

Marin Marian-Bălașa, *Ochiul dracului și al lui Dumnezeu (mentalități economice tradiționale)* [The Eye of Devil and God (traditional economic mentalities)], București, Editura Muzicală, 2021, 620 p., ISBN 978-973-42-1205-7

If we were to use the now established formula of historian Lucian Boia, we could say that the volume we are talking about is... different!* As the author, in his entire being, is an ethnologist... otherwise. I mean, he's not like the rest of us. Which benefits the author more, and us, the rest, less. Because I continue to believe that between the work and the biography dozens of threads are woven together, holding them both and structuring their patterns. You will undoubtedly ask me what is so special about Marin Marian-Bălașa's volume? Well, kind of... everything.

First of all, Mr. Bălașa is ambitious and embarks on an ethnological approach that... boggles the mind (as the chronicler said). And which, today, is little frequented in Romanian ethnology; namely: the synthesis. We, the others, more or less famous, cut out a larger or smaller piece of social reality or of the objects of study belonging to ethnology and folklore, and focus our research on this subject. Well, our author takes it in the opposite way: he chooses a way to enter the social reality – in his case the economic phenomenon – and his research object is actually... the entire social reality. We do monographic research, while he does global research. In autochthonous ethnology – using here the term ethnology as an inclusive one, which in fact melts folklore into itself – I have not seen greater ambition since Simion Florea Marian (end of the 19th – beginning of the 20th century). Which again is good. What I want to say is that the contemporary author is at an age when successive accumulations reap their fruits, but I realize that the project of this volume is three decades old and that it is actually a work of maturity. In some way, almost all of us experience this: sometime, late after we have scattered our research in various directions, we find with surprise and delight that, in fact, unconsciously, we seem to have been guided through time in the choice of research subjects so as to fill the white spots of an imaginary map of our ethnological curiosity. In other words, at some point we realize the unsuspected coherence of our research interests. And if at that moment we put our fingers on the keyboard, we can make The personal synthesis of all our research. What I have been trying to say is that at some point we are all tempted by the temptation of synthesis, only that the synthesis of the majority of us is infinitely more modest than that of Marian-Bălașa. So let's remember the first argument of the singularity of his work: the *ambition for synthesis*.

This was the orally presented text which opened the workshop devoted to discussing this book, under the title *Pentru o etnologie românească dezinhibată. O carte, un autor și opt perspective de lectură* [For a Disinhibited Ethnology: a book, an author, and eight reading perspectives], conceived, launched, organized and moderated by prof. Constantin Bărbulescu within the 2022 „ASER National Conference” (Sibiu, 14th of July). The gathering was honored by advanced academic presentations, analyses, reviews, surveys or impressions by C. Bărbulescu, Eleonora Sava, Otilia Hedeșan, Elena Bărbulescu, Ioan Pop-Curșeu, Mircea Păduraru, Ileana Benga, as well as by conclusions and answers by M. Marian-Bălașa. Re-elaborated and expanded (thus illustrating and achieving the colloquial event), most of those original presentations here follow.

Secondly, the economic perspective through which he looks at the Romanian rural social, but not only the rural, is also completely atypical within the contemporary autochthonous research. As it is known, we do not have a well-developed autochthonous economic anthropology/ethnology. An economic vision over the social life, so characteristic of the modern analysis of societies, is completely eluded in Romanian ethnology. Well, precisely this perspective, as I said – atypical, marginal and almost non-existent – is chosen by the author as the royal path to the interpretation of the Romanian social. What Marian-Bălașa attempts in the volume we are talking about is an economic interpretation of the facts pertaining to peasant culture and civilization. In fact, it goes down to the economic bases of the social and rural imaginary. And it is precisely this perspective that makes otherwise beaten and beaten subjects in Romanian folklore and ethnology to be put in a completely different light than how they appear in the canonical works. Classical subjects, in our author's approach, become... something else. Precisely this new perspective on some known subjects gives the intellectual beauty of the present work. And to stop speaking blindly, let's now take an example: the traditional wedding. The author starts from a common sense observation, which we all know in fact: "Beyond its aspect of celebration, the wedding is the moment when the economic fund with which the new family sets off on its own existential adventure is accumulated and activated. The wedding is, therefore, an occasion for economic display and financial contributions. Practically, the wedding lays the economic foundations of the setting and evolution of a family, the negotiations and discussions of the future in-laws about the wealth, dowry or inheritance to be offered to the bride and groom are intense, often heated, sometimes prolonged up and beyond the time of any events and ceremonies, sometimes excuse for deep arguments until old age" (p. 184). The problem is that we all know the economic dimension of the wedding, but (as far as I know) none of us researches it. Where are the ethnologists' research works – and this includes me, indiscriminately – in which we have the descriptions of the economic transactions of a concrete peasant wedding in the flesh and bones?!

We kept dreaming that there would come (I would say on a white horse) a young researcher who would work on rural weddings, or even urban ones, and who would do an entire doctoral thesis on the research of marriages and implicitly the weddings of at least one brotherhood and in which to highlight these "solid materialistic calculations" (p. 186) that are the basis of marriage. So, the matrimonial and therefore patrimonial strategies, if we want to use the standard terminology of European ethnology, the connection between them and how they are actually implemented. At least a small number of case studies to give us a concrete idea, anchored in the field, about this maximum transaction that marriage is. The merit of the present author is that he looks at marriage exclusively from this perspective that is hidden by contemporary ethnology, and, perhaps, other researchers will follow in his footsteps and give us the studies that will allow us to overcome general and generalizing statements. Marian-Bălașa rightly talks about the "wedding economy", "the wedding as an exuberance of the economic gift", about the "wedding gift" and the "business marriage", perspectives that I recommend to all those who want to study the contemporary wedding. There is here a white, shameful spot (among many others), on the map of autochthonous ethnology. In order not to prolong it, let us retain the second

argument pleading for the singularity of the present volume: *the economic approach to social phenomena and to past or contemporary folklore productions*.

