‘RISE LIKE A PHOENIX’: COMMUNIST MYTHOLOGY AND ROCK MUSIC

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Abstract

This article addresses the interaction between communist mythology and rock music in Romania. It analyses comparatively cultural and political myths, as identified by Tănăsoiu, with particular emphasis on the political myth of unity. Supported by an intensive use of historical myths and legends, this myth carved out a place of its own in a communist discourse designed to legitimate the new regime. Deforming the past and attaching different interpretations to it in order to suit their purposes, communists fabricated a mythology that could work for their own advantage. As the paper shows, the restrictive regulations imposed on all forms of cultural manifestation (as a result of a nationalist policy), forced artists to find inspiration in medieval sources, national mythology and folklore. Surprising as it may seem, the Phoenix band, the landmark exponents of rock music, successfully tuned in their lyrics about Dacians, national mythology and folklore to a Western beat.

Keywords: *myths*; *national mythology*; *communism*; *rock music*; *Phoenix*; *folklore*.

1. Defining Myths

This article investigates the interrelation between Romanian communist mythology and rock music. To instantiate the case, the example of the Phoenix band is amply discussed. Thus, the paper demonstrates how national mythology

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was successfully incorporated in the groups' musical repertoire, producing an original and enthralling combination of ancient folk themes and modern music.

Furthermore, an important corollary to this main objective is an integrated discussion of the way in which a regime preaching a radiant future looked to the past, to its rituals, symbols and myths, in order to construct a legitimate and valid ideological discourse. Hence, national myths were reconfigured to lend themselves to the communist conception of mythology. Drawing on Mircea Eliade's postulate, Savova-Mahon Borden perceptively argues that communist mythology "lacked the distance of time" (Savova-Mahon Borden 2001: 167) that was indispensable to the transformation of memory into myth. Thus, despite its grand objectives cast far into the future, communism had to forge symbols out of the Romanian pre-communist past. In what follows, I demonstrate how myths were exploited and incorporated into a discourse centred on national identity.

However, before embarking on a comprehensive analysis of national myths and rock music in communist years, the notion of 'myth' itself should be clearly delineated. In her insightful study *Post-Communist Political Symbolism: New Myths – Same Old Stories? An analysis of Romanian Political Mythology*, Tănăsoiu stresses the importance of myths and their *sine qua non* status in the lives of people and nations: "Myths are necessary constructions since we cannot live outside the imaginary" (Tănăsoiu 2005: 113). Notwithstanding the stated purpose of this article, it should be noted though that the category of the imaginary is defined as a dynamic system with an organisation of its own and operating independently of the exogenous world and yet influenced by it (Boia 2000: 14; Tănăsoiu 2005: 18). Admittedly, the concept of myth is given primacy in the literature on the imaginary. As such, Tănăsoiu substantiates her claims by further arguing that myths are imaginarily developed, straddling the borders of the real and unreal, their aim being to disclose the true nature of cosmic and social occurrences. Her postulate is congruent with that of Boia, who perceives myth as a construction anchored in imagination, either as a narrative or an idea (Boia 2000: 40). What is more, as both Boia and Schöpflin show, its main purpose is to explain the world, both from a social and cosmological perspective, while ensuring coherence, making "thought-worlds... appear clear and logical" and "making cosmos out of chaos" (the reference is to Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History*, quoted in Schöpflin 1997: 3).

Inarguably, myths also encapsulate the core beliefs and values of a certain community, helping it come into being while providing an immutable code of practice. In his theoretically-informed essay, "The Functions of Myth and a Taxonomy of Myths" (1997), George Schöpflin contends that myths are instrumental in the creation of collectivities or nations. His argument is also corroborated by Boia, who explicitly mentions the cohesive role played by

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myths in a community (Boia 2000: 40). More than that, one of the major functions of a myth is to offer simple interpretations to apparently complex phenomena and thus provide one avenue of inquiry. Hence, in light of all this, the views of Boia and Schöpflin coalesce around the cognitive function of myths. According to them, man is incapable of extracting the whole meaning of reality, so he represents "in a mythical and symbolic fashion" (Schöpflin 1997: 9) different dimensions of his existence in order to make sense of his collective life. However, Boia pushes the boundaries of myth as cognition even further in his comparative analysis of myth and science. As such, he asserts that they are both on a quest for profound truths, yet their approaches are different – the mythical one is "intuitive and poetic", whereas the second one relies on "induction and experimentation" (Boia 2000: 41, my translation from Romanian).

