

## THE CONCEPT OF FOLKLORE – A SYSTEMIC REASSESSMENT

LIONEL-DECEBAL ROȘCA<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT.** *The concept of folklore – a systemic reassessment.* Starting from the assertion of a necessity of an epistemological approach able to solve the theoretical deadlocks created by the historic evolution of the concept, this study intends to try a repositioning of the most important significations from the history of the concept of “folklore” according to some relevant force semantic lines first by their systemic articulation in order to be able to contribute this way to a better delimitation of the boundaries and features of a fundamental concept, in the direction of reaching an increased epistemological and operational efficiency of this.

**Key words:** *folklore, folkloristics, ethnography, ethnology, cultural anthropology*

**REZUMAT.** *Conceptul de folclor – o reevaluare sistemică.* Pornind de la premisa necesității unei abordări *epistemologice* capabile să soluționeze impasurile teoretice create prin evoluția *istorică* a conceptului, studiul de față își propune să încerce o re-ordonare a celor mai importante semnificații din istoria conceptului de “folclor” potrivit unor linii de forță semantice relevante în primul rând prin articularea lor sistemică, pentru a putea contribui astfel la o mai bună delimitare a granițelor și caracteristicilor unui concept fundamental, în direcția atingerii unei sporite eficiențe epistemologice și operaționale a acestuia.

**Cuvinte cheie:** *folclor, folcloristică, etnografie, etnologie, antropologie culturală*

### 1. Argument

Released in 1846 by William J. Thoms, “as he extended the area of use within the European countries and then on other continents, the term “folklore” gradually replaced a heterogeneous terminology, designating, referring to general contexts of the same field, popular (or traditional) culture, various approach and interpretation modalities of the phenomena subsumed to it, fact that determined from the beginning, the assimilation of the word [...] in

---

<sup>1</sup> Lionel-Decebal Roșca is Ph.D. Assistant Professor at “Babeș-Bolyai” University (Cluj-Napoca, România), Faculty of Letters, Department of Romanian Literature and Theory of Literature. Main fields of research: Folklore, Ethnology, Cultural Anthropology. E-mail: lionelrosca@yahoo.com

various meanings. Parallel with the development of the national research school, this differentiated understanding of the word deepens, the differences consisting especially in different cut outs of the objective subject to investigation” (Pop, Ruxăndoiu 1991: 23; cf. also Dundes 1965).

Within the Romanian space, the term first appears in 1885, in Hasdeu (foreword to *Etymologicum Magnum Romaniae*) and “shall prevail having to fight for a while with the one of *popular tradition*, borrowed from the French terminology, from the second half of the last century” (Bîrlea 1974: 173). Spelled at the beginning in the spirit of the original (“folklore”), but conveying different significations depending on the century and the author, the word shall “domesticate” rapidly conquering academic environments as well as those of non-specialists, which suggests that the entire Romanian culture (of the professionals and not only), seems to have identified in the term “folklore” the most suitable label for a certain objective reality. Nevertheless the acceptance and use on a large scale of the word cannot hide the variations of the **concept**, as it is attested by an entire family of the Romanian studies, dedicated to popular culture (see Bîrlea 1974, Vrabie 1970). However, once surpassed the uncertainties and doubts from the pioneering phase of the disciplines dedicated to popular culture study, especially in the second half of the XX-th century (period marked by a progressive semantic and epistemological stabilization, especially after the International Folklore Congress from Arnhem and Amsterdam from 1955, where the Commission of Experts suggested a more clear delimitation between ethnography and folklore but as well on the background of a certain ideological “sobriety” imposed by the post war historical context), the generalized scientific and common use of the term/concept of “folklore” leaves the impression – at least at first sight that that we are dealing with one of the most precisely configured fundamental concepts of the Romanian repertoire of popular culture sciences, the concept as well as the reality designated by this seeming to prevail impose by itself, with maximum clarity. Notwithstanding, a more attentive reading points out along the variable geometry of the subject in the scientific contributions dedicated to the period, and this conceptual instability, not solved satisfactorily, shall pass to the scientific/didactic literature of the new millennium; as a complete inventory of these semantic and epistemological variations are not the object of this research, we shall stop next only on some similar relevant examples.

