

**Ethnography, ethnology and museology: a complex endeavor for  
the management of cultural inheritance**

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Field anthropological research within Romanian villages (and not only; our perception is that certain theoretical problems are also raised within many other European areas) has led to different perspectives in the last few years. We have gone over numerous opinions belonging to anthropologists, researchers, professors, or people of culture – however, in this paper we will attempt to tackle the matter from a ethnography museologist's perspective.

Not necessarily an original approach, but one to systematize and generate themes for reflection, we discuss four great problems, in and from field research, which generate a series of analyses in the efforts of modern thought:

- a. The informant's statute (that of the subject, source or interviewed)
- b. Subjectivity versus objectivity, generated by the researcher's attitude towards fieldwork
- c. A stronger and stronger emergency ethnology and risk anthropology
- d. From field to the museum archive, the anthropological exhibit and public relation

The cultural immaterial heritage is – of course – harder to store than the material one. In museums, field information requires a primary processing by digitizing it and then storing it in a specialty archive, organized after the modern museology principles. Afterwards, this information can be used and exploited within the museum, serving as a starting point for theme expos which will motivate the museum to become more open towards its public.

**a. Our informant, now and forever...**

The position of the specialist regarding the container of spiritual and material values he or she researches - also known as an informant, subject, source or any other way, is a sensitive one, given the fact that most of the times the relationship between them surpasses a simple verbal interaction. The statute of this informant is, in a certain amount, legitimate, when the popular artist or creator or artifact maker is concerned, but it is very uncertain when the average peasant tells the field ethnographer about times long ago.

We were talking, on a different occasion (1), about the barriers the researcher must surmount in order to get close to his or her subject: an ideological one – the fact that the remain peasant is still sensitive to the word „informant” as it makes them recall the zealous communist activists; then a psychological one which makes the peasants not get into sensitive, personal or intimate details (on sexuality, malignant rituals or their performers), of fear that the city researcher would make the information public and in turn mock his or her story teller; lastly there would be also language related barriers, in interethnic communities or even barriers involving a sacred oath concerning certain group affairs.

Assuming that the ethnologist researcher can get across all these barriers, the contact with the informant is to be initiated, to „feel” their availability and to obtain as much and as accurate information as possible. In a field ethnographer’s manual, Jean Copans (2) says that in the field of anthropology, a huge importance must be given to building a reference framework to come up with scientific studies, the portfolio of „first hand” data, supplied by the ethnographic inquiry.

Must problems arise in the case of the intangible heritage, that is when the researcher is interested not of material objects but of customs, traditions, and rituals guarded rather often only in the individual or group memory. This information must be recalled by the informant and given to the ethnologist. This is the information the researcher will refer to in his works, based on these he or she will build points of view. In these conditions, it is imperative that a legal framework be implemented to clarify the problems between researcher and informant. Because one of the most sensible problems which are risen by field researches that regarding the paternity of the data gathered on the field.

We believe that the paternity belongs to the informant, even though is but the container and not author per se, of the given information, which, in turn, he took from his or her predecessors. Normally, the information preserved on video or audio tape makes the object of a ethnographical archive and is processed by the specialist who employs it to support his or her ideas. Sure, most of the times, the researcher is professional enough to quote on the source but the question arises weather the researcher must always ask for permission of the subject in order to publish their opinions or observations. Quite often, the subject does not want to have their name disclosed, especially in the case of more esoteric or personal info, so as not to raise irony or exaggeration or simply not to become target for certain repercussions.

Moreover, simple people have a well-defined sense of the ridiculous and fear, sometimes, even the fact that the ethnographer might interpret in the wrong manner their comments and think that this interpretation might rebound onto the whole community, which can be ancient, conservative, out fashioned.

#### **b. Can a field ethnologist be truly objective?**

Between the other descriptive disciplines „ethnography consists of the elaboration and transformation of the field experience through writing, a written way to organize that which is visible, one of the main functions of this setting being the fight against forgetting” (3) and, himself aware of this thing, the researcher will always be in peril of judging, of valuing, of emphasizing or – on the contrary – to leave out details which seem irrelevant to him/herself but which are maybe vital to the group he or she studies.

Most of the field research is developed under the shape of ethnographical inquiries and employs a series of scientific methods, validated throughout time and accepted as being the most appropriate by the great theoreticians of this discipline. Preoccupied with this subject, Eleonora Sava starts from the idea that, most of the time. The answers to the questionnaires or interviews conducted by the field ethnologist are in fact acts of the language and not objective ethnographical objectives, that is, subjective points which start as a complex interaction between the observed subject and the ethnologist that observes. In other words, the objectivity of a paper is refutable, as long as it is born at the intersection between two horizons: the one of the emitter (the researcher who initiates the act of communication) and the receptor (the interviewed subject) (4).

Under such conditions, the data gathered by the ethnographers are no longer objective social facts, at least due to the fact that the researcher cannot be fully objective, debuting research with certain expectancies linked to his or her cultural horizon and

life experience, and the subject observed is aware, most of the times, that they need to give the researcher that which he or she is looking for so that he or she can be satisfied and the communication is finalized positively.

The situation is so much more obvious when the researcher is personally involved in the creation of certain facts, of enacting certain scenarios; in such situations, the peasant subjects are often so eager not to disappoint the „city” researcher that they are willing to give up exactness; we have all observed on such occurrences that the informants tend to speak „city talk” that is, give up their local dialect or to describe folkloric scenarios as if they had taken part to them, though they only heard them told by their real participants.

