In-Between Societies: Romanian Urbanites and Their Cultural Demeanour (II)

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Urban until Further Notice

Any rural-urban distinction starts necessarily from the fact that urban development was illusory (Cole 1981), since restricted, as already evidenced, to administrative actions, and the so-called towns are largely populated by urbanites. In terms of dichotomies, the rural-urban dichotomy can be translated into magic beliefs versus rational reasoning, in the importance of the social network versus support of specialized contacts and in a confident attitude versus a more cautious and even suspicious reaction to the environment. For example, a rural type of pragmatism makes urbanites perform a ritual bathing of the child that would assure his health, cleanness and wealth by magic contact to ritual objects, while urban rationalism is traced in finding wealthy Godparents and in giving a glamorous party at the restaurant on the occasion of the baptism.

Traditional education may determine an intermingled thinking which is modern and inveterate at the same time. The "continual constitution and reconstitution of a multiplicity of cultural programs" (Eisenstadt 2000: 2) is visible at subjects with higher professional trainings. Emilia, a retired midwife, age 69, interweaves scientific explanations with magic reasoning throughout the entire conversation. She believes that birthmarks are caused by thefts the pregnant woman committed, but she rejects superstitions about twin pregnancies, since these are hereditary. Scientific training does not always succeed in clearing out the involvement of magic causes. She declared that her son had his hand burnt when he was two years old because she had disobeyed the taboo of lighting a fire, while being confined after birth.

The impurity of the blood magically bans the women in partition to stay near the hearth in villages, otherwise the child will suffer from burns or a skin disease called "small fires" (*focuşoare*). In Latin (goddess Vesta) and Greek (goddess Hestia) mythology, the hearth represents the space where the home deity resides. It was therefore forbidden to offend her by blood profanation and even today people still

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act cautiously around fire sources. When I mentioned to my urbanite subject that the cooker is different from a traditional hearth, she immediately responded that it is still a burning fire. Rural cultural patterns are transplanted into the urban environment because they induce a psychological comfort by maintaining familiar topography.

Moreover, superstitions adapt themselves to economical changes and thus the cooker embodies the archetypal features of fire. The "multiple and divergent modernities" (Eisenstadt 2003: 509) co-exist in the urban Romanian society because they are complementary: where science can no longer provide answers, traditional culture speaks up. Its voice is not silenced by the fact that customs may be replaced by urban "public opinions" and "positive law" (Park 1979: 164), mainly because the socio-economical development of postsocialist countries favours cultural persistency, as empirical data will show in the following.

Rites of passage are never ignored by the first generation of town inhabitants, or by their children. Wedding, birth and funeral ceremonies receive greater importance mainly because of their consequences on life. Family events enforce social bonding by a ritually imposed behaviour. Ceremonial acts are, therefore, the last to fade when confronted to a pragmatic type of society. The common mind functions as a cultural catalyser: "memory helps in the construction of collective identities and boundaries" (Misztal 2010: 28) and it is characterized by a "normative transmission" (Shils 1981: 24).

Forty years ago in Serbia, just as today in Romania, most of the city dwellers had recently arrived from villages. In Belgrad,

> contemporary and affluent couples speed to their wedding festivities in Fiats bedecked with plastic flowers and towels (the towels are tied on the hood just under the windshield) in the same manner that horse-drawn fiacres are decorated for village weddings (Simić 1973:71).

Today, in Romania, cars that follow the bride and the groom for the religious procession honk repeatedly and often irritate people in the street. Nevertheless, the cultural memory of a magic behaviour proves itself surprisingly active. Almost a century ago, peasants attending a traditional wedding fired their guns in the air or loudly snapped whips in order to scare maleficent entities that would have attended the ceremony. All transitional phases are defined by magical vulnerability in world-wide superstitions. In Romania, the contemporary way to ward off evil spirits makes use of automobiles.