To continue, it is worth noting that the pertinence of myths does not lie in their authenticity but in their very existence, in the messages they communicate to entire groups of people. Schöpflin's postulate that the "content of the myth" should take precedence over "its accuracy as a historical account" (Schöpflin 1997: 3) is echoed by Tănăsoiu (2005), Iorga (2012) and Boia (2000). Nevertheless, in his clear and exquisite prose, Boia amplifies this idea, contending that "the myth reproduces a true history, but its truth is more essential than the superficial truth of things" (Boia 2000: 41). As a result, defining myths within paradigms of truth or falsehood becomes irrelevant.

Myths are laden with symbolism, and their continual repetitions and re-enactments emphasise people's need to ascertain their beginnings, identity and aspirations. It is important then to clarify the connection between myths, rituals and symbols. Regarded as stories or an ensemble of beliefs, myths find their active correspondence in rituals, whereas symbols are the constitutive elements of myths (Schöpflin 1997: 3). As Levi-Strauss succinctly remarks, "the myth exists on the conceptual level and the ritual on the level of action" (Levi-Strauss 1963: 232). More importantly, taking part in and accepting the ritual determine standardization and solidarity within the group (Schöpflin 1997: 4-8).

Last but not least, however broad this definition of myths claims to be, the anthropological perspective must also be touched upon. In his ground-breaking work *Structural Anthropology* (1963), Levi-Strauss provides a minute analysis of myths in his systematic and disciplined effort to establish an interpretative framework. Thus, in order to understand the inherent polarity of myths, he drew heavily on research in linguistics. "Myth *is* language: to be known, myth has to be told; it is a part of human speech", claims Levi-Strauss (1963: 209). Myth is indeed language, but it also displays its distinctive features. As the anthropologist argues, if Saussure's concepts of 'langue' (making reference to a reversible time) and 'parole' (referring to a non-reversible time) are already established in language, then a third level could also be constituted. Inarguably,

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the idiosyncratic nature of myths lies in their timelessness, as they encompass the past, the present and the future (*ibid.*).

Last but not least, touching upon the tenets of anthropology, Tănăsoiu (2005: 114) defines myths as a "category of fictitious discourse, a form of speech opposed to the reasoned discourse of the logic". In light of this argument, myths run counter both to truth and to clear reason.

1.1. Classification of Myths

There is unquestionably an entire mythological panoply, yet, a certain standardization of myths is peculiar to Central and Eastern Europe. Since the topic of this paper is centred on Romania, it would not seem irrelevant to briefly describe these myths as listed by Schöpflin. The first ones, relatively widespread, are the *myths of territory*, which developed from the idea that there was a certain territory where the nation came into being or produced its highest forms of expression. Hence, the sacredness of the territory assumes particular weight in this particular case.

Next, probably the myth that has many resonances for the Romanian thought-world, is that of *redemption and suffering*. The nation had to confront the adversity of history, trying now to redeem itself or the world. As Schöpflin aptly explains, it has its essence in Christian thinking and in a "sense of geographical, political and cultural marginalization with respect to Europe" (Schöpflin 1997: 29). Furthermore, as this myth implies, the Eastern European countries, sacrificed themselves in the fight against external invaders ensuring the advancement of Europe. In light of all this, fatalism and passivity gain prominence. It becomes then evident that the Romanian myth of the magical lamb (outlined in section *1.1.2.* of the present paper) can be amalgamated under this myth.

