

Bringing together research carried out over three decades (1990-2020), *The Eye of Devil and God (Traditional Economic Mentalities)* builds on its 620 pages a new epistemological field in Romanian ethnology – the economic sacredness or the economy of the sacred –, but also a new theoretical and interpretive paradigm that supports this view on the folk and popular thought. In addition, the volume is included in a consistent attempt of Marin Marian-Bălașa to make visible and heard a new type of ethnological and anthropological discourse in the Romanian public and scientific space. Taking a critical

stance towards the canon of classical Romanian folkloristics, which often constructed an idealized and schematic image of the peasant and of the “national” past, this discourse reveals the purpose of the ethnological view that is to make intelligible the truly lived real, to decipher contemporary mentalities as well as current life practices. The 10 points of the present presentation argue this just stated thesis.

1. The encyclopedic dimension. Initially titled *Folklore and Economy...*, the work constitutes an idea-based or conceptual monograph, insofar as it deals with everything that has an “economic referent within the imaginary, literary, spectacular, and musical productions of folklore” (p. 5). Viewed in the context of Romanian customary thought, the economic is revealed to be connected with the sacred, and the various relations between the economic and the religious are traced through analyzes grouped in the five sections of the volume. The three fundamental concepts – folklore, economics and religiosity – are reconceptualized, having much more extensive semantic fields in the proposed approach. Folklore is defined from the very beginning as “a term and sign for a certain kind of cognition, a certain genuine, primary creativity, consubstantial to human consciousness, basic for any individual, as well as for any community” (p. 7-8); definition that will be nuanced in several subsequent reforms: “the totality of forms and formulas of sensitive expression of popular-traditional cognition” (p. 403). The book convinces us, throughout its course, that everything that belongs to this type of cognition (that is, all folklore, in a broad sense) has an economic referent, and the economic can only be understood – on a psychological and mental level – only in relation to the whole culture and, therefore, with popular religion and religiosity: “folk economics is a mental form as intimate as it is simple or symbolic, but at the same time appropriate to the real and close to the sacred. Treated in a folkloric way, the economic is a tool and an adaptation to a real or psychomental instance, at the same time indistinguishable from the sacred” (p. 8).

2. The diachronic dimension. The author analyzes cultural practices (and the mentalities that support them) not only in an archaic and pre-modern, traditional/rural/folkloric context (as in the studies of classical Eastern European ethnology), but also in a modern, industrial, post-industrial, contemporary/urban context. More precisely, he follows the continuities and diachronic of the analyzed cultural facts: “because if you separate yourself from the grammar and discourse or the classical, «official» interpretation, if you leave aside the simplistic discriminations and template definitions, this traditional economic thinking – in the form of many mental fragments of more subconscious, but repressed nature – can be identified in many of the current Romanian minds and behaviors” (p. 10).

3. The integrative dimension. The diachronic approach is correlated with a holistic vision of traditional-folk cognition, surpassing the typologies and dichotomies by which canonical ethnology operates: sacred/profane, archaic/modern, primitive-simple/ complex-evolved, etc. (although some of these concepts are still used here, but in a much more nuanced and comprehensive approach, by reconsidering the existing relationships between them). Exegesis is constructed “over and beyond any dual concepts” (p. 5), otherwise inevitably reductionist and simplistic. The approach “breaks down borders” (p. 5) that seemed immutable until recently, revealing the close

relationships that exist between the economic and the religious aspects of the same cultural fact, be it from the sphere accredited by classical folklore: calendar custom, rite of passage, ceremony, magical ritual, belief, folklore text, etc., either from the area of “marginalities” or “maximum precariousness”: begging, “begging song”, subway/tram/neighborhood carol, or from that of the “city piety”: the good-fortune letter or the “chain of luck”, the “helping-hand” games, etc. If previous studies treated the economic and the religious separately or, when they were correlated, they were approached “fragmentarily, secondary or incidentally” (p. 5), the present work considers them, for the first time in the specialized Romanian bibliography, as “a field, vision or system of a wide factological and epistemological scope” (p. 5). The integrative dimension paves the way for the detailed analysis of both the religious aspects within some practices usually regarded as materialistic and economic, as well as the strictly economic and pragmatic aspects existing in cultural facts that were considered as belonging to the magical, mythical and religious culture. “Thus, the work presents in detail the sacred economy, the profane economy (plus the sacred of the economics), as well as their far too frequent interconnection within the dynamics of reality” (p. 6).

