collection folklore material from various parts of the world, especially from countries in Eastern Europe. In the interwar period, Lloyd’s interest in British folklore went hand in hand with his political affiliation to the Communist Party, fuelled by his working class background, and his early experience of poverty and unemployment. His declared engagement with communism was possibly what encouraged him to travel and study the folklore of Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Albania. We can speculate that it also facilitated close and long-standing connections to these countries, demonstrated by the wealth of material meticulously kept in his archive.

The Romanian part of the collection comprises books, sound recordings, photography, correspondence with Romanian folklorists, and many carefully organized newspaper cuttings. In post-war Britain, Lloyd was part of the resurgence of folk music as a popular genre. In industrial parts of the country, Working Men’s Clubs, where Lloyd himself performed, were places of recreation for the community, where talented members would often perform local folk music. To Lloyd, songs sang together in the working men’s clubs of the country spoke of the everyday life of working class people and had the potential to raise class consciousness.

Judging by Lloyd’s archive, we could speculate that, in Romania, he was interested in a similar institution, namely the House of Culture. These places also hosted folklore performances – but of a different kind. The Romanian counterparts were places run entirely by the Communist Party,

1. The term is used to evaluate different aspects at different times. See Urdea 2015.

2. The notion of “folklore” has a complex history in Romania, where the term was heavily employed during the communist period. It referred to what was considered artful and aesthetically pleasing in the world of peasants. It entails a separation between the pre-modern, peasant time and the modern period (see Kaneff 2004).



and their declared purpose was first and foremost communist propaganda. Folklore performances played a central role, as the ideologues made efforts to merge national culture with communist ideology (Verderey 1995). The mix of politics and folklore resulted in something very different from the grass-roots clubs in Britain. Having been a 90% agrarian country before the war, Romania industrialized at extremely high speed with the start of the socialist period (Roberts 1951). The peasants had little choice but to become workers, and the state had a declared intention to use elements of local culture in order to plant the seed of the New Man, equipped with a communist consciousness (Mihăilescu 2008).



Map of Romania representing the “musical life” of the Romanian Popular Republic in 1959, found in Lloyd’s archive at Goldsmiths Special Collections. It illustrates places of traditional song, institutions developed during the communist period that encouraged folkloric music, as well as spaces for performance. Courtesy of Constance Howard Gallery.

Folklore came to incorporate only certain aspects of the local culture, and was used to support the modern communist state with houses of culture playing a crucial role. In these places, the ideology activists would educate the peasants in the spirit of communism, but at the same time bring them information of interest about agriculture, about their work, as well as entertainment (films, organized games). They usually had a library attached to them; they hosted exhibitions; a radio and later on a television set were also available<sup>3</sup>.

Subversion of any kind did not seem possible in these places. Meanwhile, Romanian ethnographers were silently rejecting the state-

orchestrated folklore performed by the newly created working classes, in favour of a search for authenticity in the less modern parts of the country, such as Maramureş region (see Urdea 2015). But where was Bert Lloyd in this silent power struggle? Was he aware of it? In the 1960s and 1970s, Lloyd managed to record and film various rituals in Romanian regions, he followed in the footsteps of Bartok<sup>4</sup> to the remote villages of Pădureni, he was part of judging juries at Romanian folk festivals, and he published articles on Romanian folklore. It seems that everywhere he went, he indiscriminately picked up material on everything to do with Romanian folklore music, whether recorded by professional singers, or sung at funerals on a dirt road, or performed by amateur groups of workers in the towns’ communist houses of culture. Did the “authentic traditions” matter to him any more than the performed folklore? Or did this distinction not exist for him?

Urdea was interested in the incongruity between village culture and performed folklore, which made its way into Lloyd’s archive. She chose to display images from the folklore performances in which Lloyd was, presumably, part of the jury. These images were displayed next to photographs that Urdea took during her own fieldwork of folklore performers who appeared on folklore-dedicated TV channels in 2015. These images comment on the distinctions between authenticity and performance, between rurality and modernity.

### *In and Out of the Communist Sphere*

The three authors of the exhibition looked out for the things which, during the Cold War, allowed movement between what was considered to be two distinctive worlds: that of communism and that of capitalism. Urdea decided to display some of the maps found in Lloyd’s collection, illustrating the activity of the working people in communist Romania. One of the maps she found was populated by various objects, symbols of the people’s labour in various parts of the country. Another

3. See Yurchak (2005) and Grant (2011) for more about houses of culture in the Soviet Union.

4. The Hungarian composer travelled through villages in Banat, Transylvania and Hungary in search of inspiration for his music at the turn of the twentieth century.



one showed leisure activities and featured shepherds, grapevines and couples in folk attire alongside activities such as skiing or enjoying health spas. The maps illustrated the modern project of socialism, the necessity to know the territory and to inscribe the new ideology onto the landscape, down to benign leisure activities. But there was something else to them: bright colours and light-heartedness, the wealth of material goods, or the map key, written in English, telling about the Republic's "cultural, scientific and sports exchanges." All these spoke not so much of the communist project, but of the optimism of the 1960s, on both sides of the Iron Curtain. This supports Buck-Morss' idea (2002) that post-war modernity had common features on both sides of the Iron Curtain.



Dollar Shop in the gallery space.  
Courtesy of Constance Howard Gallery

Folklore and goods permeated the boundary between communist and capitalist countries. Lloyd had been lured by Romania's folklore, as well as its communism. Yet he must certainly have got the point that certain things of the capitalist world attracted the people living in communist countries. After a collaboration with Tiberiu Alexandrescu on a book publication, the Romanian folklorist writes to Lloyd saying that, instead of his due fee, he would rather have a few English goods sent to him and his family. The tone of the letter exposes the close relationship that he and Bert Lloyd had. Alexandrescu sends a precise list of items of clothing, for each member of the family, including details of material, colour, and cut. It was down to Lloyd to shop for them. Folk items travelled in opposite direction. Two

Romanian blouses, currently in the Constance Howard textile collection, had been bought in the "Dollar Shop" in 1979 by Diane Keay, a traveller to Romania who was interested in folk attire. This movement of commodities across the Iron Curtain – folk objects from Romania to Britain, clothes made from modern fabrics from Britain to Romania – shows that the borders were, at times, porous. The blouses were produced in one of the specialized workshops in the country, to become commodities that were stocked in the Dollar Shops, which only sold goods to foreigners. There, foreign currency was exchanged for "folklore." This ability of "folklore" to act as a form of currency was also picked up by Buchczyk, who explored the journey of folk patterns to high street shops (see below).

### *Fieldwork Objects*

Urdea's research project in Romania involved seeking the relatives of the people who made the objects at the Horniman around the 1950s, when most of them were collected. Urdea chose to restrict her search to items of dress from a few villages. At the same time, she wanted to see how the counterparts of the objects in the Horniman collection had evolved *in situ*. Urdea used these textiles as a comment to the kind of performed folklore that comprises Lloyd's archive.

One of the items that she chose to put on display had been made by an accomplished craftswoman from the village of Soveja, in Vrancea: a woven bag made that year for the crafts market. During the 1970s and 1980s, the craftswoman participated in the Song to Romania festival displaying her folk art, and creating and reciting folk poetry. The festival allowed people like her to win fame and be celebrated as carriers of the Romanian national ethos. More recently, she felt that her art was being dismissed – she was no longer invited to museums and fairs. She hoped that meeting the anthropologist might promote her work in Bucharest or beyond. Although unused, the woven bag seemed to have a rich biography which made it unwanted by current

museum specialists in Britain and Romania.

The shirt of Maria G., from the hamlet of Muncei, in Vrancea was another object on display. In 1955 her husband, Vasile, sold a cloak, a pair of felt trousers and a fur hat to a museum specialist, and the objects eventually ended up in the Horniman Museum. Urdea was lucky to meet his daughter, Maricica, who had recently become a grandmother. By then both Maricica's parents had died. Her mother had passed away recently and was very much on her mind, which is why she was struck by the visit of an anthropologist asking about things that had been made by her mother, and worn by her father. As the three objects were in the Horniman Museum, Maricica offered the anthropologist a fourth object – the blouse. The shirt was made before the war, of hemp and cotton cloth woven by Maria Ghinea, and has sparse “golden” and “silver” threads and rusty metallic sequins which give away the age of the shirt. The anthropologist took the shirt, but was left wondering why she received the gift: Was it the emotion of the encounter and conversation? Was it Maricica's intention to put her mother's dress next to her father's objects in the museum? Was it so because she (wrongly) believed that Urdea was a specialist in textiles, and would appreciate it? The Horniman showed no interest in the blouse – after all, they had other ones from that region. And the anthropologist was not ready to give it up to the museum stores either. Nor could she wear it. It was an object in suspense. Urdea believed that putting it on display and telling its story may help find its place.

Appadurai and Kopytoff's notion of the “biography of an object” tells about objects changing meaning as they move from one place to another, as they change owner, or as they move from being inalienable on to becoming commodities and back again. Yet there are moments of “suspense” in this biography, when an object cannot find its new function or meaning, or when relationships to it are reconfigured. Similarly to Maricica's shirt, the objects at the Horniman museum were also placed “in suspense” for the duration of the fieldwork, when new connections were

being established, and meanings were about to change as a new display was being prepared. The display of Maricica's shirt at the Constance Howard Gallery revealed one such connection between two “suspended” objects.

Another shirt on display was made in the same village, sometime in the 1970s. In the 1960s and 1970s, in Vrâncioaia, people were still wearing clothes that looked like traditional attire. As the country modernized after WWII, there was no longer time to make fibre out of hemp and weave the fabric at home. The heavy metallic thread, so highly appreciated before the war, had become unavailable. Other synthetic fibres and soft, lightweight materials could be bought in the shops, and people preferred them to the old, heavy ones, made in the household. More flexible materials and threads meant a change in the pattern, and, in many cases, made the work easier – though no less complex. These “modern” shirts are usually rejected by museums, who do not consider them valuable or authentic.

Although they may look the same as the “folk art” or “peasant objects” on display in ethnographic museums in Romania



Urdea's personal collection and fieldwork photographs.  
Courtesy of Constance Howard Gallery.

and Britain, Urdea's items had their value questioned in the gallery space because of their biographies. To the ethnographic museum, it all hangs on what kind of image of the “source community” these stories evoke. Urdea's aim was to disrupt the totalizing image of the “source of the object” that museum collections seek to evoke. Further on, Nicolescu's installation sought to disrupt the effect the institutional collection has on the object.

## Second Thread: On the Archive's Fabric: Folklore and the Politics of Neutrality

The second thread in this curatorial project is inspired by the many changing political contexts items in archives live through. Nicolescu's piece in the exhibition takes the form of an installation of a tablecloth patched and pieced together from photographed fragments of documents which are included in Albert Lloyd's archive to be found in Goldsmiths' Special Collections. This archive contains proceedings from conferences, programs of folklore festivals, pages from newspapers, propaganda images collected by the self-trained ethnomusicologist Albert Lloyd in the 1960s and 1970s during his trips to Albania, Bulgaria and Romania. However, Nicolescu argues that Lloyd's archive hosted in Goldsmiths is not only the outcome of an eager collector, in the person of Albert Lloyd,



Tablecloth patched and pieced together from photographed fragments of documents which are included in Albert Lloyd's archive in Goldsmiths' Special Collections.  
Photo credit: Gabriela Nicolescu.

but also of an eager producer of paperwork and books related to folklore events during communist Romania: the communist state and its many institutions producing and distributing folklore materials.

By taking pictures of these archival documents, Nicolescu adds yet another layer to the Lloyd's archive and contributes to the archontic power and the archivation mood (Derrida, 1998 [1995]). After photographing the archive, she cut the photographs into pieces and put them together in a random order, for visitors to pick up and put together making their own associations. The photographed

fragments printed on textile photographic paper were meant to point to two aspects. The first one was the materiality/ the fabric of the archives themselves. This aspect made both researchers and visitors entering Constance Howard Gallery reflect on the materiality of the archives, but also on the various layers of memory folkloric objects allude to. The second one is to encounter the archive with excitement, by giving to audiences the possibility to feel the archives close to their bodies, to touch them and recombine fragments of these archives.

This "hands on" installation of images of archival material uses the common base, or substrate, of a plastic tablecloth, a material item chosen precisely because of its ubiquitous presence within socialist and post-socialist day to day reality. This tablecloth in its every day materiality and use interferes with and disrupts the performative nature of the folklore objects on display. The tablecloth was indeed an item which could tell about the everyday customs of people living through socialism. It functioned as a support not only for plates and food, but also as a backcloth for conversations, tensions, caresses, memories, regrets, hopes, aspirations, and desires. Differently from it, stage costumes in socialist Romania, and all other folkloric items were not the reality of peasant life, but instead a reinterpretation of tradition for public audiences, made visible through propaganda circulated by communist cultural workers, such as museum professionals and folklorists. The reinterpretation they produced was constructed for purely political purposes and was very far from the everyday realities of peasants, whether they still lived in rural Romania or had become first-generation urbanites.

Stemming from her piece in this exhibition experiment, Nicolescu argues that the way we work with archives is by being attracted to details. Katy Ferguson (2008) believed that archives contain illuminating things, meaning those things that stir up the imagination, and provoke those who enter archives to make their own connections and dream. In her installation, Nicolescu adds to Ferguson's idea and suggests that, in order to find these

“shiny things,” the person who excavates an archive needs to perform a process of locating, noticing, and penetrating details, thus making a distinction between what is important or shiny and what it is not. Each individual and each époque regards different things as “shiny.” Through this piece Nicolescu invited the visitor to look at and to engage critically with her own selection, and, moreover, she challenged the visitors to reassemble the pieces of the archive as they like, to make their own meanings and connections on the tablecloth in front of them.

Once converted into photographic form, the visual and textual documents contained in Lloyd’s archive lend themselves to selecting and cutting more readily than they would as physical objects. In ethnographic museums, ethnographic objects function as fragments capable of indicating the presence of an ampler reality, a reality whose edges or limits are uncertain and open to questioning: seen like this ethnographic objects work like [filmic] “cuts.” In her book on exhibiting ethnographic objects, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett states that “the artfulness of the ethnographic object is an art of excision, of detachment, an art of the excerpt” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998: 19). Kirshenblatt-Gimblett asked herself where such cuts should be made. Should we exhibit the chair as an ethnographic object *per se*? Or the table near the chair, the cup on the table? Should we also put some tea in the cup? (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998: 19).

As an anthropologist and curator of this installation Nicolescu delves into Lloyd’s archive in an almost surrealist way, by theorising and experimenting with details. Her installation stems from her previous curatorial projects where she experimented with the contingency of ethnographic objects and from her desire to go beyond what is perceived to be the dullness and boring appearance of archives and of museum stores (Nicolescu 2016a). Archives have been sources of inspiration and creativity for Romanian folklorist Irina Nicolau, who worked at both the Romanian Peasant Museum and the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore (for a detailed

account of Nicolau’s work with archives, see Blidaru *et al.* 2003); for many European artists making art from bureaucracy (Spieker 2008);



Shiny things, cuts from the archive.  
Photo credit: Gabriela Nicolescu.

and, last but not least, for anthropologists (Tarlo 2003). Nicolescu’s piece both alludes to and investigates *new methodologies* combining curatorial expertise with research and drawing on a text-based and visual archive.

Nicolescu’s approach to collecting and exhibition making reminded of what James Clifford (1981) coined as ethnographic surrealism. Clifford says: The surrealist moment in ethnography is that moment in which the possibility of comparison exists in unmediated tension with sheer incongruity. This moment is repeatedly produced, and smoothed over, in the process of ethnographic comprehension (...) Collage brings to the work (here the ethnographic text) elements that continually proclaim their foreignness to the context of presentation. These elements – like a newspaper clip or a feather – are marked as real, as collected not invented by the artist-writer.



The procedures of (a) cutting out and (b) assemblage are, of course, basic to any semiotic message; here they are the message. (Clifford 1981: 563)

Based on this surrealist experience of thinking through collecting and exhibition making, Nicolescu built her piece in the exhibition through juxtaposition of valuable and not-valuable items. She favoured cutting out and assembling different found objects with objects from the official stores of the Special Collections in Goldsmiths. To paraphrase Clifford, her ethnographic surrealism avoided the portrayal of the notions of Romanian “folk” as organic wholes, or as unified, realistic worlds, where “found” evidence, not fully integrated into the logic of existing collections, disrupted archives, stores and existing taxonomies.

By putting such various understandings of the “folk” in incongruity, Nicolescu’s installation contributes to an understanding of folkloric objects as forgeries in themselves. In conversations with Alexandra Urdea whose work was presented above, Nicolescu argued that Albert Lloyd’s archives contained more than just “folkloric” data. The back-pages of newspaper material provided invaluable data. Images of people in their spare time, skiing or visiting Romanian sea-side resorts, proved to offer contrasting visualisations of communist Romania.

Looking at these two faces of archival materials, the front and back page of the newspapers, the desired and the implicit, one could witness how images of modern Romanians stood alongside images of Romanians dressed in “folkloric” clothes. This combination and juxtaposition of materialities and parallel realities of communism drew out disparities as well as commonalities, threads, frames and details, but also showed the important role folklore played in communist propaganda and in sustaining communist modernity in Eastern Europe. As Nicolescu argues elsewhere, “folklore and ethnography were essentially rethought by the new authorities in order to promote a formalized

study of objects, which was conceived in order to help convey communist ideology in new social and cultural spaces by focusing on objects and customs, and by brushing over the social dimension associated with ethnological or sociological research” (Nicolescu 2016b: 72). Folklore and ethnography were the only two social sciences accepted by the socialist regime, in a context when sociology was marginalized and ethnology carried fascistic connotations.

### *Textiles, Folklore and the Politics of Neutrality*

Through folklore festivals, exhibitions and the publication of books related to folklore, Romanian communist institutions established connections with multiple states around the world, including capitalist ones. Albert Lloyd was a communist living in the UK but who travelled often in socialist states for cultural exchanges. His dreams and aspirations encountered in socialist Romania a fertile ground. For a more detailed account of Bert Lloyd’s life, communist views and professional career see Arthur, D., & English Folk Dance Song Society (2012). We do not know how exactly Lloyd understood the proliferation of folkloric events in Romania, neither if he had a critical or appreciative eye towards the festivities he joined. What we do know is that under the umbrella of tradition and folklore, multiple such meetings occurred: the meeting between Albert Lloyd’s passion for worker’s songs and Romanian socialist folklore is just one of them.

By mobilising the language of tradition, and consequently of a-temporality and a-politicism, the Romanian state used folklore as a neutral space for discussions over communal values in a world divided by political ideals. I suggest that it is exactly this “neutrality” and availability to be filled with meaning that makes folklore extremely political<sup>5</sup>. Folklore was used equally for the purposes of fascist and communist regimes, not only in Romania, but also in other European contexts such as the French (Peer

5. I take the idea of neutrality as politics from The Pervert’s Guide to Ideology (2012), where Slavoj Žižek explains the principle of the empty centre which can be refilled by multiple contents. An illustrative example is represented by Beethoven’s Ode to Joy that has been used by several opposed political ideologies to sustain their various agenda.

1998) and the German (Bendix 2002) ones.

To build on the idea of the hidden and un-visible politicism of folklore, Nicolescu has integrated on top of the tablecloth archival installation a selection of textiles from everyday communist and so-called “post-communist” realities exhibited hanging on a rope. Patches of a gown, a dress, a handmade dolly and even fragments from old pyjamas hung on the wall close to the table. These fragments were collected by Nicolescu from people who lived during the communist regime in Romania (1947 – 1989) and who remembered the scarcity of clothes that could be bought from shops and the time invested by many of the women in making and patching the family clothes. The fragments of these day to day clothing items, kept by women as provision, pointed to a different type of the archontic power: a storage for need, close to the body, close to improvisation, one which was not made for stage costumes, nor for displaying, but to be worn indoors, inside the house. The everyday is again something that might be considered neutral – and yet it is not. By putting together these two parallel “neutralities,” folkloric outfits next to patches of everyday clothing, Nicolescu provoked the visitor to reflect on the identity of those who wore the folkloric outfits and on the purpose these outfits served. Alongside the Balkan textile collection existing in Goldsmiths, Nicolescu proposed a collection of fragments from the socialist period. The juxtaposition of images of folklore with textiles used by people during the last years of the socialist regime in Romania inspired reflections on materiality and representation and on how folklore was interpreted and used across the Iron Curtain by different institutions supporting various political regimes. What was the relation between the stage and the everyday realities? Who dressed up in folkloric blouses? Who sang ballads? Who danced on the stage of the Song to Romania festival?

Most of the fragments of text and images taken from Albert Lloyd’s folklore

archive show what Western visitors as Lloyd believed “custom” and “tradition” to be. At the same time, it is very possible that Lloyd was aware of the propaganda dimension of the entire effervescence of folkloric events and publications. It is also possible that his collection wanted us to reflect more on the importance of institutions such as the Institute of Folklore together with the Folk Art Museum (the predecessor of



Selection of socialist textiles for day to day clothing. Personal archive.  
Photo credit: Gabriela Nicolescu.

the Romanian Peasant Museum) played in socialist Romania. The installation of Nicolescu is built in opposition to Lloyds’ archives of propaganda material. Her installation shows that there were other clothes closer to the Romanian bodies – the everyday clothes to be found in shops, opened in all the villages and cities in the country, which were very different from the stage costumes. Who has the right over representation of the peasant and copyright over his objects is a theme which will be discussed also in the third thread.



### Third Thread: Forging and Reinventing Folklore

The third thread, curated by Buchczyk, addressed the ongoing process of reworking folk prototypes in creative practice and fashion. This component of the exhibition explored the theme of imitation, adaptation





and alteration of folk sources. In 2014, Buchczyk initiated an open call for graduate students of Goldsmiths College to delve into the Constance Howard collection, comprising textile art, technical samples, embroidery and dress from different regions across the world. The artists embarked on individual exploration of the archives, including the textile pieces, pattern books, folk collection catalogues and their own experiences with the folkloric.

The thread was embedded in the recent debates about tradition and innovation (Hallam and Ingold 2007, Makovsky 2011), critiques of fossilisation of the intangible (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004), and the problematic nature of authenticity (Jones 2010, Jones and Yarrow 2013, Kingston 1999, Reisinger and Steiner 2006). Art and craft have been entangled in classifications and hierarchies valorising creative novelty and repetitive execution (Adamson 2007, Ingold 2001). Often in museums, folkloric material is presented as staged authenticity and “mounted in a hermetic aesthetic space” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998: 408) as spectacle intended to evoke “the effect called the real world” (1998: 3). As the ideas of the authentic have been key to museum classifications, any modification or heterogeneity of artefacts have led to their exclusion from the exhibition space (Kingston 1999: 188).

This thread aimed to generate a holding space for the unconsidered innovative, the heterogeneous and the modified. The exhibition space intended to test critical approaches that have suggested that innovations are recontextualisations of practice (Demian and Wastell 2007: 119), and that creative processes and improvisational actions are socially embedded, intertwined with situated enactment and active regeneration (Hallam and Ingold 2007). The display was designed as a device to create a space for discontinuity, a visual inventive method to investigate the “ongoingness, relationality, contingency and sensuousness” of folkloric

production as a dimension of social life (Lury and Wakeford 2012: 2). As a result of the call, a selection of five pieces was shown on display.

