# Notes on a Pathology of the Recent and Contemporary Romanian Ethnological Sciences

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*Dans cet article, l'auteur discute un schéma de quatre pathologies qui ont affecté les sciences ethnologiques roumains: la langue, les thèmes obsessionnels, les orientations méthodologiques et les fixations d'attitude.*

*Mots-clés: pathologie, idole, langue, méthodologie, fixation d'attitude.*

By "pathology" I mean a kind of clichés of a rather special character that have been functioning for quite a long time within the Romanian ethnological sciences as a kind of *distortion medium* interposed between reality and the eye of the ethnologist. These clichés are more than simple "common places", but rather "idols" (in the sense of Francis Bacon) by which ethnologists *take over* or *face* reality and to whom they entrust – with full confidence – the mission to construct the object of ethnology and to shape the interpretations/ understandings they produce. Naturally, every ethnologists has its own idols/ conceptual fictions on which one relies, but it is of critical importance to always be aware of their *as if/ als ob* character. The idols that have been built and imposed in the context of Romanian ethnology are the result of both genuine scientific concern and of the ideological and political goals, the result being a very problematic synthesis that has never been properly/ openly put into question.

I localize these idols at least at four levels of the scientific life in the areas of Romanian ethnology: *language and stylistics, thematic obsessions, methodological inertias* and *attitudinal fixations*. All these are rooted in the nation construction quest from the 19 century, in the essentialist perspectives from the inter-war period and, also, in the nationalistic attitudes from both the inter-war time and the communist era. The fact that they still determine today's Romanian ethnology, both the mainstream academic domain of the discipline and the second rate ethnological productions, argues in favour of the medical metaphor I've employed, that of *pathology*.



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**A. The thematic idols**

The first obsessive themes are the monographs of the biographical rites, fathered by Simeon Florea Marian at the request of the Romanian Academy beginning with 1890. He defined a triptych that had to be adored until today in a kind of *idolatrous* (because the kind of respect for his work goes far beyond the intention of the author) and *heretic* attitude (since such an insistence on these topics actually betrays Marian's goals). These centres of interest were and still are perceived as encapsulating the very essence of the Romanian mentality, religion, behaviour. It is a fact that most of the mainstream ethnology did monographic researches on death, marriage and birth rituals, many times without advancing too far beyond the level of Father Simion Florea Marian. And if we look into the research plans of the main institutions of folklore studies, we find these themes defined in long term projects. Miorita is also one of the first obsessions of folklorists, a theme imagined as containing the very equation of the Romanian spirit and, also, enigmas, images, secrets, gestures and long forgotten rituals. That is why, it is a theme on which various methodologies and generations have tried their analytic powers. It is needless to emphasize that the cultivation of such themes have created a tradition of the „serious research" and produced a kind of division in the ethnographic field into **worthy** and **modest topics**, a discrimination which determines hierarchies and research options even today.

**B. The idols from the level of methodology**

Many ethnologists talk and write on traditional culture holding on to concepts such as "Romanian essence"/ the Romanian dimension of existence/ Romanian energy (Vasile Bancila)/ Romanian spirit, "mioritic space" etc. The persistence of the inter-war essentialist concepts and perspectives reflect both an anachronistic and a nationalistic concern. The metaphysical idea of Romanian soul – "birthed and not made" – functions even today to some respect as a supreme value, as a core concept, determining the shape of many discourses, influencing the premises, because, being part of the heritage of Blaga, Staniloae, Noica, Mircea Vulcanescu and others, they are taken for granted, as already proved and valid concepts, ignoring their ideological heritage and also the context in which these concepts had been coined.

What kinds of questions ethnologists ask when dealing with thematic obsessions? As Marin Marian Balasa observes, Romanian ethnologists have updated and not re-written (that is not re-conceptualizing) the ethnological discourse on the same old issues[1]. The exploration of the material goes usually in the direction of a hermeneutic of the meaning of gestures/facts in an archaic perspective. Also, the interpretation and over-interpretation of the same aspects gives the impression of tautological/ redundant enterprise, going often little

[1] See Marin Marian Balasa's work *Etnologii, muzicologii, subiectivitati, politici* from 2013.



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beyond what is already there, in the ethnographic document, or little beyond Marian's explanations.

This „past-orientation" of most of the inquiries is another obsession of Romanian ethnologists. There is an omnipresent purpose in identifying the archaic/ the pagan survival hidden within rituals. Actually, this has been the glory of many local ethnological enterprises. However, being focused on such a goal, this automatically implies dismissing the present and a self exile in the horizon of speculative and theoretical, general issues. So, this focus on the "archaic ghost hunting", as Marin Marian Balasa puts it, implies disbelief and mistrust in the present, a disinterest in the contemporary ways of meaning production / world making and religion practices in their contextual and relational relevance.

**C. Idols situated at the level of leading attitudes**

There are a number of deeply problematic attitudes in the tone of many ethnologists, a tone that can be met in most colloquia and symposiums on Romanian folklore. I want to draw attention first to the apocalyptic manner of many discussions and discourses, the same fear that animated Marian and Pamfile that old people die, traditions disappear and so on, attitudes who were given a very sharp response by H.H. Stahl[2], but who keep on influencing today's discussions. Hardly has there been any Romanian Conference on Folklore without this attitude present[3]. Secondly, I want to comment on the **messianic role** which Romanian ethnologists assume: the role of defending the national identity, the authenticity of Romanian values, aesthetics, spirit and Romanian-ness. This "sacred mission" turns the folklorist into a guardian, a militant, and an activist who must "rise up" and stand for Romanian core values. Naturally, from this state of urgency and imminent danger, many problems are put an ultimate attitude.

**D. The stylistic/ discursive idols, slogans included**

Beyond the essentialist conceptual apparatus, whoever attends regional and national Symposia on Romanian popular culture will notice easily a special stylistics, a preference for the old language: a stylistic of the archaism and of the regionalism is to be found at work in the midst of the scientific discourse[4]. Here is a little repertoire I've registered at a conference held in IASI, organized under the auspices of the Romanian Academia: *vatra satului*, *mintea şi sufletul*, *talentul clocotitor al lui Creangă*, *românii trăiesc ca într-o cruce*, *a şti să mori* precum ciobanul din Mioriţa/ *a şti să fii* precum ciobanul din Miorita ş.a.m.d. The existence of a considerable amount of "special" expressions betrays the same old

[2] See H.H. Stahl's *Eseuri critice* from 1983.

[3] Naturally, the presence of the same old XIX century fears are feared in the XXI century is proof once again that no serious paradigmatic shift took place in Romanian ethnological studies.

[4] Of course, I have in mind such occurrences when they are not quotations.



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ethnocentric attitudes, spiritual and religious concerns and also the long term solidarity between Romanian ethnology and the Church.

"The cure", to end up in the same metaphorical coherence, has to do with the energy with which Romanian ethnologists, at least from the mainstream, would shove these idols.

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