

## THE ROMANIAN VILLAGE IN TRANSITION AND THE “ASTRA” MUSEUM<sup>1</sup> (THE RETRIEVEMENT OF THE AWARENESS OF ITS OWN ETHNO-CULTURAL IDENTITY)

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For the Romanian village, communism meant the death sentence of its ultimate material and spiritual testimonies belonging to a conservative culture and a civilization of a medieval origin, to socio-economical structures and to a cultural patrimony whose sources, cultural faces and typologies go back to Dacian-Roman Antiquity and even beyond that, to the Getic-Dacian laténé, demonstrating reminiscences of the first sedentary agrarian communities from the Neolithic Period.

The expropriation and communalisation of land, animals, and agricultural equipments determined the uprooting of the active population from the Romanian villages and a massive exodus towards the towns and cities condemned to receive and assimilate the cohorts of workers, peasants and shepherds, foresters and fishermen, who became “the industrial proletariat” overnight.

The commuting, in its turn, transformed the villages – that were once effervescent beehives, “honey” producers – in simple “bedrooms” and occasional residences (at the end of the week) for those who were called to give a hand to a rural economy of minimum subsistence, with large illicit embezzlements from the cooperative vegetal production, imposed by the inconsistency and insufficiency of their own food supplies, at the inferior limits of existence.

This economical and social slump, intensified each year due to the destruction of all traditional

community life structures until 1945/48, compromised, fundamentally, the entire cultural-traditional patrimony of our villages.

The socio-cultural rituals, with religious substance and message, were accused and attacked by an impressive agency of “atheism propaganda in the rural area”. The entire educational program in schools was subordinated to the historical materialist ideology, to the proletarian internationalism”, condemning, thus, any cultural traditions as an expression of “the cultural backward state or of the bourgeois-landlord mentalities.”

Only the representatives of the (ludic, musical, artistic, handicraft) folkore - which was perverted and altered as well, by the “new socialist products”, and subservient to the needs of representation, protocol and dithyrambic performance for the glorifying of “the socialist victory”, and, starting with 1971, for the homage of the “genius leader”, the dictator Ceaușescu – survived to this “ideological war.”

The fate of the national, and even local community and family education supporting the tradition values, the sense of responsibility before nation and the following generations, in order to preserve its own patrimony, is incumbent on some acculturation spirits, on some intruders (foreign to that locality), on a teaching staff missing their own education in the spirit of these values.

2. In this respect, the cultural heritage was abandoned, alienated, sold or destroyed.

<sup>1</sup> Cibinium  
1990-2000,  
2000, p.183-  
188.

A peculiar fate had the folk industrial installations (windmills, fulling mills, oil presses, saws, a.s.o.), whose owners were declared “kulaks”, deported to Banat or Dobrogea, or convicted and sent to “build the Canal.” The result was a rapid dissolution of these economical values that were also representative on a cultural level.

Against the background of “the economical and social (and under no circumstances cultural) emancipation”, the village home interiors are modified radically: the tough, often adorned, carved or painted furniture made up of wood that is ten or hundred years old is replaced by modern furniture made up of pressed sawdust, varnished, treated with melamine, polished, not very resistant and uncomfortable as well. “Fashion” speaks its mind, sentencing to death or alienation everything that is “old.”

The museums, private collectors, middlemen and other intermediaries (generally Romanies) store up, collect, intermediate, and quite often alienate “everything”: furniture, household tools, ceramics, glassware, icons and wood cuts, folk costume items, textiles, sewings, embroideries, ornaments a.s.o.

The village population attends impassively or collaborates to the cultural destructions of the traditional values, without showing remorse, and believing that the system of values, which defined a revolutionary way of life, an abandoned lifestyle, an opposite cultural horizon, is forever lost.

The ethnographical researchers and curators are facing, in their peregrinations and researches on site, the invariable answers: “there was an old house from our village, which was moved to the museum from...”; “we also had a very old mill, which was taken to the museum”; “we also had, it goes without saying, old pots and plates, icons covering two walls, but

some people from town came and gave us new dishes and paper icons put under a sheet of glass, very nice, and we were very happy to give the old ones in exchange”; “I had all kinds of old things from my grandfather and my great-grandparents, but the priest (or the doctor, or the people from the town hall) asked me to give them and I gave them, deuce take it!”; “there were, dear sir, but who is still keeping ugly things like those in his house, cause the young children got scared of those ugly icon saints”; “we had glass icons, but they were broken and we lost them.”

Hence, “it was moved”, “I gave them”, “they were taken”, “they were lost”, no matter the variant used, express the same idea: cultural expropriation, abandonment, waste of valuable things, and their destruction.

3. Then the antidictatorial and anticommunist revolution came. For all the curators and researchers from the domain of cultural folk values, the issue was to re-educate the village population in the spirit of preserving our own cultural-traditional values, both pertaining to objects and living, the fundamental aim being the retrieval of the system of values,





which define the cultural-traditional identity of each and every local, regional or ethnographical community, and, eventually, in an authentic national synthesis.

At the beginning, everything seemed preposterous, a cultural nonsense, a Don-Quixote act. When I talked to the colleagues from other museums (especially those with a respectable experience), I used to start virulent controversies, ironies, scornful smiles, ironic comments.