The forging of folk prototypes is strongly embedded in the notion of archival gestures. The archival work could be explicit, conducted systematically through layers of categorised sources. It could also be accidental, resembling serendipitous encounters with folk objects or patterns that could fascinate and inspire. Gitanjali Pyndiah and Oana Pârvan worked with the theme of forging the archive. In their collaborative film, they asked how the archive could be transported into the future so we could engage with it in the present. Oana Pârvan was a Romanian researcher based in London, completing doctoral studies in Cultural Studies at Goldsmiths, working on the politics of representation surrounding contemporary instances of collective action. Gitanjali Pyndiah, a London based writer and doctoral research in cultural studies at Goldsmiths, was interested in decolonial aesthetics and performative historiographies.

For the *Forging Folklore* piece, Pârvan and Pyndiah worked on the intersection between folklore textiles and notions of femininity. In a mixed-media installation, combining sensory engagement with the patterns and archival images of peasant women at work, they reflected on the tensions between domesticity and work, and materiality and embodiment. The video installation offered a sensual and intimate interpretation of the traditional materials, such as a peasant shirt, old photographs and hypnotising images of the pattern book. The rhythm of the projection presenting the body in spontaneous movement through affective memories, often excluded from the archive, was a reflection on the seemingly static nature of archival holdings. The artwork produced by Pârvan and Pyndiah generated an alternative fluid encounter with the archival material, problematizing the institutionalised categories of

preserving folklore material. The intimate, often forgotten sensory encounters with the archival material told a story of the more intimate aspects of folklore that are being rendered invisible.

The dynamics of visibility and invisibility in the representation of folklore and femininity has also been explored in the intricate artwork created by Clare Stanhope, a doctoral researcher in Arts Practice and Learning at the Centre for The Arts and Learning, Goldsmiths College. In her conversation with the Constance Howard archive, Stanhope focused on the materiality of the South East European headscarf. The headscarf is both historical and contemporary, it holds a narrative that speaks of the political lived experiences of women in many countries, and it also linked to social narratives of working class women from Romanian peasants to Stanhope's mother covering her hair curlers with a headscarf. Currently, she reflected, the headscarf is worn for both fashion purposes and political and religious means; a contentious space that weaves many feminist debates into its threads.

Stanhope's research looked at the agency of matter as central to the process of art making, focusing on the agency of skin. Through investigations of how Western drawing structures permeate into the ideals and structures of viewed female perfection both in art and contemporary media, her research discussed how these ideals resonate and debilitate the everyday movements and ownership of the young female skin. In the context of her own research, working through the Constance Howard archival material, Stanhope saw the Romanian peasant clothing depicted in the catalogues of the archive as an evocation of notions of perfection and the time-consuming detail of the patterns on the garments. However, it was the inside or underneath of the garment that captured her imagination. The stitches held the traces of past histories, hinting to the story of the garments and the women who created them. The images

of headscarves worn by female Romanian peasants were of particular interest, and she began to see these items as a thread that links many women together, crossing cultural and social boundaries.

Stanhope's artwork for *Forging Folklore* drew on gendered traditions of stitch and also the skin as a shared female narrative. The piece also began to question the contemporary view of the female skin, and the encouraged desire for 'perfect skin', which pushes us to iron out any wrinkles and creases or imperfections. The "Glue Skin Headscarf" attempted to combine both histories and realities. The cast glue skins formed a material where the lines of the skin were similar to the lines in cloth. The translucency of the material allowed the visitors to look through the surface of the skin or headscarf. This way, as a second skin, a removed skin, a potentially forgotten skin, it aimed to reflect the mislaid narratives and skills of past generations. Inspired by the archival material, the artwork told a story of both the personal, affective notions of the headscarf<sup>6</sup> and the invisibility of female labour in the creation of intricate patterns and textile work in general (Daniels 1987, Dedeoglu 2014, Goddard 1996, King 1995).

Savitri Sastrawan's work was also embedded in a subjective experience and affective encounter with the Constance Howard collections. In her exploration, Sastrawan delved into the holdings of the South East European female shirts. Her examination of the patterns and stitches of the pieces held in the collection evoked memories of female garments in her homeland, Indonesia. Sastrawan, who had just completed her Masters in Global Arts at Goldsmiths, was interested in explorations of the variety of narratives within histories, geographies and the visual cultures that have existed in Bali and Indonesia. Reflecting on the affective connections between the Indonesian and European aesthetics of feminine clothing, she embarked on creating a prototype that could materialise these connections and render them relevant

6. For ethnographies of personal and affective uses of headscarf fashion in the UK and Turkey, see Tarlo 2010 and Crăciun 2017.

to the needs of contemporary women. Rather than using home-made materials and traditional skills, she utilised a mass-produced white T-shirt that evoked notions of casual and comfortable dress for women across the world. Her artwork, utilising



Part of Stanhope's display exploring pattern and female skin.  
Photo credit: Savitri Sastrawan.

both aesthetic traditions, was decorated in watercolour patterns and elaborate stitches that alluded to the fluidity of aesthetic demarcations. This way, the piece explored the connections between the Indonesian and European folk notions of traditional pattern as well as the relationships between the everyday and the celebratory functions of folk garments.

Rebecca Miller's work has been a reflexive exploration of the possibilities of creative reworking of the functions attached to traditional female garments. Her installation for the *Forging Folklore* exhibition revisited a project she had completed during an artist residency in Serbia in 2008. The original work was driven by a desire to rethink identity in relation to her Vlach roots. Miller was a doctoral researcher on the ACT program at Goldsmiths exploring the intersections of health and well-being, creativity and digital animation. For her contribution, Miller explored her personal Vlach heritage and art practice. For the 2008 artwork, Miller used the story of Serbians allegedly visiting Vlach women who were believed to possess shamanistic talents. Her work with traditional textiles woven by Vlach women sought to reconstruct

contemporary swimwear out of woven belts. Working with the pieces, she came across the tension embedded in the material and their intended functions. The textiles were scratchy and make the finished swimwear very uncomfortable.

For Miller, this illustrated constricting elements of traditional customs and strict codes of gender typical of traditional culture. Fabric that was functional for traditional folk costumes did not translate to construct a modern bikini meant to free the body. The dysfunctionality of the swimwear, Rebecca reflected in the explanatory exhibition panel, spoke of the clash of the old traditions and the rapid globalization of the world. In 2008, the swimwear was displayed in the trendiest storefront in Kučevo, Serbia, concurrently with the folk art festival. Women and men paraded by the storefront modelling traditional Vlach costume. Miller's plan to have models wearing the swimwear in the parade was deterred by warnings that it would be considered disrespectful, deviate from the traditional costume, and would be a violation of modesty and the female body. Her attempt to reconnect her heritage and contemporary art practice therefore turned out to be a site of friction and tension with values and notions of appropriateness.

Her poster reflecting on the Serbian project in the *Forging Folklore* display took on new layers of meaning. It was a reflection on working within an uninformed context and on double misappropriation. Vlach textile traditions were transgressed along with the artwork. The swimwear was kept by a curator to be presented in the 2009 exhibition "From the Periphery" at the Dom Omladine Museum, in Belgrade, Serbia, and has not been returned since. Miller's poster presented in London was a way of reclaiming authorship of the artwork as an evolving critique of the many layers of appropriation of traditional textiles, specifically via the textiles of the Vlach women.



Folklore-inspired T-shirt design by Sastrawan.  
Photo credit: Savitri Sastrawan.

Buchczyk's work reflected on these emerging contestations of appropriation and ownership of the folk patterns and forms. The folk pattern has long been used in creative practice and the fashion industry. Since Yves Saint Laurent's pioneering 1981 collection based on Matisse's painting *La Blouse Romaine*, Romanian folk themes have been a key part of haute couture and street fashion repertoires. Folk appropriations in fashion often tend to overlook the rich histories, values and broader contexts in which textiles are embedded. Folklore often appears as a set of visual citations, a renewable source in the public domain to be drawn from. These appropriations are not equal or value free. At the outset of the exhibition, Buchczyk contacted the press offices of various fashion houses regarding the use of images from their collection in the *Forging Folklore* exhibition. She was refused on copyright grounds but also told she would be able to use them if she were a fashion blogger. The only possibility of display was related to a potential commercial

benefit for the fashion brand. Her work, by presenting these illegal images, reflected on these contradictions and ambiguities of ownership, copyright, and transmutation of design and form. Her installation within the cut-and-paste pattern sheet sought to map the threads of circulation, aspiration, and forgery.

The installation has also traced the complex stories and affective qualities related to the pattern sheets and catalogues. In the 1980s, Goldsmiths acquired several pattern books and textile pieces to be used in the College's teaching collection, often in the fashion department. Most of these patterns were valued by their "folkloric" quality. In the same period, East European women strived to be fashionable, buying Western glossy magazines, trying to get hold of different patterns and stitching together clothes in a modern style. Just as in Urdea's objects travelling across the Iron Curtain, Buchczyk's installation looked at the intersecting trajectories of patterns – some travelling East, others being sent West. The installation therefore juxtaposed the Balkan pattern books from Goldsmiths with the Western pattern books obtained by the East European women. In this context, one of the exhibited objects was a Burda Style magazine issue belonging to Buchczyk's grandmother who, like many East European women, forged her desired fashion style with her own hands. Under martial law in Poland in 1981, clandestine fashion press was sent with food packages from West Germany. Under socialism, just as several other women in the region, Buchczyk's grandmother sourced design ideas, designs, materials and tools from the West. Many of their fashion desires were situated on the other side of the Iron Curtain (Bartlett 2010). The possession of the pattern sheet was therefore a sign of their power and individual autonomy. In Buchczyk's work, the composition of the Balkan pattern book, the Burda pattern sheet and the illicit images of catwalk models wearing folklore-inspired clothes aimed to demonstrate the different formulations of





Buchczyk's poster illustrating fashion appropriation.  
Photo credit: Savitri Sastrawan.

taste, ownership, appropriation, innovation, and traditional skill.

The contributions by Buchczyk, Miller, Pârvan, Pyndiah, Sastrawan and Stanhope demonstrated the ways in which the folk prototype could trigger several situated enactments and processes of active regeneration. Each traditional thing, be it object, material or pattern, gathered around itself a different constellation of values and creative directions. By showcasing these discontinuities and potentialities of the folkloric archive, the artists and researchers showed that the folkloric does not occupy a fixed position between the traditional and innovative. Instead, it tells us about the continuities and discontinuities of social life, relationality of material culture and the

significance of sensory entanglements with archival material.

### *Three Ways of Forging the Archive*

The *Forging Folklore, Disrupting Archives* exhibition project used the concept of forgery to question the relation between folkloric objects, the archive and belonging. By using the notion of “forgery”, it attempted to move away from the question of “authenticity” – a term that has a traceable political charge in the Balkans and elsewhere. Instead, “forgery” allowed to explore “folklore” in its materiality, and to bring to the fore the kinds of relationships that the material mediated. The three threads were ways to demonstrate the multiplicity of narratives emerging from reconnections with the “traditional.”

The first curatorial thread, explored the forgery of folklore as a means to investigate judgements of value. Urdea used her own collection to explore the anthropological notion of gift and the relationships that objects mediate. Her collection of objects was also a collection of biographies, which did not always sit well together. To display them was also her attempt to resolve their incongruous stories. Perhaps the role of the public gallery after all is not accurate representation, but revealing unresolved stories and objects. Much like Nicolescu's work with the archive, Urdea found that each collection contains elements that disrupt its potentially totalizing narrative. To further Kopytoff's point (1988), biographies – of people and of objects – were useful in this respect. Such points of rupture could help re-write parts of the post-war social history, from the vantage point of folk items, their collectors, and the institutions involved in safeguarding them.

The second thread was conceptualised as a practice of digging into folklore's ideology. Nicolescu's exploration of Albert Lloyd's archives in Goldsmiths allowed to investigate the connection between communism (the “real-existing” or the ideological one) and folklore. In situating Lloyd's folkloric archives in the UK, she acknowledged a bureaucratic

complementarity (or meeting place) between Romania and the UK. Her installation prompted to personal interpretation of archives, but also to how folklore is associated to political “neutrality,” despite its use by fascist, communist, and liberal regimes.

The third thread into artistic revisions and appropriations of folklore explored the possibilities of forgery stemming from artistic encounters with the collection. The works presented in this part of the exhibition aimed to recreate folk prototypes to explore the possibilities and limits of artistic engagement with the traditional. For the artists and researchers, traditional patterns and objects generated different trajectories, connections and points of departure. The thread created a critical space to investigate the forked paths of folkloric material and to imagine its multiple modalities. This forgery invited for a closer examination of the lookalikes as well as the sources to unravel stories to reveal fragments and work with our own attachments and misconceptions. By forging folklore the thread was conceptualised as an experiment in probing what kind of possible futures could be imagined for, and with, traditional material (Basu and Macdonald 2007).

Urdea’s story of fieldwork research, Nicolescu’s surreal installation exploring the shifting emphases of archival gestures, and Buchczyk’s combination of artistic forgeries revealed the ways in which archives and collections could be reignited by innovative connections. By blurring the boundaries between tradition and innovation, the collection and the everyday, the archive and the art installation, this project uncovered the artificiality of these categories and visualised the potential of their hybrid futures.



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# A Sense of Past: Usages of Objects in Naïve Museology

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## ABSTRACT

This paper aims to establish a theoretical framework for the analysis of what I propose to call “naïve museums” by making reference to three actual instances of the phenomenon in contemporary Romania. All these naïve museums – as I venture to call them – are quasi-anonymous, private collections, mainly ethnological in character, set up out of passion by people few of whom have any specific expertise. What unites them is the enthusiasm and creativity they bring to the task of gathering, selecting and displaying objects they consider representative of the local culture. Thus, naïve museums must be approached from the perspective of their creators’ intuitive museological discourse, as they most often emphasise one particular type of local identity and are pervaded by their founders’ biography and tastes and strongly marked with their own creative touch.

In something of a contrast with the culturally composite character of the mainly rural areas where such museums are springing up in contemporary Romania, their creators configure a local identity that makes strong references to an undefined, remote and idyllic past. Taking as a guiding principle Eric Hobsbawm’s understanding of tradition as a social construct and practice of modernity, I will subject to analysis three such naïve museums by using the principle of the “syntax of objects,” a theoretical framework designed to reveal the meanings enshrined in these museums by their creators, themselves merely agents who constantly interpret and transform, through verbal and object discourse, both their local culture and *their* museums

## KEYWORDS

Naïve museums, syntax of objects, local identity, temporality, tradition.

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## Posing the question: how can a museum be naïve?

“Museum” and “naïve” are words that would seem at first sight to be mutually exclusive. All the more so when they are intended to evoke, in combination, a space that the European culture of recent centuries has accustomed us to conceive of as a “temple of the Muses,” an area by definition embodying high culture. One of the many definitions that can be given to a museum is that formulated by Eugene Dillenbourg in his attempt to reach the inner essence, the specific difference that a museum

embodies: “an exhibition is a physical environment designed for the experience of embedded knowledge” (Dillenbourg 2011: 13). This means that in a museum the space itself, its physical and dimensional givens, is significant; that the choice of objects, their juxtaposition, the angles at which they are arranged, the order, the built environment – all this contains a significance that the visitor comes to through experience (Dillenbourg 2011: *loc. cit.*). On the other hand, the word “naïve” evokes senses that are negative and seemingly unwelcome in the ensemble of positive qualities of a museum display, since a museum exists as the fruit of a process of distillation of concepts and wrestling with issues that has in view the generation of knowledge. Thus, to describe

1. Two of the museums studied in this article are to be found in areas that, although from the administrative point of view they belong to the urban environment, have features that tend to propel them towards its margins, in different ways. Agnita, where the House of Dolls Ethnographic Museum is located, is a town that has experienced economic decline in the period since the 1989 Romanian Revolution. The Schei neighbourhood of Braşov, where we find the Museum in the Attic, has over the centuries had a marginal status in the multi-ethnic melting pot of that city, because it preserved a homogeneous Romanian identity in a region that historically extended to Romanians no more than toleration.

2. "A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment." (Definition according to the ICOM Statutes, adopted by the 22nd General Assembly in Vienna, Austria on August 24th, 2007, available at <http://icom.museum/the-vision/museum-definition/>, last consulted on July 31st, 2017).

3. My translation.

a cultural phenomenon by putting together these two words is likely to give rise to wry looks and raised eyebrows, especially if the person reacting is an authority and of high status. And yet a museum can be naïve. All you need is a different conceptualisation, another way of viewing it, and you can grasp that the term "naïve" is being used not to indicate the absence of value but rather to give a name to a form of artistic expression that does not keep step either with the time period in which it is produced, or with an artistic tradition that has been fixed ever since antiquity, or with the expectations and demands of elites. Such a view cannot but be a fresh one.

The examination I am proposing is directed towards a cultural phenomenon more and more frequently encountered in Romania during the past few decades, chiefly in the rural environment and in peripheral areas of towns<sup>1</sup>: quasi-anonymous private collections, preponderantly ethnographic in character, that their creators call "museums". These have been put together by people of different levels of culture and education, lacking any experience of museum work but united by the enthusiasm and creativity they put into the effort of collecting, categorising and arranging – in ways and tonalities that can be entirely unexpected – objects that they regard as representative of their own cultural identity. The collections are housed either in premises that they own or, more rarely, in buildings provided by the local authorities. As a consequence of an intuitive grasp of how to proceed, of simply not asking themselves certain questions and of having limited practical means at their disposal, such extremely lively cultural spaces do not even consider trying to meet the strict requirements of such definitions as that given to museums by the International Council of Museums<sup>2</sup>. First hosts and then guides, their creators are more eager to preserve than to conserve, to take care of objects than to restore them, to display than to explain, to share than to educate.

Naïve museums can therefore be seen as variants, with a strong affective touch, of classic museums that conform to the already-standard definitions. However, they do not lack any of their essential features – even when they are not fully aware of them – but simply choose a different route to embody them, the route of intuition. Or, in the words of Kenneth Hudson as cited by Thierry Bonnot in a work devoted to attachment to objects, they belong to the category of single-parent museums, "where the charm counts for everything and the rules for almost nothing" (Hudson *via* Bonnot 2014: 106)<sup>3</sup>. All the same, in the spontaneity and variety that characterise them, these cultural spaces have an expressive and community cohesion potential that merit the attention of specialists – rather than their being consigned to official obscurity. In fact, as cultural phenomena that defy definition and exist in the debated area of a "between," they are in need of some conceptualising and defining if they are to be made accessible to research.

In proposing that they be grouped together under the heading of "naïve museums," I am retaining the word "museum" in my definition out of a desire for an emic attitude towards the cultural phenomenon under investigation, involving looking at these museums together with their creators, with the purpose of seeking to understand their spontaneous action in the very personal tonalities of the discourse that envelops it. At the same time, I add the word "naïve" – emptied of any value judgment – not in order to push it to the bottom of a hierarchy in which it would not even find a place, but in order to underline its candour. In order to define its theoretical boundaries and position it deliberately in an area of freedom of expression, of fresh, natural action, of spontaneously displayed feelings and of involuntary expressiveness. The tension between the terms we started off with – "museum" and "naïve" – thus subsides into agreement about a definition. Yet a little of the initial contradiction



survives to prefigure the emergence of the subject of our study in an area that lies off the beaten track and outside the realm of customary meanings, along with the cultural potential that flows from the meeting of opposites.

There is an inherent ambiguity in the naïve museum, due to the tensions that exist between it and the classic, institutional museum; these issue from the resemblances and borrowings that show it is making a cultured reference, when these encounter a freshness of expression that pays little attention to rules. The profile of a naïve museum becomes all the more individualised and hard to categorise to the extent to which its creator's personal stamp is stronger. In a stage setting of identity in which, as Oana Mateescu underlines, "the owner is an intrinsic part of the installation" (Mateescu 2009: 54), the interpenetration between their personal biography and the objects makes the collection a whole and gives it cohesion, even though there is no rigid classification system (Mateescu 2009: *loc. cit.*). In order to find room for the wide range of forms of expression and to discover a common thread that runs through them, it makes sense to resort in the first place to looking at a small number of examples that may illuminate what the naïve museum has and does not have, to bring us a step closer to understanding what it is.

The naïve museum does not operate within an institutional (local, county or national) framework and in most cases is not even dependent on financial or logistical support from any institutions. The setting up of a naïve museum is not grounded on curatorial expertise or backed by specialist studies in the area of museography or patrimony but is characterised by the non-raising of issues of this kind. In practical terms, and this too from a lack of expertise and resources – financial, logistical and regarding information – the naïve museum does not possess the infrastructure that is the order of the day in an institutional museum, that is, appropriate conditions

for the conservation and protection of its collections. Finally, it does not have behind it a range of coherent public policies, nor is it generally given visibility by means of strategies designed to promote it or make it part of a regular tourist itinerary. If it does have a Facebook profile or a website<sup>4</sup>, these follow the same intuitive line that informs the display itself.

The naïve museum starts from a powerful desire for personal or community self-representation that is sometimes poorly focused in the sense that there is not always any clear idea of who its public will be. The naïve museum demonstrates an effervescent discourse, in terms both of associations between objects and of the narrative that presents them, translates them and interprets them for the visitor, along with great spontaneity of representation. Both of these traits flow from the absence of the constraints and self-criticism that an academic approach to the issue would have imposed, as may be seen in the following pages in which I give an analysis of the three such museums at which I have carried out fieldwork. The naïve museum is a cultural phenomenon that is spontaneous, organic and endogenous, with a discourse directed on the one hand at an otherness whose contours are frequently diffuse<sup>5</sup> and on the other hand at itself, thus reinforcing in a circular way a particular feeling about identity. Finally, the naïve museum flows from a passion for collecting – most often ethnographic in nature – and attempts through objects to preserve and transmit customs, crafts, traditions and ways of life whose disappearance or alteration is felt as an imminent threat. However, the criteria that underlie the choice and arrangement of objects are either affective ones or have more to do with taste and preferences than with any specialist scheme, since they are in the final analysis an unsystematic attempt to preserve cultural identity and memory. This is the source of the unexpected inclusions of objects and the "accidents" in the representation that give the naïve museum

4. See the profiles of Florin Filipescu and Mircea Drăgan and the website [www.casacupapusi.ro](http://www.casacupapusi.ro).

its colour and strongly personal stamp and make it a deposit of meanings and a fertile territory for exploration.

The areas of abundance and of dearth that the naïve museum thus displays are an indication of the most promising way to construct it as a subject of study: in a border zone. Between the discourse of the classic museum – something that it feels after – and the popular discourse that it embodies, there is room in the naïve museum even for error. The choice of this word is not fortuitous but intended to indicate that we are distancing ourselves from any value judgment; where error can be identified in the naïve museum it seeks to rescue the term from the sense in which it is generally used and to reveal its bright side, so that it becomes a deposit of unconscious expressiveness, of new meanings that can be seen because the rules have been relaxed. If we look at it from this angle, acknowledging the liminal status of the naïve museum can move it from being ambiguous to being disambiguated. The conceptual “wobbliness” characteristic of it thus becomes the raw material for the distilling of a different kind of knowledge, from which a new epistemic awareness can take shape.