A first major source of confusion is represented for example at the level of delimitation of the object, equivocal approach of the relation between the concept of folklore and others (“culture”, “material popular culture”, “spiritual popular culture”), that serve to its foundation. This way, a classic manual dedicated to Romanian literary folklore (manual which had many editions before and after 1989, orienting probably in the epoch most of the Romanian research in the field), even though it distinguishes between the material popular culture and the

spiritual popular culture that would include also “a system of national beliefs, a system of traditions, rituals and ceremonials directed on the background of these beliefs” (Pop, Ruxăndoiu 1991: 37), conveys however (even in the traditions ulterior to the year 1989) the thesis<sup>2</sup> according to which folklore would represent only in the spiritual popular culture under aesthetic relation “understanding by *folklore* the multitude of works and artistic events belonging to the spiritual popular culture. The common feature of the elements of this multitude is thus the artistic value” (Pop, Ruxăndoiu 1991: 38). As it can be noticed right away, a certain definition sins firstly by eliminating the religious-mythological value with its ritual-ceremonial component, dimension representing exactly the primordial vitality resource of the entire spiritual popular culture: to eliminate from the content of the notion of “folklore” the very depth structure that motivates and configures all the other elements of the spiritual universe of popular culture, either more or less “artistic”, means in fact to dramatically decrease its efficiency and the epistemological credibility of the concept. This undecided and discussible positioning of folklore in relation to the components of popular culture, first of all the spiritual one (with the conceptual deadlock deriving from this), shall generate subsequently in the specialty bibliography two totally opposed solutions without any of them to prevail decisively. Thus, for example even if it starts from the meanings given to popular culture, by the manual, in a recent synthesis Aneta Micle formulates and operates implicitly a definitions of the concept of folklore (“folklore represents the spiritual culture of a nations and contains besides popular literature, music and popular dance, old beliefs and superstitions as well as empirical knowledge regarding the cosmos and surrounding world with practical and «rational» character, «the science» of reading in the stars, to treat certain diseases, besides magical practices”, Micle 2004: 31-32) that contradict the aesthetic criterion thesis, being closer to the original sense of the term “folklore”. On the other hand in a recent folklore course destined to a post university program of professional reconversion, the authors subscribe implicitly to the thesis of aesthetic criterion, stating that “folklore covers the second section [i.e. “*spiritual culture* (forms of non-object manifestation, immaterial, or non-material, intangible)”, containing the forms of verbal art (popular literature, literary folklore), musical, (popular music, musical folklore), corporal-rhythmic (popular dance, choreographic folklore), corporal-rhythmic-gestural (popular theatre, theatrical folklore, attracting into its sphere also ritual or ceremonial-ritual events)” (Constantinescu, Fruntelată 2006: 28).

<sup>2</sup> With certain roots in the traditions or Romanian folklore “maybe even thanks to the frequent approach to popular culture from the perspectives of philology, history and literary criticism” (Pop, Ruxăndoiu 1991: 25), but (aspect valid especially in the post war decades) very probably owing to the fact that the use of the aesthetic criterion in the circumscription of the concept of folklore relates especially to the activity of the Russian folklorists (Birlea 1969: 9).

