

CURRENT OUTLOOK UPON ETHNOGRAPHY

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Abstract: *This paper delves into the main dimensions of ethnography today. According to common sense, ethnography is understood as a domain that deals with the description or with the study of humankind's lifestyles in different cultures. This fact is true, but not exhaustive. In order to demonstrate this statement, this article will deal with some dimensions of the contemporary ethnographic research field: the ethnographic study as an instrument for becoming acquainted with the traditional events, the ethnographic method in social sciences and a relation between ethnography and mass-media.*

Key words: *ethnography, traditional events, ethnographical method, exploratory research.*

1. Ethnography – Description of Peoples' Lives

Within everyday communication or in mass-media, we often hear about *ethnography and folklore*, about *museums of ethnography* or about *great ethnographers*. In a vision specific to common sense, ethnography stands for a field that deals with the description or with the study of mankind's lifestyles in different cultures. This is true but not exhaustive.

Ethnography is connected to folklore and this fact makes us think about our ancestors' cultural productions or about those of other people who lived during pre-modern times. This is why we have numerous museums of ethnography. They comprise elements of material and non-material culture pertaining to the past, however, unlike the museums of history, where the main exhibits highlight outstanding events and historical personalities, in an ethnography museum we rather find out regular life facts,

specific to a certain population: which was the epoch's garment, which were the main production means, how the events in the lifecycle unfolded (baptism, wedding, funeral) and even what happened during leisure time.

Etymologically, ethnography comes from the Greek words "*ethnos*" / people and "*graphein*" – to describe. For a long time, the terms of ethnography and ethnology had undifferentiated use, with reference to the study of primitive societies. However, after the Second World War, the two branches of anthropology were defined in a different manner. Ethnography was attributed the task to collect data and ethnology the task to interpret them, to the purpose of carrying out the comparative analyses among the different communities and societies.

This way, "in contemporary vision, ethnography stands for the first step of cultural anthropology – which is the empirical step of picking up the concrete data and of illustrating the enunciations

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with pretension of generality” (Geană, G., 1993).

Ethnographers are those professionals who pick up information about the culture of communities, through the method of the ethnographical survey, which implies carrying out direct observations and collecting the data directly from the community members. The main techniques used by the ethnographer are the participative observation and the semi-structured interview. In both cases, the collected information is audio and/or video recorded.

Folklore is integrant part of the data collected by the ethnographers. Folklore is defined as “the totality of the artistic, literary, musical, plastic etc. creations, of the popular customs and traditions of a country or of a region.” (source: DEX, 1998).

Ovidiu Densuşianu (1873-1938), Romanian linguist and folklorist, stated that „folklore has to show us how the different manifestations of life reflect the basic people’s soul, how this one feels and thinks either under the influence of the ideas, of the beliefs, of the superstitions inherited from the past, or under the one of the impressions that the everyday occurrences arouse” (apud Pop, 2006, p. 12)

2. Ethnographic Study – an Instrument for Becoming Acquainted with the Traditional Events

In this part of the article, I will submit an ethnographic study that I performed during the 90-ies, with a rather weird theme in the scenery of the specialized literature. It is about a comparison between two events with no apparent connection: New-Year’s Eve and death watch. However, at a close analysis, the two events have many common elements. They are connected by the people’s very belief in renewal and the

manner in which they perceive the lapse of time.

Older researches have shown that the Romanian people used as unit for measuring time not only the calendar time, with its multiples and submultiples, but also another unit: “human life” or “human epoch”, expressed not necessarily through a number of years, but through indicators that marked “the biological and social-cultural fulfillment or non-fulfillment of life: marriage, birth, children’s upbringing and education, including their marriage” (Ghinoiu, 1992).

Starting from the two fundamental dimensions of time present in Romanian popular culture – *annual time* and *human time* – we will note that New Year’s Eve and death watch embody, in fact, the same idea, but they are constructed, each if them, on a certain dimension of time. If New Year’s Eve means death and rebirth of annual time, death watch expresses death and rebirth of human time.