The same interpretation is given by Narcisa Stiuca: „the field is not just a spatial reality but a cultural one as well, defined by certain values but also by certain social relations that the researcher needs to acknowledge. His or her situation is a paradoxical one, if not unpleasant: on one side he must reach scientific exactness, giving up all cultural prejudice on one side and on the other he must integrate within the studied community to understand it and to profoundly analyze it” (5). In fact, no one accuses the ethnographer of not being objective, the discussion being in far more elastic terms: if possible he or she must give up all their cultural horizon and to declare him/herself absolutely objective.

The understanding of field gathered facts is a subjective endeavor because in order to decode facts, even if he subjects himself to a set of objective or objectivity patterns (i.e. to any ethnographer chants are a magical therapeutical practice etc), it is done personally, subjectively and conveying the facts carries the imprint of each researcher’s personality, because each pursues a different goal, each has a certain research subject and has an already made up mind on that given subject, certain research methods and consequently participates in a certain manner to building relationships between himself and the group he studies.

### **c. Risk and its management form an anthropological point of view**

Every society, in a well-defined historical moment, was put in the situation of confronting a certain risk. From a risk anthropology point of view, risk is defined as factor which can produce unbalance of any type, for a shorter or longer lapse of time; risk is different from sin or taboo or from disregarding a custom because all these situations are generated by acts of the individual, who, in turn is guilty of disturbing balance; in the case of risk however, someone else generates conflict and the whole community suffers.

The research is located within the well-defined sphere of the emergency ethnology or, more vastly, within the framework of „risk anthropology” (6), as it was shown above. The ethnological studies must target that „immensity of human culture” which the field ethnographer comes into contact with, creating a bond with the studied group (7); the appeal is made especially to collective memory, storing local history under all its aspects and which must serve as a subject for study of the ethnological campaigns after the model of archaeological salvage diggings.

If we are to speak of the necessity of research we would have to begin by saying that what we uncover these days on the field are but reminiscences of a Romanian tradition which have been guarded under the wave of industry and technology.

Urban civilization brings a series of structures which alter a great deal the village’s life – an urban cultural model based on globalization, computers, and standards – with a lack of specific identity. In this entire new social cultural context, witnesses, participants and actors disappear as the elders disappear. This is where the necessity of field research emerges in order to gather, compile and interpret data.

#### **d. From field to the museum archive, the anthropologic exhibit and public communication**

A fine museographer will always categorically know that the process of gathering field data is just the first half of the research equation. This is because the goal is to use the obtained data so that the field research results can become highlights for the future generations of specialist but also for the public.

Archiving the data is therefore essential. The databases in the museums become true archives and the modern technologies advise us to digitize the archives both in verbal and also photo form. The process of archiving is performed under strictly established rules, on information categories in a logic manner so that future access to the database is as friendly as possible.

Exhibiting the data is, we consider, the most spectacular part of using it. It involves not only the knowledge and skills of the museographer but also his ingenuity and creativity in order for the exhibit to be a live, dynamic and attractive one. The times for chronologic, one sided, narrow exhibits have been surpassed by the ne pace imposed by the modern anthropological exhibit. Each object can tell its own story in a context which is itself background for the story. The artifacts must talk themselves, employing modern means of media to complete their physical profile.

The perspective onto the exhibit is no longer a static one or unilaterally archaeological, ethnographic or historical, but a global anthropological vision which can outline epic phenomena. This is where the museographer's communication with the public intervenes, or better yet the communication of the artifact to the public, because the visitor must be stimulated to be able to weave his or her own tale starting from the explanations. Therefore each exhibit is a different experience for each visitor, who becomes participant to a world that he or she can build themselves, after being given the general outline.

Such concept regarding the exhibit makes place to the immaterial heritage as well, which is otherwise hard to use.

Even more, in the social, cultural and political context of the moment, of becoming members of the European space, the expos which will manage to outline the local ethnic side will become more and more sought for because they will be the ones to respond to the need for identity and legitimacy of the individual, who must often work either far away from his or her origin or in a massively urban and impersonal environment.

All these remarks - from gathering field data to digital archiving and making exhibits of it - will oblige the cultural media to reevaluate a museographer's work, which, we believe, will become of more and more importance in the coming times.

(1) Camelia Burghele – *Repere de cultură tradițională sălăjeană*, Zalău, 2006, p. 86 - 90 (cap. *Patrimoniul imaterial, o problemă deschisă. A fi sau a nu fi informator*)

(2) Jean Copans - *Introducere în etnologie și antropologie*, Iași, 1999, p. 34

(3) Francois Laplantine – *Descrierea etnografică*, Iași, 2000, p. 57

(4) Eleonora Sava – *Despre dinamica raporturilor observat – observant în Caietele ASER. Patrimoniul etnologic: concepte, atitudini, tendințe*, nr 3 / 2007, Oradea, 2008, p. 121

(5) Narcisa Știucă – *De la descrierea etnografică la scriitura etnologică*, în *Caietele ASER. Cercetări actuale*, nr 1 /2005, Oradea, 2006, p. 67

(6) Cosmina Maria Berindei - *Argumente pentru cercetări de antropologia riscului în satele românești*, în *Caietele ASER*, nr 3/2007, Oradea, 2008, p. 143 - 150

(7) Daniel Fabre - *L ethnologie et ses sources*, în Gerard Althabe, Daniel Fabre, Gerard Lenclud - *Vers une anthropologie de present*, Paris, 1995, p. 50