In the field study described in this article I combined semi-structured interviews with creators of naïve museums with direct observation of how objects were arranged in them, using photography as a recording method. I focused on three such museums: the *Museum across the Water* in Podul Nărujii (Vrancea county), created in an old-style house dating from the earlier half of the twentieth century by Maricica Hanu-Mare, from the village of Nistorești, who had only elementary education and has never been to a classic museum; the *House of Dolls Ethnographic Museum* in Agnita (Sibiu county), opened in their own home by a retired teacher couple, Mircea and Maria Drăgan; and the *Museum in the Attic*, set up in his parents’ old home in Scheii Brașovului by the retired engineer Florin Filipescu and containing exclusively

family items dating from the past century and a half. My reason for selecting these three naïve museums from the large numbers I discovered all over Romania was that each of them, through the objects in it, actualises a different dimension of temporality. Grasping and analysing these hypostases of time – and implicitly of the past – as an integral part both of the objects and of the choices underlying the way they are arranged in space, constitutes the core purpose of the article.



### **A framework for understanding some “wobbly” museums: the syntax of objects**

“All museums are a stage, and all artifacts merely players; they have their entrances and their exits, and one artifact in its time plays many parts,” writes Wolfgang Ernst in a study of the way museums are laid out (Ernst 2000: 18), shifting the Shakespeare quotation to the area of museums in order to highlight in an expressive way the fact that objects, in the role of exhibits, cannot convey, unless they are linked in reciprocal relations both with each other and with the space in which they are deployed, the meanings built up with their help. What kinds of relationships become established between the objects in a naïve museum – given the ways in which it does and does not resemble a classic museum – while they are functioning as (unconscious) bearers of identity-related references? Directing our attention to the links created between objects can provide us with the key to constructing a theoretical path to structuring the meanings invested in their own creations by those who found museums – meanings that most often exist on an identity-related register.

We may borrow an initial theoretical tool for this enterprise from the reflections of Horia Bernea, in 1994, when the Museum of the Romanian Peasant was still in an

embryonic form and was looking for a unity of style and a formula for its existence. At that point its founder enunciated two vital concepts, “strong articulation” and “weak articulation” (Bernea, Nicolau, Huluță 2001: 88), both concretised in objects, but with the objects having different roles. Strong articulation would be a powerful object that would make an impression through its materiality, through its coherent form and through its function being evident. Such an item would be capable, through its powers of expression, of giving structure to “a complex of sub-assemblages” (Bernea, Nicolau, Huluță 2001: *loc. cit.*) – a series of objects in the same register, more fragile in form and material but which, by being in the orbit of the powerful object, could construct a single meaning. Its counterpart was “weak articulation,” a single object, intentionally fragile, which was counted on to evoke more subtle registers. For example, while a loom was an example of “strong articulation,” one part of it, such as the warp frame, could be used to organise a space around the idea of construction or of hierarchy.

What is being aimed at, therefore, is a relation that is constructed not merely through juxtaposing exhibits but through their syntactic disposition, the focus being on the connections that have to articulate the items into a scenography of their own, into a semantic construction. Furthermore, an aspect that Horia Bernea mentions and that Jean Baudrillard had earlier developed is that such a semantic construction is very closely related to the space which it activates by conferring on it a morphology and a rhythmic quality of its own: “Without connection, space does not exist, since space exists only if it is open, challenged, given rhythm, broadened through a correlating of objects and through transcending its function in a new structure” (Baudrillard 1996: 13)<sup>6</sup>. We must therefore keep in mind not only the links that could be made between objects from different registers, which have become exhibits as the result of an act of selecting and displaying on the part of the

creator of the museum, but also the type of space in which they are placed, their actual arranging with regard to aspects such as the type and shape of the room, the function this space had prior to museification and the path taken during its conversion of use, along with physical characteristics such as light, textures, colours or any other features with which objects can enter into semantic relations.

This theoretical tool borrowed from Horia Bernea’s museography can be further strengthened by appeal to the principles formulated by Jacques Hainard<sup>7</sup> to describe what he calls “a well-tempered art of creating an exhibition” (unpublished lecture)<sup>8</sup>. The link between the two giants of European museography is no merely bookish and theoretical one but exists at a biographical level too: Jacques Hainard maintained a close connection with the Museum of the Romanian Peasant in the early ’90s, when he held a series of seminars that forged its future style and manner of expression. Less theoretician and more museum practitioner, with great experience in mounting exhibitions covering the disputed area of post-colonial anthropology, this Swiss expert stresses the fact that a good exhibition can never be a stringing-together of objects accompanied by descriptive labels that overload us with dry, repetitive information. The greatest risk is that the viewer will become bored – Hainard says this with humour and without mincing his words. Once boredom sets in, significations become unclear and the visitor is no longer prepared to invest effort into constructing bridges of meaning between the culture being showcased by metonymy and the culture within which it is constructed and received. Consequently, Hainard maintains, to avoid information overload and the danger of coming up against a failure in communication, there must exist in the exhibition – in the form of an object or a group of objects – “a syntax, a style, a pen” (unpublished lecture)<sup>9</sup>. An element that can function as a semantic motor for the entire

6. My translation.

7. Former curator of the Neuchâtel Ethnographic Museum and subsequently Director of the Geneva Ethnographic Museum.

8. My translation.

9. My translation.

construction, pulling the display together into an idea with a life of its own, intelligible to the viewer, into a position that the whole exhibition adopts. To identify such a semantic motor in a naïve display means finding that ferment of characteristically unconscious expressiveness that moves it on from a mere inventory of heterogeneous objects to an individual, subjective staging of its creators' personal, local or regional identity.

Consequently, the theoretical route I have been describing in the preceding pages is one that emerges from the meeting of Horia Bernea's concepts of "strong articulation" and "weak articulation" with the principles of Jacques Hainard. It is from this meeting of concepts that I have distilled the expression "museum syntax" to describe the unity of meaning that can be extracted from the things brought together in a naïve display, on the basis of connections identified between the objects and the space in which they are put and which they transform. It should be noted that such borrowings from theory in no way aspire to make the naïve museum fit into a bed of Procrustes by forcing it into a frame of thinking that obviously belongs to elevated registers that are the fruit of the distillation of concepts. The enterprise has a different role, that of extracting from the way a classic museum is put together concepts that will provide clues to grasping the ways objects in a naïve museum are organised in space. In other words, what I have been aiming for in advancing the term "museum syntax" has been to fashion a theoretical framework with the aid of which I can penetrate in an analytical way into the magma of unconscious and not wholly open-to-categorisation expressiveness found in naïve museums. By using it I will be able to trace the manner in which the objects in the naïve museum group themselves semantically, making themselves available to be looked at and understood.

It is just this magma, shot through with the unforeseen, that the naïve museum offers

– extremely varied in the shapes, materials and textures of the objects that articulate themselves in space, dense as the network of meanings – that causes the syntaxes that can be deciphered from the whole to be many in number. They can be drawn out and organised in a diversity of typologies, depending on the criteria that serve a particular line of research or that match a particular sensitivity on the researcher's part at a given moment. The purpose of using this theoretical instrument need not be to fully explore the phenomena we meet on the ground but – distancing ourselves from any extravagant ambitions or aspirations to be exhaustive – to underline the polysemy and polyphony that characterise the naïve museum. Consequently, from the palette of possibilities that use of this instrument opens up, I have chosen to employ in the pages that follow a type of syntax that concentrates on the temporality bound up in objects and actualised in the discourse of the naïve museum. A temporality that is itself polysemic and that frequently refers to tradition as an equation between culture and identity.

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### **"An object left behind by the older generation": the traditional syntax of objects**

"We made use of the location, as it's quite isolated, we made use of the building, as it's an old one, and we brought together traditional objects, from our area, from here, so as to keep tradition up to date!" says Cornel Bercariu<sup>10</sup>, the initiator and financier of Maricica's *Museum over the Water* in Podu Nărujii, Vrancea county, of his enterprise in opening a little museum that would present the daily life of the people who formerly lived in that area: "To keep and remember the old customs of our grandparents!"

However, by contrast with the usual way the expression is used – one which Cornel

10. Interview conducted on May 1st 2017, Podu Nărujii, Vrancea county.

Bercariu shares – the meaning current anthropological discourse attributes to tradition is not that of a slice of the past detached so as to be brought into the present but – exactly the opposite – a response communities make to a present situation. This response is only projected into an *illo tempore*, but in reality it represents an existential solution for the future, which, as it is most often perceived as problematical, needs a legitimization, a normative explanation given in the present, an identity-related point of orientation (Mihăilescu 2004: 181-205). Or, as Henry Glassie puts it, tradition represents “the creation of the future out of the past” (Glassie 1996: 395), “the means for deriving the future from the past, [thus] a volitional, temporal action” (Glassie 1996: 409). Along the same lines, Russel W. Belk emphasises that “we tend to be especially concerned with having a past when our current identity has been challenged” (Belk 1990: 670); this is in an article in which he illustrates how objects have the capacity to flesh out an idea about the past and to transfer it into the present, where it can act as a support as we face an uncertain future (Belk 1990: 671).

The villages of Vrancea exist on shifting sands of this kind. Still bearing deep scars left by a Communist regime that systematically dislocated their ethos and peasant identity – born from a close connection with the soil – then having experienced a post-Communism that overwhelmed them with new possibilities and the high-speed invasion of urban, media-influenced, alien socio-cultural models, weighed down by the burden of their differentness and archaic character, painted in the colours of legend, to which present reality purely and simply no longer corresponds – a Vrancea village is a living cultural node, a crucible of identities seething with diverse references, paradigm shifts, reconfigurations and often disturbing quests for meaning. Yet an old object has the power to build a bridge over the shifting sands of the present. Leon Rosenstein writes that an old object

functions, at a psychological level, as an antidote to the insipidity of mass-produced objects and as an escape from present reality (Rosenstein 2000: 26), because, due to the enduring nature of the material and through its beauty, it has the ability to transpose the past into the present, to root existence more strongly in time and to communicate an image about the past (Rosenstein 2000: 27). It is a bridge that draws its stability from the past and stretches towards the future in such a way that the changes we sense it will bring become bearable.

However, the *tradition* that detaches itself from a socio-cultural dimension of this kind is not characterised by the organicity apparent in the practices of those archaic communities with their cosmocentric vision of the world (Mihăilescu 2004: 187), in which things were *given* by God and their ongoing development was governed by *order*. Rather, it belongs to an anthropocentric vision (Mihăilescu 2004: *loc. cit.*) the seeds of which germinated in the Renaissance and then in the Enlightenment, in which the human being is conceived of as separated from the will of God and as having descended from a cyclical time, which could be restored through custom and ritual, into the implacable linear progression of his own will and of a forward-looking logic that is characteristic of modernity. *This* tradition, however, has no room for cultural mobility but expresses an abstract permanence, a “frozen” time from which history has been evacuated and which refers to a past that is formless, uncertain, an *illo tempore* in the accents of myth. It bears traces of reification, just like a museified object, and falls here within the meaning that Jean Baudrillard ascribed to mythological objects: “We might be tempted to see in it a survival of traditional symbolic order. But these objects, however different they may be, are also part of modernity and derive their twofold meaning precisely from it. [...] They have a specific function in the system: they signify time. For in just the same way as naturalness is the refusal of nature, so



historiality is the refusal of history via the exalting of its signs – a rejected presence of history” (Baudrillard 1996: 53).

What is the situation where Maricica is concerned? Leaving aside any bookish explanations, the first point to make is that the museum she has put together bears the marks of the *naïveté* of her spontaneous action. More than that, the pattern of traditional occupation of a home that she has used as her criterion in arranging the rooms in her museum cannot be modelled on open-air ethnographic museums, since she has never visited an institutional museum. Her organisation of space and arranging of objects are a demonstration of choices that spring from her own life-experience and evoke memories of a childhood passed in the home of her grandparents Ion and Ilinca Cornea. That being so, where can we locate Maricica’s discourse? In the historic past of her own community, or in that *illo tempore* of perennial tradition? Between the two. Maricica lives and creates her museum in the fluid, adaptable space of memory, in the sense attributed to it by Pierre Nora (1989:8)<sup>11</sup>. For this reason, two kinds of past are interwoven in the discourse of the *Museum over the Water*. One is that of concrete memories, involving precise details about the characters who enlivened her childhood and about the events she lived through then – a relatively recent past, however, in relation to the old village the museum attempts to evoke, given that Maricica is not old. The other is a past time that is formless in texture, uncertain, a non-historical time, a time of tradition, in fact a non-time that assumes concrete form in her discourse through the use of the imperfect tense. Employed by Maricica when she is talking about people of olden times or about archaic practices, the imperfect is a tense of continuity, a tense that makes up for discontinuities by generalising past actions, but at the same time a form of the verb that has to do with imprecision and an idyllic vision. The use of the imperfect makes it easier to avoid fixing a cultural detail or a

practice in a specific moment in the past and shows up to a point that we are looking at a reconstruction of the past that eliminates history and sets up in its place an idea about the past – a comforting, even a gratifying one. And to the extent to which the objects in the museum are anonymous – without known former possessors and without a story, their trajectory and biography having been lost due to the haphazard way in which they were collected, with a lack of any interest in identifying their owners – the formless time expressed through the imperfect tense is also the time in which the objects exist.

How can this be seen in the syntax of the museum? Let us first focus on the two sets of peasant costume, male and female, suspended on coathangers – an intuition of display panels or mannequins – on the left-hand wall of the bedroom, which is partly draped with a decorative cloth (Fig. 1). On my first visit to this museum two years ago, the female costume was displayed in a way that stirred my curiosity, given that there were no signs of a physical body supporting it; Maricica had used pins to attach the sleeves of the blouse to the belt of the peasant skirt to suggest the graceful appearance of the women of long ago, who used to pose in this dress outside their gates on festival days. Things have changed a little since then: some of the articles of dress have been replaced, with the present ones evoking bridal attire, a proof of this being the banknote attached to the front of the

11. “Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer.”



Fig.1. Bride and groom's costumes in Maricica's naïve museum.  
Photo credit: Anca-Maria Pănoiu.





Fig. 2. The cradle in which Maricica chose to put the “cocața” – a plastic doll representing a baby girl. Photo credit: Anca-Maria Pănoiu.

man’s shirt, reflecting local custom. As for the sleeves of the woman’s blouse, which are now crossed over her belly, Maricica says, with a chuckle: “Well... *she’s standing there waiting to be married!*” The staging is a little different, but the reference remains: we have here, beyond doubt, a kind of concrete attachment to her forebears’ gracefulness, fed, probably, by childhood memories, but equally we cannot fail to notice a theatrical reference in the positioning of the costume, like a minimalist version of a diorama. And the syntax is not a simple juxtaposition of bridal costumes but also includes a “semantic ferment” that pulls it together into the desired idea, that of evoking the traditional life of a peasant couple in days gone by: the ceramic plate of the “blessing on the house” type, placed there not only because of its words about protection and plenty for the home, but, in a deeper sense – according to what Maricica says – intended to reinforce the idea of the union of the masculine and feminine principles. In this “strong” articulation it does not matter that the plate is far from being a peasant object;

it is one of the mass-produced ones that we can find by the dozen in fairs selling so-called traditional ware in Romania.

The syntax of tradition recurs in the *Museum over the Water* in the morphology of space: the criterion governing the arrangement of the rooms was that of following in detail the topology of a peasant home in that region, although the act of museification causes the variations found in real life to be smoothed out and the general effect to become somewhat typological. However, restoring the layout of the rooms and trying to give them back their original functions produces in the *Museum over the Water* exactly what the term “museum syntax” describes: the space is activated via the objects. The space covers the objects and contains them by suiting itself to their functionality, while they punctuate it, give it rhythm and shine light on their former uses so as to confer solidity to the network of archaic meanings and provide clues about the purposes of different areas in an economy of the dwelling that does not entirely match the function-based distinctions found in modern dwellings. In the traditional house the purposes of spaces interpenetrate, and the various museum syntaxes formulated in accordance with utilitarian criteria configure an architecture that is symbolic and to a degree fuzzy, with “alveoli” of objects that add themselves to the physical limits of the house and effect a parcelling-out of space, enriching it semantically.

Thus, two beds with straw mattresses have been positioned in the bedroom as an echo to some extent of the bridal costumes hanging on its left-hand wall. Following the same pattern of inserting a cycles-of-life time into the “frozen” time that belongs to the museum, beside the hearth in this room Maricica has placed a kneading-trough in which she has put to bed the “swaddled baby,” a plastic doll wrapped in a scrap of black skirting with a banknote pinned to her diaper (Fig. 2) to bring good luck. This is an allusion to the germination that the



Fig. 3. A part of the “big room” in Maricica’s naïve museum: the syntax comprises objects somehow elitist for rural culture, in order to stress the value of the place. Photo credit: Anca-Maria Pănoiu.

marrying of the bridal costumes promises by means of the words on the “blessing on the house” plate. The meaning conveyed by the placing of the cradle close to the hearth is not merely a naïve evocation of the link between warmth and sleep; in the proximity to each other of these two objects may be read, at a deeper level – albeit unrealised by Maricica during the creative act – the symbolic connection between hearth as a holy place of germination, the germination that the child embodies, and the “germination” of bread in the kneading-trough now become a cradle. The coal-heated iron on the hotplate of the wood-burning stove adds an everyday touch to a cultural equation in which sacrality is a frequent reference.

Following the same pattern of the morphology of the traditional dwelling, Maricica has assigned the largest space in the house the role of the “big room” (Fig. 3)

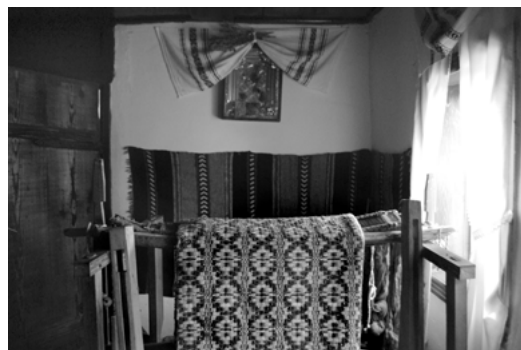


Fig. 4. The loom’s corner in Maricica’s naïve museum: the syntax of objects suggests as well a “sacred” atmosphere, in contrast with the daily routine. Photo credit: Anca-Maria Pănoiu.

– a place strongly charged with values (Iuga 2011) – in which she has placed the loom very close to an icon in a silver frame, which is hung on the wall with a towel and a handful of dried basil (Fig. 4), along with a small woven rug that forms a background for old framed photographs of the former owners of the house. Of the “big room” Maricica says that it is “like a kind of day room, a... *living!*”<sup>12</sup>, which gives proof of her presence of mind and spontaneity in adapting her language to what she intuitively feels will be her interlocutor’s cultural code. This is an act of cultural mediation through which she demonstrates that she is no stranger to the urban references she uses and that she is in fact half-way between the universe of the visitor from the town and the purely rural tradition that she has showcased in the museum.

From the “big room” one descends not only in the scale of values but also literally – down a steep step – to the secular everyday level of the “dairy”. This is the “summer kitchen,” as Maricica once again translates, in which she has put mainly the equipment used in the making of dairy products, to testify to the pastoral farming on which the local economy was based in the past (Fig. 5). Here, probably more than in any other room, the objects “help” each other reciprocally to configure the whole by drawing tight the connections of the syntax in which they are organised. In fact these objects illustrate, in sequence, the stages of a local occupation, from sheep-shearing



Fig. 5. A part of the “dairy room” in Maricica’s naïve museum: a traditional syntax in which objects are organised in a way inspired by the utilitarian purposes in a typical ancient peasant home. Photo credit: Anca-Maria Pănoiu.

12. The word “living” is a neologism for “living room” in Romanian (translator’s note).

time, suggested by the placing side by side of the sheep-bell and the shears – also linked to each other by the hard solid metal of their construction – to milking and the making of dairy products, suggested by wooden troughs and bowls of different sizes, and then to the actual consumption of the food products: the placing together of strainer, stirring-stick and slicing block in the immediate vicinity of the stove – source of fire – and of the “blind” table, with crockery ready on it and in the drawer of which visitors who do not hold back from touching objects can discover cutlery, prepared (this too) *as if* to be used. A grouping such as that shown in Fig. 5 can function as a summary of the part of the room devoted to pastoral pursuits, like an extended syntax that contains a set of specific micro-syntaxes, all of which conform to the same criterion of use. This part is semantically completed by the other area of the room – the space for conviviality – in which objects such as the bed, the “blind” table and the stools evoke the rest, free time and conversations that in old peasant homes used to punctuate the rhythm of daily work. There is a breath of life in the syntaxes in this room, achieved through the placing of objects as if the activity they are used for is either poised to begin or has been suddenly interrupted. The placing of objects in the space of the room indicates a note of imminence; they seem to show signs of recent use and, in their reification, to encapsulate a unit of life.

However, in this pattern of the morphology of space there are also breaches in the syntax. There are areas in which the siting of one or more objects breaks the traditional configuration made up in accordance with the criterion of use. Such areas are breaches in the field of semantic connections that up to now have been very strongly linked together; they lift the veil on that freshness and freedom of naïve action that, because it is not over-anxious not to err, mobilises an unconscious expressiveness of its own. Fig. 6 puts before us a syntax of this kind, in which references to the

traditional mode of life no longer ring true. In a standard old-style house the place of a high-days-and-holidays apron skirt would never have been *on* a door but rather in a chest or storage box. The decision to place it where it is puts us in mind of the deliberate planning involved in a theatre stage set; the object is no longer eloquent through its functionality, through the matching of form to purpose or by the way it mimics



Fig. 6. A rupture in the traditional syntax in Maricica's naïve museum: the way of exhibiting the cloth carries a theatrical meaning, therefore implies a non-peasant reference. Photo credit: Anca-Maria Pănoiu.

a body that is absent but suggested – as in the syntax of the bridal costumes – but has become an example of the beautiful for the sake of the beautiful. A display. One which departs from the traditional ethos in which the aesthetic and the functional were to be found in close mutual interdependence, but manages to say something through this very departing: an apron skirt draped over the wooden door of an old-style house that has become a museum can speak, involuntarily, about the distance between the village world it wishes to evoke and the



Fig. 7. Scenography of a traditional wedding in the *House of dolls* Ethnographic Museum in Agnita, comprising contemporary elements.  
Photo credit: Anca-Maria Pănoiu.

contemporary village as we find it, in which the act of museification was born and which cultivates a specific idealised image about its own roots.

In the Agnita naïve museum I met a different way of constructing a stage set for tradition. Of the three museums investigated, the *House of Dolls Ethnographic Museum* is the one that makes the clearest references to the institutional museum and aspires most rigorously to reproduce its practice. This can be seen in its wish to organise items according to category and in its concern to make clear their provenance and date and to describe and document them. Due to the Drăgans' academic training and Mircea Drăgan's interest in studying the folk music tradition of Valea Hârtibaciului, their museum shows evidence of basic principles of method in the way the rooms are laid out following ethnic criteria – the “Romanian room” and the “Sas room” – and in the efforts made to organise each room into a number of areas

or sub-assemblages of items.