Another source of terminological and conceptual confusion originates from the uninspired translation of the “lore” component from the original term by the word “science”: without being completely illegitimate (“science” [“știință”] in Romanian language may relate to “knowledge” [“cunoștință”, “cunoaștere”] – with all its forms and contexts – and to “science” as “scientific discipline” as well), this validation determined an invalid identification of folklore (with the correct meaning of “knowledge”, of traditional popular “knowledge” [“cunoștință”, “cunoaștere”] regarding the surrounding universe, under all its aspects) with folklore understood as “science” (academic type, discipline dedicated to the study of a certain object) of the spiritual popular culture. We meet because of this frequently definitions such as: “Folklore – 1. Popular creation made of a unitary organic and dynamic system [...] 2. Science that studies the phenomena and cultural actions pertaining to popular culture” (Vulcănescu 1979: 140), fact that launches a supplementary epistemological provocation as proved by the above mentioned post-university course: “after reading the entire learning unit, the students must obtain the ability to distinguish between «folklore 1» = «object of study» and «folklore 2» = «scientific discipline whose object is “folklore 1”» (Constantinescu, Fruntelată 2006: 28). All these aspects but also some that could be brought into discussion suggest we think, the necessity of a “re-positioning” of the folklore concept in order to remediate the lacks of approaches such as those above mentioned; this is not only necessary, but less difficult than it may seem at first sight, because the subject’s “folder” constituted during one and a half century contains in fact all necessary elements (only distributed in problematic configurations). The solution resides mostly in the correct application of an organized systemic and systematic perspective, on the data of the mentioned “folder”.

## 2. Delimitations

We have seen that traditionally the definition of the concept of folklore was made in relation to other concepts such as *culture*, *civilization*, *popular and spiritual culture*, etc. thus, the rethinking of this concept should start from these aspects as well, correlated fundamental concepts. The issue that appears at this level is that these concepts offer at *their* turn (too) much semantic and epistemological variability in order to be able to use them without previous mentions, that concern not the settling in a definitive manner of the issue (result probably impossible, due to the extension of the theme), but, first of all the possibility of elaboration of a conceptual reference as adequate as possible for the goals of this study.

Therefore, will not try to summarize here the entire file of the relations culture-civilization: a classic evaluation (surely outdated) identifies over 300 definitions given throughout the times of the two concepts (Kroeber

1952), without this to have led to a clarification of those concepts, but rather to the floundering without any solution of the discussion, in epistemological and terminological imprecision. Reviewing the most important positions express in this respect (cf. Tănase 1968 and 1977), we shall try next to propose a classification of our own that, without solving all issues, has, in our opinion, the advantage of being more operational.

This way, in the semantic field of the term “culture”, two major types of meanings can be delimited (each grouping numerous subsets of definitions):

- a. In a restrained meaning (“culture 1”), culture is seen as the sum of all productions of the spirit, that own world of the spirit that, according to Hegel, the man creates as a preferable alternative to natural world<sup>3</sup> – in this meaning (“culture 1”) the concept is opposed to the one of “civilization 1” (see infra); a subtype of this meaning, philosophical and rational (Vianu 1982), axiologically marked restrains even more the field, to the excellence of the spirit - is the so-called “high culture”.
- b. In a global meaning (“culture 2”) highly anti-philosophical, and anti-axiological, historic (Vianu 1982), the concept contains “the totality of elements forming the social, material and spiritual background, created by the man throughout the history”, “material goods”, “spiritual values” and “elements of social organization”<sup>4</sup>; in this meaning, “culture 2” as sum of all specific human activities is opposed to the concept of “nature”, subsuming “civilization 1”.

Regarding the concept of “civilization”, we distinguish here:

- a. restrained meaning (“civilization 1”), designating the totality of concrete means and techniques with pragmatic goal by which the man adapts to physical world (or adapts it to his necessities)<sup>5</sup>;
- b. “high” meaning (“civilization 2”); with its roots in the Greek-Latin civilization (where it real to the qualities of the citizen, of the socially conscious man) its sphere extended to containing the social system, but also the techniques (in a large sense) organizing a culture superior to another: the civilization is now seen as a deliberated form of organization of the culture, of its organization in order to intervene in the world order, is “the historically matured culture, that became conscious of its purpose and values”<sup>6</sup>.

As to the relation between these concepts, almost all possible logic positions had been expressed throughout the time. We shall adopt a differentiating perspective on the concepts of “culture” and “civilization”, as

<sup>3</sup> See its use for example at Mehedinți 1986.

<sup>4</sup> Mircea Babeș in Preda 1994: 390.

<sup>5</sup> For example Mehedinți 1986.

