

ELEONORA SAVA (ED.), *A doua viață a studiilor de folclor*
(Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2025)

A tough question which has arisen for some time now in the fields of ethnology and anthropology regards the very object of study: the traditional human communities and their beliefs, concepts, rituals, and their whole way of life. Given the fulminating technological developments of the last century, from industrialization to transportation and communication, which have drastically and irremediably changed not only the practical aspects of existence, but its very essence, one may justifiably wonder whether such communities still exist. The question involves not only methodological or ethical aspects (what devices we use, how do we encircle specific communities and individuals in an interconnected world, how do we manage field data and what is our relation with it and with its providers etc.), but even epistemological and philosophical ones. Alas, not few researchers have concluded that these fields of study have lost their object, and consequently, their relevance, to the point of practical impossibility. In the context of globalization, with its underlying uniformization (in various degrees) of customs, tastes, beliefs, and attitudes, how can such research still be performed and, even more so, why would it be?

This may be a valid and justified stance if we try to approach these subjects as it was done in the past, while disregarding contextual facets. Expecting to descend into a traditional (and virtually isolated) community, in order to investigate its social and cultural aspects as researchers did in the last century, using the same methodology, the same conceptual framework and, last but not least, similar ideological biases and purposes, is an endeavor bound to fail. Stating that “times and worlds change” is a tired and useless cliché, but in this case, it really describes the situation. Clinging to out-of-date methods and concepts condemns such an undertaking to obsolescence and if a discipline is unable to renew its scientific arsenal, it loses all relevance and becomes a mere artifact in the museum of past intellectual trends. And when this danger looms over a scientific branch, enterprises aiming first and foremost at updating its epistemological framework are not only important, but truly lifesaving. And such efforts can arise only from within the branch itself, after honest processes of self-reflection have been undertaken, many times against fierce opposition coming from the scientific establishment. But sometimes one can be a prophet in one’s own country.

An enterprise as such is the volume *A doua viață a studiilor de folclor* (*The Second Life of folklore studies*), edited by Eleonora Sava, associate professor at the Faculty of Letters of Babeș-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca. Coming in the context of progressive loss of academic status ethnographic disciplines face, this volume constitutes a solid argument in favor of revitalizing them, thus contributing to the rigorous education philology students receive. This reason is explicitly stated in the foreword: folklore studies, placed at the crossroads of different humanist disciplines (literature, sociology, anthropology, psychology and so on), do not only play a great part in the intellectual formation of students, but are a requirement, given that the official middle-school curriculum stipulates that pupils

have to be able to express their own linguistic and cultural identity in national and international contexts, as it relates to traditions, local and national specificity, or cultural diversity (16).

The volume gathers the papers of seven students and graduates from the Faculty of Letters, which have also been presented at the faculty's student conferences in 2024 and 2025 (the *Literature, folklore, and cultural studies* panel). To be noted that none of the authors are trained professional ethnologists, their contributions being the result of sheer personal interest in the topics. Not having absorbed the strict content of an ethnographic education granted them the freedom to move between unconventional themes, methods, commentaries, points of view and layers of analysis. This is not to say that the researches are in any way lacking rigor and discipline. On the contrary, the seriousness of their approach and the manifest enthusiasm for such ventures bring a fresh air into the discipline and emphatically prove that folklore studies can and should be rejuvenated, so that they may contribute to a better understanding of the current cultural and social (but also economic, political and, why not, philosophical) environments. The way they use the conceptual and methodological apparatus is commendable, proving on the one hand that they have the capacity, the will and the patience to listen, learn and persevere, and on the other hand, that they were properly guided.