For example, the “Romanian room” has a traditional wedding syntax (Fig. 7) in which the object that constantly recurs in the museum, the plastic doll, is brought into relation with other objects that belong to the same ritual register so as to suggest, even in a freeze-frame way, the acted-out nature of such occasions: the groom's and bride's costumes and the wedding flags. This is one of the places in which the discourse of objects is matched by the verbal discourse of the hosts; when I ask about the flags I learn that they are in fact replicas made by Mr Drăgan following the accounts given by the old people from whom he was collecting musical folklore. More than that, he tells me in detail how he hung from the flags a wooden spoon and a miniature cradle – the household tools of the trade for women – as an allusion to the good-augury customs practised by village women in olden times when “initiating” a newly-wed young girl. This way of instructing through the use of an evocative object derives its effectiveness from the meaning conferred upon it by its being linked to a ritual. Here, however, the traditional wedding is not left a prisoner in an imperfect/past continuous time, as it is in the *Museum over the Water*. All at once, in an anticipatory tone in which one can discern a touch of nostalgia and disappointment, Mr Drăgan feels the need to add a chronological detail to his description of the custom by emphasising that weddings in the area no longer follow the pattern that held sway for many decades but are changing visibly as a result of contact with Western influences, and that this has led to an ironing-out of specific local features and to their being “melted down” in a global magma. And the museum syntax of the “Romanian room” succeeds in hypostatising this movement in historic, datable time by showcasing the tradition in its sense of “dynamics of culture,” of “swing term between culture and history” (Glassie 1995: 399); the left-hand side of the room evokes the weddings of former days

by having the polystyrene mannequin that fleshes out the bridal costume wear a coif – made of artificial flowers (Fig. 8) – a local custom that the Drăgans tell me went out of use around 1938. Less than a metre away and part of the same syntax is a plastic doll still dressed in old local costume but culturally hybridised in that it is wearing a white veil (Fig. 7, left side), in line with the urban model that gradually came into use after the 1938 watershed. There is something else that most probably belongs to the same logic of temporal dynamics, although the decision does not necessarily reflect a deliberate intention: the wedding flags placed behind the wedding mannequin with the bridal coif are only partially a replica, as the crosses at the top are original, while the culturally hybrid part of the syntax, the one that refers to a style closer to the present, has been

whose miniature garments have been sewn from scraps of cloth found by the Drăgans in the possession of the Gypsy tentmakers of the Valea Hârtibaciului. The two of them explain to me that there are no differences in decorative style between Romanian and tentmaker garments. Their intention here is subtler than a simple typological differentiation, and this in at least two ways. On the one hand, making use of fragments speaks about the age of the object, about use, discarding and keeping, about a scrap of cloth as witness to the whole and about perpetuating the memory of the whole by inserting the remnant into a logic and a function that are both entirely other than the original garment – from a woman's blouse, for example, to a simple discarded rag, and then to a miniature shirt clothing a doll in the heart of a museum about the past



Fig. 8. Scenography of a traditional wedding before 1938 in the *House of dolls Ethnographic Museum* in Agnita (the chronological clue is given by the head adornment of the bride). Photo credit: Anca-Maria Pănoiu.



Fig. 9. A part of „The Saxon Room” in the *House of dolls Ethnographic Museum* in Agnita. Photo credit: Anca-Maria Pănoiu.

given the replica flags as its background.

The division of the display in the *House of Dolls Ethnographic Museum* along ethnic lines is a further clue that it aspires to the rigorous typologies used by classic museums. I am not referring here simply to the above-mentioned division into “Romanian room” and “Sas room” but to a procedure that shows even greater attention to detail: in the many dolls in the “Romanian room” there are some, mixed in with the throng,

of the multi-ethnic villages in the area. On the other hand, the inclusion by blending of the tentmakers in the “Romanian room” is designed to suggest the amicable coexistence of the two ethnic groups and their closeness even despite their differences, in contrast to the Sas of the area, who maintained their unitary cultural profile over the centuries, aided by their practice of endogamy.

It is the ethnic criterion once again that underlies the layout of some sub-

assemblages in the “Sas” room (Fig. 9). Besides their cultural homogeneity, certain registers of the daily life of the Sas of the area are hypostasised: for example, the “Lole” costumes hanging from the wardrobe in the right-hand side of the room highlight a ritual occasion in the community’s life, the first week of February, when the custom is enacted – and the sight of the equipment used then reminds Mr Drăgan to include in his discourse descriptions of how the local Sas were organised in former times. Similarly, the tool with which the fat pork they kept hanging in their church roof was marked Sunday by Sunday after every cutting-off of a piece prompts him to give details about the Sas’ particular kind of community solidarity.

In consequence, the naïve character of the *House of Dolls Ethnographic Museum*



Fig. 10. A part of the “big room” in the *House of dolls Ethnographic Museum* in Agnita: eterogeneity and subjectivity of the exhibition, given by the congestion of objects. Photo credit: Anca-Maria Pănoiu.

does not necessarily reside in the exhibits being freely associated; indeed there is an evident concern for categorisation. Rather, its deviation from the norm – and it is this that gives the collection its appeal – flows from a practical deficiency: because of a lack of space, which the Drăgans mention repeatedly and with regret, the great diversity and abundance of the items ends up by overloading rooms that were already cramped. The rooms are so dripping with objects that at times it seems that you can no longer see the edges of them, as if beyond the visible objects there were nothing but more and more objects. From this flows a kind of heterogeneity. Quite apart from the physical boundaries of the house, the space is not so much activated by objects as actually suffocated by them. That which in the *Museum over the Water* constituted a delimitation that was invisible but could be perceived through the syntaxes of objects, gathered together and extremely contained from a semantic point of view, here becomes pervasion, fusion, mixture. Thus in the midst of the agglutination, due to the force of circumstances and in spite of the owners’ concern for categorisation, we can see certain breaches in the syntax of tradition. Of the four thousand vinyl records they own, the Drăgans have put several hundred – all of German music – in the “Sas room,” following the ethnic criterion, although the overwhelming majority of the objects there revolve around an idea of the village and olden times. In a similar way, in the “big room” – the meaning of which is a suggestive reference to rural life – space has been found for two solid nineteenth-century wooden cupboards of urban provenance inherited from an uncle of Maria Drăgan’s. There is no room for objects to be delimited from each other except by their own edges, which means that their trains of association come into collision; items of town furniture such as the cupboards, the pendulum clock and the mirror are placed in the immediate neighbourhood of folklore dolls, components of a syntax



that evokes the display of traditional woven fabrics in the “big room,” kept for times for showing off one’s finery in the village; or – here too, as in the *Museum over the Water* – not far from a doll tucked up in a cradle, which refers specifically to the traditional rural upbringing of children (Fig. 10). When syntaxes interpenetrate each other in this way, the unintended message is a consequence of the space constraints, while the amalgamation functions as a naïve lowering of the rigorous tone of the ensemble, like a scent that subtly reminds the visitor that they are not in fact in an ethnological museum but in a house-museum that is home to an impressive ethnographic collection brought to life by the hard work and passion of the Drăgans.

In the *Museum in the Attic*, any explicit discourse regarding tradition is entirely absent. In the highly personal style of construction of this museum, in which Florin Filipescu cultivates a deep attachment to each object, each photograph and each document, the things are the emanation of a full, precise biography, rich in details that cause them to be laden with meaning. There is no explicit concern with ethnography beyond the fact that the household equipment is so archaic and rooted in the local culture that it could in fact be studied from an ethnographic point of view. However, Florin Filipescu’s approach is too personal and interiorised to need to be supported by a display of tradition in the sense of construct, fiction and projection into *illo tempore* that we raised as an issue at the beginning. The objects belong to a time that is datable, they have individual profiles and stories that bring them close to the sense that Russel W. Belk attributes to old items that form part of one’s family inheritance, which help their collector’s self to extend through giving it “a sense of familial self continuity that extends beyond death” (Belk 1990: 676) and a “sense of past essential to the sense of self” (Belk 1990: 677).



## Conclusions

The three naïve museums to which I have devoted attention in this piece of research exemplify three different ways of understanding and showcasing tradition. In the *Museum over the Water*, the syntax of objects that are anonymous and refer to a past without fixed points approaches the meaning that Eric Hobsbawm attributed to “invented traditions” (Hobsbawm 2012: 1-2): attempts to establish, in a constantly changing modernity, points of continuity with a preferred historic past. Essentially artificial – as Hobsbawm underlines – these attempts are nevertheless interesting when seen in terms of the identitary need to establish desirable reference points in places where memory perhaps records features of decline, along with points of continuity where reality is most often characterised by breaks in sequence.

The syntaxes of the *House of Dolls Ethnographic Museum* remove references from the generalised time of tradition and tend towards a kind of cultural memory of that ethnographic area and of its multi-ethnic community, with the objects configuring what Belk calls “aggregate reified past” (Belk 1990: 674): a hypostasis in which the extension of the self via objects that encapsulate identity rises to the higher level of a collective, community self. Finally, the time that the items in the *Museum in the Attic* evoke seems, of the three, to be the most personal, the most subjective. The time showcased there is a time of interior rhythms.

Thus, these three naïve museums differ to some extent in the distinct ways in which they understand the past and embody it in objects. What unites them, however, is their existing in the fluid space of memory, before whose spontaneity, as Pierre Nora highlights, history has always maintained a critical, suspicious attitude (Nora 1989: 9). Sharing – though in different ways –



the features that I grouped together at the outset of this article under the heading of “naïve museum,” the three of them do not allow themselves to be troubled by the critical discourse of history, which in Nora’s words evacuates memory. Since they are living cultural spaces steeped in orality, bearing the powerful personal stamp of their creators, along with their subjective recollections and discourses, memory is far less constrained here than it would be, for example, in a classic institutional museum dependent on a particular official discourse demanded by national or regional history.

Through the way they reassemble the past out of objects, naïve museums have the potential to become places of memory for the community in which they come into existence, while for visitors from outside they could evoke a certain exoticism linked with a generalised past. Both in the first case and in the second, what emanates from the disposal of objects in space and, in the final analysis, what the spectator takes away with him when he crosses the threshold of the museum once more and re-enters the outside world is a deeply subjective sense of past.



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#### **IV. Traditions in dialogue**



## Atelierul de creativitate. A Sentimental Dossier

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## ABSTRACT

9 stories about people, relationships, creativity, communication;  
9 stories about how the educators and artists at the Romanian Peasant Museum open up the museum for adults and children alike, translating its contents into colours, sounds, happenings, and objects.

## KEYWORDS

Romanian Peasant Museum; Irina Nicolau; Atelierul de creativitate; museum education.

### Cosmin Manolache



## A knitting-a-stocking kind of project

Every time she'd start tinkering based on an idea she'd come up with that very night, Irina [Nicolau] would say she was "knitting a stocking." Maybe this was her way of downplaying the aesthetic aspect, choosing to describe it as a little more than an everyday domestic chore – something that could be accomplished by anyone just bold enough. She would launch into the new thing impetuously, making use of bits and pieces of pretty much everything: words said or written, fabrics, paper cuttings, leftovers, colourful yarn, patches, coins, beads, lace, buttons, an array of knick-knacks so varied that it would be almost impossible to list them. They all came together into a coherent whole due to enthusiasm, inspiration, team work, and, most of all, naturalness. Irina would wear clothes she had sewn herself, clothes that other people couldn't even dream of. It was on a daily basis that she came up with all sorts of projects – she hated this word, which was only beginning to make its way



into our lives back then in the late 1990s. She sometimes found people to help her make them come true, sometimes she didn't. *Atelierul de creativitate* [The Creativity Workshop] was one of those lucky projects – it goes on to this day although there were times when, as with any wonderful creative endeavours ran by a Romanian institution, it came under the threat of bureaucratic lack of imagination.

But what would this creativity workshop look like? Nobody had done it before in Romania. We would hear of similar things done in Western museums, but there was nothing like that in our museums. No, I'm wrong, the Romanian Peasant Museum had organized something at the Orizont Galleries, in the 1990s. Irina would tell us how, as a child, she would spend her afternoons at the Bulandra Theatre where her mother worked as a seamstress – sewing, modifying, patching the characters' costumes to fit the actors. An imagined world tailored to the bodies of people you could meet in the streets of Bucharest. This kind of childhood can only make you keep your dreams alive into adulthood. Irina imagined the workshop as a space of absolute freedom, where adults and children would sit side by side, with age being not an issue. A luxury turned into a privilege for both groups.

In fact, *Atelierul de creativitate* is just one expression of what Irina understood by "the encounter." For her, the encounter, coming together to make something, was, so to say, a theme. No, a fixation. An obsession? Maybe. Though this is not the right word either. Another such encounter happened back in the early 1990s when she managed to convince a few of the young people protesting in Piața Universității to come to the Museum "to eat clouds together." This was the way she went about things. And this was a good thing, making sure that the Museum got a makeover every two or three years, as if to mirror a concept she had invented, namely *museo-parea* – from Greek, to make a museum together, in company. Sharing an office with Irina every day, I understood what "together" meant for her. There was a constant exchange of words, of ideas, we came together to do things – a proper workshop. Most of all, she wanted a museum that was alive, open, not one that stuck to immutable, virtually unquestionable rules. So she fought the pressure of this other way of doing things – according to which the sole purpose of a museum is to turn things into heritage. The workshop or laboratory atmosphere, with constant experimenting going on, re-imagining the past, was the state of grace that I experienced in the Museum, a state that would often protect us from excessively bureaucratic thoughts or actions. Since I have no idea what her logbook contains – but I like to think that she kept one, scribbling down her ideas – I can only speak of my own experience working with her. Besides the *Atelierul de creativitate*, she came up with the *Noah's Ark* project and team; then there were the weekend *Mornings at the Museum*, inviting the visitors to take part in "Lazy Saturday," "Expert Saturday," and "Busy Saturday" events that we'd organize. Some of these ideas couldn't survive without Irina. *Atelierul de creativitate* was the exception.

Irina only got to see the workshop grow for one year, between 2001 and 2002. But *Atelierul de creativitate* went on for many more years, in the basement whose walls she had padded with pages from a German encyclopaedia – where children created experimental museums (the Museum of the Peasant Child, for example); they played with clay turning it into animals; they did their own weaving; they imagined and performed shadow stories; they listened to sounds being born out of ideas, words and instruments that had become their friends; they tamed dragons made out of the Museum's old rusty gutters by painting them in bright colours; they became expert papermakers. They learned new ways of learning than those taught in school. We did so many things together, which would fill much more than a few pages. We did the impossible, we saw that we had done well, and we were all very happy!



Ana Pascu

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**Atelierul de creativitate: the beginnings**

Knowing Irina Nicolau, ethnologist, researcher, and later director of the Romanian Peasant Museum, was an extraordinary opportunity for me. As a professor at the Ethnology and Folklore MA program in Bucharest, she gave us more than information. Her charming, original and spontaneous personality transformed the professor–student relationship into a master–disciple one. As first-year MA students, we fell in love with her, the Romanian Peasant Museum, which she helped design and build with patience and passion, and with ethnology.

That's how I started working for the Museum, in 1996. Irina trusted young people and the enthusiasm of youth. She helped them discover their talents and find the right path. Since I had experience as a teacher, in 1999, I followed her suggestion and started working with children. She felt it was very important to bring the children to the Museum and closer to the peasant culture, its values and its beauty, especially since, as the generations passed, fewer and fewer children would have grandparents in the countryside, the direct contact with the village being thus severed.

Irina wouldn't force her suggestions on anyone. You came to see that she was right on your own, and you willingly took the next step to put her suggestions into practice. That's how I ended up going to the local education authority and talking excitedly to some of the inspectors there, explaining why it was so important to bring the children to the Museum and what we could provide. Before long, the Museum was teeming with children. I would give them ethnology classes at the Village School – a friendly space, furnished with old desks, maps, and colourful images. I would tell them stories about village life, show them blown-up images, sometimes screen interesting films from the Museum's collection of ethnological films. I had many chats with the children, trying to get them to remember what life in the countryside felt like, to make comparisons between the objects in the Museum and those they had seen in their grandparents' homes. I tried to give them an understanding of the village, to bring them closer to it.

The program was designed for elementary school children as I was afraid that it would appeal less to older ones. Some school groups came only once; others came back. My best collaboration was with Mrs Alice Andreescu, who ran a private school for children with severe disabilities, between 1999 and 2000. For a while, they would come every week. I would prepare lessons that they could understand, and then we would draw together and go for walks around the Museum. Gradually, the children came to trust me. When a little girl with autism rested her head trustfully and affectionately on my shoulder, I was extremely moved and I felt like I had made a difference. Village School hosted a small exhibition with the objects created by these special children: knitting and stitching pieces, drawings, photographs. For as long as the exhibition lasted, I would often go and look at them; I'm not sure how much these children learnt from me, but I sure did learn a lot from them!

I started writing. The first piece of writing I did was for children, *Carte cu îngerași pentru copilași* (Book with little angels for little children), and I showed it to Irina. She encouraged me to write more, so that text was followed by *Cartea spațiului* (The book of space) and *Cartea timpului* (The book of time). I typed them on a typing machine, and Irina made the illustrations. At the beginning of the year 2000, some men carrying a heavy box showed up at the Museum. Inside, there were several publications of the Museum. Among them, my writings turned into toy-like little books. This was typical of Irina – she knew how to encourage you with both words and actions; and she had this way of coming up with ideas



that only added value to your own, making them shine, making them complete.

In 2000, Irina Nicolau, Carmen Hulață, myself and Matei Cerkez, professor, we co-authored an alternative textbook, *Lecții cu povești despre facerea lumii. Carte pentru școala mică* (Lessons with stories about the creation of the world. A book for elementary school). This was an original textbook, with short cheerful texts, well researched but appealing, with funny illustrations done by Cristian Topan.

My work as a pioneer of the children's program ended in 2000, when I started my maternity leave. On my return, in 2002, Irina had done wonders, improving the program, creating *Atelierul de creativitate*. The offer was much more diverse, and children could learn through art. Other colleagues, Ciprian Voicilă and Ruxandra Grigorescu, were looking for new ways to reach the children's hearts. But Irina Nicolau had passed away...

### Ciprian Voicilă

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### Once upon a time...

Before *Atelierul de creativitate*, there were the ethnology lessons at the Village School. In 2000, Irina asked me if I'd be willing to take over what my colleague, Ana Pascu, had started a year before. Around the time of important celebrations, Christmas, Easter, I was to tell the children visiting the Romanian Peasant Museum stories summing up the main legends, beliefs and customs occasioned by these celebrations, veritable explosions of the sacred in the profane. Irina's long-term thinking was that tomorrow's museum-goers must be familiarized early with this world – the seeds of traditional culture would then grow and bloom in their hearts, making them come back to the Museum.

In 2000, Irina Nicolau, Daniela Alexandrescu and myself published a book about professor Dorel Zaica – an artist who, following to some extent into the footsteps of Jean Piaget, had conducted a survey of sorts among children during the Ceaușescu era, asking them Socratic questions, some funny – Where do microbes live? – others right down subversive – What is the [Communist] Party? The book included thirteen out of one hundred thought experiments. Getting to know Zaica, going over the manuscripts and the drawings he had saved from dust and oblivion, and later reading a few books on drawing as a way to explore children's personalities expanded my perspective on the creative potential of children and on the methods to investigate the imagination.

So, in time, my meetings with the children – who would come daily, weekly or every now and then from various Bucharest schools and kindergartens, but also from private institutions such as Radio Itsy Bitsy or Worldvision – would unfold along two conceptual lines. First, at the School Village or right in front of the Museum – as it was the case on June 1, 2002, when Irina drew with us and the children, on huge cardboards placed on the sidewalk, and Marius Caraman photographed and filmed the crowd of children eager to draw and listen to the stories – the children would learn how the hedgehog helped God create the world, with more than a little help from the bee; the names of the *ursitoare* [the Fates] who came to decide their fate the third night following their birth; how the Sun fell in love with his sister the Moon; how a serpent coming into the peasant's household is a good omen because it is said to bring him good luck; how women used to give birth in the villages; how they lived; how the Rohmanies<sup>1</sup> would learn that people were celebrating Easter; and so on. Second, we would come up with topics just for fun: *Parent for a day, just for a day; An upside-down world; The story of the hand; On the inside; Questionnaire about old men with long white beards*<sup>2</sup> – we'd ask them why there were so many old men coming up in December, and how were they related to each other. In addition, there were some

1. The Rohmanies or *Blajini* (approx., the meek) are a mythical people who, according to Romanian folklore, live on the edge of the earth and are a righteous people. They would learn that it was Easter time by seeing the shells of the Romanians' red-dyed Easter eggs coming down a river. (translator's note)

other topics meant to bring out the children's personalities and how they related with their social environment – *My family*, they would draw each family member in a little house doing whatever that member would normally do at home; *Diary entry*; *Self-portrait*, on the back of the drawing, they would write their main qualities and defects as learnt from their parents or other social interactions. As the years passed, the children's creations kept piling up in our office – writings, collages, drawings. Around 2001, our new colleague Alecu, under Irina's supervision, produced a series of postcards which used some of the children's creations. Later, Martor Publishing printed booklets with some of the topics we had imagined accompanied by the children's drawings. And after that, Cosmin, Carmen, Ana and myself published a short encyclopaedia of Romanian mythology for children – *Îngeri, zmei și joi-mărițe* (Angels, ogres, and evil witches) – written and illustrated in the same playful-serious spirit. One important note: Ruxandra Grigorescu's joining us at *Atelierul de creativitate* made the interactive meetings with children even more exciting. Open-minded, ready to take on quirky challenges, Ruxandra was a consummate artist who knew how to challenge the children, offering them different materials that they could use to transpose their fantasies.

These were beautiful, romantic years, as we would call them nostalgically today, the *mot d'ordre* being openness – for both the children and the not all-knowing adults. We really enjoyed escaping for a while from the dull restrictions of space and time that come with adulthood, awakening, from under layers and layers of years passed, the inner child. In turn, the children would enjoy listening to our extraordinary stories, would easily join in the playful-educational atmosphere, and not once interrupt us (the way it happens today if you persist in trying to convey some information to them).

My rather long journey with *Atelierul de creativitate* ended with a project aimed at high-school students. Together with Călin Torsan, we went around Bucharest – he would introduce them to the art of musical instruments and the stories that brought them to life, and I would share with them some of our national mythology. I remember, for instance, how well-received our stories were at Caragiale High-School. I also remember their astonishment learning the origin of the word *Abracadabra*, and how it might be connected to *Avestița*<sup>3</sup> and her apotropaic names. This project was built on yet another of Irina's ideas – *the missionary museum*. We would not limit our work to the children visiting the Museum. We would reach out and find them, sharing with them our knowledge – whether it was little or a lot, I cannot say, but it certainly was exciting.

2. According to Romanian tradition, in addition to Santa Claus, there is also Saint Nicholas who comes and brings either gifts (to good children) or a stick (to bad children) on December 6. (translator's note)

3. According to Romanian mythology, an evil spirit who targets pregnant women and small children making them ill or killing them. (translator's note)

## Ruxandra Grigorescu

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### Spring to summer 2002

Before I joined the Romanian Peasant Museum, *Atelierul de creativitate* had already started the Village School program. Two rows of desks, with polished tops that made the pencils roll (zuhrrr), and chairs that clanked (clank clank, I guess), and holes for inkwells (who can still remember those?). Coming to think about it, this was *Atelierul de creativitate*, with its specialized employees and a special status. As early as 1990, before having a chance to start work on the actual Museum building, they organized an exhibition hosted by Orizont Galleries, *Toys of Clay* – the ground floor contained artefacts recovered from the old Museum collection, while in the basement they set up a workshop for children. The exhibition was curated by Irina Nicolau and Ioana Popescu. I remember that, to the right of the staircase going to the basement, there was a Christmas tree (which was brown and

dry because it was June) beautifully decorated with walnuts and pretzels. As I looked away from the tree, I met Irina's eyes – big, brown, smiling at fair-haired Dimitrie whom I was carrying on my shoulders.

