

## TO BE OR NOT TO BE A *RESPONDENT*. REMARKS ABOUT INTANGIBLE ETHNOGRAPHIC HERITAGE

Dr. Camelia BURGHELE

*Spiritual culture* was always seen complementarily to *material spirituality*. Consequently, in the contemporary environment when the general trends of *globalization* impose a severer redefining of *the identity marks*, *intangible cultural heritage* strongly requires norms of preservation, conservation and re-giving of meanings, exactly like material cultural heritage. Broadly speaking, *intangible cultural heritage* presumes the absence of the material support in both creation sector and transmittal of information, as it predominantly happens in the cases of *oral forms of traditional/popular culture*.

In the latest years, any discussion regarding the act of defining, outlining and conserving the immaterial/intangible heritage has started from the two UNESCO Sessions (the 1989 Recommendation regarding traditional culture and the Conference held in Paris in 2002), which postulate the acknowledgement of the *folklore* as a value of the intangible cultural heritage that requires through its intrinsic identity and cultural dimension an increased attention in defining the community specific.

The 1989 UNESCO recommendations which also aimed to Romania authorize folklore as a group or individual creation whose norms and values are transmitted orally and which may include literature, music, dance, games, mythology, rituals, customs or handicrafts.<sup>1</sup>

Further to this discussion about the destiny of folklore and traditional culture, they organized several notable international conferences (at Turin in 2001 and Rio de Janeiro in 2002), which launched the idea of the necessity to urgently define the notion of *intangible heritage* so that the syntagma may enter

the legislation of all civilized countries and in this way it may be protected as soon as possible.

With respect to our legal framework, I have to mention that, unfortunately, Law No. 182/2000 regarding cultural heritage<sup>2</sup> does not refer at all to intangible spiritual culture, defining as category of *assets with ethnographical significance* only those subcategories which regularly are named, by ethnographers and museographers, subcategories of the large *category of material culture* (tools, ceramics, furniture, fabrics, objects made of metal, bone, stone, ornaments).

Therefore, large chapters of traditional spirituality are not legally capitalised, such as group history, faiths, symbolic representations, cultural models or vision concerning the world *i.e.* cultural sequences which are constituted in that sector of oral nature, broadly named *folklore* or more elaborately *oral literature*<sup>3</sup> that centres the remark especially on the ethnic, social, cultural or political profile of the group.

Thus, it is absolutely necessary to create an intellectual environment which defines and names the ways of conservation of intangible heritage, indubitably regulating the relationship between (i) *the popular creator*, particularly the promoter of spiritual values and less the artisan who produces material objects and whose relationships with the specialist who evaluates them are easier to define because at last he subordinates to the market economy laws and to those regarding demands and offers, and (ii) *the specialist* who writes down and interprets the information gathered in the field, regardless of his/her specialisation.

1. Nicolae Constantinescu, *Predarea disciplinelor etnologice azi, ca modalitate de valorificare a culturii populare*, în *Sinteze/Teaching Ethnological Subjects Today as a Modality of Capitalizing Popular Culture in Syntheses*, CNCP, București, Vol. 9/2002, p. 32

2. *Monitorul Oficial al României*, No.530/October 27, 2000

3. Pierre Bonte, Michel Izard, *Dicționar de etnologie și antropologie / Dictionary of Ethnology and Anthropology*, Polirom, Iași, 1999, p. 385.

4. Jean Copans,  
*Introducere în  
etnologie și  
antropologie*  
*/Introduction to  
Ethnology and  
Anthropology*  
Polirom, Iasi,  
1999, p. 34

5. Jean Copans,  
*op.cit.*, p. 41

Lately, by nature of my professional preoccupations, I have studied more intensely the magical-therapeutic ritual phenomena, respectively the extremely sensitive sectors named by Jean Copans the *superstructure* of a monograph (a series of sub-ensembles characteristic for spirituality), in fact forms of cultural and esthetical expression<sup>4</sup>, which define the social, largely based on field investigation. I had the opportunity to talk to many respondents and frequently faced problems related to data approach, gathering, reception or conservation.

Nothing is more difficult than to obtain information of aspects related to so sensitive problems (if not even esoteric) as it is the case of those adjacent to the ritual. First of all, *an ideological barrier* operates, over whose pressure many of the respondents failed to pass: the effects of certain interdictions for ideological reasons uttered by activists of the communist regime when the values of the traditions were between parentheses and the old had to be replaced, at any cost, by the new, continue to be visible. Peasants are still afraid that they could suffer from retaliation if the village mayor or the police chief heard what they discuss with the lady coming from town. Among other things, our old practice of using words completely discredited by socialist and communist regimes and so full of unpleasant memories such as “respondent” (translator’s note: in Romanian, it is called *informator*, a person who offers information, particularly to police) or “investigation”, even if it is ethnographical, seems to impress even us, the researchers... I have met many respondents who refused to give information of magic-religious rituals or who blocked out when seeing the tape-recorder. It was about the fear of not using against them the information stored on magnetic tape.

In the autumn of the year 2000, I lived an impressive experience from this point of view *i.e.* the subjects’ reticence and refusal to accept to be “respondents”. It happened in a village with serious trends of depopulation where the collective tradition stated that

because of a curse, most of its men died and left behind women of various generations. Being alone, most of them performed divinatory or therapeutic magic-religious rituals, but people said that some of the women performed black magic scenarios. All configured in an inciting subject for mass-media and it was even the village mayor who called a TV Channel in order to make publicity to his village by sending the reporters directly to the alleged witches (at that time people considered Valea Lungă as “the village of the witches”). The result was an exaggerated reticence on behalf of all inhabitants and thus, one year later, when I reached the place nobody wanted to talk to me. I stayed in the village for several days and tried to convince its women of my good intentions. Finally, some of them accepted to offer me information. However, most of them and obviously those about whom I knew that they were very good at stealing the animals’ milk or causing diseases and curses to their fellow creatures did not cooperate at all and refused the dialogue. All declared that they performed only domestic scenarios of a positive finality and with Christian divine support, namely popular disenchantment accompanied by prayers and fasting.