We have decided to set upon the “opposing side” all by ourselves, without any other (argumentative) arsenal, but our own patrimony, our own museum structure. Inviting the folk artists and handicraftsmen from the entire country to an authentic national fair (the initiative goes back as early as 1986) represented the beginning. The success was gradual, increasing permanently, and today the fair enjoys a national and international notoriety. After 1990, a series of similar manifestations followed: the establishment of the Folk Creators’ Association from Romania (as an ONG foundation), then of the Academy of Traditional Arts (conceived as the superior national forum of superlative individual values from the domain of folk culture, civilization and art), and, eventually, of the National Olympics of Traditional Artistic Handicrafts (on the level with

the Ministry of Education), which is a national competition for the Romanian village children.

All of them together have represented, by their reunification in a coherent system, on the levels of representation, (commercial and educational) action and mediatisation, and on a national scale, the “ASTRA” Museum programme concerning the consolidation, reactivation, catalysing and transmission to the young generations of the cultural-artistic creative activities and the public recognition of the national importance of our folk culture.

Numerous initiatives of international presentation followed, by sending folk interpreters and handicraftsmen to many European countries, and, recently, in the summer of 1999, to the United States capital city, Washington D.C., to “The Smithsonian Folklife Festival.” Their national renown became international, and the value of their products and interpretative art – a passport of free international passing.

The Romanian folk culture and art “summoned up all their energy” and “integrated”, with a huge success, in all Euro-Atlantic structures.

The next on our list were the inhabitants of the villages, which the exceptional monuments and values, transferred to the Open Air Museum from Dumbrava Sibiului, originated from.

One by one, outstanding visitors of the Traditional Folk Civilisation Museum were the spokespersons of the rural communities from Rășinari, Săliște, Sibiul and Cacova (Sibiu County), Bezded (Sălaj County), Straja (Suceava County), Avram Iancu, Stănești and Goești (Alba County), Săpânța and Botiza (Maramureș County), Tulgheș (Harghita County) a.s.o., living the same unprecedented cultural experience and attending the same “initiation” ritual: the religious mass at the wooden church from Bezded (the inhabitants of the village

that donated the church had participated at its dedication), the special guided tour of the entire museum, a long break with a thorough discussion at the monument from their village (the guests insisting on the things that were not presented, on the display errors, on the inadmissible absences from the household items or on the folk technique), the suggestions to improve our presentation being the most competent advice received by the curators.

The culminating point was, each time, an extraordinary, tongue-tied, enthusiastic reaction from the visitors. It was the natural outcome of the revelation of the value and importance of the monuments brought from their village, therefore, without any specific relevance in their perception, in the system of exponential values, in the biggest, the most representative, the most complete thematically speaking, the most modern organized, the most scientifically systemized, and the most harmoniously integrated in nature museum in the open air from Romania. The artistic performance (the folk dance called *hora* or the *sui generis* performance put on by the guests on the amphitheatre stage in the open air museum) crowned the series of manifestations brought about by the visit of the "village people", the people coming from "all the places" where the monuments transferred to the museum originate from. Their metamorphosis is miraculous! Returning to their native village, they tell those that remained at home about "the miracle from Dumbrava Sibiului", which is, indeed, "a Marvellous Grove, with a strong feeling of pride because the inhabitants have something representative for their village, there, in the Museum of our Country."

The villagers' psychology changed completely. Instead of saying "they took from us", now they think: "well, if these are values, important things for

the gentlemen of learning, then we must make more account of them and honour them as such."

And the results could be seen soon: those who have never been to the museum, now wanted to come through the agency of the school (the children), church (the parishioners), town hall (the villagers).

The museum continued the information assault: the catalogue-guide, which presents distinctively each monument, thematically integrated in the phenomenological category that it represents, was sent as a present to each and every village (to school for the library, and to the town hall for the officials) that has a monument in our museum. Those interested, like the teachers, can demonstrate, minutely, based on this work, the value and importance of these assets in "the Museum of the Country."

And we haven't stopped here. A series of articles, which introduce successively all the monuments brought from the villages of each county, have been published in the national and local press, stimulating the villagers' pride of seeing their own patrimony praised "in the newspaper."

As far as the next stage is concerned, we intend to produce – in our own ethnological-anthropological film studio – videotapes for all the local TV studios, which are going to present the local values treasured in the Sibian museum.

This "intensive therapy" for the reconsideration of the representative values, on the level of defining the ethno-identity, has already had stunning effects. The ethno-folk competition – inspired by the International Folklore Festival, organized by the Smithsonian Institute in the United States capital city, Washington D.C. (to which Romania was invited and participated in the summer of 1999) – entitled the National Folklore Festival from Sibiu that is going to make its debut in this

autumn has the task to strengthen, within the Romanian local communities, the responsibility of preserving the cultural traditions efficiently, and to claim attention to all "living human treasures" (a conventional concept introduced by UNESCO in 1989, by means of generalizing a unique experience, namely that of putting under the jurisdiction of law the protection of the artefact masters in Japan), and reaching, thus, a superior level of recognition and representation.

With this complex educational program meant to retrieve the awareness of the ethno-cultural identity values, the "ASTRA" Museum proves that it has acquired and carried out admirably Grigore Antipa's testamentary advice (1927), according to which the purpose of a

museum, no matter its collections or profile, is "knowledge, culture, education."

Stepping in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and in the third millennium, the museum has fundamentally renewed its purpose and message, demolishing the century-old myth of object fetishism.

Moreover, the "ASTRA" Museum from Sibiu has demonstrated that it knows how to overcome its classical functions and old-fashioned "intra muros" manifestations, becoming one of the most important, most active and most offensive cultural institutions, an authentic caryatid of the modern national cultural edifice, able to make a contribution to the modern consciousness concerning its own heritage value and its propensity to define itself as a constituting part of the European and world cultural heritage.