4. The theoretical dimension. The very obvious distancing from the constraints of the dichotomies with which the humanities operated in the early days, and which were perpetuated by Eastern European ethnologies through the grid of communist positivism, is followed by the elaboration of conceptual frameworks “closer/suitable to particular cases, mixtures and interstices” (p. 7). In this sense the author builds-up a theoretical support both supple and comprehensive, capable of supporting the analysis of cultural facts in their multifaceted dimensions: “Because, in reality, there are no *boundaries* (neither between realities nor between the terms for approximating the reality), but rather continuous or at least frequent crossing/intersection, transfusion or mutual infusion. Understanding the sacred as profane and the profane as laden with sacred, or their extremely numerous contact, overlap or contagion surfaces, the penetrations/diffusions and (con)fusions between the two, the degrees, processes and times of the passage of the sacred into the profane and viceversa, all these or many such kaleidoscopic realities have not become perceptible and operable (cognitive-conceptual) within the majority of Eastern European ethnologies and anthropologies. In contrast to the regional exegetical tradition, the present volume comes precisely within the sailing line of a more sensitive and flexible approach to culture” (p. 7).

5. The conceptual dimension. Elaborating the theoretical level of the work involves defining the concepts used and rethinking the already existing concepts. In order to build an effective operating system, the author creates and puts to work a whole terminology able to support the case studies, in an extremely stylistically expressive manner. I select only a few examples, such as *ritual needs*, *cultural-ritual need*, *psychomental instance*, *psychomental experience/psychomental experimentation*, *the magic economy in the, psychotherapeutic economy (of birth)*, *psychomental well-being*, *peasant societies*, etc. In this context, *reconceptualization* becomes one of the main stakes of the proposed hermeneutic process (see above).

6. The analytical-interpretive dimension. The analysis of Romanian folk and popular mentalities forms the most consistent part of the book, in which the author

directly applies this theoretical lens, through complex interpretations and memorable case studies. Here, for example, is the section dedicated to urban piety and the letter (or “chain”) of luck, in the fifth part of the book, entitled *The sacred and profane economy of the everyday (from the old village to the contemporary city)*. Here, an extremely popular phenomenon in recent decades, but more than a century old (as the bibliography dedicated to the subject attests) – the letter or chain of luck – is integrated into the Romanian history of popular religious mentalities, in an excellently documented and penetrating analysis of the mutations that this form of scriptic folklore has registered over time: “from the very religious traditional letters (or «chains»), the phenomenon will go through the agency of some (possibly oriental) spiritualisms [...]; in order to arrive at and end up with totally desacralized, cruelly profane letters/notes/rants and messages that try to arouse or take advantage of people’s credulity by directly addressing their economic interests and phantasms (of course, also providential), as well as a totally non-canonical or non-ecumenical, confusing, abysmal superstitious background, anyway, still... «folkloric»” (p. 554). Explaining the prolificacy of written notes through the sacredness with which writing was invested in traditional thought, the exegesis takes into account both the older history of notes and handwritten letters, of the «chain of St. Anthony» type, which circulated throughout the 20th century, as well as the most recent of messages multiplied by means of technology (photocopiers, at the end of the last century, respectively the Internet in the first decade of the 21st century: narration/joke/ppts/ppt sent and received by e-mail). Their multiplication and diffusion aimed, in the folklore imaginary, at the “proximity and instrumentality of Luck” (p. 558) especially in economic terms, and inaction brought into play its reverse side, bad luck, or what the author calls the *economy of curse*. Defining terms for customary thought – luck, bad luck and curse – are circulated and actualized through forms of media communication specific to post-industrial societies. The analysis applied to a corpus of narrative messages of this type highlights the magic-religious mentality that articulates and perpetuates them. The analyzed pps are only the latest form that a very old phenomenon has taken: “namely, the traditional spam of *lucky letters*. Those who relied, some, on the religious faithfulness of the poor, others on the credulity of the superstitious, the greedy or those addicted to the «gift economy» (or the memorial alms), others on the illusion of the lonely and helpless ones as if they could influence or help the destiny of others” (p. 558). It is just one of the many examples of alternative readings of the facts of traditional culture that support the close and complicated relations between the sacred and the economic in the folklore imaginary, talking about processes and dynamics that are part of the long life span.