The third myth of *unjust treatment* is analogous to the second one, stressing the suffering of the community as a consequence of its fate. As it transpires though, the myth draws attention to victims (for example the story of the deportations of Latvians by the Soviet officials in the wake of the Second World), implying that they "suffered for the wider world and the wider world should recognize this" (Schöpflin 1997: 31).

To continue, the *myths of election* make reference to a particular mission bestowed on a nation, either by God or by History. Schöpflin illustrates the case by giving the example of Hungarians who, before the end of the First World War, invoked their "civilizing mission" (Schöpflin 1997: 31-32) when dealing with different ethnic minorities. Though latent nowadays, this idea still makes occasional forays into public discourse related to Slovakia or Romania.

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Two other myths whose meanings can be easily construed are those of *military valour* and *rebirth and renewal*. A few words should be said, however, about the myth of *ethnogenesis and antiquity*. It not only seeks to establish where a group comes from, but also to settle the debate concerning the first ones who came on a certain territory. Illustrative of this myth, according to Schöpflin's perceptive remark, is that of the confrontation between Romanian and Hungary over Transylvania and the "use of the Daco-Roman continuity myth and that of a Sumerian descent to counter this, respectively" (Schöpflin 1997: 34).

The *myth of kinship and shared descent* perceives nation as family, hence the rejection of other ethnic groups. Finally, the *myth of foundation*, also discussed by Tănăsoiou and Boia, explains the basic human need to begin something new and signpost that new beginning by an act laden with mythical attributes. Nonetheless, in a more detailed analysis, Boia argues that "the very function of a myth is to recount the sacred history of a genesis, of a foundation" (Boia 2000: 174). Further, the Romanian scholar distinguishes between myths of foundation and myths of origin. If the former are historical, the latter are cosmic (*ibid.*).

The taxonomy formulated by Boia bears close similarity to that proposed by Dubois (1998). Yet, the latter subsumes the two myths of creation and foundation under the myth of origin. Their cosmological and historical roles are, however, compatible with those stated by Boia. What is more, Iorga interestingly notes the inclusion of genealogical myths in the myths of foundation (Iorga 2012: 147).

To continue, as has been previously the case, similarities and differences can also be identified in the classification of myths provided by Boia (2001), Tănăsoiu (2005) and Petrescu (2011). If Dubois and Tănăsoiu distinguish between eschatological myths and myths of foundation, Petrescu elaborates on the historical context that prompted Ceauşescu and the Romanian Communist Party to employ dominant historical myths. Therefore, Petrescu explains how communists slyly resorted to myths in order to cement the popularity gained in the wake of the Soviet Invasion of Prague in 1968. Using a "legitimating discourse, that of ethnicity" (Petrescu 2011: 154) was instrumental in making people identify with the regime and adhere to its views. It is worth mentioning that this approach used by the regime (in need of its own language) stymied any ideas of revolt or dissidence in a large swathe of the population. The regime was regarded as a protector of the country's independence and territorial integrity.

It is important to note that both Girardet (1986, *apud* Laborie 1988) and Schöpflin (1997) remark on the centrality of myth in political life. According to the latter, myth is employed as a communication tool within the community, as a conduit for messages sent from leaders to their subjects. In this respect, it serves to increase mutual devotion and confidence. As Schöpflin conclusively

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states, “mythic and symbolic discourses can [...] be employed to assert legitimacy and strengthen authority” (Schöpflin 1997: 18). His view dovetails with that of Chiara Bottici (2014) who points at the active role played by myths in the attribution of meaning to political phenomena. As such, the main tenet of her argument is built around the creative function of myths, rather than their descriptive one, for a myth “does not claim to describe the world; it aims to create its own world” (Bottici 2014: 93). More importantly, a closer examination of myths reveals the interdependence of politics and culture inasmuch as all political acts are enveloped in a broader cultural context.

As far as political myths are concerned, Bottici and Boia acknowledge the presence of myths in the modern political arena, the Romanian historian further arguing that they propose a “distortion of the present in relation to the past” which is “politicised”, whereas the present is “historicised” (Boia 2000: 189).