Semi-structured interviews, direct and, occasionally, participative observation, thorough gathering, presentation, and interpretation of data, favoring the voice of the social actors and revealing emic perspectives, all grant scientific solidity. Although vast transcripts from interviews, discussions and rituals offer in-depth insights into social and cultural phenomena, they never feel redundant or off-topic, and create a beneficial balance between description and interpretation (once too many times in the past there have been ethnographic accounts which overwhelmed the reader with irrelevant or commonplace data). Perfect samples of this excellent management of field data are the papers on the last gatherings ("*șezători*") in Bobohalma, Mureș County (Maria-Carina Lechințan), and on the swain groups from Făgăraș Land (Ioan Marian Streza). An interesting case is presented in the section dealing with the *barrel divination* ("*cătatul în ciubăr*") in Rodna, Bistrița-Năsăud County (Alexandra Anca), where the observer also takes part in the ritual, after having plotted to incite the whole procedure, proving that sometimes the researcher is able to actively *create*, or at least provide motivation for his/her own fieldwork.

Another very important aspect deals with the new media technologies that are sometimes considered to contribute to the eradication of traditional customs and communities. But this new wave of social researchers prove that nothing could be further from the truth. On the contrary, if new communication tools make many old habits go out of date, they open the gate to a plethora of fresh social and cultural realities, coupled with novel ways to interact with them. This has been happening for some time now (since the possibility of recording images and sound became reality), with the introduction of radio and television, and later with the Internet and the current user-created content. Of course, this only works if old definitions of tradition and folklore are updated, to mean not only *popular creation*, but rather *informal culture* (vernacular, implicit, unofficial), as the editor states in the foreword (9-10). Following this approach, two chapters deal with the analysis of visual documentaries involving the caroling tradition in Mărișel as ways of turning tradition into patrimony and spreading it via mass-media (Marian Neamțiu), and with the digital reconfiguration of a traditional culinary item, the sponge cake (Simona Alboi). The idea of a *secondary life* of folklore

studies, alluding to the reevaluation of traditional themes, methods, and contexts, is amplified here by the integration of contemporary technology as a social and cultural dimension, which often influences and even forges *reality*.

A mark of epistemological bravery is also the investigation of themes which have not been at the center of ethnographic research, for various reasons (not least due to ideological preferences): domestic violence, for example. Although everyone has heard stories and jokes dealing with violence within families, or they have personally known such cases, not many studies have dealt with this huge elephant in the room of social sciences. It takes the courage and the passion of a young researcher (Ana-Maria Hubăr) to approach this difficult task and to give an astounding ethnographic account of a chilling instance of family abuse. When reading between the lines and the lucid analysis of the gathered material, one may also sense the emotional investment the researcher put into this endeavor, proving that subjectivity is not necessarily a hindrance on a rational discourse, and that sometimes science can also have, dare I say, a socially therapeutic function.

Finally, the paper on the fairy motif in the literary work of I. D. Sîrbu (Ionucu Pop) attests the value of ethnographic inquiries beyond the strict field work and the usual themes and items integrated into social research. Tracing the popular influences in literature and other cultural products may reveal insights of utmost importance about a given society, helping us understand the ways it manages shared ideas and symbols. Revealing the popular sources of inspiration in a great literary corpus and writing about a writer who used other written and oral stories is a perfect way to support the idea of a *secondary life* of folklore studies.

It should be also stressed that the linguistic and literary qualities of the texts are exquisite, sometimes even reaching outstanding, polished, and elegant aspect. This comes as another reason for keeping folklore studies in the philology curricula and even promoting them by creating a main course on this topic at the Faculty of Letters (a wish clearly expressed by the editor, 16-17). It is true that a few conclusions and interpretations are somewhat rushed and could have used more argumentative and factual support, but that is excusable in the case of very young researchers who only took on this task out of personal interest. In time, having accumulated more in terms of experience and knowledge, it is certain that their abilities will only develop. At this particular moment, their efforts are salutary.

The volume reaches its aims and proves once and for all that such studies are a necessity in the fields of ethnography, anthropology, sociology, or philology, but also for any complete humanist education. Our hope is that this will not remain a singular effort and that it will serve as an example for other capable individuals (researchers, teachers, students etc.) to enrich the field of contemporary ethnography with their own projects. To close with a metaphor, the academic ethnographic community is in some ways similar to a village and, as one of the interviewees in the book has stated, “*satu' știe tăt*” (“the village knows it all,” 73).

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