Urbanites are unlikely to break the traditional set of rules, since customs can ensure inner peace by the conviction that things will turn out well (Author 2015). All urban subjects I interviewed respected pregnancy taboos and went through religious procession in order to redeem the so-called sin of giving birth. On the other hand, the second generation of city inhabitants reacts under cultural pressure exerted by parents; they no longer acknowledge the importance of rituals and even disobey them. Magdalina declared that she blackmailed her son to respect the "Hen" custom (*Găina*) at his wedding, with the threat not to attend the event otherwise. Also, when her daughter delivered her child, the urbanite in question went personally to the

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hospital and offered the midwife a traditional gift consisting of a towel and soap[1], although it is the confined woman who has to redeem her sins by this gesture. Even more so, my subject took the situation into her hands again, when her daughter-in-law had her child. Another female subject, Elena, age 50, specified that both her children's weddings had to be organized by all means traditionally.

Traditional culture still manages to create a certain expectation of unwanted events, as in the case of second generation urban informant Cerasela, age 36, who is a maternity resident doctor. When she gave birth to her child, she did not obey the custom to offer the midwife soap and a towel, and limited her gratitude to offering money. Soon, the infant developed pyoderma and her entire family blamed her infringement. In this case, although the original meaning of the custom is lost, the ritual obligation persists. It is important to notice how the traditional code remains active in reflecting life events. Infringements followed by fear are a socio-cultural symptom that reminds of the beginning of acculturation.

Pressure is also put on institutions when it comes to passage rites. The medical staff of the Emergency Hospital in Iaşi city was obliged to include in their life saving kit matches and a candle to be lit when death of a patient is imminent. The measure was taken because of the repeated questions asked by relatives of defunct whether or not death occurred "with a light" (*cu lumânare*). In traditional mentality, the After World is covered in darkness and the departed has to receive a candle as part of the alms in order to see his/ her way (Ciubotaru 1999: 47). Whenever death occurs and no candle is burning close-by, the family has to perform ritual acts that atone for this great ontological tragedy: they pay specific religious services for a long time, offer alms and use specific candles during the Easter procession.

Constraint is no longer necessary, since the outlook on life applies folk patterns. Although the urbanite "is no longer supported by the collective wisdom of the peasant community" (Park 1979: 165), he chooses to obey cultural and social rules (such as staying indoors before the religious rituals), because traditional memory is active. Escaping constraints, abandoning or modifying ritual prescriptions become an option only for the second or third generation of urban inhabitants, who are not affected by anxious perceptions of the city. For urbanites, clinging to traditional beliefs is an antidote to the chaotic life in a town, since superstitions induce the illusion of order:

> we create, in short, our own cover stories. These then serve as a kind of lens through which we filter our experience of the world. They may produce a distorted sense of reality, but that distortion can serve a vital function, often by making the world appear to be a rational, predictable place we can control (Hallinan 2014: 2).

Romania still experiences the first phase of urbanization, out of the four established ones[2]. This socio-economic context characterizes most of the countries

[1] The custom is called "the midwife's sleeves" (*mânecile moaşei*) and is active in Russia, Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Bulgaria (too ee Hulubaş 2012: 103–118).

[2] Urbanization, suburbanization, counterurbanization and reurbanization are generally considered to be the four phases of the urban population dynamics.

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from the ex-Soviet bloc and implies active memories on traditions and folk beliefs. In Ukraine, for example, magic causes of events are commonly invoked, even by mass media:

> Even among the most educated and technically-minded modern Ukrainian urbanites, ancient beliefs in witches, witchcraft, house demons, dead souls, sorceresses, and their influence on human life is incredibly strong (Golovakha-Hicks 2008: 38).

Bulgaria is also confronted with this socio-cultural phenomenon. The above-invoked custom concerning symbolic redemption by a gift for the traditional birth attendant (consisting of a soap and towel that would cleanse the birth blood), acquired an institutional form: a national holiday called "Day of Natal Assistance and Motherhood". The old ritual is now performed both at home, for grandmothers that actually ceased delivering babies more than half a century ago, and in hospitals. On the 21st of January,

> Bulgarian women visit their grandmothers to ceremonially wash their hands and to present them with a fluffy new towel. The same ritual is enacted in the maternity wards of hospitals, where nurses are given a towel as an acknowledgement of their role in taking care of the mothers and their newborn (Stavreva and Quek 2008: 67).