As Petrescu and Boia show, communist propaganda, paired with a cohort of writers and historians, successfully exploited four essential myths: “ancient roots; continuity on the present-day territory; unity; struggle for independence” (Petrescu 2011: 154). This taxonomy overlaps, to a certain degree, with that produced by Tănăsoiu (2005). She equates, on the one hand, myths of foundation with cultural myths and, on the other hand, eschatological myths with political myths.

Her views are congruent with those of Petrescu (2011), insofar as the myth of ‘unity’ is concerned. Nonetheless, in addition to ‘Unity’, both Boia and Tănăsoiu mention “the Saviour, the Conspiracy Theory and the Golden Age” as political myths whose sources are steeped in religious myths and fiction creations, establishing thus a link with cultural myths (Tănăsoiu 2005: 116). In parenthesis, it should be remembered that the quadruple classification of myths (Conspiracy, the Saviour, the Golden Age and Unity) was first drawn by Raoul Girardet in his work *Mythes et Mythologies Politiques* (1986), being largely inspired by French politics. However appealing a description of these myths might be, it falls outside the limited scope of this paper. I will confine myself to briefly writing about two supplementary political myths identified by Boia (2000): history as a source of inspiration (see, for example, the Roman Empire used as reference by Mussolini, or the Commune of Paris of 1871, exploited by Lenin) and the so-called “run forward” myth (revolutionary mythology espoused by fascism, communism or Nazism in their attempt to create a new world and a new human being; Schöpflin 1997: 192).

In what follows, I will discuss the way in which some of the myths previously described are articulated under the communist regime in Romania.

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1.1.1. Historical Myths

Let me get back now to the myths identified by Petrescu (2011) and Boia (2000) in an attempt to decipher their underlying meanings. First, 'ancient roots' and 'continuity' are related to ethnicity and to the century-old dispute between Romanians and Hungarians over Transylvania. Second, 'unity' and 'independence', as Petrescu keenly shows, formed an integral part of party policies following 1956. In other words, Ceauşescu asserted his political views by foregrounding both the unity of the nation around the "monolithic party" (Petrescu 2011: 154) and its independence within the Soviet Bloc or on an international level. What triggered this political stance can be easily explained as soon as a comparison with the medieval rulers of the Romanian principalities (Wallachia, Moldavia and Transylvania) is made. Thus, the medieval princes battled with the Ottomans over the independence of their territories in much the same way as the communist regime was forced to make a stand against Soviet interference in order to secure the independence of the socialist state.

The issue of unity was thus clearly expressed and defended by Ceauşescu in his balcony speech following the Prague Spring. What is more, it emerged as the focal point of the Romanian Grand National Assembly convened on 22 August 1968, in the wake of the Soviet invasion of the Czech capital. Hence, the Communist leader claimed that "…a big and tragic mistake, with heavy consequences upon the fate of the unity of the socialist system and the international communist and workers' movement, occurred" (Petrescu 2011: 154).

Therefore, myths and symbols coalesced into a discourse designed to garner support for the cause of the regime, galvanise a nation and fuel the communist movement. In much the same vein, they played a pivotal role in helping the regime acquire validity and justify a dominant position. Building on Schöpflin's argument, Petrescu notes that "mythic and symbolic discourses can […] be employed to assert legitimacy and strengthen authority. They mobilize emotions and enthusiasm. They are a primary means by which people make sense of the political process, which is understood in a symbolic form" (Petrescu 2011: 154).

Connecting the dots between the past and the present and thereby upholding a claim for continuity became thus a major preoccupation for the regime. To instantiate the case, during a public gathering in Cluj (a city in Transylvania) in 1968, Ceauşescu highlighted the mission of the Romanian Communist Party to continue the century-old heroic actions of medieval rulers such as Michael the Brave, Stephen the Great or Mircea the Old. By inference, a parallel can be inarguably drawn between these princes' fight for independence and the party's independent stand in relation to the Soviet Union.