In traditional culture, human being has personified not only nature, but also *time*. However, time is not absolutely seen as an arrow with irreversible trajectory, which means the linear representation of time is not a pure one. There will be added the cyclical representation, time seen as a circle, undergoing the logic of a perpetual return. Annual time swiftly dies and is reborn, after 365 or 366 days. Human time dwindles and is rekindled in the rhythm of the “human life”: every death is accompanied by a birth; a man disappears but another one takes his place.

To the purpose of illustrating the idea which brings together New-Year’s Eve and death watch, we will make a short stop in the space full of significations of these two popular manifestations, the way they appear within Romanian culture.

First of all, what is New-Year’s Eve and what particularizes it? New-Year’s Eve is the feast which marks the moment of a

year's closing and of another calendar year's beginning. The Old Year is old and dies; the New Year barely opens its eyes towards the world. On this occasion, people are practicing rituals for the time restoration. This restoration process comprises a period of several days: the last of the old year and the first of the year that just begins. At midnight on the New-Year's Eve, time experiences a spiritual breakage, renewing itself. It is the night of huge energy unchaining, the night when the control upon behavior diminishes, when, within the humans' conception, supernatural forces intermingle with human forces creating disorder, chaos. The old year grew old, degraded and it will die. Another year, maybe better, will rearrange what can currently no longer be chained. Hence, the necessity of the purification rituals practiced during the beginning hours and days of the New Year (illuminations, production of noise, water sprinkling), to the main purpose of chasing away the malefic spirits, the evil from among the people.

The Romanian ethnological literature deposits a great richness of the New-Year's Eve's practices. This is the time for parties, prognostics, charms and love spells, this is the time for good wishing and for making up calendars such as the one of onion sheets, in the desire of finding out how the year to come will be. For instance, in Moldavia, the custom called "Malanca" or "Țurca" is still practiced.

"Malanca" is a hoard of youngsters who bear different masks, every mask having a certain role in popular theatre plays which are played in the householders' courtyards or on the streets.

The masks have a profound signification in the moments of temporal crucial moments. According to Mihai Pop, the games with masks stand for the bringing forth of all tensions accumulated during the year (apud Ghinoiu, 1994). The mask

may be an escape from the everyday normative regime, an avoidance of the social control, but may also be a tentative of exceeding the borders of one's own personality. Bearing a mask, you are *another*, anybody, real or imaginary. There are put into function important psychic mechanisms of simulation and dissimulation, but also of identification, as through a mask the individual may be what he wishes to, identifying this way with the model, with his referential which may be divinity himself.

In the manifestations of Malanca, there appear simulations of the death and rebirth of some characters of significance for the life of the respective community. The idea that time cannot be reborn but through paying the "mythical tribute of the god's or his substitute's death and resurrection" (Ghinoiu, read literary works) determines people to sacrifice the deity in his zoomorphic hypostasis (masks which represent revered animals) or phyto-morphic one (wheat in guise of knot-shaped bread and cracknels).

In the game of Malanca, **the bear**, for instance, as a mask, is a character undergoing this ritual. Divined during the pre-Christian periods, the bear enrolls in the rhythms of the annual time, dying and being reborn once with this one.

The game of Malanca brings into stage numerous characters, occupations and behaviors from everyday life, most of them being however parodied, bantered. For instance, boyars are satirized as they appear dressed in ugly, dirty, poor clothes. Other masks illustrate public or military personalities: emperors, ministers, generals. The masks cover a wide range of social roles, the community of the village creating for one day, only for a day, a world for itself, a society in miniature, in which regular order is reversed.

During this time the decisive moment, when the world order is affected, the

gypsies appear, the “coppersmiths”, who divine the future. Then there appear the most turbulent elements, the “devils”, who top the disorder goblet, realizing an orgiastic picture in its true sense.