If you simply look at the summary, and especially if you read the entire volume, you cannot fail to notice the space the author gives to the marginals of the Romanian society: Roma, beggars and the poor in general. In fact, the entire peasant society is perceived as being characterized by economic dependency, political and cultural subordination; and I think he is not wrong with this assessment. Because from Pierre Bourdieu onwards we know that the European peasantry is a social class that is always an object and never a subject. However, Parts III and IV in Marian-Bălașa's book, which represent about half of the volume final text, are entirely dedicated to these marginal categories. If we add the analysis of the meanings of poverty in the folklore texts, from Section I, we are forced to note that the author's major interest is directed towards these social categories. Marian-Bălașa empathizes and is irresistibly drawn to the condition of the marginalized and to their cultural productions, which the canonical authors do not necessarily ignore, but certainly neglect. In other words, in Romanian ethnology the marginals and their folkloric and ceremonial productions occupy exactly the place that dominant society attributes to them, i.e. marginal; while in the work of Marin Marian-Bălașa the social marginals are extracted from their humble condition and propelled to the forefront of research! Together with Irina Nicolau and several other contemporary or older researches, MMB's approaches the rituals of the poor in Bucharest (such as the "lamb-touching walk", the "subway carol", the "begging carol" and others). Yet, he is equally interested and almost fascinated, I could say empathetically, by the gypsy fiddler and his role in shaping the local folklore. Through empathy and the maximum interest given to the fate's disinherited ones, I tend to place Marian-Bălașa's book alongside Vasile Ernu's trilogy of marginals or the one dedicated to *Viețașilor de la Rahova* (Survivors from Rahova) by Eugen Istodor. Thus, let's mark and remember the third singularity of the present volume: *the interest in marginals and their cultural productions*.

Fourthly, the gaze of the ethnologist Bălașa is disinhibited and strongly challenging. He doesn't shy away from tackling uncomfortable topics and calling things out. He talks about the misogyny of peasant society as reflected in folklore texts, about rural violence, about the laxity of peasant morals and even about popular racism, i.e. about those things that can transform the Romanian peasant good and identity into a character, according to the standards of today, as doubtful as possible. Of course, few of the Romanian ethnologists do this because in this way they would threaten the privileged alliance between the dominated ideology (the national/nationalist one), and ethnology, that is, between *the peasant* and *the Romanian*. This would be equivalent to the demystification of national ethnology. Marin MB thus becomes a kind of Lucian Boia of Romanian ethnology – the one who dismantles the founding myths of the peasant's image in all local/national ethnological production. An unfortunate positioning, because in this way one becomes the favorite target of the local academic establishment. It is true that he himself does not whisper his words when he talks, for example, about the "economy of the political folklore" or about "folklore and political opportunism", totally marginal topics in contemporary academic debates, because they obviously put the guild in a bad, unfavorable light. Anyway, the author rightly states that: "The interference of politics

in folklore – that is, the genuine, massive, tendentious and aggressive interference of a substantial, partisan and despotic politics – is a premiere of the 20th century. On this subject, distinct studies, objective, consistent, have not yet been initiated. And those carried out during communism (such as exegesis or collections signed by folklorists until 1990) inevitably bore the mark of political enslavement and conditioning” (p. 500).

In beautiful case studies, Ioan R. Nicola and Ilarion Cocișiu “fall victim” to him, but Al. Amzulescu is not spared either. Yet, on the other hand, even if he mentions the phenomenon, MMB easily passes over the main servitude of Romanian ethnology, namely: the privileged alliance between ethnology and national ideology. And which is not from yesterday, but has always been, more precisely from the very birth of the discipline at the end of the 18th century. Folkloristics, and the whole constellation of researches on the native peasant world in the 19th century especially, but not only, in fact are integral parts of the mechanism of production and consolidation of the national ideology. Marin MB knows this very well, much better than many of his colleagues, and I am convinced that he does not approach the subject consistently for the simple reason that it is not within the scope of this work; so, one should not be unfair to him. In conclusion, an asset of the present work is the fact that it casts *an uninhibited look at the research objects of the ethnologist, as well as at the knowledge generation mechanisms in Romanian ethnology*.

Fifthly, the author has his own style, a specific writing, which, it must be said, does not benefit the reader, but which eventually catches you and which in the end you really start to savor. At least that’s what happened to me. MMB does not have an easy writing style: the phrase is long, arborescent, baroque as someone put it, full of repetitions and even lexical innovations. In his case, even the writing is... different. For example, it uses Arabic characters instead of Roman characters to designate the centuries (as the rest of us do); uses the hyphen in print to differentiate the doublet *pósturi–postúri* (postures – positionings). However, in the end, despite all such things, how many of us can boast that their text can be recognized from the first, even when it does not have the author printed on its front and next to the title? In the end, I can only assure you that the effort to read this over 600 pages book (small layout, so about 800 pages in fact) is worth doing. In the end, you won’t regret a single reading minute.

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