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Dr. Bogdan NEAGOTA

CEREMONIAL EXPRESSIONS OF POPULAR RELIGION IN RURAL EUROPE IN THE 18TH-20TH CENTURIES. ETHNOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL-RELIGIOUS APPROACHES

This project proposal, borne forth through a multifarious epistemological perspective - historical-religious, ethno-anthropological, and historical-cultural - expresses a hypothesis we have advanced as early as during the preparation of the PhD thesis (1997-2003), and have subsequently verified, along our ethnological and historical-religious researches: that is, that the most profound structures of continuity across Europe's religious history are to be best found at the level of popular cultures, with their whole body of subsequent religiosity¹.

European folkloric cultures, as well as their religious expressions, denominated with the standard idiom of 'popular religions' - a formulation in obvious connection with official religions, social-politically, etc., dominant - have had a 'subdued' existence ('subalterne': Cirese 1973), particularly long and remarkably consistent. Official policies surrounding them varied widely, with every new epistema and every new society. It is not among the aims of this project, to rewrite the history of popular cultures and religions, in the Europe of the last millennia, considered from Neolithic rurality, all the way up to industrial and post-industrial European (acculturated and acculturating) hygiene.

¹ Mircea Eliade advocated the necessity of broadening the religious history of Europe, by means of a double strategy: on the one hand, opening it towards extra-European archaic cultures, and on the other hand, creating an aperture towards European popular cultures: which meant, as a *sine qua non* condition, the epistemological porosity of the science of religions, towards the ethno-anthropology of rural Europe, i.e. the valuation of folkloric materials as 'authentic religious documents' (Eliade 1980/1991: 39-40, 57; cf. Eliade 1983/1988: §304-306).





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What we do aim at, is to retrieve: not proofs supporting ideology, but units of understanding the contribution of popular cultures to the European heritage of identities. Among the bouquet of identity resources of present-day Europe (Archaic and Classical Antiquity, Judeo-Christian Late Antiquity, extra-European cultures etc.), the folkloric cultures of Medieval and Modern Europe, partly prolonged, regionally and locally, into present, hold much consistency, primarily through deep inter-textual stratification, as well as through privileging structures of continuity. We do affirm that the structures of continuity between the different epistemata having constituted the diachrony of the European space (geographically confined by the Urals) must be looked for by the level of rural popular cultures. Great shifts of paradigm have been produced within hegemonic cultures, institutional in the highest social-political, military and economic, sense, and much less within rural societies, conservatory and de-centralized.

For example, during Late Antiquity, the religious revolution produced by the recognition of Christianity as state religion, has mainly affected urban societies, as well as institutionalized religious cults, which had previously benefited from the Roman state's support. At the same time, the domestic magical-religious cults, specific for rural customary societies, showed amazing longevity and vitality up to modernity, obliging local churches at elaborating acculturating strategies, and, on the long term, adaptive mechanisms: 'popular religion' and 'official religion' weren't confined to autarchy, but assumed the morpho-dynamics of a mobile *statu-quo*. Beyond the polemics of Christian Late-Antique and Medieval intellectual elites, with local expressions of popular religion, full of 'superstition' and pagan residuals, local parishioners have had to design strategies of *modus vivendi* with the rural subdued societies; while the attitude of the Church, both in the East, and in the Catholic West, has been one of tacit acknowledgement of reality as *de facto*, and of identification of hermeneutic mechanisms able to convert pagan cultural realities to Christianity, or at best, capable of synthesis and slow neutralization of blatantly pagan beliefs and practices. This has been until late the situation in the post-Byzantine landmass, with its institutionally less potent churches, but just as well in the Catholic space, at least until the Counter-Reform: when, due to critiques from the Protestant block, the attitude of the church became sharper, raising significantly the acculturating pressure on popular religion.

It would nonetheless be methodologically wrong to address popular religion in isolation, as if it were a buried treasure / *reliquarium* / a living-fossil cave survival, severed from official religion, that is, the religion of elites, in polemics with whom it might have self-defined its opposition. On the contrary, it is more likely that popular religion functioned organically, through genuine integrative hermeneutic networks, trying to incorporate the inputs of institutional religion, translating them, with a *sui generis* hermeneutics, into vernacular language, and integrating them in semiotic systems specific to local popular cultures. Because popular religion always worked by adaptation and inclusion, and not by exclusion, while still preserving some sort of autonomy regarding the official theological-political *establishment*. That is why some



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researchers prefer to speak about a popular Catholicism (De Martino 1959 and 1975. Charuty 2001: 359-385) or popular Orthodoxy, depending on the social-cultural reference space, and not about 'popular religion', which terms evident ideological connotations.