“Their role is reduced to the creation and maintenance of an atmosphere of exuberant mirth”; “they turn somersaults, they climb onto houses, into trees, they glide under the bed, they hinder the others’ game, they soil the girls with soot” (Jula and Mănăstireanu, 1968, page 13)

The Old Year, personified in guise of a “tired, hunch-backed and ragged old man” (ibidem, page 56) speaks with the New Year, represented by a lad disguised as bride, probably a symbol of the purity, of the fertility and of the fruitfulness of the year to come.

Numerous other customs of the New-Year’s Eve are to be found over the entire Romanian cultural space. They attest for the fact that, far from being a poor event, the New-Year’s Eve not only connects two calendar years, but also millenaries of spirituality, through the traditions transmitted from generation to generation.

On the other meridian of time, *human time*, the ethnological literature identifies numerous manifestations associated to the moments in which a human being departs for ever from this world. It is about the manifestations specific to the *death watch*. Death watch comprises an assembly of rituals which unfold at the dead person’s house during the nights subsequent to the death up to the day of the burial. On the basis there lies the belief that the dead person does not have to be left alone for a single moment at night, as his spirit, who wanders round the house, is being lurked by malefic spirits.

To this purpose, at the dead person’s house there gathers almost the entire village, regardless of age, sex or of other nature.

The manifestations that we will make reference to as follows have been kept up to our days in very few places in our country. They are to be found nowadays in certain isolated villages from Vrancea or in a few localities from the mountains of Apuseni (Graur, 1971)

The atmosphere which emerges at the dead person’s house during the death watch is of an uncommon mirth and dynamism. Everybody laughs, cracks jokes or screams. The so-called “death watch games” are also very numerous, staging everyday occupations, significant events from the community life or elements pertaining to the Christian religious practices.

Sometimes the dead person himself is caught into game, his movements being rendered by the participants through different supporting systems and body movement systems. Many of these games symbolically enhance the pregnancy and the sexual behaviors. These moments are charged with significations, as they draw very close life and death, love and death, dual terms, but which cannot exist one without the other.

The mirth and the exuberance from the death watch reach maximum levels when the dead person is an old man. An explanation would be that, in the popular conception, the deceased old man would have a very high potential fertilizing power (Ghinoiu, 1992), which means that there is an increased chance for the place of the respective man to be soon taken in the community by a new-born.

Consequently, all this mirth from the death watch is justified through the people’s belief that the life of the one who died will be replaced by another life, of a child who will be born, the continuity of life being this way ensured. At the New-Year’s Eve - as we saw - the mirth was brought forth by the birth of a new year instead of the old and degraded one. The

death watch marks in its turn the joy of a new life which will be born instead of the dead person's closed life.

The masked persons are not missing from this event, as from the New-Year's Eve. They bear masks which represent hideous figures or heads of savage animals. Together with the youngsters, the masked persons enter into foolish games. The uproar from the courtyard is covered by the rhythmical trampling of the steps and by the unusual screams, with apotropaic character, in order to chase away the demons.

The death watch is therefore the moment which marks the end of a unit of time: "human life". This is why "the appearance of the masked persons at the death watch is inscribed in the same ritual of time restoration" (Ghinoiu, 1994).

In the unfolding of the New-Year's Eve and of the death watch, there are many common elements. We saw that the games, the masked persons, the party elements that may even reach orgiastic levels, and likewise the state of mirth are present in both events. Beyond these ones, there are other similar aspects, such as lighting a ritual fire.

The ritual fire appears also during the death watch. In the middle of the courtyard there is kindled a great fire, fed with fir tree chips, the whole night, creating strange effects through the play of lights and shadows. Round the fire, there dance the masked persons. This is a cathartic fire, a fact proven by testimonies which attest for the fact that, very long ago, the dead person himself was passed through the fire. There appears here an aspect which places very deep in past millenaries the origin of the inhabitants of the Romanian land: fire as sacred, purifying element, which at death destroys the body, anchoring nevertheless the soul into eternity.

