

The book by researcher Marin Marian-Bălașa, from the “Constantin Brăiloiu” Institute of Ethnography and Folklore, impresses primarily through the novelty of the academic approach. The author travels along the sacred-profane and wealth-poverty axes, through a thorough analysis of a variety of folklore subjects and how they are closely related to the economic side. In fact, this is also the central idea of the book – the economy of the facts of Romanian traditional culture/folklore; in other words, it looks at the folklore facts through the prism of economics, in the words of the author: “This work judges, on the one hand, *folklore, traditional* and *popular* (primary/elementary dimension of unanimous cognition and creativity), and, on the other on the other hand, *economy* (way of an administrative approach to the world and life) as paradigms of the sacred-profane spiral. Paradigms that move non-rectilinearly or oppositely, non-unidirectional and non-contradictory, anytime reversible and confluent. The present theory and demonstration captures the interpenetration of the fields, the becoming and return of something sacred into the profane, as well as the revelation, the gesture of absorption or evasion of the profane into or from the sacred” (p. 8). What the author wants and even succeeds in doing with this volume is “synthesizing a *theory of the sacralized economy*, as well as an *economy of the sacred*” (p. 5).

Innovative is the very vision of the author, who simply re-reads – and co-opts us readers in this process – manuscripts of carols, fairytales, stories, *snoaves*, songs, in a new key – of the economics, and in an original/personal manner. With this, the

author puts the dot on the “i”, or rather unties a nodal point in folklore/ethnological/anthropological sciences, because our field of work needs another *retelling/(re)analysis* and from *other* angles of the facts of traditional culture, than the ones we are used to, or were used to until recently. The author himself warns us from the beginning that „this work naturally ignores numerous theoretical settings or classical definitions – performed from epistemological and exegetical levels belonging to another time, other orientations or degrees of disciplinary development. In the present case, many such definitions, already classic, inertially familiar, becoming ineffective. Based on *re-conceptualization*, the present work claims the reader’s receptivity in favor of alternative, unconventional approaches, in fact, for a much more nuanced problematizing” (p. 6). Thus, the attention to *nuances* is a key element of the book, the one that makes the interpretative approach go beyond “simple dualisms”.

The volume includes an introduction and five chapters centered on several ideas: the sacred and the profane in traditional economic thinking, the anthropology of demand and offering, rites, ethnic subdifferentiations and economic servitudes, the folklore of maximal precariousities, the sacred and profane economy of everyday life – which bring the economic perspective on folklore into contemporaneity/factuality/present. The nodal point of the author’s hermeneutics is the interest for the marginalized people. Starting from a “theme regarding marginal aspects of social and cultural life” in Romania, the author continues to open his research during the last thirty years, until he reaches “creativity, mentality, economy.” Here, the author’s idea of making the connection between creativity and poverty is extremely interesting: the poor are creative, the rich are not.

The subject of begging did not attract the attention of ethnologists in particular or those in the humanities in general. However, the comments and annotations, the author’s field notes successfully demonstrate that there is no reason other than the theoretical limitations of the Romanian academic environment that such a subject did not attract interest for study throughout a long period of time. I would even say that contrary to the general association, after 1989, of the entire Romanian society with the image of a country “full of the poor, the disabled and the abandoned orphans” (p. 9) should have aroused a great interest in the socio-human sciences of research in depth of these aspects/marks of poverty.

The present presentation did not attempt to perform a general approach to the entire volume, but rather to highlight some ideas, aspects, approaches that strengthen the *uniqueness* of Marin Marian-Bălașa’s academic endeavor. The book is a *synthesis* of long-term researches, quests, interrogations, as he says, “slowly written”, and through which he makes us all witnesses but also challenges us to discuss not only “the folklore understanding” but also the “thinking about folklore”.

The arguments visavis the duet poor/rich (poverty/wealth) are valuable, from where after analyzing several folklore species (lyrics, proverbs, popular prose) the researcher proposes two major conclusions: the first speaks about “«the equality» between poverty and ethics, respectively wealth and the lack of virtue”, and the second which emphasizes the two conditions from traditional-popular thinking by which one gets rid of poverty: divine intervention or the gift economy. The author’s discussion

about Romanian hospitality (“the Romanian gives so that he’s given back”) is also well pointed at by this idea, and obviously the one about the praise of work, of domestic work, domestic industriousness as he calls it on page 78.

Then the pages dealing with the idea of gender education, which is obviously different, depending on the matriarchal or patriarchal “prisms”, are worth noting: “through the matriarchal-feminine-passive prism, the girl must cultivate her beauty and physical comfort. Through the patriarchal-masculine-active prism, the girl must cultivate her ergonomic availability and hardworking, productive character.” The pages about the eros economy caught my attention (all the more so since we are generally educated to look at eros in opposition to the economic) and here the author’s demonstration regarding the erotic fairs or the sexual freedoms of the past, and the criticism of the approach to that subject matter by the folklorists of the (communist) “golden age” constitute a bountiful reading. Re-reading and implicitly re-interpreting the idea of belonging to the nation, crucial for any “peasant”, the desire to accumulate in order to “ensure the perpetuation of the family/nation”, brings us again to a nodal point: “to have means to be, to accumulate means to become” (p. 77), and which is repeated in the discussion about the wedding economy, where the author brings us from the symbolic heights (that is, of the way the subject of wedding was treated in ethnology/folklore in general) toward the real world: “The wedding is, therefore, an occasion for economic display and financial contributions. Practically, the wedding lays the economic foundations of the foundation and evolution of a family, the matchmaking, quarrels and discussions of the future in-laws about the wealth, dowry or inheritance to be offered to the bride and groom being intense, often heated, sometimes prolonged beyond the time of any events and ceremonies, sometimes pretext for old age deep arguments” (p. 185).