However, Boia places greater emphasis on Dacians in his attempt to demonstrate how Ceauşescu's regime made a foray into the past in a bid to

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redefine its present. Antiquity showed great potential to legitimize communist power and was therefore fully exploited. To give an example, in 1980 the party went to great lengths to organize the 2050th anniversary of the creation of the 'unitary and centralized' Dacian state under Burebista (Boia 2001: 167). The Dacian King provided the necessary validity to the regime, and the unity, authority and power of his state paralleled those of Ceauşescu's Romania. Naturally, Burebista served as a platform for the aggrandizement of the communist leader himself.

As Boia ironically observes, such celebrations succeeded one another and were cast in the same mould. The prominent themes were origins, then continuity and unity, as Petrescu also noted, and finally the Ceauşescu era. All the fabricated spectacles underlined the harmonious fusion between past and present mirrored by the figure of Ceauşescu. In 1986 the commemoration of Mircea the Old (Mircea cel Bătrân) created a stir throughout the country and the medieval ruler was stripped of his cognomen of 'old' and became instead 'the great'. It is worth drawing attention to the fact that any failure to use this epithet could have serious consequences.

History was thus rewritten, deformed or reinterpreted to serve the purposes of the Romanian regime in its quest for viability. Following the same line of thought, an event of momentous importance such as the Bobâlna Peasant Revolt (1437) was turned on its head, being transformed into a revolution. Fast-forwarding into the 18th century, the communists affixed a new meaning to the uprising led by Horea, Cloşca and Crişan (1784), describing it as a forerunner of the French Revolution. The onus was thus on historians of the communist era to extrapolate from different historical episodes. As a result, it was shown how Romanians introduced the concepts of modern nation and national state as evidenced by the union under Michael I and by countless similar undertakings prior to 1600 when the idea of ethnic unity had hardly been contemplated in Europe. Boia is the one who conducts a deep and multilayered analysis of the myth of the nation and of the nation-state. The former represents, in the historian's view, one of the greatest myths of modern times, as he further explains: "The nation embodies not so much an objective historical reality, but rather an ideal project. It exists in people's consciousness. It belongs to the imaginary" (Boia 2000: 172).

Finally, the pursuit of an independence-oriented policy was further signalled by Ceauşescu's rejection of the Brezhnev Doctrine that acknowledged the right of the Warsaw Pact to take action in order to defend socialism. Thus, timing was also perfect, as Ceauşescu chose to clearly showcase his firm political stance before the Romanian Grand National Assembly that marked in 1968 the 50th celebration of the unification of Transylvania with Romania (1 December 1918).

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In light of all these strategies and manoeuvres, the regime reconfigured its social and political position. In the closing days of the 1968, Romanian national-communism reached its zenith, with the party as the leviathan that preserved and reclaimed the political heritage of the three historical Romanian principalities.

Vladimir Tismăneanu[2] aptly observes in his article *Behind the Façade of the Ceauşescu Regime* (2008) that Ceauşescu astutely capitalized on the suppression of the Prague Spring to solidify his personality cult. Under the veneer of domestic unity, he allegedly opposed the Soviet threat devising a "self-serving mythology in which he was the fearless hero, the symbol of the unity of party and nation"[3]. More than that, Tismăneanu's statement resonates with that of Boia, insofar as the latter also regards mythology as the driving force behind the construction of a credible and legitimate regime. However, with great acumen and analytical mind, Boia discerns the pernicious consequences of the communist historical mythology in contemporary Romania. According to him, the historical mythology built in communist years, remains latent in contemporary Romania, having a negative impact on the country's road to recovery: "Mental constellations have a longer life than material structures. Thanks to the communist regime, a historical mentality which has been long outdated in Western Europe continues to affect Romanian culture and society to the full" (Boia 2001: 181).