Both New-Year's Eve and death watch unfold during the night. This is in fact the

time when there occur the most important feasts of the popular calendar or of the Christian calendar. "Darkness, which on the symbolic level is associated to the initial chaos, stands for the frame propitious to the great transformations" (Ghinoiu, 1992). Night is the time when a life takes the place of another one; night is the time of love, of procreation, but also of the Fatal Sisters who appear at a child's birth in order to unveil his destiny. During the night of the New-Year's Eve, people tried to enter into relation with the spirits; if during the entire year, they were afraid of them – resorting to various apotropaic practices – now they were asking their help in unveiling the future (Ghinoiu, 1994).

Another common element, which we mentioned before, is represented by the purification acts. The illuminations, the crossing over fire, even the passing of the cattle through the fire, the fumigations, the water sprinkling, the noise production are both met during the New-Year's Eve, and during the death watch. Likewise, all orgiastic elements, comprehending through these ones all excesses which would be condemned during everyday life (parties, drunkenness, obscene jokes etc) are, during these nights, behaviors which nobody has the right to elude. Maybe here, belongs the dance where the kiss is rendered official and compulsory, the **perinița [little cushion]**, whose origin seems to be placed in the death watch games.

As a conclusion, these would be a few elements which allow us to make a connection between the feast of the New-Year's Eve and the custom of the death watch, climax moments on the thread of annual and human time. The two events have a particular importance as they mark crucial moments of existence. These are moments in which people unveil the power of their soul: the power to hope and the power to make their life better, which

inscribes in the cosmic rhythm, which they can nevertheless not resist.

3. Ethnographic Method in Social Sciences

Nowadays, in social sciences, “ethnography” means more than the description of some cultural elements of the various communities or peoples. On the methodological level, we speak about a certain type of making research, about a way of collecting and presenting data specific to the social. It is about “the ethnographic method”, a form of qualitative research which implies observing and describing the main aspects of an object to be studied (a social unit, a phenomenon, a process)

Giampietro Gobo, Italian professor of methodology, considers that the main attributes of the ethnographic method are the following: 1) the researcher establishes a direct relation with the social actors; 2) living for a certain time in their natural life environment; 3) to the purpose of observing and describing behaviors; 4) interacting with them and participating to their everyday activities; 5) learning their communication codes in order to understand the significance of their actions; 6) systematically taking “ethnographical notes” (source: <http://www.sociol.unimi.it>).

The research of the ethnographic type may be defined as “an interpretative activity in which, through the intermediary of the observation, of the in-depth interviews and of other types of interviews, the researchers attempt at grasping the signification of the communication through analyzing the perceptions, the shared information and the activities of the social actors” (source: <http://www-1.unipv.it>)

During the year 2004, another Italian professor, Marco Marzano, published the work “Scene finali. Morire di cancro in Italia [Final Scenes. To Die of Cancer in

Italy]” The author says that this book stands for an example about how a sociological research can be carried out on the basis of the ethnographic method. I will briefly submit the fundamental elements of the content of this work:

- the Research Issue: how is/what means to die from cancer in contemporary Italy?
- the Study is substantiated on a personal experience, the author’s father being a victim of this disease. The study is focused on the interactions among the social actors involved in this world which is being built around the disease and around the cancerous person, and the method of research is the ethnographic one, based on direct observations upon the places, persons and events.
- the Basic Sentence of the Study: to die from cancer is a social process, in the sense that a person “has begun dying from cancer from the social standpoint” ever since the moment he/she found out the diagnosis and/or the moment somebody (the doctor or another person) has known the patient will die in a relatively short time.
- Consequences: place major, dramatic changes occur on the level of the social interactions “round the ill person” and the main elements around whom there are structured the social relations among all those involved in this social micro-universe are: therapeutic decisions (choices in connection to the treatments) and informative decisions (choices with respect to the information and to the communication of the information with respect to the gravity of the disease).
- the main parts of the study: a) in the first part there is described the so-called “mistake in the communicative process” with the person sick of cancer, part of the author’s personal experience. It is about hiding the truth from the sick person and about creating “frail conspiracies”, which are however discovered by the sick person