On the other hand, popular religion, far from being expression only of 'subdued classes', definable through opposition to 'hegemonic classes', as it has been theorized by some neo-Marxist historians and anthropologists, should be treated as a definite social-cultural reality, specific to both the parochial rural/semi-urban community, and to the parish priest, as a key missing-link for understanding exchanges and negotiations between the two strata (Eliade 1995: 21). Popular religion is marginal only from a documentary point of view, since, for such a long time, the only sources for the modern researcher are the ecclesiastical ones², and since, until so late, there has not been any genuine intellectual preoccupation for describing and understanding popular culture and religion.

In order to put forth popular religion, from the perspective of subsequent ceremoniality, we chose a number of ceremonial complexes, underlain by magical-religious ideologies nowadays more or less concealed, but rooted in archaic historical-religious circumstances, and beholding enough efficient adaptive mechanisms to modernity, to be visible throughout even contemporary Europe.

We speak of those bovine processions, attested in different yet not too distant cultural spaces: in Transylvania (*The Adorned Ox* on Whitsunday and Midsummer's Day), in Moldavia (the ceremonial oxen plough), Central and Southern Italy (approx. 90 local patron-saints' feasts, among which 60 still active), in Sardegna, in Sicily (patron-saints feasts), within the whole Alpine range (*Viehscheid* and *Almatrieb* in Bavarian Allgäu and in Austrian Tyrol, *Desarpa* in alpine Italy and *Desalpe* in francophone Alps), and in the Pyrénées – all morphologically related, but integrated within various calendar syntaxes (spring calendrical feasts – Whitsuntide and Midsummer, and local patron-saint feasts). For example, in the case of oxen processions, observing the social-cultural and confessional contexts are a must in understanding the modalities in which institutions belonging to the dominant ecclesial culture monitored ceremonial expressions of popular religion, appropriated them, and integrated them within *Christianized* ceremonial syntaxes. From this point of view, we can speak of ceremonial processions with bovines, which follow the archaic pattern of augural caroling (as it is for the *Adorned Ox* in Transylvania), and where the parish priest has no role whatsoever; and of processions in which the bovines are associated to the cult of Virgin Mary and of local patron-saints (Spitilli 2004 and 2010), represented in statuaria in the shape of antique lectisternae. Or, in some cases, 'Christianization' and integration of old animal processions into Christian processional syntaxes

² We refer here to the documents of witchcraft trials, and to the polemic papers elaborated in theological milieus – all underlain by a reductive and discrediting hermeneutic intentionality.



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(rural, semi-urban and urban) is recent enough, dating back no earlier than the Counter-Reform (see the *Whitsun Ox* from Loreto Aprutino, Pescara province, or the *Midsummer Ox* from the French Pyrénées).

The second type of ceremonial we advance for analysis consists of masking with vegetal elements, within a number of winter calendric ceremonials (the carnival preceding Lent) and spring ceremonials; masks which we are mainly studying in Transylvania (*the Green Men - Păpălugăre*), the central and south-east European space (*Green George* etc.), and the alpine provinces (*Uomo Selvaggio, Wildermann* etc.).

Then, it is about the dances with ursine masks (*Bears* and ursine-like masks) and about those with goat-like masks (*The Stag, The Goat, The 'Turca'*), widely attested in the whole Romanian space (still active in Transylvania and Moldavia – on Christmas / New Year, and in Mountainous Banat – on Carnival / *Fasching*), in Central Europe, Dalmatia, the alpine range, Sardegna, and the Pyrénées.

In the case of vegetal and animal masks, the too evident pagan substratum made it impossible the inclusion of these customs within the Christian calendar, and therefore, in the Catholic-like social-cultural contexts, they were isolated and expelled to the ceremonial frame of the Carnival before Lent, the superlative expression of the popular culture of laughter (Bahtin 1974). Therefore, within the Catholic popular cultures, the vegetal or animal *masquerade* was given calendaristic asylum in the week preceding Lent, while, within the popular cultures of the post-Byzantine space, the carnivalesque masking was tolerated by local Orthodox churches more often along the year calendar (the interval between St. Nicholas and Epiphany, and the week before Lent), even at the risk of a double ceremonial performance: of the priest, and, independently, of the masked characters (which is the case of spring feasts – St. George, Ascension and Whitsun).

Therefore, what we have here are various expressions of popular religion, covering, through such unitary yet particularized local variants, Europe's religious history itself, and its so complex diachronic inter-textual stratigraphy (Caprettini 1992: 22), attainable through a regressive ethnology (Vovelle 1998: 252). Analyzing folkloric calendar-round ceremoniality may lead to a deep understanding of the structures of continuity underlying popular religiosity (cf. Aníño and Lombardi Satriani 1997).