I remembered then the textbook written by field ethnographer Jean Copans who pays attention to the fact that, upon building the system of references for making specialized studies, the anthropologist has to give an overwhelming importance to the portfolio covered by “first hand” information supplied by *ethnographical investigation*. However, the source of information is exclusively oral and the researcher is obliged to establish a dialogue with his/her interlocutor in order to obtain as many data as possible. “The field investigation represents an oral documents-gathering [...]: traditions, rituals, conversations, all forms of culture being mediated through a verbal expression”<sup>5</sup>, but professor Copans also notes that only the respondents easiest to approach (notorious and old people) are frequently brought in the foreground, while women,

young persons, lower or marginal groups are often passed over<sup>6</sup> just because of this reticence to disclose secrets regarding certain old occupations (for instance such as healer), magic-religious rituals (whose secret was “handed over” only by the master to his/her best apprentices, in compliance with some well-preserved mental scenarios, being known for instance that folkloric mentality pleads for the loss of efficiency of the disenchantment when it is said outside the ritual framework) or aspects related to conjugal, intimate or sexual life.

As any ethnographer who pays respect to his/her profession, I also took part in major ethnographic researches whose general purpose was to describe an ethnographic region in a monographic way, following the questionnaires drafted in advance. For sure, it is a lucky case when the subjects/respondents are much easier to approach, cooperating in the event of general somehow common issues. It is more difficult when the ethnographer aims to precise targets, most of them being taboo for the popular culture of the community (as already mentioned, aspects related to sexuality, malign magic-ritual acts or performers specialised in such acts).

Then, there is a *psychological barrier*, since the approached subjects are afraid to be anachronic or even ridiculous by stating that they believe in or perform acts considered very old and sometimes even ancestral, which could seem improper to the educated researcher.

Exceeding all these barriers and the potential unavailability of the subjects, their lack of time and memory or disinterest, we can conclude that the process of identifying respondents is not that simple and the dialog therewith may be, not only once, totally unfruitful. I intend neither to blame the subjects nor to exacerbate the role of the observer-researcher. I just want to say that the more precious the collected data are in outlining an intangible cultural heritage specific to a group or community, the more difficult they are to be obtained. Under such circumstances, a legislative

framework is more than necessary to clarify the problems and regulate the relationships between the popular creator (either an artisan or a source of information regarding tradition) and the scientific researcher. One of the most sensitive issues raised by the field research refers to the paternity of the information collected. Data stored on a video or audio tape form the object of an ethnographic archive and are processed by the specialist who generally uses them to support his/her ideas. Undoubtedly, most of the times, the researcher proves sufficient professionalism and deontological spirit to cite the source, but the question is if the folklorist always asks for the interviewed respondent’s permission to publish his/her opinions or remarks. Getting back to the information with a character closer to the esoteric one or those with a strictly personal character, there are often registered cases when the subject prefers not to have his/her name cited for the purpose of not generating ironical or deliberately exaggerated reactions or not becoming a target of possible reprisals. Thus, one of the ethnographers’ dilemmas is caused by the Hamlet-type establishment brought up to its end: whether the subject of the research decides to be or not to be a *respondent*, is this available as regards the public use of information offered to the researcher or should the latter ask for his/her interlocutor’s permission to use the received information? Unfortunately, the copyright law<sup>7</sup> does not help us to much because it failed to stipulate any measure in this sense. It is only the deontological responsibility of the folklore collector, which intervenes and regulates to a certain extent the chaotic situation. In order to maintain and protect his/her credibility and career, the respective person will cite the name or at least the initial letters of the respondents so that the information may be checked if needed. However, the above-mentioned discussion remains open: what happens to those respondents who do not want to disclose their identity, but the researcher really needs the information gathered from them. This is one of the most

6. Jean Copans, *op.cit.*, p. 41 - 42

7. Legea dreptului de autor si a drepturilor conexe/ Law regarding Copyright and Joint Rights, *Monitorul Oficial al României*, No. 60/1996

8. Narcisa Știucă, a field ethnographer, is preoccupied by such aspects that she develops in a work intended to draw attention exactly on the problems occurred at the link between the scientific character due to the professionalism of an ethnographic research and the rights of the investigated respondents, under the circumstances when the current legal framework does not provide at all such relations (Narcisa Știucă, *Patrimoniul cultural și legile lui, în Sinteze/ Cultural Heritage and Its Laws*, in *Syntheses*, CNCP București, Vol. 9/2002, p. 53 – 57)

delicate moments of the relationship collector/subject, when the researcher has to choose between credibility and relationship with the information-suppliers.<sup>8</sup>

Unfortunately, most of the times, the respondent offering data about traditions, customs or texts is very little present in the foreground. The laurels go, to the

greatest extent, to the researcher who processes and publishes the information. Because of such thing, the future laws regarding heritage ought to define more largely the category of *popular creator* aiming to the statute thereof, and why not, to legal provisions, which not only conserve and notify the information of spiritual culture but even protect *the respondent*.

*Translated by Iuliana Gresie*