That, at the Orizont Galleries, was the first *Atelier*, if you were to ask me. Later, there was chalk drawing on the asphalt in front of the Athenaeum, maybe some other places too. All these very “busy and important” researchers – ethnologists, ethnographers, including Horia Bernea himself, the painter-director of the Museum – were dreaming of an *Atelier de creativitate*, but it was only in 2002 that it was officially created.

When I joined the *Atelier* team, Filo (Ciprian Voicilă) and Răzvan Alexandrescu (aka Alecu-I'll-be-right-with-you) were already working there. Filo was in charge of Christian beliefs and celebrations, while Alecu, who was an artist, would challenge the children with drawing projects such as *Portrait of an important figure* (and he got a very good portrait of Traian Băsescu who was back then mayor of Bucharest, and later became President); *Gardens for four seasons*; *The Story Tree*; *Fantastic and Domestic Animals*. I was their apprentice for a while, and then I moved on to painting, stitching, and shaping pottery in the new space of *Atelierul de creativitate* – opposite from “CIUMA” hall, to the left of the Museum's main entrance.

We would all improvise, testing this new ground, trying to be as faithful as possible to the Museum's materials, trying not so much to teach the children “the craft of stitching” or “the craft of pottery” but rather to introduce them to the village world coming from the city world, starting from our – and their – experience as urbanites. Of course, there was their encounter with *matter* – the paint in the tubes (back then children were kept away from any artistic methods that would stain or make a mess), the prickling needle and the slippery thread, the clay that sticks to your hands, and the modelling paste that smells like the dentist's office.

On June 1, 2002, we organized the “Drawings on a Rope” exhibition. It was dubbed the *June 1 Operation* because it was more than an exhibition. The children passing by on Kiseleff Road could stop to draw or paint on large sheets of paper stuck to the trunks of the trees lining the sidewalks. This was a beautiful madness, involving lots of buckets of clean water and countless brushes that needed cleaning. The space was put under the protection of the event's “mascot,” Anton the Scarecrow, which Irina had made especially for the event – two faces, one with his eyes closed, the other with his eyes open, one blue eye, the other green, wearing his name written on his forehead, and filled with rustling plastic bags.

This was the last “happening” that Irina coordinated. One day, a little before that, I was taken aback to hear her say: “Know what, Rux? Last night, when I couldn't go to sleep, I was thinking about... what new things we could do at *Atelier*.”

Many things have happened since – both in her name and her memory.

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### Some of the children

There were the blond Arbăr, an Albanian from School 11, the one who drew Traian Băsescu's portrait; the talented Capsali children (first Maria and Teiu, then the twins); Alexandru Paleologu's overly polite and overenthusiastic storyteller grandson (who was sent to us to teach him peasant dances but who had instead to make do with me, walking around the museum, and drawing and telling stories). Then there was the little genius – four years old and “mum will tell you how many” months – who drew in no time a view from above of their kindergarten tables, with the children sitting on their chairs, leaving me flabbergasted





by his mastery of the *racourci* perspective; when I asked him: “What can you see through the window from outside?”, he drew the desk, the computer, mouse, and keyboard, with an astonishingly mature technique. Then there was freckled blue-eyed Victor whom we had aptly nicknamed “Victor-pictor” [*pictor*, Romanian for painter]; a three-year-old girl who would sew standing up on her chair, beautiful, perfectly aligned stitches, like a machine; a tiny first-grader who would murmur to himself constantly, as a way to work up his courage, the jingle of the TV commercial [for painkillers]: “Bye, pain! Paduden!”

And today, there are Iana whose fingers are so fast and so skilled; Eliza always ready to take on a challenge and complete it, hard-working, determined, and incredibly talented; the same for Maria the serious one, and Tamara who draws a little and then does a little dancing. Not to mention Grig, and his triangle rooster – an illustration for Ion Creangă’s story – and Nora, his sister who is still learning to speak and loves dots of all colours and sizes, both brought to the Museum by their brave Grandma. Because you need to be brave to handle such grandchildren and to cross Bucharest with them in tow, braving storms and heat waves.

And these are just a few of the children – give me a sec, and I’ll remember more names. For them, it was worth putting into practice Irina Nicolau’s idea to create *Atelierul de creativitate* then, and it is now worth making sure that it goes on.

Are they the future public of the Romanian Peasant Museum? I couldn’t say. What I can say is that we are giving them a new perspective or at least some nice memories.

**Mirela Florian**

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### 10 years of *Atelierul de creativitate*

I have worked for the Romanian Peasant Museum’s *Atelierul de creativitate* for ten years, from its early days, when it was just beginning to grow from a seed planted by Irina Nicolau, and up until it grew famous and won awards. I had thus the opportunity and privilege to be part of this growing process, and I can testify to the transformation that took place before my eyes year after year, thanks to the hard work and patience of a few big-hearted people, who spared no effort and fought for funding. As hard a job as raising a child.

Ten years slip by, and many things happen in between, making it impossible to sum them up in a few lines. Among the beautiful things that happened as this unusual child grew up were the firing sessions in the Museum’s kiln – starting early in the morning and ending late at night, in a magical atmosphere that, like any magic, is hard to capture on film. After twelve hours of continuous fire, the pots and figurines crafted throughout the year by contemporary Bucharest girls and boys at the *Atelier* would shine bright red in the kiln – visible only in the dark. The magic would fade away in a couple of minutes, under the eyes of the master fire whisperer, Dumitru Constantin. Uncle Mitică, as we call him, the Romanian potter from Piscu who actually built the Museum’s kiln, knows exactly how high the flames are supposed to be and the secret correlation between the fire, the temperature (he doesn’t need a thermometer for that), and the perfect firing of clay.

At the end of these ten years, I am left with at least two priceless things: the joy in the children’s eyes and the friendship of a few people who still work for the *Atelier* or were just passing through.

As of late, *Atelier* is entering a new stage of its life, gaining more and more experience, making its debut on the Internet – it looks like it has finished growing up. Happy birthday and many more to come!





## Beatrice Iordan



### Bringing animation theatre to the museum

“Beatrice, come to the Museum to perform a *Mărioara* şi *Vasilache*<sup>4</sup> [puppet show].” This happened in 2001 – having been freshly admitted to the “Actor puppeteer” section of UNATC [National University of Theatre and Film “I.L. Caragiale” in Bucharest], I had spread the happy news around to all my friends. Irina Nicolau was one of the people I loved, so I told her about my feat. She received the news with this advice. I didn’t take her words seriously back then, but, as the years passed and I became increasingly attached to the Romanian Peasant Museum and the people who brought it to life, many of them being currently my colleagues, I started contemplating bringing *Mărioara* şi *Vasilache* to the Museum as she had advised me.

And that’s how the story of the Romanian Peasant Museum animation theatre started in 2006. Since then, together with many groups of cheerful children, we have performed various folk puppet shows: Mircea Vulcănescu’s *Vicleimul*, performed right in the centre of a Christmas market at the Museum; *Lăzărelul*, performed at yet another market at the Museum on the occasion of *Mărţişor* celebration in 2007; many shadow theatre shows with Păcală as the main character; but also performances based on the stories written by children during the animation workshops.

In 2009, together with a team of museum educators, we started a series of training workshops for colleagues from other museums. The outcome of the workshops was a book, *Shadow Theatre at the Museum*, meant as a *guide-helping-hand* to those who wanted to diversify their museum education methods.

That year we created the Museum’s animation theatre troupe, *Tropăiele* – 10-15 children who would come to the Museum every week to play, perform and grow. In 2014, several adult volunteers joined the troupe, helping us perform the shadow theatre show *The Story of a Piglet*. Children learn here not only how to perform theatre shows and to tell stories, they also pick up the complex craft of building the puppets and the stage setting, with their grandparents and parents sometimes joining in.

The animation theatre workshop is growing with each generation of children who attend it – as they become familiarized with traditions and folk stories, but also with classic and contemporary authors, as they bring them to life with the help of puppets and silhouettes in the shadow theatre.

## Lidia Stareş



### Following the yarn of encounters across age

Whether stitched or woven, the yarn defines us as we use it. It works like the bow that helps the sound come about. Stitching and weaving help us manifest the sound of the spirit that animates us.

So here I was one July, with a bunch of loud children between 4 and 16 years of age, eager to stitch or to play with fabrics. My bunnies – I cannot call them otherwise – were taken aback to discover that they could actually cut clothes for dolls, hamsters, etc., and then decorate them with beautiful stitches, or even print on them with fabric paints. The little ones (4-5 years old) made dolls from tree branches picked in the Museum’s courtyard,

4. *Mărioara* and *Vasilache* are both characters of a folk puppet show. It used to be performed by itinerant performers at fairs and on the edge of towns, sometimes accompanied by folk religious shows. These puppet theatre shows would parody prominent figures in society, the mores, but they would also target taboos, they would tax various faulty human traits. In addition to *Vasilache* and *Mărioara*, other characters such as Napoleon Bonaparte, the grave digger, the Turk, the Kazakh, the Jew, the cantor (or priest), the hunter, the yoghurt seller, etc. would feature in these shows.

and were very proud to draw the Museum's exhibits in front of visitors who praised them.

In time, as there was plenty of room, we started weaving on the vertical loom, in addition to the horizontal loom we had used thus far.

Then one day I get a phone call, a man's voice saying to me he would be interested in weaving on the vertical loom; when I asked him how old the child was, he said he was the one interested in learning how to weave. Before I met him, all sorts of thoughts crossed my mind – he had told me he studied philosophy. What kind of experiment did he have in mind? When we finally met – he was an ascetic-looking, lanky guy, with long messy dark hair – we talked and agreed on the techniques, what we could achieve with them. I had no idea I was entering a funny stage of my life. Two days later, the young man and two other friends of his called me – they were in the Museum's courtyard. So the four of us started spinning – the two friends were complete beginners.

And that's how, completely unawares, we got caught up in this amazing enterprise. A secret yarn was being woven around us. Their excitement was contagious, so some other friends, boys and girls from very diverse fields of study and work, joined us. They started coming to the Museum's workshop, learning all sorts of things, so that, little by little, we came up with the idea of putting together a Spinners' group. We researched all the steps of the process of obtaining wool yarn. This is how we learnt that, after the sheep were sheared, the wool would end up on the fields, in the forests, or even on the side of the rivers. Having been away for a while, our friend showed up one day with a huge load on his back. He had made a trip to Northern Moldova, to his grandmother's, and had brought us back a treasure: prime quality sheep wool already washed. Next, we got together to start combing and carding the wool.

After several failed attempts, the young man strapped the wool load to his bicycle and, following the advice of several people, took it to a man who owned a wool carding machine as old and time-worn as himself.

When our wonderful wool was returned to us, it was as fluffy and soft as clouds from heaven, and we were all very excited to begin spinning it. So we got on the train to Bucovina (to visit Domnica and Veronica in Gura Humor). In two weeks' time, we had learnt how to hand spin, had taken notes and filmed, had done the weft and the warp on the horizontal loom. The hand spinning, we learnt ourselves, and the rest we recorded.

The best yarn (thin and even) was made by the boys. So now we had all this yarn – what should we do with it? As the *Mărțișor*<sup>5</sup> celebration was approaching, we dyed some of the yarn crimson, with pokeweed berries, and the boys felted the remaining white yarn.

Last but by no means least, this experience has marked our lives two-fold: two of the young people gave up studying philosophy and passed the entrance exam to study anthropology with flying colours, and I came to put into practice an older idea of mine, namely dying with plants (flavonoid dyes).

The group has more or less dispersed, but we still see each other on both happy and sad occasions. The young people in the group got married, some of them have children, others have made a purposeful life for themselves abroad. This experience has been a blessed "potion" – until this day, people of all ages and nationalities stop by the Museum to learn how to stitch and weave. Also, along the years, we have been gifted a wonderful horizontal loom, fabrics, and countless other things.

5. On March 1, Romanians celebrate spring by wearing red and white string as a sort of luck charm – for health and long life. *Mărțișor* was originally made with wool yarn. Similar traditions can be found all over the Balkans (Bulgaria, Greece, etc.). (translator's note)



**Valentina Băcu**

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**Atelierul de creativitate – as I saw it, as I knew it**

On my first encounter with *Atelierul de creativitate*, I was behind my photo camera – I was volunteering at the Romanian Peasant Museum and I had a passion for photography. I liked to sit in a corner and watch – hands, eyes, lips, faces going from smiling to frowning, and intent, half-smiling or dreamy eyes. And then I'd hit the button, trying to capture it. What I was trying to capture exactly, I didn't understand at first, it only dawned on me later, when I started teaching workshops myself.

It still happens to me to be behind my camera, looking and trying to capture *it*. The sense of well-being that I experienced as a child, in the company of my grandparents, looking for something to do, playing with yarn, fabrics, but also around the hearth, watching delicious meals being cooked in clay pots, or around the oven that smelled of bread made with love. The sense of well-being that I feel in my own home, with my children playing under the table, or around me. The sense of well-being that I get during the workshops, watching and capturing emotions. Some of these emotions are: the emotion of handling your first piece of handmade paper or the pieces of canvass or glass on which a story about a musical instrument is going to be printed; popping balloons and jumping to find (again) the freedom to express yourself; cushions filled with dreams about kittens and baby dolphins looking for a home; the needle that prickles the fabric; but also that far-fetched imagination belonging to a time when life felt like an endless summer day.



**Raluca Oprea-Minoiu**

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**Atelierul de creativitate or playing around the museum**

Some might find it strange that we chose the 'sentimental dossier' form for our presentation of *Atelierul de creativitate* at the Romanian Peasant Museum. Today, in 2017, the *Atelier* also has a(n overly serious) bureaucratic side to it – bylaws, an organization chart, projects equipped with budgets and deadlines, acquisition procedures (a ton of them), annual reports.

That might be precisely why, as a form of protest, but also an act of justice, I wanted this article to be not rigid and didactic, but a meeting place for thoughts, emotions, and people.

Therefore, I will start by saying that I haven't actually met Irina. But, strangely enough, listening to all these stories about her, being surrounded by all her quirky things and ideas, my own playfulness found a place in the Museum.

I put pieces of papers with riddles about museum items in inflated balloons, and the children wasted no effort to find them and read them! Boom, bang, bang, booom! And, all of a sudden, the big serious Museum turned into the best place for searching, hiding, or getting lost in thoughts.

One day, as the children and I were searching for dragons and white horses, we stopped and wondered in front of the icon of Saint Charalambos and the plague (what a frightening strange animal!?!). That's where I got the idea of a workshop on fears. Who doesn't have fears? Small or big, well-defined or vague, understandable or coming at us from some immemorial dark time. How did the peasants deal with these fears? They would appease







them, trick them, with an entire array of props designed to deal with each kind of fear – using their skills to keep them in check. Starting from here, together with the children, we created a made-up world where fears are tamed with words, with gestures, or colours. Drawing a little inspiration from peasant life, a little from psychotherapy, we (re)invented our world. A fear-free world.

I had long chats with the children at the Museum – about what it's like to be a guest or how we could live without holidays or how the painters' "fast of the eye" (yes, you read that right) would help them create beautiful sacred icons. Together, we invented a time of conversing about 'celebration' and 'celebrating,' including stories about how it was back then, stirring memories and desires to make up stories about how it is now. And since not all of us were skilful conversers, we used everything we could get our hands on – colours, flour, kinetic sand, all sorts of cereals, wet earth, cinnamon and lavender, water and feathers, clay.

We went through the Museum's archive drawers containing thousands of photographs, the rule being that we got to choose only two. Do you think that's easy? Which one would you pick? The one with the children and the swing, the one with the soldiers and the street sellers, or maybe a horse and a dog? And in what kind of a story would these images feature? A science-fiction or a contemporary story, a tale with ogres or with characters from the latest computer game? Choose carefully, because next you'll have to perform that story...

We played with fantastic animals and we waged wars, our main weapons being sounds, and we built imaginary shelters, hanging the sun and some wolf teeth by the door to protect us from evil spirits, the way Romanian peasants would do. We made up stories, which we would then perform with gusto – the windmill in one of the Museum's halls became a prehistoric helicopter, while the reed of the loom became in turn a Lego ladder and a magic comb whose teeth the hairs would willingly and magically enter one by one.

We also demolished many preconceived ideas. The guided tours for children on the autistic spectrum that lasted over two hours – they wouldn't want to leave the Museum. Intense workshops with blind children, where colours would be brought to life with the help of spices, sounds, and movements. Teenagers who would forget about phones and tablets for hours on end. Parents and grandparents who – at first a little embarrassed then happily – would stain their cuffs with clay and flour, promising themselves to play more often.

One day, as the workshop was about to start, a little girl asked me: "Was the peasant good or bad?" She thought that the peasant was nothing more than a made-up character from a fairy tale. As the workshop was about to end, I asked her if she had found her answer. She had – "The peasant is alive, for real."

That's exactly what I feel about *Atelierul de creativitate* at the Romanian Peasant Museum. It is for real – alive, energetic, full of character; it has a beautiful history, materialities and languages as diverse as its people – ethnologists, artists (painters, puppeteers, musicians, potters, photographers), museum curators, researchers, museum educators, psychologists, craftsmen.











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# Creative Traditions Forum: the Project and the Team

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### ABSTRACT

The present text is an interview with the members of the "Creative Traditions Forum" project, hosted in 2017 by the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant, with the financial support of the National Cultural Fund Administration (AFCN Romania). The aim of this project is to encourage the development of the whole area of creation related to traditions, to bring traditions into the modern age and to draw benefits from knowledge that has been accumulated and passed down, in a way that will be useful and applicable to the period and the times in which we live. In other words, the project is promoting the idea of the modern age of traditions, in which tradition takes on contemporary usefulness.

### KEYWORDS

Creative Tradition Forum, interview, project team, traditions, cultural patrimony, peasant cultures, manufacture, hand-made, peasant crafts, traditional skills.

Today it is not hard for anyone to observe the process of breaking-up and also of reconfiguration of a peasant world that we have become accustomed to calling traditional. Emigration for work and the processes and phenomena that characterise globalisation bring with them a particular kind of emancipation of both individuals and communities, one in which cultural cross-fertilisation and fusion have an extremely important part to play. These factors taken together make any return to what we have understood to be our "traditions" a problematic one.

In the rural world the transmission of local peasant cultures is taking place in a truncated and incomplete way, while the image of "traditions" as an area of national policy already has a history of its own, which is sometimes supported and at other times contradicted and thrown off course by the media image of the same "traditions." At the same time, the distance between traditions as ethnographically reified and their contemporary form of existence is widening visibly, and the need to recover and even resuscitate some local peasant cultures that have already passed into history has become a pressing priority, including for those who still form part of the rural life of the present day: village people are opening their own ethnographic museums and running their own "folklore festivals", while "tradition institutions" (museums, research institutes, centres for encouraging the creation of popular art) have assumed responsibility for the preservation and transmission of "authentic" traditions in their exhibition, archival and even display forms. However, each of these approaches needs to recognise that it has failed to



reinvent social applications for traditions, and more specifically to reinvent a functional role they could play in contemporary society. It is precisely here that the Creative Traditions Forum, a research and cultural action project under the aegis of the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant (NMRP), has something to say, as may be seen from this report of a conversation I had in August with the members of the project team.

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**Corina Iosif: How did the idea of the Creative Traditions Forum originate? How did this project come into existence?**

**Vintilă Mihăilescu:** In the beginning was...practice! But this sprang from the shared dreams and efforts of two people, Teodor Frolu and Ivan Patzaichin. Together with the organisations they set up and the collaborators who joined them, they began by carrying out local development projects in the Danube Delta. All that was missing was the “creative traditions” label. Next, Teodor and I became associated in a grandiose project, a “country-wide project.” Taking our inspiration from the visionary ideas of Grigore Antipa (about whom we know very little apart from the “Antipa” National Museum of Natural History) and Nicolae Georgescu-Roegen (about whom we really know nothing), we launched what he called “Romania powered by nature.” “We launched” is a *façon de parler*, because this went no further than a kind of joint blue sky thinking. After that, when the “country-wide project” had been put aside for the present, we turned our attention to something more tangible and realistic, and it was thus that the idea of “creative traditions” appeared. The Forum was the organisational framework we thought would be the best vehicle for promoting this idea. The rest has been hard work – and, at that precise moment, Oana Perju came on the scene and got us all organised!

**Corina Iosif: Oana, tell us the story of your connection with this project.**

**Oana Perju:** My involvement in this project began at a very specific moment. I recall a meeting we had at the Peasant Club [*Clubul Țăranului*] in September 2016 at which I had the opportunity to make the acquaintance of a number of people from different domains: journalists, researchers, students, etc. Prof. Mihăilescu had told us that we would be setting off on a quest in the footsteps of Don Quixote, a venture into the world of “creative traditions”; at that point I imagined that I would be wind or a windmill, it was not very clear exactly what, but never for a moment did I imagine that I might find myself in the role of the miller himself! Things developed from then on and I found myself contributing to the writing of an application for National Cultural Fund Administration (AFCN) financing for our project. This financial support we needed for the Creative Traditions Forum to become reality came through in November 2016. The project was initiated on 16<sup>th</sup> January 2017, in association with the NMRP team, and now, in August, it is in full flow. And so it was that I set off on this journey in the company of Professor Vintilă Mihăilescu, Anamaria Iuga, Anca-Maria Pănoiu, Iris Șerban, Cristina Hurdubaia, Gabriel Brumariu, Carmen Zadară and Constanța Petre, with the close support of Teodor Frolu, truly one of the project’s strategic partners.

**Corina Iosif: How does the Creative Traditions Forum fit into the wider framework of the NMRP’s cultural policies?**

**Anamaria Iuga:** The Creative Traditions Forum initiative falls fully within the sphere of



activity the NMRP seeks to pursue. It should be said at the outset that ever since its foundation our museum has been committed to achieving as profound and comprehensive as possible an understanding of the old peasant/country world and also of the contemporary peasant world in all the variety of its current cultural expression, a world affected by emigration, post-industrialisation, etc.. In fact, the very way Horia Bernea, the museum's Director from 1990 to 2000, laid out the exhibits was unique in nature. The museum was conceived as one of context, in which, besides the objects that provide the material basis for the displays, the relationships these objects have with each other or with the space would play a vital role. It was to be a museum in which the order in which they were displayed would be as important as the actual fact of their being displayed. It was, at the same time, a museum which gave the visitor great freedom to "read" what was displayed in it and to interpret it in accordance with their own views, feelings and discoveries. The NMRP has been from the beginning a museum based on old peasant objects but one conceived in such a way as to be experienced in the present. It continues to speak to everyone, for the reason that, as Bernea stated, it is addressed primarily to the heart.

In a similar way, its fieldwork too has focused systematically on ethnological and ethnographic studies of the contemporary village, investigating local customs and methods as practised today. To this end, the museum has encouraged field studies that are firmly anchored



in the socio-cultural context of the present day. One of the museum's offices even bears the name of "Recent Patrimony", and the field recording we carry out concentrates especially on how traditions are expressed in contemporary local contexts. This way of dealing with traditions may be seen in such projects as Village Collections, Agricultural Practices, Ethnophony, etc.