Contexts and Reasons for Rural Behaviour

Urbanites react with a stir when asked about traditional beliefs and enjoy remembering things their grandparents and mothers told them. They are members of *Gemeinschaft* or "fixed-membership group", since they "remain culturally conservative in the face of external pressures to change" (Plotnicov 1962, 100). Hence, there is no danger of manipulating the subject to admit unrealistic beliefs when suggesting traditional explanations in the interview. Viorica, age 56, mentioned that many of the common childbirth customs were brought to her knowledge only after she moved into the city. Work colleagues coming from different rural areas let her know about certain superstitions and rituals, but she kept her traditional awareness of the fact that "it is not how it was done" in her native hamlet. Therefore, patriarchal culture does not offer the premises of falsifying spiritual data for a scientific thesis. Peasants and urbanites immediately reject alien elements, being more exposed to material changes (such as improving the comfort of house living), than to acculturation.

The interlocutor has to insist tactfully and to rephrase his questions in order to obtain an exact image of the cultural retention. Villagers would respond by saying "it is right to do so" whenever they no longer posses magic explanations for beliefs, while urbanites tend to elude answers in two ways. Firstly, they invoke religious ideas and Christian deities. For example, when asked why the pregnant woman should not tell anyone about the time she is to give birth to her child, Daniela, age 28 answered that only God knows the exact moment. After mentioning the belief that the more people know about the labour, the more the pregnant woman will suffer, the informant confirmed knowing it. The superstition is common in Romania, but also in Polesia, a region located in South-East Europe (Kabakova 2000: 56).

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Another similar situation refers to the unbaptised infant, who is very susceptible to evil intentions in cultures all around the world. The interdiction to leave the child alone in the room is found in Turkey (Bartoli 1998: 226) and also in villages from Moldova, in the eastern part of Romania. When the mother has work to do, she uses apotropaic objects to be replaced by. Some urban subjects mentioned Orthodox icons and crosses put in the cradle of the baby, while further questions revealed that fire tongs were also used to ward off maleficent entities. Villagers use them next to a broom and a knife, and describe these objects put by the unchristian baby as companions that would fight against all evil attacks. Elena B., age 61, explained the magic power of domestic items as anthropomorphised weapons: the broom "sweeps off evil, the fire tongs bash it".

Apart from the religious conventional answers, the interview should go beyond common pragmatic responses. The traditional solution for a continuously sick child, who sometimes has already dead siblings, is not a visit to the doctor, as urbanites tend to say on a first impulse. All questioned informants were familiar with the magic custom of "selling" a sick baby on the window of the house to a woman with many healthy children, in order to re-write the fate and escape death. Actually, Magdalina symbolically "bought" six urban children[3].

The natural context to activate traditional data is mainly ceremonial (as baptism or the moment when the child turns one and has his hair cut by his Godmother), but it also conveys family moments, when traditional knowledge is passed from one generation to another (for example, when the daughter or the daughter-in-law is pregnant, the urbanite mother draws her attention on baneful gestures or sights).

Whenever ex-peasants find themselves in the company of their friends and relatives, work colleagues or neighbours with rural origins, Goffman's distinction between the expression they give and the expression they give off (1959: 2) becomes inoperable.

Urbanites discern clearly the justified contexts for rural behaviours. The interview is an artificial context and it does not pay for the infringement of the urban appearance. On the other hand, "the rites of passage" (Van Gennep 2013) such as childbirths, weddings and funerals, are ontologically more important than urban acting. Even the most self-conscious urbanite I talked with, Stela admitted that she would warn uninitiated young urban mothers on what should be done during infant's ritual bath performed after baptism (*scăldătoare*), despite any possible negative reaction. Sorina, age 42, declared the same about the custom to bathe the new Christian with magic ingredients, such as milk, sugar, bread and many more:

> 'I know it has to be put inside the bath and she [the infant's mother] has forgotten to. If it has to be done, what?! I tell her! If I know it has to be said, why not

[3] The house symbolizes the womb the child exits again, this time to a longer and better life. The woman who receives the baby outside the window pays a few coins to his mother and brings back the child on the door. The ritual is performed three times, after which the baby remains with his biological mother, but he would call the woman who bought him "mother", too.