<sup>6</sup> Tănase 1977: 127.

designating two qualitatively distinct levels (and operational, accordingly, in theoretical plan), as follows:

- a. By “culture” we shall understand “the attitudes, acts and limited works – as genesis, intention, motivation of finality – at the field of spirit, and intellect” thus “customs, traditions, beliefs and religious practice, ornaments and entertainment, science works, philosophy, literature and music, architecture, painting, sculpture and decorative or applied art”<sup>7</sup>, in other words ideology (in the largest sense of the word)<sup>8</sup>;
- b. by “civilization” we shall designate the totality of material means and with utility-pragmatic character, that help man to adapt to physical environment (that at the same time adapts according to necessities), that is “food, shelter, clothes (but not adomments), public buildings, mean of communication, technology in general”<sup>9</sup> – in other words techniques in a very large sense<sup>10</sup>;
- c. but, in the situation of complex societies, that exceeded the tribal/ rural state, creating government, a culture based on writing etc., between the two compartments – both intersecting, but without subsuming one to another completely – there is another category of facts (ideological and primary at the same time), acting as an interface equal in dimensions and importance with the areas they divide, unifying them; it is about the economic and administrative activities, those of social, political, military and juridical, organization, education and learning<sup>11</sup>.

Next we shall try to particularize the meaning of these concepts at the situation specific for the tribal/ rural cultures/ societies, in a systematic manner, in synchronic as well as diachronic dimension, or order to be able to re-draw starting from this, more adequately the boundaries of the concept of folklore.

## 2.1 Delimitations in diachrony<sup>12</sup>

In temporal order, the first entity presented to analysis is *primitive culture* (in the sense of “culture 2” mentioned above): consisting of the material dimension (“civilization 1”) and spiritual (“culture 1”), it is in this phase unique (and therefore common, shared by all members of a certain

<sup>7</sup> Drimba 1984: 6.

<sup>8</sup> Concept that would validate the best the meaning of the term “culture 1”.

<sup>9</sup> Here we only partially follow Drimba’s definition 1984: 5-6.

<sup>10</sup> Concept that would validate the best the meaning of the term “civilization 1”.

<sup>11</sup> The three major components are not opposed but completion each other in a complex interrelating and dependence process, forming together a dynamic process of patterns, evolving within certain temporal parameters.

<sup>12</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the concepts from paragraphs 2.1. și 2.2., see Pop, Ruxăndoiu 1991: 23-44.

society), and its dimensional spirit (“culture 1”) is characterized by integral orality. At the end of a complex historical process acting (in some societies) on several interdependent levels (apparition of writing, of the state etc.), this first entity is divided in other two (according to the popular/ aristocratic opposition): from this point forward we have to do with a *popular culture* (“culture 2”) as well as with a “*high*” culture, “*aristocratic*” (“culture 2” as well), between the two being established throughout the time, various types of relations. Supplementary (and subsequently in the terms of chronology, as they enter in contact, in various moments in different geographic spaces, with the types of existence and organization of modernity), popular culture (“culture 2”), is divided at its turn (according to the traditional/ non-traditional [i.e. recent] opposition) in a *traditional popular culture* and a *non-traditional (recent) popular culture* (this latter marked increasingly in its material and spiritual dimension – we operate here with “culture 2” as well – by the impact with modernity).

## 2.2. *Delimitations in synchrony*

As we have already shown, synchronic, systemic, transversal radiography emphasizes in the case of “historical” complex societies the existence of 3 big compartments: “culture 1”, “civilization 1” and the interface between them. In exchange, in the case of tribal/ rural societies, where the specialization of certain functions (military, administrative, juridical, educational etc.) did not take place yet, *popular culture* (still in the meaning of “culture 2”) – the traditional one, as well as the non-traditional one, their systemic configuration being the same, only content is modified according to the pressure of chronology – can be described as the sum of 2 basic compartments delimited according to the material/ non-material [i.e. spiritual] position (compartment that in the phenomenal reality functions holistically making an integrated and dynamic system).