A second important aspect of the programme of our Museum involves communicating traditions to the public – not only traditions as they exist today, but also as they can be seen through activities that actively encourage creativity. Initiatives of this kind are represented by what takes place at the Creativity Workshops and in activities carried out with the help of museum volunteers. Thus the idea of the Creative Traditions Forum, involving as it does the simultaneous presentation of so many varied initiatives, all of which use traditions in a creative way, is thoroughly in accord with the logic of our Museum. The Forum will also at the same time provide an ideal context for the establishing of partnerships that will facilitate constructive discussion of traditions and of how they can best be creatively exploited. Thus the setting-up of this Forum is a natural development of previous museum initiatives in the same direction.

**Corina Iosif: Can you give us a brief description of the project? Who are its partners?**

**Oana Perju:** The Creative Traditions Forum is intending to bring together a number of players from as wide as possible a range of areas and to combine two worlds – those of creative industries and of cultural patrimony, where there already exist praiseworthy initiatives. Therefore, as we made progress in our discussions of how to promote and communicate the event, we came to the conclusion that it would be a good idea to have the umbrella concept of Romania of Creative Traditions, which would represent the platform on which the Forum would develop and would thus guarantee continuity between the present project and future

projects related to it. The event this autumn (6<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> September, at the NMRP) will be a space in which to discuss and explain what exactly is meant in Romania by creative traditions, but it also represents our contribution to the European cultural patrimony, all the more so since 2018 has been declared European Year of Cultural Patrimony and 2019 is the year in which Romania will hold the presidency of the European Union Council. This being the case, we wish to find a form of cultural action that will encourage the strengthening of a network of people interested in and passionate about creative traditions, as part of a long-term strategic approach designed to contribute to economic and social sustainability at the local and regional level. This is an ambitious endeavour, but we have strategic partners including DC Communication, the Romanian Architects' Association, the *Calea Victoriei* Foundation and the Master of Visual Studies and Society of the National School of Political and Administrative Studies, along with financial backing from the Directorate of the National Cultural Fund and the Romanian office of the representative of the European Commission, and supporters that include the World Bank and the Romanian Cultural Institute. As the project progresses, the participant list too is taking on an increasingly coherent, detailed and complete form. I am conscious that the point from which we set out has now become a circle which includes more than 30 people involved in the Forum (a full list may be found on our Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/TraditiiCreative>: [https://issuu.com/romaniatraditiilorcreative/docs/brosura\\_forumul\\_traditiilor\\_online](https://issuu.com/romaniatraditiilorcreative/docs/brosura_forumul_traditiilor_online)), partners such as The Institute (Re-Design Crafts and Romanian Design Week), the Peasant Club, and backers belonging to the corporate world, including Carrefour.



The jigsaw puzzle we started with is taking shape, but there is still room for additions, directions and – why not? – plans and dreams.

**Corina Iosif: What are the aims of the Creative Traditions Forum?**

**Oana Perju:** The principal aim is to encourage the development of the whole area of creative traditions. This is an emerging field and one which needs the collaboration and co-operation of the different players mentioned above. We therefore wish to put at the disposal both of the general public and of a specialist audience a space – bearing the NMRP specific – for the promotion and display of the products of this project and of related ones; we wish to open up the way for potential partnerships and collaborations, which can be established both during the Forum and via the online platform to be launched this September. We wish to start a series of debates connected with the context of creative traditions and to create the context necessary for the bringing to light of financing and marketing possibilities that exist in Romania for initiatives that can be regarded as falling within the field of creative traditions. In the end, what we wish to achieve through the Creative Traditions Forum is to bring traditions into the modern age and to draw benefit from knowledge that has been accumulated and passed down, in a way that will be useful and applicable to the period and the times in which we live. In other words, we are promoting the idea of *the modern age of traditions*, in which tradition takes on contemporary usefulness.

**Corina Iosif: How can the concept of creativity be linked with that of traditions?**

**Vintilă Mihăilescu:** This name is more a stylistic device, an oxymoron designed to draw

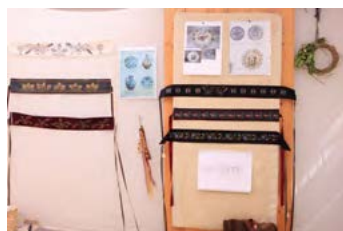
attention to a perspective on traditions that is slightly different. It means, upstream, a departure from the somewhat reifying view of traditions that we Romanians generally share. It has long been known – and accepted – that “traditions” do not reach us purely and simply like survivors that the past brings to us and that we venerate in the present; we too intervene in the process, interrogating the past, searching, sometimes selecting and reconstituting memorable parts of it. As Jean Pouillon said, traditions thus become established from the present towards the past and not in the opposite direction, as we are normally accustomed to think. What reaches us, sometimes, are “customs” – and in the case of Romania, which is probably the longest-surviving peasant society in Europe, these still exist in considerable numbers. One example of this shift and transfiguration from “custom” to “tradition” would be Călușul, an archaic custom (a ritual), which itself underwent changes over time (even customs are neither once-for-all-given nor eternal but have a dynamic of their own), but which at a particular moment was turned into a stage performance by Gusti’s teams and presented at the Universal Exhibitions. We may say that the transformation of “Căluș” dance and ritual from “custom” into “tradition” began at that moment: tradition selected only the dance from the ritual complex of the ancient custom, brought in a choreographer and offered it to a public. A custom has no public, but traditions always presuppose a public...

To move on, the association of creativity with traditions shows rather a way of making use of them: not simply conserving and faithfully preserving traditions, but also exploiting them “productively”, so to speak, in the perspective of the future, not merely from the perspective of the past. English has three expressions at its disposal in this context, heritage, patrimony and legacy; Romanian has only two, *moștenire* and *patrimoniul*. All of us have an inheritance [*moștenire*], but the question is what we do with it. Now, from this point of view, “creative traditions” suggests that we can do two different but complementary things: we can preserve them carefully, “patrimonialise” them like some kind of inheritance that has been left to us by our forebears and that we need to look after in a reverent way (legacy), and we can “exploit” them, put them to work, use them as a resource for organic future development (patrimony). Architects, for instance, can serve as an example in this regard in the way they creatively re-use “traditional” kinds of material such as wood (shingle) and earth (adobe, mud brick).

**Corina Iosif: How does the Creative Traditions Forum fit into the wider context of European policies regarding traditions?**

**Vintilă Mihăilescu:** You cannot reinvent the wheel! Initiatives of this kind have existed for a long time in other countries in Europe. It may seem paradoxical, but there are more of them precisely in those places where the loss of customs occurred long ago and is more complete, so making the need to recover them all the more pressing. In many ways, therefore, the “creative traditions” project resembles initiatives, programmes and institutions that are already operating in much the same way in other parts of Europe. In Romania, what we are concerned with is more a process of formalising and federating various individual and group initiatives of this kind which are as yet patchy in nature and are located in different corners of the country.

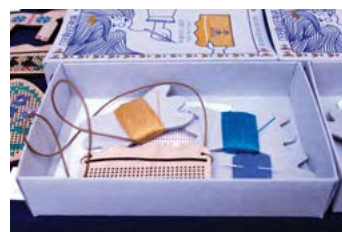
**Corina Iosif: Why has this project been conceived as a Forum?**



**Vintilă Mihăilescu:** In order to avoid any confusion with the “fair” format! More and more fairs are making their appearance, dealing with crafts, traditional products, etc., and the majority of them are more interested in the preservation and perpetuation of “traditions” and, in some cases, “marketising” them. The Forum is something partially different: what it has in mind are potential ways of exploiting traditional resources, or, in other words, it sees traditions as resources (and) as having a purpose that goes beyond traditions themselves and simply “making them available on the market.” And there is something else: the word “forum” involves dialogue, reflection, debate. The Creative Traditions Forum hopes not merely to bring together existing initiatives, but also to inspire future ones.

**Corina Iosif:** The Traditions Forum is now in full flow. What are some of its present aspects and what is their significance in the broader economy of the project?

**Anca-Maria Pănoiu:** I am currently working on a series of introductions written by participants, texts which follow a narrative thread that I have conceived in the form of an open interview in which I have sought to find a unifying formula for how the participants’ profiles



can be presented. No matter what project or product they are bringing to the Forum, I have tried to give them a place in this structure which will describe the origins of their projects and how each project actually began. When completed, this form of presentation should give a picture of what defines creative tradition: the traditional source of inspiration and how it is being creatively exploited in the present; about the people, players, personalities who have become involved in the story; about the places that have influenced them, - all of this, in a way, also being part of the tradition. And, because we are talking about creative traditions, and thus about a field oriented towards the future, the structure is designed to highlight the direction in which each project is heading and how it is attempting to keep capitalising upon the traditional resource. This is what I am trying to do now – to use the participants’ responses to a questionnaire (and the majority of them did reply to it) as the components of this narrative thread that will help us to design publicity materials, both in a concise form, for social media, and for the forum’s brochure. Again, I think there is a fundamental point that somehow, in a way, needs to be openly acknowledged – the fact that this first event involves finding our way, testing the waters, and uncertainties. I am referring to that distance that exists between project and realisation, a distance that can indeed be creative but can also generate moments of panic and upheaval between Vintilă Mihăilescu’s pump-priming theoretical formulations and what is happening in concrete terms. I am referring to the challenge involved in staging any event for the first time, conscious that even we are not succeeding in articulating it in all its complexity for the participants, so as to make theory become practice. More specifically, it is turning the concept into a fact, the distance between concept and its materialisation. It is precisely this process of “turning into fact” that is the greatest challenge involved in the project. What we are exerting ourselves to do all the time is to hold things together, to preserve the coherence and convergence of all the steps and segments. In fact this is also one of the aims of the project: to create a coherent network with the aid of which all these people can meet and be able to communicate with each other, make each other’s acquaintance... But we are at the stage of testing the waters, with some things going well while others are not, and some people thinking



better of their initial involvement while others are joining us along the way...

**Corina Iosif:** Are these texts the result of a dialogue carried on with the participants in a systematic way?

**Iris Șerban:** Emails were used to initiate a general dialogue in which all the people involved in the project take part. There are exchanges of messages, dialogues that can contain elements of tension or sometimes of misunderstanding of other messages, late replies that lead to things becoming confused... This has been the dynamic of relationships between those involved in the project and, more importantly, of how it has been managed. If I may add my contribution to what Anca has just said regarding the difficult task of keeping tabs on our project, the most difficult job has probably been that of Oana Perju. She is both the project manager and the interface at which we and the other participants meet. I say this because we, the NMRP team, do not (except on rare occasions) communicate directly with all the players involved in the implementation of the Forum. I am referring here, for example, to the DCComm team, to Professor Vintilă Mihăilescu, and to our financial backers: there is the NMRP team, there is the DC team, there's Oana and there's the Professor! Oana is the person who holds the reins. Now, for instance, we can chat "live" about how we are working on this brochure called Creative Traditions which is in fact the catalogue that introduces the participants. It is not an exhibition catalogue as such but rather a kind of expanded flyer, if one can say that. It contains an introduction to the theoretical principles of the project, plus a text that explains the aims of this first event of ours and introduces all the forum participants in turn; using the structure about which I spoke at the beginning – origins, inheritance, people, places and the future. The catalogue draws all the project's partners and participants together into a single logical structure that has as its point of convergence the reactualisation of traditions. However, it is also linked to the "stage set" of the fair, which makes it a functional tool too, a tool that facilitates the staging of the fair as part of the project; it is, therefore, a consultative document. It will not be a book-object or a brochure-object; its primary role will be one of conveying information, though it will of course be attractively designed. If you come to the fair, you, as a visitor, want to know something about a specific project. Let us suppose that our visitor is an architect and wants to discover details about the five relevant projects he can see in the catalogue and so heads for stands 7, 9 and 3, for example.

**Corina Iosif:** Are there any differences between the way the project was initially formulated and what it looks like at present?

**Anca-Maria Pănoiu:** From a theoretical point of view, the project has remained as originally conceived. The way in which (as we have realised) it is extending, sometimes beyond our control, has flowed from its being put into practice, which has meant the involvement of a very large number of people, a very large number of players – and this is good, because it demonstrates the project's growth potential. That being said, there are constant challenges in managing something of this kind, providing the necessary interconnections within the network of people who are orchestrating the project, and ensuring that these links are actually working.

**Iris Șerban:** Let me give a concrete example. Our budget provides for thirty stands, but we have over forty participants. A selection process took place – there were a large number of people who registered or who were invited to participate – and this final selection process brought this down to roughly forty participants. But we have thirty stands at which we need to group and classify people and projects according to their themes and types of approach. Those coming to the gastronomy section will thus be displaying together. But then how are we going to group together three people, all with different approaches to the subject of gastronomy, three different projects with larger and smaller products that need or do not need refrigerators?...



Let's suppose that some of these people are from the Sibiu gastronomic region, which has been declared a European gastronomic region for 2019. They will not be coming to sell but rather to present their project, which, no surprises here, is connected with food. By contrast, the people from "Kernel", who make artisan bread, may well be coming to sell. The people bringing the *brega* (millet beer) are also coming with sales in mind. So the problem arises of how these people can be grouped together in such a way that what the fair has on offer can be varied and relevant, in such a way that we do not have some people bringing just a story while others bring only products to sell, and in such a way that the allocation of space on the stands is equitable and the way they are designed is appropriate for the project proposers occupying them. We started off with the idea that a specific number of people and products and projects to be presented would be coming, and inevitably we have come up against the tactical and organisational issues involved in including a fair in the project. This is one of the major challenges of the project, and here redefinitions have to take place.

**Anca-Maria Pănoiu:** Are you giving participants the information they need and doing so in good time? Are you answering their phone calls? When you send out information that seems clear to you, is it actually reaching them sufficiently clearly for the resulting event to match the initial scheme? These are the kinds of challenges that come up every day.

**Corina Iosif:** If I have understood correctly, one challenge was the devising of a kind of market for traditions in which objects and products could find their place as goods for sale, while at the same time it preserved the structural link with the cultural source of traditions.

**Iris Șerban:** What is at stake is not finding them a place on the market – market being an economic concept – the problem is one of how here, in the museum courtyard, you can give them coherence, and how you can respect everyone's contribution in such a way that they are allocated enough space to be able to sell and communicate at the same time. Some participants tell us the bad news in advance: we have three projects running at the moment, we cannot undertake to be at your fair for all five days, we can only be there with our presentation for one day! In this case, for example, how can you build in a project that you regard as extremely worthwhile but that you cannot keep for more than one or two days? What are you going to do with the stand it will require when it comes?! That is another potential problem that needs to be solved.

**Corina Iosif:** My impression is that you are in fact talking about the difficulties involved in reconciling the idea of a forum with that of a fair. Am I correct?

**Anca-Maria Pănoiu:** The forum is more a space for debate in which people can meet and talk, more at a theoretical and technical level, about everything they have experienced in their projects, in their field of activity... which is not that hard to do...

**Corina Iosif:** In fact there are two concepts – partly similar and partly distinct from each other – that come together here, that of forum and that of market. In the specific case of the fair planned as part of the project, these need to be integrated in a fertile way. There are points of convergence between them but also lines of divergence that manifest themselves as difficulties encountered in the course of managing or rather controlling the project as a whole, if I have understood what has been said. Have there been steps or aspects, whether in connection with collaboration between teams, or in connection with collaboration between people, or actually connected with holding together composite ideas of exhibiting, such as, for example, that of forum-fair, which could be regarded as nodes or hubs of the project?

**Anca-Maria Pănoiu:** When the project began, my impression was that the scenography aspect was being somewhat minimalised or put off. Being highly aware of space and the need for curating, I felt that it was vital that we settle right at the beginning what this was going to look like in space. Also, given that this was the first such event and a pilot event and that the concept



itself was still being forged and distilled, a great deal of effort was devoted to theoretical and conceptual work: What do creative traditions mean? What is it that connects all these people? How are we going to articulate the concept? And any discussion of the practical part of the project, which is, in fact, the fair, was put off and put off. We have reached the point at which such a discussion has clearly become a priority, because those who are going to come and who need to understand what creative traditions are will not be making contact with concepts but with what they actually see. It is for this reason that I believe that a highly important step will be to work out the scenography which will be the vehicle for the conceptual significations of the project.

**Corina Iosif: What do Creative Traditions mean now, six months after the project began, in the context of the NMRP?**

**Anca-Maria Pănoiu:** They mean a contemporary project or product that makes use of a resource from the past, a traditional one, but through it creates something else. And this something else needs to be telling not as an act of recovery, or less as an act of recovery than as potential to project the inherited “dowry” concerned into the future, to make it something of value for contemporary needs and requirements, for today’s world. You can no longer talk about craft skills, for example, in a merely backward-looking and nostalgic way. You need to find a way to place them in a new syntax in which they can produce meaning and knowledge and even jobs, to come to practical aspects, because at the moment traditions most often mean cultural leisure activities. A craft skill can no longer ensure financial sustainability for an entire mini-region as it used to do in villages in the past. So, in town, it appears as an “object” for display, museified, that can be taken further, exploited and recovered only in the context of debates and workshops. It can no longer be resuscitated so as to be what it was initially – an activity by means of which a community can support itself economically.

**Iris Șerban:** I believe we have people coming to exhibit at the fair who are involved in wider economic circuits, almost mass ones. And this is one of the chief aims of the project: to demonstrate that creative traditions, unlike crafts and thus unlike traditions, have the potential to become products that are relevant at the macro level, at the level of the market, and not the niche market but the mainstream one.

**Corina Iosif: There is one thing that surprises me: not once in this discussion have you used the word “identity.” Why?**

**Iris Șerban:** For me this is not appropriate discourse. The idea of identity associated with that of crafts comes with a whole ideology behind it and implicitly with a particular view of tradition and of the peasant/countryman. Our project is not a project about identity or the reinvention of identity. We are not concerned with traditions viewed in terms of identity but with a source of inspiration that we find in traditions.

**Corina Iosif: A source detached from the concept of identity?**

**Iris Șerban, Anca-Maria Pănoiu** – Not that connected... Not that interdependent ... not that inextricably entwined with this concept...

**Iris Șerban:** Precisely. I will give an example, that of the “ȘEZI” (“Sit”) project, which works in wood, or the projects run by the DELTACRAFT people, who work with local craftsmen but also with designers. I want to make it clear that this is my view, not necessarily the perspective of the project: what a particular craftsman knows how to make has value as a craft item, as practice, but is not necessarily in its essence a feature linked to identity... Good, let’s say that the craftsman comes from Bucovina, or from Maramureș. He, through what he makes, is saying something about the region he comes from, but I – the “producer” of creative traditions – take what he produces, reinterpret it, adapt it, innovate and make his products relevant in Bucharest or in the urban environment in general, for a public that is completely different from the original one. Thus it is not only the public that changes, the market changes too, there’s a



radical change in the environment in which these products are displayed and integrated and so changes also occur in how they are interpreted as objects whose (conceptual) origin is linked to tradition. I'll give another example: the people who are bringing 3D woven carpets. These are woven carpets with figures printed on a 3D printer inserted into them. I can't see a woman from some corner of a village putting a carpet with 3D insertions down in her "kept for best" room! But I can see a tourist, or someone who is interested in those ethnographic areas, or some "hipster" who wants to have something traditional in their house, buying something like that. I feel the target public is changing.

**Corina Iosif: What is the project's target public?**

**Iris Șerban:** Every product has its target public, especially in virtue of the fact that we are gathering people who already produce those things and have already found themselves a place in a market. One of our aims is precisely that of broadening the public, of combining the various kinds of public. For example, we have the NMRP public, the people who come and "consume" NMRP fairs, which fuses, for instance, with the public of the architect Mihai Nuță who works in wood shingle, who already has orders and is known on the market, who has already built chalets and mountain refuges for public bodies and for various individuals who can afford to purchase such things. So, Nuță the architect's public will meet the publics of other exhibitors, leading to the idea that these categories of public will mingle and so produce a public with wider interests.

**Anca-Maria Pănoiu:** The principal target of the project is a young urban public, interested in taking up the creative part of tradition but in a form in which it is integrated into a logic that is industrial and contemporary. Creative traditions are a border region between what is old, what comes from the past, and the concept of creative industries, which somehow reproduces the source of inspiration in an industrial logic. This is where the target public could take shape, in a zone in which the specific or local or what was previously just manual work meets modernity and proliferates, following a market formula. But this is a young, urban public, who can afford to acquire, to consume, as Iris says, a style of design.

**Corina Iosif: In this case, is the historical dimension of the source, that is, of traditions, still taken into account?**

**Anca-Maria Pănoiu:** I think that in this case the historical aspect loses out. What is left in the centre of attention is the process, the practice, but the time element slips away. The past loses out to the projecting of a future for which such things have to become functional, have to present interest. And so as not to continue to speak in terms of over-specific concepts, I am going to invoke the example we were talking about at the beginning, in January or February, the lamp with the USB! It's a lamp, a bedside lamp, made of osier in the Delta, the technique was entirely the traditional one, involving weaving osier. It was a product created through a partnership between a designer and an engineer, and the engineer attached a USB stick to his lamp!

**Corina Iosif: Can you give me a few examples of people involved in the forum?**

**Anca-Maria Pănoiu / Iris Șerban:** For instance, there's the book *Stories from the Calendar*, an editorial project in which the author, Iulia Iordan, has taken her inspiration from old collections of ethnography and folklore but has tried to reformulate the stories about time and the traditional calendar so that the children of today can understand them. Why? Because she was involved in cultural-educational projects and realised that time, for children, is generally an abstract concept, and that the way peasants in olden times used to give time physical form in characters, in figures, and in images that were apotropaic and possessed great magical powers was something that brings concreteness to these abstract ideas and helps modern children to understand them. Or there is the architect Mihai Nuță with his *șița* (roof cladding and wood shingle) project. In fact there is a team of architects who have studied the way the

technique of *șiță* (roof cladding) developed in Vrancea and Buzău and who are now using this traditional knowledge and adapting it to meet present needs. This means, for example, adding a fire retardant layer or using a method of fitting that makes it easier for maintenance men to climb up high to do their work. All this either did not exist in the past or existed only in a vernacular form. When you bring a model of this kind into the present you have to adapt it to meet new market requirements and feasibility requirements and so make it fit for purpose in the present day. Or there is the “*ȘEZI/Sit*” project, involving an architect couple, Octavia and Lucian Loiș, amazing people, poets and architects and carpenters too, who are turning out their products on an almost industrial scale. It even says in their literature that they are feeling they need more workers because demand is constantly increasing and the project is tending to grow and extend. They took the styles of traditional furniture as their starting-point but added a component of personal design and now sell these pieces of furniture, that is, they create them and market them not just as functional furniture but as objects intended to awaken and reawaken sensitivity to traditional cultures, to the aesthetic and symbolic value of such objects. To a great extent, when people buy them they are consuming in a symbolic way, consuming archaic-rural otherness, consuming tradition, which for the urban public has come to mean something exotic.

**Corina Iosif:** Without exaggerating your own importance, what does your particular contribution to this project look like?

**Anca-Maria Pănoiu:** Well, even at the risk of lifting the curtain at the back of the stage and allowing people to see our behind-the-scenes work, I would venture to say that the problem and challenge of this project is that... it is absolutely massive! For this reason it has a tendency to escape in many ways from the boundaries set for it, because there are so few of us, because there are so many things we have to construct and make connect with each other that you have the feeling that they are slipping through your fingers. And if you have noticed any hesitation in what we have said in the last thirty minutes, it comes precisely from this difficulty in holding together all the dimensions of the project. Plus, as you have observed, a large part of it has been “farmed out” to other people.

