

PREMODERN FOLK CULTURE AND CONTEMPORARY AVATARS

Laura Iliescu

Abstract

My research works explore cultural expressions created during oral formalized communication, which reveal informal knowledge, philosophical views and coordinates of creativities that, in a way or another, can be related to folk tradition and to its contemporary hypostases, as well.

My main domains of interest, as configured in the habilitation thesis, are: • orality and literacy in premodern and contemporary times: popular books, hagiographies, apocrypha, and folklore; writing and reading practices; second and virtual orality; • informal knowledge and oral performance; ironsmithing; • ethnology of mountainous space; • ethnology of dreams and dreaming; • folk genres: fairy tale, legend (with a special interest on supernatural encounter narratives, beliefs narratives and their ritual continuity), charm, ritual funeral song; • monographical typologies of religious figures in the Romanian folklore; St. Elijah, Mother of God; • folk religion: theoretical studies; devotional and magic practices; interrituality and shared sacred spaces; • digital humanities and the study of folklore; fairy tales and video games; • anthropology of the body; • creating, archiving and editing documents of oral culture; rural fieldwork. These fields of research does not simply represent successive stages of my professional biography, but are harmonically articulated in synchrony.

The habilitation thesis is structured in two parts. While the first one analytically exposes the research achievements I carried out between 2003 (the year of the PhD defence) and 2023 as a scholar employed by the Romanian Academy, as principal investigator or member of national and international team projects, and as associate professor at the University of Bucharest, the second one presents the topics I intend to develop in the near future.

The first chapter argued that orality, with its nuanced corollary of variability, interactive communication, anonymity and collective character, was one of the parameters that defined premodern practices of literacy. In this regard, the manuscripts of popular books were not closed and imuable texts, but series of versions created through the performances of copying and recomposing a model through writing it, reading it, and listening to it in different cultural, social and historical contexts. In the monograph *The Reward of Paradise. Written and Oral Sources for Romanian Legends about the Gymnosophists* (2006) [Răsplata paradisului. Filoane livrești și orale asupra credințelor despre Blajini în spațiul românesc] I proposed the strategical concept of 'oral-written hybrid space' to describe how the integrality of a certain text is fluidly composed by all its written versions and oral variants. The main focus was on *Alexander Romance* and to its inter- and hypertextual connections with other texts, images and oral folk legends. In the specific case of Alexander's visit to the Makaron Island, I investigated narratives, iconographic representations and vernacular rituals associated with the Happy Ones mythical people (naked philosophers living earthly paradise) who entered the pattern of Christian hermits and, consequently, who was worshiped among Romanians as The Mild Ones, The

Rohmans. Working to this topic I achieved competences in the domain of hagiographic and apocrypha medieval and premodern literature.

Different manners of putting orality in relation with literacy have been explored in further studies concerning, for example, the collective status of epistolar genres among semiliterate people, or the relations between texts and their paratextual manipulations. The annotated edition I coordinated (2005) provided unpublished documents written until 1918 by semiliterate people with Romanian rural and urban provenience.

I dedicated a special interest to the topic of sacred communication mediated through a written support and through the very gestures and efforts of writing and reading, which were charged with devotional meaning. For medieval times, the issue was deeply examined in a study I dedicated to scribes' signature on manuscripts and, for early modern and recent epochs, on apocryphal written legends whose ritual performances articulate relations of contiguity between the texts' content and the specific gestures that activate their power. The most recent study published in this regard was *The „Dream of the Mother of God” and its oral-written performances. With examples from early modern and contemporary Romanian tradition* (2022); because the issue is closely linked with the field of vernacular religion, this study is described in the section dedicated to my work in this domain.

The book *Men and irons. Introduction to the immaterial univers of the ironsmithing*, which I coordinated and co-authored, is presented in the second chapter of the thesis. Using folkloristic concepts and methodology extrapolated on the ironsmiths' working events, the focus was on the specific knowledge and cognitive tools (color, sound, body posture and movement, etc.) embedded and informally transmitted through such performative events.

The monograph *Carpathian structures of mentalities. Narratives, rituals, living space at local communities* [Structuri mentalitare carpatice. Narațiuni, ritualuri, habitat la comunitățile locale] (2013) and other studies dedicated to people's interactions with the mountainous space (with a special, but not exclusively concern to the Carpathian Chains) are described in the third chapter of the thesis. Except for a few professional categories (shepherds, hunters, brigands, hermits, and, much later, alpinists), people avoided going up the mountain even when speaking about communities settled at its bases. Until recently, humans' relation with this wild territory were mediated by social and individual practices, rituals, legends and beliefs, memories, toponyms. I was interested in legends about supernatural figures assigned to this space; in the relations between mental maps and the topography of the mountain; in the construction of the imaginary hypostases of the mountain; in the process of “putting literary fiction in local topography”; in the ethnological study of mountaineering (the article *Considerations on life, death and the re-consecration of nature in the context of rock climbing* was one of the first studies in the Romanian ethnological literature dedicated to mountaineering), etc. Consistent fieldwork was required for this demarche.