A primary such compartment is represented by the *material popular culture* or the *popular ± traditional civilization* (“civilization 1”) that would group elements related to the habitat (home, household, location etc.) traditional occupations, home industries, crafts, etc. (see also Vlăduțiu 1973, Butură 1979). The other compartment is represented by the *spiritual ± traditional popular culture* (“culture 1”), or, in the initial sense of the word, the *folklore*, that would group: the so-called popular literature<sup>13</sup> or (for terminological

<sup>13</sup> By introduction of a new opposition (literary/ non-literary) it can be delimited with a rather heuristic value a popular “literature” legitimate to be exploited by methods of the literary critics, aesthetics, etc. even though this represents in reality an aspect, a side, a dimension, not a separate area of folklore. Another distinction (based this time on oral/ written opposition) increases the system by two more branches: a popular oral literature ± traditional (the standard body of literary

unity, *literary folklore*); music (*musical folklore*); beliefs and traditions (*mythical-religious folklore* and *traditions folklore*) etc. **Between** those two compartments, not as a third distinct category, but rather half in the sphere of popular civilization (by materiality and pragmatic finality), and half in that of the spiritual culture (by its ideological content: religious, philosophical, aesthetic, etc.) should be placed in the section of *popular art*<sup>14</sup>.

In these conditions the aesthetic criterion can be legitimately used to restrain the definition of folklore, identifying it exclusively with the “artistic” part of the spiritual popular culture? As we have already seen, there are “aesthetic” facts in the popular culture (popular art for example) that get out at least partially from the sphere of spiritual popular culture. On the other hand there are aspects even of folklore **defined from the point of view of the aesthetic** that force this criterion to invalidation, as flexibly we would understand to apply it:

- a. not only that entire genres and folkloric species elude a certain criterion (enigmistic genre, the paremiological one, disenchantments, popular theatre etc.) but in the same time:
- b. not even in the interior of a certain species the aesthetic quality is not/ cannot be the decisive factor as long as folklore lives only through variants and a variant that does not pass the test of “aesthetic” can be more eloquent from other perspectives, at least this (or more) important: antiquity, authenticity, spreading, mythical-religious meanings etc. (From this point of view it can be stated that the appeal to aesthetic as ultimate criterion reveals an approach modality to the folklore phenomenon (too) profoundly due to some disciplines as literary criticism, linguistics, stylistics or even philosophy: to search aesthetic values in folklore – the very concept of “folklore aesthetics” seems to be (much too) difficult as demonstrated by the autochthonous specialty literature from G. Călinescu to Ov. Bîrlea or Petru Ursache – is not *per se* an illegitimate epistemological goal, but surely a pertinent goal firstly for those certain disciplines and only secondarily for the study of folklore itself. More than that, such a definition would sacrifice the vast domain on mythical-religious beliefs and traditions, on whose articulations is built the entire edifice of the popular culture (spiritual but also

---

folklore) and a written popular literature – of relatively reduced proportions (popular books, verse [“verșuri”] books etc.), this is placed at the contact point with the “high” written culture.

<sup>14</sup> Indeed neither the aesthetic is a specialized and autonomous function in tribal/ rural societies: “art for art”, the pure and simply “beautiful” objects represent in the best case, irrelevant exceptions as percentage and meaning because in the functional reality of the traditional worlds any “beautiful” object (a ceramic vase, a carpet, a shepherd’s staff, a door pillar, a costume element, an icon, a gilded egg etc.) instruments at the same time (even more at first instance) another finality as well: pragmatic, semiotic, religious etc.



material): in the absence of this fundamental mythical-religious and ritual-ceremonial component, the “spiritual” dimension of the popular culture not only represents an unrecognizable physiognomy, but loses any meaning and value, existential or scientific.