**Iris Șerban/Anca-Maria Pănoiu:** And it has had to be, because the NMRP would not have had the resources to manage something of the size we have set ourselves. But in fact I think that when you write a plan you do not realise how big the proposed enterprise really is. Let's suppose that at the planning stage you decide to produce a brochure, a catalogue, anything... So, is a catalogue such a difficult prospect? You imagine you'll be selecting information from the descriptions you've received from the participants, putting it together and there you are! But wait a moment – this catalogue has to conform to the NMRP style, the techniques and modalities of expression that make the museum impossible to confuse with any other institution. So in fact it isn't just a catalogue!

**Anca-Maria Pănoiu:** And even this wouldn't be that difficult.. But wait a moment, this catalogue needs to talk about thirty people who in the first place have to exist, but at the point at which we wrote the project they didn't exist, because the selection process hadn't happened yet! Then, once you've identified them, they need to reply to you, they need to be available, they need to supply you with the information! And all these things, happening at the same time for a pilot event that still hasn't found its formula and personal style, really do pose a challenge!

**Iris Șerban:** Not to mention the stress imposed by the issue of financing, because I'm not sure if the financing we have from the AFCN will cover even half of what we need. I at least, because I am more involved in the administrative side (and Oana is the person who knows this best), have experienced financial rather than any other kind of panic. How are we going to make the display stands for the fair? We still don't know what they are going to look like. These fifteen stands, which will be made from wood and canvas, will join the ones



that already exist at the NMRP and that have been used before. These new ones must not look like market stalls, or be that different either, and they also need to be inexpensive, and ready in time, and capable of providing a home for the story of each exhibitor, so they need a logic. And for these stands we find that we have 5,000 lei left over, then that we don't have it any longer, hang on, we've got it, hang on, we haven't got it! (Anca will tell me off and say I'm talking out of school) and this situation is stressful for the person who has to cope with it directly and then obviously for Oana too! It is particularly stressful for the people you are collaborating with, because the team of architects designing the display stands need to know that they have 5 or 10 or 15 lei to play with, and then the rest of the team, who are doing the brochure, become stressed and asks "Come on, how am I going to do the brochure?" Wait a moment, it would be useful if the text in the brochure could include some of the key words that will appear on each stand, and the text also needs to be related to the text on the site and the posts on Facebook – the only problem being that three different people are working on the Facebook posts, the site and the brochure... I may be exaggerating a bit now... But that's roughly what things are like right now, certainly challenging, but such is the atmosphere when you're working on a pilot event!

**Anca-Maria Pănoiu:** I am working more on the creative side, so I'm encountering less of the stress inevitably generated by the financial and administrative obligations. An example of what is causing me problems is the need to receive data and information from people and put this content into the form in which it will be presented within the project – let's say, for example, the introduction pastile for Facebook posts. What does that mean? It means a little picture that you upload. What does this picture need to contain? A photo of the participant, plus a text that also needs to come from the participant but which you have to process. However, this text needs to come in a format and the photo needs to be of a specific size. You request all these things, you write to them about them, you repeat them, you tell them, you explain them to them, you send a form, you send an email, you ring them. When the replies do not come, you basically need to fill the gaps. Now when there are 30 or more participants each causing these problems for you every day, instead of the dynamics of the project moving in a convergent direction you are dealing in some respects with a divergent movement. And obviously this too could be regarded as a challenge.

**Iris Șerban:** For me what is at stake is how we can create a project that is relevant from a practical point of view and faithful to what was announced. When the general call to the public to register participating projects was launched, there were three criteria you had to meet in order to qualify: to have a traditional source of inspiration, to have a creative way of exploiting that source of inspiration – whether in terms of material, of technique or of something else – and, in the third place, for it to be a project or product that was sustainable from a socio-cultural and in particular an economic point of view. As for the relevance I mentioned, I feel this has to do mainly with the feasibility of the project. I think that both components can fail if you are not able to keep them under control and if you do not have a follow-up, something that comes after the finalisation of the steps in the project as distinct actions! be a failure. The forum part can fail if people come there merely to discuss, without being actively committed to taking some post-event action – whether they are financial players, or institutional players, or actually practitioners in the area of creative traditions. This could happen if the idea somehow gets around that the forum is an event like any of the other events that you come to and just talk... We have tried to encourage the people participating in the fair to take part in the "forum" section too, explaining to them that it will not just be discussions but a dialogue that will be summarised in a mini-final report that we will attempt to get on to the desks of institutions potentially interested in the subject it covers. The network thus created will be the concrete expression of what remains active after the project is completed: a network in which people

can draw inspiration from one another. As for those who come as visitors, they too may be potential entrepreneurs in this area, they too may have ideas, because what we are putting on display is not only ideas that have been given physical form but rather models of good practice. So my personal challenge and my fears are concerned with how we can manage to give this Romania of Creative Traditions project – which deserves something large-scale and involving a very major economic commitment – the publicity that it needs in order for it to be able to evolve. And I think that it is only on the first day of the fair that we will be able to judge the degree to which we have succeeded.

**Corina Iosif: How far does this Forum go and what are its limits?**

**Vintilă Mihăilescu:** I was about to say that it has no limits... In fact, the Forum of Creative Traditions has not been conceived as a free-standing one-off event, potentially repeatable every year. As we have already said, it is not a “fair”, an “exhibition”, but a continuous process. Of course, we are starting this year with a launch, an inaugural event, but the activity of the Forum will go on after that, in the virtual realm, via a platform that will continue the work of identifying initiatives belonging to our sphere of interest, making them known and promoting them, along with encouraging interaction between creators, craftsmen and designers in the rural and urban environment, commentary from the public, and so on. There will also be other “events”, some already projected and others that will be planned as the project continues. Obviously we also need a space where results can be exhibited from time to time, but what is essential is to stimulate the *process* of ensuring these results find their place in a melting-pot in which cultured and (still) popular ingredients, crafts and creative industries, “traditional” and current techniques can be combined. And this must be done without imposing or even suggesting any “necessary” convergence between them. The Forum is thus a “work in progress”, and even its initiators neither know – nor even wish to know! – what will come of it over the course of time.

**Corina Iosif: How do “creative traditions” fit into “Creative Europe”?**

**Vintilă Mihăilescu:** Creative Europe 2014-2020, and especially its Culture sub-programme, has the explicit aim of strengthening and widening specific areas of trans-European collaboration and of opening culture up as much as possible to new communication technologies and business models. Current European policy in the area of patrimony (and, by implication, in that of “traditions”, our particular field of interest) is in fact a continuation of that pioneered by UNESCO immediately after the Second World War, when Aldous Huxley was the President of the organisation. In line with this, the Creative Europe 2014-2020 platform states explicitly: “Culture is likewise a major resource for economic development, job creation and social cohesion, offering at the same time potential for urban and rural revitalisation and for the promotion of sustainable tourism.” I believe we can identify with all these desiderata. However, I also believe that we have our own particular contribution to make to this “European symphony”: the way in which we are attempting to combine traditions as a *source* (from the past) and as a *resource* (for the future), the result of this reciprocal transfiguration being material objects, products and practices that are not now either well conserved traditions, or well oriented development, but a kind of... “third way.” That may sound a little much to claim, but for the moment it is the only formulation that comes to my mind.

From this point of view, this year’s Creative Traditions Forum is a kind of experiment and avant-premiere for 2018, which will be the European Year of Cultural Patrimony, the centenary of the Great Union, and the year when this initiative of ours will, we hope, reach its mature expression.

**Photo credits: Cristina Hurdubaia.**





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# Inside the Creative Traditions Workshops

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### ABSTRACT

The interviews that make up this section of the journal illustrate some of the particular challenges facing recent initiatives to recover, in a creative way, a range of artisan products. These are projects that go beyond the standard efforts at re-activation and re-animation that created a cultural landscape generally characterised by inertia. Mention should also be made here of two other equally interesting projects, Mesteshukar ButiQ, a Bucharest-based social enterprise working at giving new value to traditional Roma craftsmanship, and PATZAIKIN Design, which grounds its inspiration in the fishermen's traditions of the Danube Delta, the name being a tribute paid to the world-famous canoeist Ivan Patzaichin.

### KEYWORDS

Creative traditions, design, craftsmanship, knowledge.

## In conversation with Mihai Sibianu, co-founder, along with Marlene Stanciu, of the DELTACRAFT project

DELTA CRAFT is a project that aims to revitalise traditional crafts in the Danube Delta region by means of collaboration between craftsmen and designers in the creation of a collection of objects that draw their inspiration from the culture, history, resources and techniques that are typical of that area.

### 1. What were the circumstances that led to the birth of the DELTACRAFT project?

Two organisations were involved – KraftMade, of which I am a co-founder, and Ecopolis, an association that deals mainly with environmental projects in the Danube Delta region but also has some social and conservation ones. They wanted

to do something more outside the box in the area of handicrafts, while we already had several years' experience of combining crafts, using traditional methods of working, with contemporary design. So Ecopolis suggested that we form a partnership and apply jointly for Norwegian funding, which we duly received. We helped them with the writing of the project proposal and subsequently drew up a curatorial concept, chose the designers who would be involved and co-ordinated the entire creative and production process. So the circumstances were favourable.

### 2. What do you think makes this project stand out from the other (not to say the floods of) craft revitalisation initiatives that have sprung up over the past decade?

Well, in the first place our principle was to give prominence to a very large number of craftsmen. On equal terms with the designers. That was one thing. Besides that, our collections have always been based on

painstaking research. This is the principle we have followed in all our projects. So we're not talking about let's make a cool little wooden chair 'cos we've seen one in the museum and we'll change the shape of the legs slightly and



Photo credits:  
DELTACRAFT.

put our talented-designer name on it. Giving prominence to the craftsmen, getting them directly involved in the process, searching for solutions together – if you do that you give a somewhat more authentic and substantial character to things and everyone learns something new, the craftsmen from us and we from them. If you involve the craftsmen in this way, the results of their work will often surprise even them.

*3. What stages did you go through in developing the project, and which were the most difficult/challenging parts of them (and obviously, how did you overcome the problems)?*

I don't want to say a great deal about our style of working in terms of how it was developed and structured in stages. There were certainly many shapes to the approach with which we researched the area, then we drew up a curatorial concept and formed the design team by taking account of certain considerations. I remember having in front of me a list with the names of about 30 designers on it, and working on it. The most difficult parts of the process – and this was a surprise to me – came not from the outside, from the craftsmen, but from inside the team when – the perennial disease of the Romanian boss, who thinks he knows everything and is good at everything – our partners began to interfere in the creative process by entering into face-to-face discussion with the designers, the day

before we were due to begin work, regarding a concept that had already (and not even recently) been fixed and committed to paper. This naturally led to a mini-chaos, with opposing factions forming on the spot. I could go on about it for two hours, but to cut a long story short, this interference had a considerable influence on the flow of the project; the pointless tensions and posturing it generated certainly did not help things develop well. We didn't really succeed in smoothing out the divergent positions; what we did manage to do, from our point of view, was to focus on results.

*4. Is this a project that could be replicated by using the methodology you employed? If so, now that a number of years have passed, what do you think could be added if someone wanted to start something similar?*

It could certainly be replicated. The working methodology came entirely from KraftMade, I've used it several times. But I'm not convinced that just anyone could replicate it. You need somewhat of an overview and then hard work and patience. What would I add? More time in the field, more time with the craftsmen both on the job and over a glass, chatting. We were always in a rush, we had less than two weeks in which to devise and produce an entire collection – quite an achievement really.

*5. You say in your written description of the project that "the designers and craftsmen worked together, influencing the process by which the object is created and influencing each other". Could you give an illustration of situations of this kind / the dynamics of a balance of this kind?*

There are objects that all of the three designers have worked on equally, and yes, as I said, we encourage the craftsmen to become involved in the process; we have asked our designers to be open to this as well. Experienced craftsmen with a vocation for what they do have a kind of wisdom in finding all manner of instant solutions that we who have had too much education lose along the way. The best example in this regard is the

craftsmen with whom we have worked on the leather part. The chair and that large tassel are objects that have come to look as they do precisely because we have fitted in, with and drawn inspiration from, the craftsmen's way of doing things. For the tassel we used a simple method of decorating the strips of leather which resembles the way they do the same thing for horse harnesses or even for the small tassels used for horses' ears. The leather on the chair, likewise, has a plaited motif that I have seen them use on other objects. So these items would not have existed in their present form if we had gone to them with a sketch and said "Make this". The designers got their inspiration from the craftsmen and the craftsmen turned out something that they had never made before, even though it was so close to what they were making day in, day out.

6. *What happened later to the objects produced as a result of the workshop? Are some of them being produced in limited batches, or did they remain at the stage of temporary experiments?*

Sadly – you know how it is in Romania – everything good is either only good on paper, or only in a declaratory way, but if it manages to be good for real then it's sure to die speedily. The things we made there were meant to be prototypes and the partner organisation had initially taken responsibility for continuing to make (in small batches, to order) the objects that had been created. We had agreed this together specifically so as to create a sustainable project, with the purpose of giving the



community of craftsmen with whom we had been collaborating a genuine opportunity to become rather more visible and in the second



Photo credits:  
DELTACRAFT.

place to put some honestly earned money into their pockets. It seems that our partners didn't have the capacity to implement it, so it stayed at the stage of a temporary and even transitory experiment.

7. *Based on your experience with this project, to what extent do you believe that creative industries can contribute to the promotion of Romania's material and immaterial cultural patrimony (at the empirical level there seems to be a tension between the idea of small batch artisan work based on repeated actions and a limited range of objects, and the idea of design, focused rather more on unique objects or a limited series – I may be mistaken here)? And, why not, perhaps you could tell us what pitfalls they need to avoid when they decide to dovetail these two approaches? (Here you can also make some useful critical observations about what you can see happening, without necessarily going into precise details if you don't think it's OK to do so.)*

If we did this with TATAIA as far back as 2009 it is clear that it can be done. So creative industries can make a significant contribution to promoting Romania's cultural patrimony, both its material and its immaterial aspects. In the first place they can do this by not promoting what is not genuine. And they can also do this through methods of good practice, by carrying out thorough research in particular directions, they can promote our cultural patrimony by involving people who have know-how in their projects, they can write about our patrimony, they can stage performances that combine the old and the new, they can do all kinds of things. They can

Photo credits:  
DELTACRAFT.

invent ways of doing this, because that's why they're called creative industries. They only need to want to do this and they must do it

in your fingers and calloused palms. That's the only way we can keep a little bit of history alive.

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### In conversation with Marlene Stanciu, co-founder, along with Alex Herberth, of the SOXEN 2.0 project

#### 1. What were the circumstances that led to the birth of the Soxen 2.0 collection?

The Soxen 2.0 collection came into being as the result of a meeting between two creative people with Saxon roots who were interested in the cultural heritage of the Saxons of Transylvania, Marlene Stanciu (founder of KraftMade, anthropologist, textile designer) and Alex Herberth (wood restorer, furniture design and production, traditional and modern wood preparation techniques). Both are involved in exploring the harmony and natural balance that exist between time-honoured wisdom and contemporary usefulness, with an emphasis on sustainable materials and the narrative potential of the objects. The concept had a natural birth from their mulling craft lore acquired over the years, and this is reflected in the objects in the collection: the rocking chair ½ 7B, the loom-woven carpet T3, Schemel – the three-legged stool that draws its inspiration from milking stools and the shoemaking tradition of the Transylvanian Saxons, and the Stamm bench. What this process of creation and production brought to the surface was that the stories objects have to tell are always subjective and extremely personal, springing from the social significance attached to them and a specific understanding of history and cultural heritage. And when the heritage is a shared one and the understanding goes deep, it is natural that the result should be harmony.

The Soxen 2.0 collection draws its inspiration from the craft techniques and cultural consciousness of the Saxons of Transylvania, both being expressed in the objects in the collection, some of which are one-offs while others have short production runs. The interior design items are made using traditional carpentry and loom-woven



Exhibition view Romanian Design Week.  
Photo credits: The Institute.

properly, deontologically speaking. There are all kinds of initiatives out there that on the face of it are thoroughly laudable, but I can't see any genuine and sincere promotion going on if you don't bring into play real generators and suppliers. You can make things on a production line for profit, traditional chairs using lasers and CNC (Computer Numerical Control) or Romanian blouses by the ton on a sewing machine, naturally you can. But as I have said, the real wisdom lies in the hands of people who have done this all their lives and have done it as a vocation and with love, they've done it for the sake of tradition and meaning, for folklore, not just because it was financially advantageous or because it was the current trend. Taking crafts as an example, if you don't involve these people in the process, if you don't give them the opportunity to have plenty of work so that they can take on apprentices to learn the craft and keep it going, everything gets lost, becomes redundant, becomes fashion and nothing more. So my advice is that we should avoid production lines, because there are enough people using them and very successfully too, and concentrate on short production runs and maybe even on one-off production, the things are more expensive that way I admit, but each one tells a story of the hard work that's gone into it, tacks stuck



fabrics. These techniques are intended to draw attention to the carefully-worked details that echo the practical and forward-thinking spirit that is part of the culture of Saxon craftsmen. They also examine the sources of Saxon aesthetic harmony and the reasons why things were made following a particular pattern, while testing out the contemporary practicality of archaic ideas of natural materials and a slow circuit of design, production and consumption (slow design). Like his grandfather, a *Sas* carpenter from the village of Ormeniș in Mureș County, Alex Herberth has been processing the wood in a sustainable way, using old-fashioned tools and traditional joints, wanting to show that perfection does not depend on modern technology but that patience, skill, and a thorough knowledge of the materials you are using are more important. The woven fabrics are created, also by hand, by Marlene Stanciu – as her Saxon great-grandmother from the village of Cincu, Brașov County, used to do – on a loom dated 1808 and using materials that were typical ones in that period – nettle stem fibre and wool. The process of building up the fabric millimetre by millimetre is a painstaking and laborious one, beginning with the retting of the nettle stalks and ending with the finished fabric; it involves patience and rhythm, like a kind of ritual or meditation in which the thoughts and feelings of every day are mirrored. For this reason, objects worked in the slow design manner age gracefully and will endure as a legacy for future generations, just as those who fashion them inherited the wisdom of things made in aesthetic and practical harmony with nature.

2. *What do you think makes this project stand out from the other (not to say the floods of) craft revitalisation initiatives that have sprung up over the past decade?*

In 2013, when we thought of KraftMade, the idea of returning to the sources of Romanian culture and rediscovering our identity was already in existence, but there were not as yet projects like ours. So we set out with a wish to discover what craftsmen there still were in Romania, what they knew

how to do and what problems they faced, and we looked at designers too in the same way. It was only after a year of research in which we covered an enormous amount of ground, going into dozens and dozens of houses in the country and talking with village people, and another year of exploratory production together with designers, that we came up with viable solutions and projects that could express with precision the problems and ways of solving them in which we believe. In brief, what we do is genuine craft, by encouraging traditional techniques, that is, the how and why of the way good, sustainable things were made by the craftsmen of old. This is a truly fundamental difference between us and the majority of projects that market themselves as restoring value to Romanian identity but in fact just stick symbols on to their objects to tap into a kind of nostalgia that is patriotic or harks back to an idealised long-lost country childhood – without ever facing up to the issues of the sustainability or ethics of their production.

The fact that we promote the concept of *slow design* means that we are interested in



Schemel.  
Photo credits:  
KraftMade.

making a sustainable object that can tell a story, that has cultural roots that can be deciphered in the key of the region from which it comes. We are interested in the conditions in which the craftsman works, his being paid fairly, the local and sustainable sourcing of materials used, the quality of finish for the design market, promoting the fact that a person with a name and an identity and not someone anonymous is producing the object concerned using traditional techniques that come from our immaterial patrimony, and the object's



potential for ageing well. In addition, we are concerned that traditional techniques should not be lost, which means that we emphasise the transfer of skills to younger people, and we live this out in the first place by practising craft activities with our own hands.

*3. What stages did you go through in developing the project, and which were the most difficult/challenging parts of them (and, obviously, how did you overcome the problems)?*

The Soxen 2.0 collection is atypical compared with the other collections we have produced up to now. The fact that we have been both designers and craftsmen, and that the *Sas* cultural terrain into which we have launched ourselves is part of our roots, has meant that this collection has come to us naturally and has been for both of us a rediscovery of our identity – these objects into which we have put our labour and emotions and feelings over the several months during which we have planned, experimented with and produced them. So it has been a delight at every step.

At KraftMade we have always relied on short production runs and one-off objects, because we believe that this is the area of production a craftsman should be involved in. Thus it is that in the Soxen 2.0 collection too we have objects that can be reproduced, but they will never look the same. For example, because the wood we use is sourced locally and seasoned naturally in the air for three to five years, we offer clients the varieties of wood we already have in stock, so that one Schemel can be made of apple wood, another from pear and a third from oak, and this diversity of theirs tells the sustainability story. And the motifs of tulips and triangles woven into the T3 carpet are always a bit different, because we wanted them to express the beauty of imperfection, to be guided by what felt right when they were made, and to bear the mark of the hand, which is different from the perfection of machinery. These are things it is still difficult to explain to clients on the Romanian market, but right from the beginnings of KraftMade we have ensured

that every project included educating the client and the public, because we have built up a market that did not exist before.

*4. Is this a project that could be replicated by using the methodology you employed?*

KraftMade has implemented a methodology that functions well in the area of projects that involve collaboration between traditional crafts and contemporary design; we have tested and optimised it and also put it at the disposal of a variety of partners who have sought our advice as consultants over the years. We are committed to the authenticity of the final product, which depends on the respecting of cultural significance, and to a rigorous application of the process of research-grounding-creation-production and of the concept of slow design, all of these being steered by constant mediation between the two worlds. That is, you need a genuine and as profound as possible knowledge of the cultural area from which your objects draw their inspiration and of the materials and techniques you are going to use, then you need to distil and put in general terms the concept that tells the story of your object, and only then do you define and produce an object that will have meaning and functionality in this cultural ecosystem. When these principles are strictly followed, things work and are sustainable.

*5. What are the ingredients of the balance between the work of the artisan (a series of precise actions repeated over the years during which the same objects are produced time after time) and the direction given by the designer?*

Ideally, in order for things to function and for these two worlds of craft and design to produce something coherent, the craftsman and the designer ought to spend time together and effectively to work together. In this fast-moving world KraftMade makes up for the absence of this through production mediation. Because we know our craftsmen extremely well, we know who to call on for each project and we know what will work and what will not, depending on that particular craftsman's

personality. But if a designer is going to enter into a working relationship with a craftsman for the first time he needs to understand in advance what his abilities and limitations are and – this is very important – to find a language they can both speak, one that goes beyond lines on the computer screen or digital utopias.

Our experience has shown us that not all craftsmen have the ability to initiate a design, that is, to apply known techniques to a product that from a cultural point of view is foreign to them. For this reason, taking account of the Romanian cultural context, it is the designer's job to make an extra effort to ensure that the craftsman has understood the product from both a technical and an aesthetic point of view before he sets to work.

We have summarised our advice to craftsmen in a little guide, "Made with my own hands. The good craftsman's guide", published in 2013 and available online [in Romanian] at [https://issuu.com/kraftmade/docs/facut\\_cu\\_mana\\_mea](https://issuu.com/kraftmade/docs/facut_cu_mana_mea).

