

The Traditional Guest Room under a Modern Magnifying Glass¹ – Review –

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Keywords: Romanian folk tradition, the guest room, the dynamics of tradition, ethnological approach

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In the Romanian folk tradition, the guest room is traditionally called *casa bună* (the best room), because, as opposed to the other rooms of the house, that the family uses for eating, sleeping and other domestic activities, it is uninhabited. It is used to keep valuable objects and to receive special guests on special occasions. As it does not host everyday activities, it is mostly related to holidays and special family events.

Describing it as a feminine place, a place of collective memory, a binder but also a buffer space between life fragments and crucial events, the ethnologist Anamaria Iuga provides a fascinating analysis of the traditional guest room (*casa bună*). Born in Maramureş, the author narrows her focus to the Iza Valley area, intending, as suggested in the book's subtitle, to describe the "dynamics of tradition". "*Valea Izei îmbrăcată ţărăneşte. Camera bună. Dinamismul tradiţiei*" ("*Iza Valley traditionally decorated. The guest room. The dynamics of tradition*") was published in 2011 by Galaxia Gutenberg and designed as a scientific study; moreover, it accurately describes the atmosphere and the mood of the place.

The research is conducted in three villages, Dragomireşti, Ieud and Săliştea de Sus and is divided in four parts, in order to facilitate the readers' understanding. The first one consists of a methodological presentation of the geographical, historical, social and cultural elements of the Iza Valley region, followed by a part that describes the traditional guest room and its material components: *strong elements* (the ones that still preserve tradition) and *weak elements* (which go outside tradition). The third part examines the dynamics and the ceremonies of the guest room, which has an important role in the traditional celebrations (the researcher uses the wedding ceremony as an example). Finally, the author explains the circumstances in which the guest room was created in the first place, referring both to people and objects.

What is the guest room (*casa bună*)?

"In this room (*casa bună*) the owners must exhibit the most beautiful things they have: the finest carpets (*ţoluri*), flowery woolen blankets (*cergi*), the most exquisite woven

¹ Anamaria Iuga, *Valea Izei îmbrăcată ţărăneşte. Camera bună - Dinamismul tradiţiei*, (Târgu Lăpuş: Galaxia Gutenberg, 2011), 318p. ISBN 978-973-141-430-0

towels (*ștergare*), generously ornate pillow shams, the most valuable icons and platters (*talgere*). The girls' 'dowry' is also kept in this room, in dowry boxes or displayed on the walls or on the bed. Here is the place where the guests and the Christmas carollers are received, and, most importantly, where the crucial family events take place. When two young people get married it is in this room that the bride and groom bid farewell to their parents. When a baby is baptized those who come to celebrate the event are received and feasted in this room. Also, when a family member passes away this is where the funeral wake takes place before the deceased is carried to the grave."¹ Briefly, this is how Anamaria Iuga summarizes her study. As she is familiar with all the objects in this room, with the way the beds are made, with the specific role and place of any **object**, she does not overlook any of the key elements. The author presents the importance assigned by the inhabitants of the above mentioned villages to these objects and highlights the main characteristics, as well as the elements that differentiate the guest rooms: they are localized on the north side of the house, the gloomy one or they overlook the street, they are the back rooms, they are unheated and uninhabited, as the owners enter here only on special occasions or on Sundays.

A globalizing perspective

The starting point of Anamaria Iuga's book, *The Iza Valley traditionally decorated* is her PhD thesis. What makes it remarkable and special is that although the book is a scientific research in every sense of the word, conducted with all the necessary resources, it is also a fine depiction of a subject which is very close to the authors' heart. It is worth mentioning, first of all, that it is her roots that bound her to the places she analyses and she rediscovers now as a researcher, which results in a slightly diachronic approach to the matter. Second of all, it would be rather unfair not to say that this familiarity with the subject also comes from the fact that she studied it intensively, which gives her full accreditation for the analysis of the guest room, both from an ethnological and a sociological perspective. Therefore, Anamaria Iuga does not content herself with simply comparing and contrasting the rooms she studies, by creating some effective taxonomies. Rather, she intends to get much more from the book as its public is little willing to spare much time to some descriptions of the Romanian folklore. Leaving aside the snobbery that some Romanian intellectuals show when it comes to folklore, although they have no more knowledge of the subject than the politicians who take part in all sorts of politically sponsored folklore festivals (and good money are invested in them, indeed), the time has come to offer an interpretation of what is presented and analyzed. Thus, the biggest asset of this book is the presentation of the guest room's dynamics, for in Anamaria Iuga's view, it does not involve solely the four walls and the traditional art objects existing there. The guest room is an extension of the owners' body and soul, a place where an abundance of memories linger on, where the images of the most important events in their lives still endure, a place where usefulness and beauty are harmoniously combined, a place of social values and closeness, a symbol.

¹ Anamaria Iuga, *Valea Izei îmbrăcată țărănește*, 10.

The guest room – an extension of the owner, today's snobbery?