In conclusion the aesthetic can be a legitimate reading grid of the folkloric fact (even though with some applicability restrictions and a rather decreased success rate), but in no case can it be a decisive reference point in the delimitation of the folklore fact – it can be therefore, included in the investigation arsenal of the object, but cannot build a definition of the object itself. Thus, as we have already suggested, the only adequate definition of *folklore* (one that also stays true to its etymon) is the one that **integrally** equates it with spiritual popular culture, mentioning one or another of its aspects by supplementary determinations. (*literary, musically* etc.)

### **3. Related and supraordinated concepts: folkloristics, ethnography, ethnology, anthropology**

A second important source of terminological and conceptual variability is represented as we have already stated by the confusion between folklore – object and folklore – scientific discipline. Thus, once mentioned the definition of the object/ field of study (*folklore*), by successive delimitations operated thanks to the introduction of restrictions based on systematic oppositions (oral/ written, material/ spiritual, traditional/ non-traditional etc.), it impose equally, the mentioning of the definition of the discipline that is studying this object/ field:

- a. firstly, in order to avoid any confusions between the object of the discipline and the discipline itself, we think that the most adequate solution is the univocal adoption of the term (already with a long tradition, but unfortunately with a more reduced circulation than its correlate, folklore) of *folkloristics* by which we will understand:
- b. the science (academic type this time) that studies the spiritual popular culture ( $\pm$  traditional) or folklore ( $\pm$  traditional), with all its sections.

Finally, the last major source of terminological and conceptual variability we signal next is constituted by the relations between various disciplines related throughout the time with the investigation of the archaic/popular culture phenomena. Forced to operate with notions resulted from rather a historical practice than from a systematic elaboration (notions whose specific contents were dictated mostly by belonging to a certain intellectual tradition, to a certain scientific school (national), or even to a certain institutional routine), the discussion of these relations ended inevitable by generating an enormous and rather confusing bibliography. Without going into the details of this immense folder, we shall observe though that even

when it is attempted to achieve a more accurate distribution of the roles of the respective disciplines, the statements related to this tend to remain in a vague generality: “lately it appeared the opinion that ethnography, ethnology and anthropology are three distinct scientific disciplines, that starting from the same material, constituted successively as a result of the necessity to study thoroughly the knowledge regarding human society (Micle 2004: 33). As far as we are concerned, without ignoring the *historical* dimension of apparition of those certain disciplines, we consider that the exact definition of the status of each discipline cannot be achieved but only by a proper *epistemological* foundation of the issue. In this respect starting from the epistemic distinctions formulated before, we intend to draft up a (synthetic) possible hierarchy of the four related sciences, a hierarchy articulated not to accommodate some scientific use but first to ensure an increased conceptual efficiency.

We already identified *folklore* as being equivalent with the entire spiritual popular culture ( $\pm$  traditional), and *folkloristics* as the scientific discipline distributed to the study of this case. Symmetrically (and complementary), to the object of “folklore” corresponds *popular civilization* ( $\pm$  traditional) – or, in other words, material popular culture ( $\pm$  traditional) – as to the discipline “folkloristics” corresponds (because it is part of the same epistemological plan) *ethnography*. Situated on the same epistemological level with folkloristics and ethnography (and “between” them as, due to the specificity of its object, it needs to borrow concepts, theories and methods from both), *folk aesthetics* has for object of study the *folk art* (at its turn settled – as we showed previously – “between” folklore and popular civilization, whose characteristics it reunites). Integrating all three dimensions: folklore, civilization, folk art (and being situated this way on a superior epistemological level), the ensemble of *popular culture* ( $\pm$  traditional), constitutes the object of study on another science (that evolves at its turn in a epistemological plan higher to that corresponding to folkloristics, ethnography and folk aesthetics); based (as etymology suggests) on the exploration of popular culture phenomena as they present themselves in the perimeter of a certain cultural homogeneity of whose demarcation lines coincide usually with those of an **ethnic** unit (ethnic group, ethnicity, people, nation etc.) *ethnology* is a more complex discipline than those mentioned previously, that contains and combines in a synthesis superior to parties, with the goal of thorough study of popular culture, configured in a specific manner by a certain ethnic conformation.