*6. What happened later to the objects you made for the collection? Are some of them being produced in limited batches, or did they remain at the stage of temporary experiments?*

The Soxen 2.0 collection has done well this year. After its launch at the "Redesign Crafts" exhibition during Romanian Design Week, it went on to the "Threads of Tradition" exhibition at the Madrid Design Centre, "Creative Traditions" at the Museum of the Romanian Peasant and then to Vienna Design Week. The collection is fully up and running and available for orders.

*7. Based on your experience with this project (and also with DELTACRAFT), to what extent do you believe that creative industries can contribute to the promotion of Romania's material and immaterial cultural patrimony? And, why not, perhaps you could tell us what pitfalls they need to avoid? (Here you can also make some useful critical observations about what you can see happening, without necessarily going into precise details if you don't*

*think it's OK to do so.)*

Designers can play a vital role in promoting the immaterial patrimony if they are willing to do so. Based on our experience, we can say that those who have tried this method of production that involves craftsmen in the design process have found that the products have sold extremely well, as long as the principles we discussed earlier were respected. This was due to the added value conferred by the traditional techniques employed and by the fact that the items were handmade; these features were made a marketing point and increased their sales when compared with other products that they had designed. The only preconditions are that they should respect the people, employ traditional materials and techniques, and not make pseudo-products in which the marketing is full of hype but ethical and aesthetic content is lacking. I believe that the work of designers in Romania is affected by two issues. One is a lack of quality finish – and I cannot understand quite why, but perhaps they do not know how to request it or have not been able to find suitable producers. The other problem is that the story a product should have to tell is often absent.

These two missing features can be put in place if designers acquaint themselves with our immaterial heritage, because what gives products their defining quality is not a symbol or an image or some shape taken from artisan folklore but, we cannot say it sufficiently often, the way in which experience of materials and place produces a particular wisdom, defines an object's function and story. In the same way, we need to become aware the so-called "popular/folk craftsmen" who produce artisan wares, that is, decorative items, are an artificial invention of the last 60 years and are very different from the craftsmen who produce items for use, and it is this latter kind of immaterial heritage that we regard as valuable. In brief, what designers stand to gain from a process of collaboration with craftsmen is authenticity and quality, while Romania's immaterial heritage thus has an opportunity, via designers and their promotion networks, to live on and to become a necessity once more.



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## V. Book Reviews

**Cristoph Brumann, and David Berliner (eds.), *World Heritage on the Ground. Ethnographic Perspectives*, New York and Oxford: Berghahn Publishers, 2016. Published in association with the European Association of Social Anthropology (EASA), vol. 28**

**Reviewed by Vintilă Mihăilescu**

*Professor, PhD., Department of Sociology, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Romania*

This work edited by Christoph Brumann and David Berliner delivers what it promises, that is, a skilful bringing-together of two equally legitimate approaches: a top-down one, which investigates UNESCO's World Heritage Program as a global institution, and a grassroots one, which seeks for local applications and implications of patrimonial decisions taken "up there." While Brumann has, as he himself admits, "never done such a World Heritage site study", he has had extensive experience of "participant observation of accessible meetings of the World Heritage system" (Brumann 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014), very much as Marc Abélès had of the EU institutions some years ago (Abélès 1992). By contrast, David Berliner has had intensive experience of fieldwork at Luang Prabang in Laos (Berliner 2010, 2011, 2012). It is at the intersection of these views and interests that the general question of the book arises: "What does World Heritage actually do on the ground of the World Heritage properties, far away from the meeting halls where the committee takes its decisions?" The general answer, as Berliner puts it, is that "by attempting to preserve spaces, practices and objects, UNESCO experts and national heritage professionals effectively transform them."

If patrimony/heritage is an old concern, its global dimension – greatly fuelled by UNESCO policies – is a rather more recent one. It is rooted, in a way, in a warm-hearted and broader UNESCO project inspired by its first president, Julian Huxley: the writing of a "History of Mankind", leaving Euro-centrism

behind and holding out an image of peace and understanding to traumatised post-war humanity (Duedahl 2011; see also Cameron and Rössler 2013). Ascribing global time and significance to local people was already in the air. The project as such failed, but the route of heritage proved to be much more successful in achieving the same goal. In convention after convention, UNESCO was opening up the field of patrimony, bridging natural and cultural patrimony, material and immaterial (that is, *Oral and Intangible*) patrimonies, and moving from *legacy* to *heritage* in order to link past with future and ensure sustainable development. Soon patrimony became an all-embracing "allegory" (Choay 1996), produced its own vocabulary and values (e.g. Harrison 2013; Samuels and Rico 2015), and called forth in return more and more critiques, theoretical and empirical alike. While they would normally have appeared in a range of different publications, such contributions to patrimony issues in general and UNESCO World Heritage ones in particular started to be more and more grouped together by common topics, cultural spaces or shared approaches in reference collected volumes (e.g. the Berghahn Key Issues in Cultural Heritage Series edited by William Logan and Laurajane Smith).

In this dynamic context, Brumann and Berliner's collection of "ethnographies of encounters" stands out through the problematic unity it presents beyond/behind the diversity of empirical evidence, with each contributor tracking what happens between the UNESCO offices and the UNESCO protected heritage

site he/she is observing “on the ground”, and raising, from the point of view of his/her personal field experience, those “fundamental questions (UNESCO’s) bureaucratic machinery has often little time for asking.”

With only one exception, the case studies in this volume are chosen from around the non-Euro-American world, in remote places mainly approached through the “tourist gaze” (Urry 2002): the Medina of Fez (Morocco), the Mosques of Timbuktu (Mali), the old town of Lijiang and the Yin Xu archaeological site (China), Luang Prabang (Laos), Angkor (Cambodia), the Borobudur and Prambanan temples (Indonesia), Chichén Itzá (Mexico), the Kondoa-Irangi Rock Art, the Tadrart Acacus, and the Valcamonica Rock Drawings sites (Tanzania, Libya, and Italy), the Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove (Nigeria), and the Mapungubwe Cultural Landscape (South Africa). The corresponding ethnographies are grouped in three categories: Cities, Archaeological Sites, and Cultural Landscapes. While all are critical – and sometimes even overwhelmed by disappointment (Jasper Chalcraft) – none of the authors are either “patrimony believers” or “patrimony atheists” as Brumann (2014) has it, but simply committed to the results of their in-depth ethnographies.

The eleven case studies stand for eleven different situations too, with their individual contexts, interests at stake, social actors and/or values. Nevertheless, in different ways and to different degrees, some fundamental criticisms and questions underpin them all. Up-stream, there is the fundamental question of “Whose patrimony?” as addressed, for example, by Noel Salazar. Traditionally, “world patrimony” belongs to the World; but how can a local/national patrimony be deterritorialised? Taking place “on the ground”, World Heritage literally *makes place*. In a complementary way, it also *makes time*, inscribing local stories in a global History, thus imposing a universalistic view – which Chalcraft does not hesitate to call “a kind of colonial imposition” – over local visions of both past and present, without UNESCO’s policymakers even being aware of the counter-memories they are thus oppressing (Di Cesari

2010). “Why are some stories told and others ignored? Who decides if, when, and how to tell a community’s story or how to interpret and present the history of a community for public consumption and representation for future generations?” (Jackson 2010). UNESCO’s World Heritage program thus reveals its hegemonic power dimension.

This is more visible in the multi-layer system of global-national-local interactions of actors and competing interests that interposes itself between global bureaucracy and local practices. When UNESCO policies hit the ground, they are filtered by national ones, and sometimes come into conflict with them. At other times the interaction may go in the opposite direction: unable to ensure the safeguarding of their particular outstanding heritage, countries may appeal for UNESCO protection. A recent example would be the Romanian government’s recent efforts to have Roşia Montana placed on UNESCO’s patrimonial list. A further issue is that World Heritage values do not necessarily match local understandings and interests. Generally, locals do enjoy the material benefits that come with patrimonialisation, but in most cases this is so for only some of them; staging World Heritage brings touristification, which in due course implies gentrification and in the majority of instances de-localisation of the traditional residents. The Cultural Landscape convention may conserve a history- and value-laden local space by converting it into a global framed heritage-scape, but it may also “save” it from the locals’ own concurrent and *sui generis* particular heritage-scapes (Gillot *et al.* 2013). As Manon Istasse highlights in an insightful manner when presenting the case of the Fez medina, such heritage-scapes are also a matter of “affect and senses.” Yet “World Heritage policies and heritage policies in general (...) miss both the sensory and the affective aspects of heritage” – what she terms, following Muriel Girard, “les émotions patrimoniales” (patrimonial sentiments). “This stance”, she concludes, “often leads (heritage experts) to deny any heritage competences to inhabitants. (They) are accused of not being educated about heritage preservation and of not taking proper





care of their houses; they are believed to simply let their houses deteriorate, to want to replace traditional mosaic with modern tiles and to have no taste." This, once again, also applies to Romania, where country people find themselves accused of spoiling their peasant traditions, which have to be saved against them by state regulations. To state it as a norm, a heritage-scape is what it has to be for everybody, not what local residents actually feel about it.

A further issue is that UNESCO World Heritage policies and values face challenges from business interests, with "patrimony entrepreneurs" frequently having the last word in the local implementation of the heritage project. The question then arises: sustainable development for whom?

Last but not least, as dramatically shown by Charlotte Joy for the cases of Timbuktu and Gao, what if your heritage is my offence, if international protection of your sacred heritage is my "on the ground" blasphemy?

After reading the whole volume, the least one

can say is that World Patrimony is not always a blessing for its local "owners." In a world of "economy of experience" (Pine and Gilmore 1998) and "ethics of authenticity" (Taylor 1992), the "democratisation of heritage" promoted by UNESCO is of course being welcomed by millions of foreign tourists whose "exo-nostalgia it feeds", but it is also overwhelming locals' "endo-nostalgia", as Berliner has it. Whatever its good intentions, UNESCO thus cannot be considered as totally innocent of what is taking place "on the ground."

But does this mean that UNESCO is guilty? The editors make their stance clear at the end of the Introduction: "The chapters (in this book) should curtail over-enthusiastic belief in the idea that an appreciation for heritage can simply be transported intact over large spatial and cultural distances: what we present are mixed and often complex messages. They neither unanimously speak for demonising the World Heritage venture, nor do they encourage its glorification."

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**Margaret Beissinger, Speranța Rădulescu, and Anca Giurchescu (eds.), *Manele in Romania: Cultural Expression and Social Meaning in Balkan Popular Music*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2016**

**Reviewed by Claudiu Oancea**

*PhD., Independent Scholar, Romania.*

**M***anele in Romania* provides the first comprehensive analysis of one of the most controversial, but also one of the most dynamic popular music genres to emerge on the Romanian music scene during the past thirty years, a genre whose roots extend, however, as far as the 19th century, as several of the contributors to the volume claim.

But what is all the fuss about *manele*? *Manele* (singular: *manea*) are controversial for various reasons. Firstly, because of their association with Roma people, secondly because of their sound, which is perceived as “Oriental”, and thirdly because of their lyrics, which deal with sex, love, power, and informaleconomy. Everyone in Romania has heard of the music genre, yet the reactions of people from various social strata, various age and professional categories, are always different. These reactions range from outright disgust to enthusiastic admiration, and often include a kind of self-imposed ignorance. Romanians hear, listen to, and complain about *manele*; still, any attempt at defining them has remained vague, at least before the publication of the book under review. George Pruteanu, one of the most famous Romanian public intellectuals and politicians of the 1990s and 2000s, used to qualify *manele* as being “what mildew is to bread: something that alters.”<sup>1</sup>

In making such a comparison, Pruteanu was expressing the view held by most Romanian intellectuals, as well as middle and upper class socio-professionals. Under various names, and in different

forms, *manele* had been part of the music underground/ periphery since the 1970s, gaining more and more popularity throughout the 1980s and especially in the 1990s, when they became acknowledged by their name. Lately, in Romania’s public sphere, *manele* have become the negative expression of a social and cultural context marked by the political rupture of 1989 and the passage from an officially closed society, within which state approved *fakelore*<sup>2</sup> was salient, and access to Western popular music genres was restricted, to one dominated by rapid Westernization and intense capitalism.

As it embarks on the ambitious task of tackling *manele*, the book under review surpasses in depth and width of analysis the Romanian public sphere magazine articles, editorials, or highbrow essays which have addressed this topic. The volume brings together ethnomusicology, anthropology, cultural studies to provide a detailed and nuanced account of *manele* as a music genre, and as a social and cultural phenomenon. Furthermore, the book’s interdisciplinary approach covers various facets of *manele*, their performers, their audiences, their lyrics and the way in which they represent the transition of Romanian society and culture from the communist period to one marked by capitalism, neoliberalism, Europeanization, and globalization.

The content of the volume is divided into nine chapters which form three thematic clusters. The first cluster explores *manele* in musical, historical, and geographical

1. George Pruteanu, “Un fel de jurnal despre manele (A Kind of Journal about *Manele*)”, last accessed June 15th, 2017, <http://www.pruteanu.ro/9ultima/manele.htm>.

2. By *fakelore* one understands “imitation folklore created to pass as genuinely traditional.” See The Merriam-Webster Dictionary, last accessed June 26th, 2017, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fakelore>. For *fakelore* in the Romanian socialist context, see Anca Giurchescu, “The Power of Dance and Its Social and Political Uses”, *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, Vol. 33 (2001).

terms. The first chapter, written by ethnochoreologist Anca Giurchescu and ethnomusicologist Speranța Rădulescu, provides a historical and contemporary overview of the *manea* phenomenon in Romania. The authors begin by claiming Ottoman aristocratic roots for the genre, then they discuss its Romani appropriation in the second half of the nineteenth century and its contemporary influences coming from Romani, Balkan, and Euro-American popular music genres. The chapter also focuses on the diversity of *manele* in their instantiations, such as songs, dances, and performances. Closely linked to life-cycle events, such as weddings or baptisms, as well as to private and public events that are part of nightlife entertainment, *manele* target a variety of audiences, including both the *nouveaux riches* of post-1989 capitalism and the lower classes, for whom the world depicted in *manele* (re)presents the standard of living they wish to achieve.

The second chapter, written by musicologist Costin Moisil, focuses on the history of *manele*, from the nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. He relies on a variety of primary historical sources and secondary literature to challenge Andrei Oișteanu's theory according to which *manele* were a legacy of the Phanariot era. Thus, Moisil states that *manea* was a generic term, which had been in use since the mid-nineteenth century, referring to any so-called "oriental" music, either previous or contemporary. The usage of the term becomes more important, as the nineteenth century is marked by an ever-increasing influence of Western styles of music, which can be correlated with the creation of the Romanian nation-state based on Western European models. By the early twentieth century, the loss of familiarity with Turkish music meant that *manea* would become an umbrella term for any new musical (sub) genre which bore any "Oriental"/ "Turkish" sounding influence.

In Chapter 3, Speranța Rădulescu

discusses how the music of *manele* is structured, focusing on the ways in which the genre is created and disseminated. Rădulescu underlines that contemporary *maneliști* (performers of *manele*) descend from *lăutari* (traditional, usually Romani, musicians). This descendance informs the ability of *manele* to absorb new influences from different music genres and to appropriate them. Thus, innovation can be achieved through absorbing new influences, recuperating tradition, and remodeling. According to Rădulescu, *manele* lost their pre-1989 stylistic homogeneity, becoming increasingly diverse after the fall of the communist regime. Their audience also became more heterogeneous. Hence, rural *manele* took on regional influences, while urban *manele* incorporated Western (both European and American popular music influences). This led to the creation of so-called eclectic *manele*, in which multiple influences ended up homogenizing the songs, by cancelling out each other's effects.

In the fourth chapter, ethnomusicologist Margaret Beissinger puts forth a comparative approach to *manele* by placing the genre in the context of other Balkan ethno-pop genres, such as Serbian *turbo-folk*, Bulgarian *chalga*, or Greek *laika*. All these genres feature a multitude of similarities in regard to their contemporary origins, to influences from Middle-Eastern popular music, to common-themed lyrics, or to spatial and temporal contexts of performance. Similarly, these genres trigger *nesting orientalisms* within their own countries. However, they are also set apart by significant differences, in addition to linguistic ones: they are deliberately national in their stylistic construction, and they have been heavily influenced by their own historical, social, and cultural background. For instance, one important difference that Beissinger underlines is the fact that while performers of *turbo-folk* or *chalga* in Serbia and Bulgaria respectively are female members of the ethnic majority population,

3. Speranța Rădulescu. 2016. "Actors and Performance", in *Manele in Romania: Cultural Expression and Social Meaning in Balkan Popular Music*, eds. Margaret Beissinger, Speranța Rădulescu, and Anca Giurchescu, 148. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

performers of *manele* in Romania are predominantly male Roma. For Beissinger, the explanation for the male bias of modern day *manele* lies in their descendance from an urban genre, performed at the turn of the twentieth century by male Roma, as well as in the nature of the power relations between patrons and performers within the communities where the author has carried out her research.

The second cluster of chapters, from 5 to 8, focuses on the interactions between the participants in the performance of *manele*: performers, audiences, patrons of *manele* (including *wise guys*, or mObșters), mass-media etc. The first chapter in this second cluster, by Speranța Rădulescu, focuses on the actors of the *manea* performance, whether in terms of creation, consumption, or assessment. It argues that *manele* owe their success not only to their creators, or to their performers, but also to their audiences, whether fans or adversaries. According to the author, "*the real manea fans are students, young peasants, apprentices, workers, functionaries, greater or lesser businesspeople, and loafers.*"<sup>3</sup> Rădulescu also discusses the fans' ethnic background and shows that Romanians and Roma react differently to *manele*, particularly when it comes to dancing: while for the former dance is only an appendix, for the latter it is at the very heart of the *manea* performance. The adversaries of *manele* include intellectuals, elderly people, traditional *lăutari*, and inhabitants of rural areas. The latter reject the *manea* phenomenon and prefer to it what they deem to be rural music. In addition, urban-educated, middle-class young people may disregard *manele* altogether and lean towards Western popular music genres.

The sixth chapter of the volume, written by anthropologist Victor Stoichiță, focuses on the live performances of *manele*, whether these occur at weddings, baptisms, or at public events in night clubs. Relying on direct and indirect observation and on qualitative interviews with performers and consumers of *manele*, as well as on text

and musical analysis, Stoichiță construes instantiations of power and the idiom of parody, as manifested within performances of *manele*. He argues that *manele* concede the experience of alternative agencies: members of the audience may take on temporary new identities (such as those of *nouveaux riches*, mObșters, characters mentioned frequently in lyrics of *manele*) by "dedicating songs" (*dând dedicații*) and paying tips to the performers, whose songs and lyrics address the themes of financial potency and social respect.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, however, as Stoichiță argues, audiences may not take *manele* lyrics and performances seriously. Thus, their reaction is to parody *manele*, a cultural practice which Stoichiță finds present among casual listeners, as well as among performance audiences.

In his chapter, "*Manele and the Underworld*", writer Adrian Schiop pursues further analysis of the interrelation between performers of *manele* and their audiences. His main line of inquiry lies with the underworld, the post-1989 *nouveaux riches*, who have benefited (illegally) from the economic turmoil of contemporary Romania. It is to them that the performers of *manele* sing praises at private or public events. Taking a cue from Stoichiță's chapter, Schiop underlines the fact that *manele* performers, similarly to *lăutari*, never express their own feelings, or message, in their songs. Consequently, they act more like mediums, through which audiences convey their own desires. This, in turn, explains why live performances are the main income source for the performers of *manele*. However, for certain male performers, they have also become dangerous encounters with some of the more notorious figures of the crime world. It is during such live performances, described by the author as a form of semi-ritual, that songs are sung on commission, and money is circulated between musicians and mObșters. While performers of *manele* are despised by gangsters, primarily because they can be bought, they are also coveted by

4. Whenever a guest or a sponsor (the person who pays for the entire performance in the first place) gives a tip (*bacșiș*) to a *manea* performer, they might do this as a symbolic gesture for another person present at the event. The performer will take the money and announce to everyone the names of the donor and the addressee, as well as the sum paid by the donor.

the underworld, as an appropriate means to gain notoriety.

The last chapter of the book's second cluster, written by Beissinger, focuses on the village *manele*, or, as the author puts it, on "an urban genre in rural Romania." Relying on text and music analysis, as well as on participant observation, Beissinger details the narrowing gap between urban and rural culture, through the lens of *manele*. She points out that village musicians have continued traditional forms of culture, while concurrently acting as agents of cultural modernity, also because of their intense competition with urban ensembles.

The third cluster of the book consists of a chapter by anthropologist Vintilă Mihăilescu, on turbo-authenticity, and an epilogue by Rădulescu. It goes beyond the analysis of *manele* as mere musical performance, and it advances *manele* as a wider social and political phenomenon, with deeper implications, an issue at which the first two clusters of chapters only hinted. Thus, Mihăilescu addresses the phenomenon of *manelism*, which is directly related to what the author calls "the primitive accumulation of desire." By this, the author means a process triggered by the collapse of communism, which has led, through intensive Westernization, to the formation of the post-1989 "Romanian dream." This dream, the phantasm of the absolute winner facing society, is a recurring theme in lyrics of *manele*. Speranța Rădulescu's epilogue seconds Mihăilescu's reflections and contends that the changes in Romanian society have had an impact on the world of *manele* itself. The editors leave the story of *manele* with an open ending, as one cannot ascertain their future trajectory.

Overall the book combines descriptive and analytical approaches and, while specialized (ethno)musicological jargon is often used, the style employed is accessible. Together with the wealth of detailed and general information on *manele*, as well as on the historical and geo-political context of Romania and Southeast Europe, this

makes the book useful for both general audiences and specialized scholars. Of great importance is the website accompanying the volume, which includes maps, field research photos and, most importantly, audio and video recordings of *manea* performances.<sup>5</sup> Another great strength of the book (also symptomatic for the lack of secondary literature about the topic) lies in the different approaches undertaken by its authors, even if this leads, at times, to the overlapping of certain pieces of information.

This, however, is only a minor point of criticism for a book which opens new fertile ground for inquiries into the world of what Donna Buchanan has called "transnational ethnopop."<sup>6</sup> In the current context of *manele* becoming appropriated by urban, college-educated, middle-class audiences, *Manele in Romania* offers the reader a reminder of the fact that "mildew" (to come back to Pruteanu's term) has been and might as well be the source for aesthetic re-evaluations. The revisionism put forth by this book goes well beyond the aesthetic realm, and a Romanian translation of *Manele in Romania* would only contribute to a more thorough debate about the racial prejudices and the identity crises Romania has accumulated throughout its (post-communist) history.

For students of post-1989 Southeast Europe and Romania, this volume might well serve as an alternative history textbook, its often specialized terminology notwithstanding. For scholars of the region, as well as for those dealing with broader issues, such as the interrelation between music genres and society, Westernization, Orientalism, national identity de construction, the book under review is bound to become an indispensable, or, at least, a highly valuable reference.

5. See <http://www.manele-in-romania.ro/>. Sociologist, ethnologist, and amateur musician Florin Iordan is the website technician.

6. Donna Buchanan. 2007. "Oh Those Turks! Music, Politics, and Interculturality in the Balkans and Beyond", in *Balkan Popular Culture and the Ottoman Ecumene. Music, Image and Regional Political Discourse*, ed. Donna Buchanan, 41. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.