7. The critical dimension. In order to build the new field of research, with all that entails – vision, methodology, theory, and hermeneutics – the author first deconstructs the commonplaces of national ethnology, the “taboos”, dichotomies and descriptive-empiricist commentaries of the old ethnological paradigms. The stakes of deconstruction are on the one hand ethical (involvement in a moral and intellectual recovery of research, but also of Romanian society), as well as scientific (connecting Romanian ethnological discourse to Western bibliographies). The polemical reports on totalizing discourses take on accents of virulent criticism when he talks about works anchored in the paradigm of communist positivism, or when he discusses the intermingling of the ideological and

the political in folklore/folkloristics: “Totally cynical and perverse, the Ploughman only becomes when it comes under the influence of the political and the communist ideology, in the form of “worker’s plough-wishing song and especially the greeting ceremonies that marked the first day of the new year of the Ceaușist officials” (p. 98).

8. The innovative dimension. The deconstruction of classical and national ethnologies opens up obviously innovative epistemological and methodological perspectives. Human acts and behaviors are seen as concrete forms of manifestation of a vision of the world, a *Weltanschauung* shared by individuals and the community. In this approach, facts are seen as actual expressions of mentalities, since “more than the «way of thinking» (of a man or society), the mentality is the real way of being, of performing oneself” (p. 401). The analyzes privilege the *particular* (to the detriment of the general), the *everyday* (current practices, neglected or considered insignificant by the “great theories”), the *creative marginality*, in opposition to the „theoretical/artificial ideal of the «authentic», archaic, major manifestations” (p. 9), followed for decades by Romanian ethnologists, the *dynamics* and *pluralism* of the researched facts, the *interactions* between them (which are no longer perceived as isolated segments), *individual usage* and creativity, their relationship with the *psychological and mental context*, etc.

9. The evaluative dimension. Critical connection to ideologized or essentialist discourses involves both evaluating them in categorical terms and asserting one’s own ideas and interpretations in definite/ultimate manner. Here is an example right from the *Introduction*: “What this work aims to do is [...] to definitively *establish* [my emphasis, ES] the fact that the economic, apparently gregarious or subordinate, represents an element of consciousness on the one hand omnipresent , and, on the other hand, loaded with deep cultural and religious resonances, meanings and functions” (p. 5). The often ultimatum tone and trenchant wording stimulated my inquiries and eventual responses to the book, the author, or myself. They invited me to reflection and dialogue.

10. The dialogic dimension. I would say that the invitation to dialogue and problematizing is not only a defining feature of the book, but also of the author himself. Over the last few years, at the National Conferences of the Association of Ethnological Sciences in Romania, Marin Marian-Bălașa initiated and managed to coagulate a system of bringing together in debate some current issues, less (almost not at all) frequented by canonical Romanian ethnology: “Sexuality and society – a book between revelation and scandal; discussions on the edge and in the core of the last volume signed by Andrei Oișteanu” (Craiova, 2016); “Ethnoanthropology of the equation (Male + Female) = roles/claims/duties and aspirations/psychocultural structuring” (Baia Mare, 2017); “Aurea Mediocritas (or about the critical mass of culture: aspirants, marginals, anonymous)” (Blaj, 2019) etc. In addition to **reorienting** the gaze towards themes as important as they have been little addressed so far in our country, these debates have brought together ethnologists with similar/closer visions and methodologies, from (approximately) the same generation of researchers, located in different university centers, such as Otilia Hedeșan (Timișoara), Mihaela Bucin (Szeged), Mircea Păduraru (Iași), Ioan Pop-Curșeu (Cluj), Elena Bărbulescu (Cluj), Astrid Cambose (Iași), Amalia Pavelescu (Sibiu), myself and others. The creation of a common dialogue space, where the case studies, ideas and

experiences of each participant could be discussed and enriched, meant at the same time the establishment of a group of specialists who produce convergent discourses, based on a common epistemological and methodological foundation. One of the main stakes of these round tables was to make individual discourses better heard within a reflection group and, through this, to contribute to a change in the research paradigm in Romanian ethnology.

I must add here the fact (not to be neglected) that part of the texts contained in the volume (or initial versions of some texts) were published during the years 2006-2007 in the “Săptămâna Financiară” newspaper, in a systematic effort by the author to make the ethnological exegesis on traditional economic mentalities accessible to the public and to open perspectives of reflexivity on the purposes and benefits that ethnological disciplines have or can bring to deciphering current realities.

This is why I consider, without a trace of doubt, that Marin Marian-Bălașa is a completely unmistakable voice in current cultural ethnology/anthropology, and the volume *Ochiul dracului și al lui Dumnezeu (traditional economic mentalities)* represents an important landmark in a programmatic approach of the author to make known a new type of scientific discourse and to impose paradigmatic changes in Romanian specialized research.

ELEONORA SAVA