At an epistemological level of even a higher degree of generality, the object of study becomes *culture* itself (without other supplementary determinations), activity and product of man’s activity as cultural being, “producer” of culture, and science dedicated to the study of this domain is *cultural anthropology*, belonging to an epistemological level higher than that of

folkloristics and ethnography as well as to that of ethnology and fructifying their concepts, theories and methods and, more importantly, their results.

Schematically summarizing, the image of the relations between the disciplines would look as follows:

- a. **object of study:** folklore (spiritual popular culture) + popular art + popular civilization (popular material culture) > popular culture > culture;
- b. **scientific discipline:** folkloristics + folk aesthetics + ethnography > ethnology > cultural anthropology. In order to visualize more easily this scheme we could say, for example that all spiritual-symbolic aspects related to the home (from the building rituals to the hypostases of the house in popular folklore) would be the object of *folkloristics*, all artistic aspects related to the home (from the decoration of the home to the presence of the home itself as an artistic motif in folk art) would be the object of *folk aesthetics* and all material aspects (from building techniques to the typology of houses) would be the object of *ethnography*; in exchange the entire complex of the house, approached from integrating point of view, on all the three dimensions and followed in the spreading area (specific) to a certain (ethnic) community that implies a certain cultural homogeneity – “among Romanians”, “among Hungarians”, “among Bulgarians” etc. – shall constitute the object of an *ethnology* of the “Romanian” house, of the “Hungarian” house etc., an ethnology determined to seek to circumscribe the characteristic features (the unique ones as well as the common ones) of a certain way of dwelling in space as it is structured in a particular configuration depending of the belonging to a specific ethnic group (and the latter being possible to be followed on different levels of generality, from more restrained ethno-folkloric areas, to national areas of even supra-national regions – for example the space of the Balkans – as long as these levels can offer convincing proof in favor of the existence of a certain ethnical-cultural homogeneity). Acting at a higher epistemological level, *cultural anthropology* comes to synthesise the very conclusions of such particular “ethnologies” (ethnology of the “Romanian” dwelling, of the “Chinese” dwelling, of the “African” dwelling etc. as practical technique, artistic symbol and ideological meaning at the same time) in order to draw conclusions regarding habitation in general as it is put into practice by *homo sapiens*. But in this approach anthropology, (with its subdivisions) does not come only with a more complex theoretical arsenal, but also with another modality of posing the problem, a modality adequate for the philosophic and epistemological level in relation to which the discipline formulates its questions – that of the

**universal**<sup>15</sup>. This statement does not imply that anthropology compares ethnically shaped patterns in order to deduct cultural universals, but that it does this in order to reach to conclusions with general/ universal value – even regarding the difference – concerning the human being as culture creating being: in the terms of the already used example, the anthropology level research does not necessarily try to disengage (or to invent, if it does not find) a universal valid scheme in the case of pragmatic and symbolic strategies of habitation (of course it is not excluded for such schemes to be identified legitimately but, certainly, these can always be found if we climb enough stairs towards generality: from this point of view, the issue consists more of the fact that usually the more general these schemes are, and therefore lacking particular determinations, the less relevant they are), but to inform – by identification of common characteristics (born either by functional similarity, or by a possible biological common root), as well as other specific ones – about the manner in which pragmatic and symbolic strategies of habitation function in the case of the *homo* species, in a way that even though it develops a similar function, the human dwelling is something else than a nest or a den.

#### 4. Conclusion

Built by historical accumulation of documentary material and significations and permanently de/ re-constructed as answer to permanent movements from epistemological paradigms from the field of socio-human sciences, throughout the last one and a half century, the concept of “folklore” came to offer today a rather confusing image, similar to the one provided by a badly focalized optical instrument. Indeed, instead of immediately and efficiently turning to a unique and clearly defined semantic configuration, the contemporary researcher is confronted mostly with a vague form, multiply repeated, whose phantoms echo every time more imprecise and faded, thus undermining the perception of the whole: in other words if from far away the silhouette remains recognizable, as we try to approach the details, the clarity becomes every time more problematic.