It is also interesting to notice how, by providing a comparative analysis of the three localities, Anamaria Iuga applies the conclusions to the entire society of Maramureș; furthermore, she observes the internal tensions that lead to changes or to closer bonds and she finely notes the dynamics of this society (for she inclines to some sociologic conclusions as well, as a result of the sound theoretical notions she has in this field). For instance, the author defines her work as “the starting point in observing the way in which the people in Maramureș see themselves as both tradition preservers and tradition changers.” The guest room, well-embellished so as to show the male owner's economic status and to define the female owner as a versed housewife is therefore (it is not the first time this assertion is made, if we were to consider the previous works that analyzed the significance of this space) a mirror to the owner's personality, and a way to define him or her in relation to this place. And just as the traditional carved wooden gates in Maramureș used to show the social difference between villagers (it is the author who makes this comparison), the guest room is the *alter ego* of the homeowner.

Without adopting a strait-laced attitude, Anamaria Iuga manages, through intensive fieldwork research in the villages of Maramureș, to establish such a close contact with the locals, that the references she makes to the values which define their lifestyle are unmissable. Feeling as a local herself, the author presents objectively, without sounding surprised, two contradictory phenomena that define today's motley world: in some houses, the owners dissolved the traditional guest room, adorned with traditional craft objects, and preserved solely its functional characteristic, that is, the finest room in the house (where one can find the most expensive and modern furniture); in other houses, on the other hand, even in those recently built, the owners consider designing a traditional guest room. It would be also interesting to discuss how the people of Maramureș perceive the guest room as a sort of personal museum. For it is not only the most beautiful room of the house, but it is also indicative of the owner's social status (which is nowadays measured in the leather sofas and the fancy furniture, luxurious even, if we were to consider the hard-earned money made abroad and invested almost exclusively in houses). Thus, a traditional guest room in a new house, decorated with traditional objects, may always be a sign of snobbery for the tradition preserver.

The way we call it is the way we perceive it...

This room – the guest room – is defined in many ways and any appellation, even from a linguistic point of view, is rooted in the way the speaker perceives a certain object. Therefore we highlight the fact that this room is the *front room* in that it overlooks the street, especially in the shotgun houses, because it is used only for special occasions and it keeps valuable family objects. Whether traditional or modern in its decoration, this room remains the *front room* and the *best room*, where access is restricted, so as to be defined as special, particular. It is also called ‘parade room’, because this is exactly what the people of Maramureș do, they make a parade of this room, they show off whenever they invite a guest to see their “museum”. Now, as the element that makes the difference when it comes to those guest rooms is the decorations, the author strategically includes the new appellation of the room right in the book's title. The guest room is also the “traditionally decorated room” (decorated with traditional craft objects), a passive voice, therefore, that requires a grammatical agent, *by someone*. This is why *traditional* is no

longer a *sine qua non* attribute, but rather the result of an external action for it is always a person that decides to traditionally decorate this room; hence this appellation has a slight touch of artificiality.

What and how the villagers talk

The book is crammed not only with accurate and pertinent descriptions that meet the demands of a scientific research, but also with villagers' quotations. It is obvious that Anamaria Iuga took great pleasure in interviewing the villagers and to finding their life stories, having the guest room as a starting point, for here so many crucial events took place. In this way we learn about a woman's sufferings, as she was forced to marry someone she did not love, from some lines that describe the courtship custom; we also learn about a mother-in-law's sour attitude to the other mother-in-law: "if she got dressed here, let her get undressed here. But no! She had to do it at the house on the hill, because only there wanted the mother-in-law."¹ These quotations render the text not only authentic but also vivid. "This room welcomed priests, doctors, engineers, teachers and farmers, all social categories. All were well treated in this room. And so, poor people did their best to keep it neat and clean."² Stylistically speaking, this discourse is accurate and fluent; at times such quotations playfully interrupt it, but overall it is readable and it provides food for reflection; for answers are not offered on a plate and Anamaria Iuga prefers to suggest instead of explaining.

From ritual to ceremonial

Finally, the author makes two observations that show her perception regarding a new manner, a globalizing one, of analyzing a space from an ethnological perspective. In one of the introductory chapters, she states very clearly: "The customs combine the cultural and social elements"³. When she talks about the almost extinct custom of *drușca* și *stegar* (bridesmade and best man) and briefly presents the reasons behind this change, she emphasizes that it is caused by social factors and that this combination of cultural and social elements is not homogeneous. "In the past there were a lot of problems, because a bridesmaid wanted a certain best man and the best man wanted someone else. Even if the two wanted to be a pair, another bridesmaid could come between them. (...) Those who were paired (*drușcă* and *stegar*) had to stay together during the whole wedding, dance only with each other, and eventually the best man had to take the bridesmaid home (...) which was pretty difficult, because at the wedding there were other boys, other girls. (...) They would feel constrained."⁴ The social factor prevails over the cultural tradition. For it is worthy of note "how the stress is moved from the ritual elements, which are related to culture, religion and cosmology and placed on the ceremonial ones, related to social relationships, but also involving laicization and the spectacular."⁵ This is the axis of Anamaria Iuga's book, the result of an amazing work which wisely puts together the remains of authentic folklore and social factors.

¹ Ibid, 168.

² Ibid, 169.

³ Ibid, 24.

⁴ Ibid, 177.

⁵ Ibid, 274.