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> tell her? I know this has to be put in the bathing water, if you agree, put it, if not, don't. Yes. Otherwise, she can say afterwards: "But I didn't know!". I had to say it'.

The sudden rural intervention into an urban setting of events may appear rude and unexplainable since previously, the urbanite dissimulated well his traditional knowledge. It is the authority of the elders that imposed on him the necessity to pass on cultural data. Peasant societies (Redfield 1940: 735) are defined by such fixed laws that create cohesion and also coercions for their members. Passage rites gather the most frequent contexts of socially enforced gestures.

Nevertheless, an urbanite with thorough knowledge would "refuse to spin out meanings, but simply say that they perform rituals in certain ways because that is the tradition", since ritual "is about doing more than saying something" (Seligman et al. 2008: 4). During the interviews, a certain pressure of the researcher determines informants to ask themselves rhetorically why ritual gestures are mandatory and what they might mean. This effect of the "observer's paradox" (Labov 1973) made Viorica demand herself several times on the reasons of the actions she scrupulously repeated in her urban life. Elena B. resorted to fanciful interpretations immediately, such as assessing that the egg battered into the bathing water of the newly baptised child would bring about fertility.

Two contexts for traditional reactions have been therefore established: familiar circumstances and ceremonial events. As for the explanations, they may be related to three different situations. Firstly, every time scientific causes cannot be found, magic knowledge steps in to provide answers. All three stages of the passage rites identified by Arnold Van Gennep in 1909 offer examples of superstitions and practices that defy the urban context. The rites of separation, transitional rites and the incorporation ones (Van Gennep 2013: 11) present in the childbirth customs performed in Romanian towns abound in rural gestures and convictions.

Secondly, superstitions survive as an intention to ward off evil. Next to the red thread tied at baby's wrist, urbanites use brooms, knives and Orthodox icons or crosses to protect the baby. The first are obviously older than Christian cult objects. The broom is supposed to "sweep out the evil" by itself, as Elena B. declared, whereas the knife also animates itself and stabs maleficent entities that come to torment or to steal the unchristian baby.

The last reason for the persistency of traditional knowledge in Romanian towns (Author 2014) defines the main purposes of magic: dominating fate and deciding favourable outcomes. The ritual bath after baptism contains several ingredients with magic powers. Milk is supposed to provide a white beautiful skin to the baby, while sugar makes him "sweet", which means that he will grow up to be pleasant and popular. Furthermore, the one year old baby has to choose a work instrument from a selection made by his parents and Godparents and presented to him in a ceremonial context. The object he picks up apparently foretells his future occupation.

The above presented findings show how traditional information mingles with everyday urban behaviour. What is perfectly mimicked as adaptation to town living is, in the case of Romanian urbanites, a latent yet vigilant cultural memory that dissolves the antinomy between the "preservation of one's indigenuous roots and adherence to the modern project" (Sachsenmaier 2002: 58). The socio-cultural palimpsest can be used to diagnose the level of urban adaptation and acculturation based on the visibility of previous traditional education.

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Conclusion

This study contributes to the existent literature by adding a folkloric dimension to urban sociology. Much of the discussion has focussed on the idea that traditional knowledge influences social behaviour even after subjects shifted from rural settlements to urban living. I argued that folk beliefs and gestures are spontaneous and reveal a magic outlook on life. Three reasons support this anachronism: the scientific impossibility to explain everything, the fear of unseen evil forces and the human aspiration to positively influence the future. A broader aim of this article has been to use qualitative sociology to reveal the dynamics of everyday behaviour for post-socialist urbanites and to see how ingrained cultural identity influences their actions. The article suggests that urban cultural studies should make use of ethnographic data to track behavioural patterns of gradual adaptation.

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Abstract

This article considers the role of traditional knowledge in the everyday life of Romanian urbanites by focusing on rural reactions and convictions displayed in urban settlements. The method is based on a comparative approach between the native places of subjects and their own actions and beliefs. Post-socialism did not eliminate superstitious reasoning, which continues to exist and even to assimilate modern devices to magic purposes. The article proposes that ethnographic evidence should be made use of in urban cultural studies of South-Eastern countries. The socio-cultural perspective contributes to a better understanding of the modernization dynamics.

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