---

<sup>15</sup> If we were to systematize (on basis of the specific example analyzed) the manner in which the disciplines discussed here should formulate question in philosophical-epistemological plan, the situation would present as follows: what are the characteristic data of the home as material reality ? (Ethnography); what are the aesthetic values of the home as object or subject of folk art ? (folk aesthetics); what are the meanings of the house in the traditional imaginary universe ? (Folkloristics); what are the material, aesthetic and symbolic elements characterizing the dwelling/ home of Romanians ? (Ethnology); how does the “cultural animal” (**Man** as a universal subject) live in general, what are the human strategies (material and symbolic) of the habitation ? (Cultural Anthropology).

Therefore, starting from the hypothesis of a necessity of an *epistemological* approach (the only one in our opinion capable of solving the theoretical deadlocks created by the *historical* evolution of the concept), but benefiting from the advantages of retrospective view, the present contribution intended by a synthetic and systemic analysis to try a redistribution of the most important meanings from the history of the concept “folklore” according to semantic lines relevant firstly by their systemic articulation, in order to contribute this way (according to the exigencies on the present scientific moment) to a better delimitation of the boundaries and characteristics of a fundamental concept, towards reaching an epistemological and operational efficiency of this, if not absolute, at least (much) increased.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bîrlea, Ovidiu**, 1969, *Metoda de cercetare a folclorului* [*Folklor: Method of Research*], București, E.P.L.
- Bîrlea, Ovidiu**, 1974, *Istoria folcloristicii românești* [*History of Romanian Folkloristics*], București, Ed. Minerva.
- Butură, Valeriu**, 1979, *Etnografia poporului român* [*Ethnography of Romanian People*], Cluj-Napoca, Ed. Dacia.
- Constantinescu, Nicolae, Frunteletă Ioana**, 2006, *Folclor* [*Folklore*], București, Ministerul Educației și Cercetării, Proiectul pentru învățământul rural.
- Drimba, Ovidiu**, 1984, *Istoria culturii și civilizației* [*History of Culture and Civilization*], Vol.1, București, Ed. Științifică și Enciclopedică.
- Dundes, Alan**, 1965, *The Study of Folklore*, Berkeley, University of California.
- Kroeber, A.L. and Kluckhohn, Clyde** (with the assistance of Wayne Unterainer and Appendice by Alfred G. Meyer), 1952, *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions* (Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology), Harvard University, vol. XLVII, No. 1, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- Mehedinți, Simion**, 1986, *Civilizație și cultură* [*Civilization and Culture*] Selecție de texte, prefață, sumar biobibliografic, note și indice de nume de Gheorghiză Geană, Iași, Ed. Junimea.
- Micle, Aneta**, 2004, *Folclor literar românesc* [*Romanian Literary Folklore*], Oradea, Ed. Universității din Oradea.
- Pop, Mihai, Pavel Ruxăndoiu**, 1991, *Folclor literar românesc* [*Romanian Literary Folklore*], București, Ed. Didactică și Pedagogică.
- Preda, Constantin** (coord.), 1994, *Enciclopedia arheologiei și istoriei vechi a României* [*Encyclopaedia of Archaeology and Ancient History of Romania*], Vol.1: A–C, București, Ed. Enciclopedică.
- Tănase, Al.**, 1968, *Introducere în filosofia culturii* [*Introduction to the Philosophy of Culture*], București, Ed. Științifică.

- Tănase, Al.**, 1977, *Cultură și civilizație* [*Culture and Civilization*], București, Ed. Politică.
- Vlăduțiu, Ion**, *Etnografia românească* [*Romanian Ethnography*], București, Ed. Științifică.
- Vrabie, Gheorghe**, 1970, *Folclorul. Obiect – principii – metode – categorii* [*Folklore. Object, Principles, Methods, Categories*], București, Ed. Academiei.
- Vulcănescu, Romulus**, 1979, *Dicționar de etnologie* [*Dictionary of Ethnology*], București, Ed. Albatros.