and which are cumbersome. Therefore the author of the book opts for the alternative of the sincerity, of communicating the diagnosis ever since the very beginning. In the second part, there is described, on the basis of the observations carried out through the ethnographic method, the professional context of an oncology hospital, the doctors and the nurses being called by the author “the professionals of death”. There are afterwards described, on the basis of interviews and of direct observations, the interactions within the patients’ families, there being identified the problems and the needs of the members of these families. An important part of the book is dedicated to describing the patients’ *telling*. Interested in the way the patients relate themselves to the disease, the author identified four types of “stories” that reflect four types of attitude towards cancer: the stories of “persecution” (sick person as victim, disease explained through external causes), stories of “restitution” (state of sickness seen as transitory state, the patient being optimistic), the stories of “salvation” (sufferance seen as a path towards salvation) and stories of “liberation” (out of the social control, obligations, constraints; the sickness interpreted as “gift”).

The ethnographic research is used, as we illustrated through the study above, not only for describing the social units (groups, organizations, institutions, communities etc) but also for obtaining typologies or for identifying the social networks (Berg, 2007).

The identification of the typologies or of the social types is an approach specific to sociology, and the ethnographic method is of great help in this respect. As regards the identification of the social networks, in sociology there is the Network Analysis – specialized on the analysis of the data of a relational nature – but the ethnographic

method may very well be of help in collecting the information and may complete the network analysis in interpreting the data, through collecting information about the significations and the interpretations that the social actors give to their own relationships.

4. Ethnography and Mass-Media

In the 80s, social research upon mass-media targeted the identification and the measurement of the effects that the means of mass communication had upon the public. In the framework of these preoccupations, the methods resorted to were the surveys (that should produce quantitative data about mass-media consumption) and the experiments (used for identifying and measuring the effects of the media consumption) (Dayan, D. 2007). Many such experiments tracked the effects that the productions with aggressive or non-aggressive charging had upon the children’s behaviour. Others had as target the identification of the effects of the subliminal stimuli upon the social representations or upon the ethnic prejudices.

During the 80s, many researchers directed their attention towards descriptive approaches, trying to analyse mass-media within various contexts: geographic, sociologic and historic. There began consequently the description of different types of media programs and productions, the analysis of the institutions that produce them and the conditions of reception for these productions. For instance, in Australia, during the 80s, as an answer to the uncertainties or to the fear produced by the globalization processes, mass-media granted high importance to the cultural programs about the native populations, the main message being cultivating the respect for the customs, the mythologies and the rituals of these populations.

A new theme in this field of mass-media ethnography is represented by the *media landscapes*. They are part of the mass-media ethnography, being placed in the framework of the preoccupations for analyzing the “globalization reception”. This way, every society has its own media landscape, in which the media products in circulation on the worldwide level may be available or not, have certain costs, are broadcast at hours of higher or lower audience etc.

The media landscape of a society may be rich or poor, formulated in a single language or in several, of the state or commercial, and each disposes of a certain “configuration” of the reception of the worldwide circulation productions.

Conclusion

Current ethnography does not represent only a branch of anthropology, destined to collect and analyze the field data about the culture of the various peoples or communities. The concept of “ethnography” is also used in the methodology of social sciences, designing a special type of research of qualitative nature.

This way, the ethnographical study exceeded in comprehension the popular customs and the traditions, turning into an independent method in sociology, or in the communication sciences, a method used especially in the exploratory researches or in the research approaches, which intend to identify social types or even social networks.

Ethnography penetrated a new field, the one of the communication sciences, where the ethnographical study supplies important information which forms the basis of the comparative analyses of the media sceneries.

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