Naturally, the comparative approach encompasses equally the limits of this method (privileging synonymic invariant-like elements, morphologism, and spatial-temporal de-contextualization); but it is this the proper and only way to distinguish isomorphycisms and structures of continuity, *cognitive rules / invariants*, structuring these ceremonial-religious phenomena. Beyond these generic morphologic-religious descriptions, necessary to the identification of specific determinations of each ceremonial complex alone, our interest lies in emphasizing those mechanisms of transmission which have made possible the historical longevity of the phenomena in focus, and their wide distribution. Surely the problem may be



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addressed both as diffusion, and documentable historical circulation, and as meta-history: the 'cognitive' transmission of ceremonial invariants, in predominantly oral social-cultural contexts, which comprise mechanisms of memory and inter-textuality (Culianu 1998: 8-9, 22-28).

On the other hand, we are using historical-religious methodology as a vessel for exploring long-concealed archaic strata, otherwise unnoticed by modern eye. Passed through anthropological-historical and historical-religious analyses, these ceremonials work, for the modern researcher, as finest seismographs, best at understanding mental horizons underlying the religious history of profound Europe.

We emphasize on how, for the Romanian cultural space, beyond knowledge over local bibliography (published or archival), we do have a comprehensive ethnological experience, both spatially and temporally (1997-1998, 2001-2010), and a large archive at our disposal – including visual collections, in the Orma Ethnological Association (see Annex CV). For other cultural spaces, our information is exclusively bibliographic, sometimes though being back-up-ed by personal field researches (Sicily and Abruzzo), and by active extant collaborations with the majority of the referential cultural spaces summoned in this project. Consequently, we do have the ethno-anthropological documentary basis required by a comparative enterprise and an ample historical-religious analysis.

Stages of research and valuation of results:

(1) The in-depth apprehension of the Romanian popular culture shall benefit, beside the already existing materials of the Orma Ethnological Archive, of an always more comprehensive approach to the field, and of research stages (of one month) in the Ethnologic Archives of Folklore Institutes of the Romanian Academy (Bucharest, Cluj, and Iasi).

(2) In the interest of enlarging, as scheduled, the pan-European comparative approach, we propose a minimum of four stages of research, documentation and fieldwork in Europe, which would be undertaken in the following locations³:

Italy⁴: Istituto Superiore Regionale Etnografico, Cagliari (Sardegna), SIMBDEA (Abruzzo), Museo Nazionale delle Arti e Tradizioni Popolari (Roma) and Univ. Ca' Foscari (Venezia).

³ We quote selectively but a number of our active collaborations in the European ethno-anthropological network. For a comparative ethnological-religious documentation, we may benefit of these academic contacts: Prof. Eva Pocs (Univ. of Pecs), Jiří Woitsch (Ethnography Inst., Czech Academy), Mitar Mihic (Musée d'Ethnographie de Beograd).

⁴ Scientific contacts: Prof. Ignazio E. Buttitta, Univ. di Sassari; Prof. Giulio Angioni, Università di Cagliari; Dr. Gianfranco Spittilli – museographer in Abruzzo – SIMBDEA; Dr. Elisabeta Silvestrini – Museo Nazionale delle Arti e Tradizioni Popolari, Roma; Prof. Glauco Sanga – Univ. Ca' Foscari di Venezia.





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France⁵: Univ. de Toulouse, Institut d'ethnologie méditerranéenne, européenne et comparative (Aix-en-Provence), Univ. de Provence; Université Victor Segalen Bordeaux 2, Département d'anthropologie sociale, ethnologie (optional).

Austria: Universität Innsbruck – Institut für Geschichtswissenschaften und Europäische Ethnologie, Institut für Geschichte und Ethnologie.

Germany: Institut für Volkskunde/Europäische Ethnologie, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität (München)⁶

Spania (optional): Universidad del País Vasco / University of the Basque Country, Vitoria-Gasteiz; Universidad de Oviedo, Asturia; Museo Nacional de Antropología y Etnológico, Madrid; Museos Etnográficos de Asturias.

(3) Authoring a number of studies on European popular ceremoniality, from an ethnological-historical-religious perspective, aiming publication in the following European journals: La Ricerca Folklorica; Terrain. Revue d'Ethnologie de l'Europe; Ethnologie française; Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions ; Ethnologia Balkanica. Journal for Southeast European Anthropology.

(4) Publishing a volume on popular religion and its ceremonial expressions (CNCSIS credited publishing house).

(5) Organizing two conferences with European participation, within the network set forth, on popular ceremoniality, one devoted to bovine processions, and one to ceremonial masks in different social-cultural contexts.

(6) Editing the respective collective conference thematic volumes, in electronic or on hard-copy format.

⁵ Scientific contacts: Prof. Giordana Charuty, Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes; Prof. Noëlie Vialles, Collège de France; Frédéric Saumade, Univ. de Provence et IDEMEC.

⁶ Scientific contact: Prof. Ulf Brunnbauer, Institut für Volkskunde/Europäische Ethnologie, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, München.





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