With the subchapter *The power of the poor, the divine beggar*, the author begins a demonstration of strength regarding begging and its cultural values, which brings an extraordinary image benefit to Roma ethnic group. I would say that these theories and demonstrations of the author about the phenomenon of begging, based on the published materials as well as on his own field research, represent the strong point of this volume. To insist on just one idea: the beggar (like the guest) *sometimes* represents (my emphasis) a transcendent principle. The emphasis is important, because the researcher thus wants to highlight the distance between popular and folk Christianity and the Crist-centered one (p. 106). The author also exposes and interprets other markers of the Romani mentality, that we can find in the Romanian folk-popular culture, but I will stop only at the phrase *Să-l ia daracul!* (to devil with him!), which the author says that it represents “the expression with which Romanian folklore usually scorns the Roma and ends up any reference to the Gypsy, and which unfortunately persists up to this days. In tandem with begging here comes the idea of work, of what authentic work mean, says Marin Marian-Bălașa, in traditional culture, namely “authentic work is physical, raw, agricultural work”. The idea of well-doing as an investment is also interesting (p. 165), where the author’s field experience converges with the proverbs wisdom.

In the sub-chapter *Payment/reward and the subjective agendas of the caroling*, the argument regarding the request for gifts at the end of the carols, and their replacement

with money in the recent period, ends with a question that is as pertinent as possible and likely to incite a wider study: “The village interest in currency/money must be seen as a derogation, decadence, desacralization?” (p. 206). Subchapter *The Transcendent Child* (p. 226-229) leads the discussion towards an eminently positive image of the child. Again, a discussion that incites a separate study, because only renouncing Satan through baptism is not a sufficient action to cut off the relationship with the negative transcendent. I also could not ignore in this brief presentation the discussion about the *manea* and *manelization*, because I endorse to the author’s conclusion that manelization has “become a (...) mental determinant, quite identity”, and even that it should be “used as a metaphor for the Romanian political and educational elementariness. The idea that “economic and sociological statistics focused only on «objective» facts is misleading. In fact, there is no economy without culture. That is, without the reflex of a socially *played out* psychology and mentality. Poverty and wealth are states of mind, too” (p. 401) – brings fire to a science that is based on in-depth studies (with qualitative methodology) such as ethnology.

Also noteworthy are the lines criticizing the advertisements for the Bacchus products, and which are viewed by the author as a real attack on human dignity (primarily of women, but also of the “smaller and weaker” colleague) (p. 445-447), or those in which the author analyzes the popular empathy for thieves (p. 449-477).

*The economy of political folklore* shows how a “system brake”, as the author calls it on page 491, puts sticks in the wheels/obstacles to an approach in line with the current paradigms in the field, comparable to those of a historical nature, and still supports the “politicization of the academic folklorism” and implicitly of communism.

The subject of new folklore, the one through which Marin Marian Bălașa believes that “perhaps for the first time folklore (the folkloric man) cheated”, I think it deserves a separate book. Towards the end of the volume we reach the “eye of God” stated in the title, through the (so) necessary discussion about the new religiosity of the Romanians, the one after 1989, which is a phenomenon of such a wide scope that it amazes in contrast with the poverty of academic interest. Or maybe it is precisely what the author notes: “the financial behavior vis-a-vis a religious institution” which basically supports an ideology with notable effects in politics, is likely to make the native researcher avoid the subject. Of course, at the end of the volume we find out the spotlight on money, on the *idea of money*, which, after a previous discussion on the birth of an ecological mentality, the author puts “in its place” by expelling it from the Temple.

The volume offers a more in-depth look at the Romanian “soul”, beyond the festive appearances that hide under the rug everything that is negative and only exacerbates the ceremonial beauty, as well as a discussion about the real society, the one from archive collections but also the one found under our very eyes, on the contemporary ground. Summarizing, this academic approach is notable for: 1. *Innovation*, at the epistemological level, of the ethnological interpretation, the author proposing a new reading key; 2. *New subjects*, such as for example the folklore of the marginals, TV commercials, etc.

The book is written in a downright baroque language, with many figures of speech, and which makes the reader feel at the same time captured and attracted with

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extraordinary force inside the formulated ideas, leaving him then exhausted and resigned, capitulating to the ample demonstration of the author's strength. It is a reading that keeps your mind engaged, right there on the text, otherwise you won't understand anything. At the same time, it is a book that addresses and proposes topics for experts' discussions, or at least for doctoral students, i.e. to advanced experts in the field, not to those at the beginning of the journey or very outside the humanities.

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