Due to the fact that it articulates issues concerning mountainous high space with questions regarding specific expressions of religiosity this environment predisposes to, the books *The church 'alongside'*.

Some rituals among the herders from Carpathians. Ethnological study on shepherds' religiosity [Biserica de „alături”. Câteva rituri necercetate ale ciobanilor din Carpați. Studiu de etnologie asupra religiozității pastorale] (2020) opens the fourth chapter, which is dedicated to the works I developed in the domain of folk religion. Since itinerancy and danger are elements that characterized shepherd's activities, I advanced the idea that liminality is part of the dynamic relation between what is allowed and what is not allowed concerning religious and social conducts during seasonal dislocation from domestic settlements and parishes, when they live on the plateau where the priest is (cvasi)absent (but the hermit is closer). The religious practices that entered my attention have liturgical correspondents, but are performed outside the consecrated liturgical space and under specific circumstances: the shepherds' sanctuary located high in the mountain and so called 'wedding between fir trees'; the 'confession and the prayer at the tree'; the 'consumption of tree buds instead of Easter anaphora'. I explored them as parts of units that include other related rituals, apocryphal medieval legends (the *Legend of the Cross*, the biblical *Story of Lot* and his penitence) and their oral reverberations, local narratives, artefacts, to which I added a strong topographic dimension. These rituals and the religious views they embed haven't been studied before, and I was surprised to find many references to them made by the interlocutors I discussed with during the field researches I conducted between 2011-2019. Shepherds and their families, and also local priests offered their emic opinions about the meanings and the reasons the rituals were/still are performed. At the end of the analysis I underlined a folk theological view that assigned to the arbor - in its hypostases of tree of crucifixion, tree of paradise, tree of mercy - the function of a (cvasi)liturgical intercessor of human communication with God.

I defined religiosity as a process of internalization and interpretation individual and social practices through the tripartite relation between: 1) the sacred authorized by the religious institution of the Church; 2) the supernatural, understood as an extension of institutionalized sacred expressed through parareligious or magic practices, incantations and belief narratives that, at their turn, authorizes individual and social behaviors; 3) the numinous embodied by human and non-human agents. These topics have been developed in researches that covered a large thematic palette, which required multidisciplinary approaches and which articulated the past with the present, as well. Among the topics explored in this regard, there should be mentioned those of: acquiring and transmitting sacred knowledge through initiation; lycanthropy and witchcraft; the liturgical object potentiality to be manipulated in magic contexts; miracles and shrines; religious and supernatural figures, etc. Theoretically, I proposed the strategical concept of 'Christian common religion' (an adaptation of Peter Burke's 'common culture' term) characterized by the existence of a corpus of knowledge and devotional practices that are shared by people who belong to diverse categories of believers and, simultaneously, by distinct manners of positioning towards this shared repertoire, depending on the very actors involved in its construction and evaluation (high clergy, parish priests, laymen, rulers or commoners).

In the frames of a larger collective project concerning the life cycle in Romanian traditional culture, my contribution is exposed in the fifth chapter of the habilitation thesis concernig the social role and the onthological status assigned to the child and childhood, along with the means of informal pedagogy. A consistent study over marriage and matrimonial alliances is also finished.

The monograph typology of St. Elijah's figure in Romanian folk culture, the principles and the methodology of creating the modular structure of the twelve types I identified, is described in the sixth chapter of the thesis. A synthesis of the comments over each type of this classification is also included. Fieldworking and archiving oral culture documents represent important activities I conducted during the years. The eight chapter presents my contributions in this regard: recordings, projects and other activities in the archives of folklore, studies dedicated to epistemological, ethical and methodological questions concerning the interrelated processes of creating, archiving and interpreting documents, of generating knowledge and cultural heritage, etc.

Didactic teaching, a competence I acquired during ten years of collaboration with the University of Bucharest, is exposed in the final section of Part I, where there are described objectives, results, thematic issued of the courses I taught: mythology, anthropology of the body, orality and literacy, fieldworking, theories of the imaginary.

In the near future I indent to continue and to finish the works which are in progress - the monographic typology of Mother of God in the Romanian folk culture (to be published in 2025) - and to open new research topics: multiconfessional shared sacred spaces in Dobruja; dreaming practices and oneiric miracles; a multimedia digital map of fairytales as a critical edition of documents; contemporary revalorisation of traditional tales through video games. These projects are detailed in Part II of the thesis.

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Laura Iliescu