1.1.2. Cultural Myths

If Petrescu and Boia, as I have previously shown, are intent on showing how communists tapped into Romanian national history to construct a tenable political discourse, Tănăsoiu expatiates on the cultural myths exploited in the post-communist era. She subsumes them under the foundational myths, providing a tripartite classification: 'Traian and Dochia', 'Meşterul Manole' (The Craftsman Manole) and 'Mioriţa' (The Lamb) (Tănăsoiu 2005: 117). It should be mentioned, however, that Tănăsoiu's tenet draws on George Călinescu's categorization. The celebrated Romanian writer and literary critic identified four main myths as axes of investigation of Romanian spirituality: the aesthetic myth (sacrifice for the creative act), the myth of transhumance, the erotic myth and finally the ethnogenesis myth (Călinescu 2001 [1941]: 41-42).

Every myth is born out of a necessity to account and look for a people's origins. Myths also reflect a nation's drive to demonstrate its noble origin and

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[3] Article available at https://www.rferl.org/a/Behind_Facade_Ceausescu_Regime/1145867.html

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antiquity, a characteristic especially applicable to Eastern Europe. Romanians retrace their origins to Rome and proudly assert their Latin descent. The myth 'Traian and Dochia' is illustrative of this belief, as it offers a metaphorical explanation of the birth of Romanians as a nation, revolving around the interrelation between Romans and Dacians.

As Tănăsoiu aptly observes, the search for origins correlates strongly with an endeavour to find the Primordial Time or the so-called Golden Age (Tănăsoiu 2005: 118). The pledge to usher the country into a Golden Age became a leitmotif not only of the communist era but also of post-communist Romania, consistently incorporated in any political discourse. Nevertheless, the Golden Age was positioned in different time frames: in the future for communists ("communism is the road to socialism and the perfect society", Tănăsoiu 2005: 118) and in the inter-war period for contemporary Romania.

To continue, the second cultural myth that helps explain the uneasy and apprehensive atmosphere enveloping both communist and post-communist discourses is that of 'Meşterul Manole' ('The Craftsman Manole'). The myth develops around the building of the Curtea de Argeş monastery that was to become the official church of the rulers of Wallachia and later of the Romanian monarchy. Craftsman Manole had been entrusted with the task of building the monastery but the walls he built during the day collapsed at night. In one of his dreams Manole was communicated the solution to the problem: a human sacrifice. As a result, his wife Ana, the first person who came to the building site in the morning, had to be walled in alive.

Of notable importance is Lucian Blaga's play revolving around this myth and providing an insightful dialogue between Manole and the spirits. As Manole implores them to tell him who makes the wall crumble down, he receives the following answer: "It's the Powers!" (Tănăsoiu 2005: 121). The term 'powers' was a defining feature of Romanian history as it made reference to the Ottomans, the Russians/Soviets, the Americans, the French or the Austro-Hungarians. Consequently, the powers embody organizations or individuals operating covertly and intent on destroying the country. According to Tănăsoiu, the conspiracy theory is a typical example that runs deep into the fabric of Romanian political and social life. To substantiate this claim, the 'Yalta Syndrome' (Tănăsoiu 2005: 121) emerges as the epitome of such theories. It continues to have an overpowering influence on Eastern Europeans' psyche, as people fear a new division of Europe according to spheres of influence. However, Romanians put a twofold interpretation on the Yalta episode: for communists it marked their birth, whereas post-communist Romania blames it for casting a blight on the country. Finally, Tănăsoiu sounds a note of warning, claiming that the creation and use of such theories to vindicate the misfortunes plaguing a country distances people from politics.

The third and last cultural myth is that of 'Miorița' ('The Lamb'). It recounts the story of a Moldavian shepherd warned by its magical lamb that two

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other shepherds, one Transylvanian and the other one Wallachian, intend to kill him and steal his sheep. Yet, despite being alerted to that heinous plan, he takes no action and accepts his fate. Immersed in a communion with nature and playing his flute, he waits serenely for his killers. The overarching idea is thus structured around a resigned attitude in the face of destiny which represents, in Vulcănescu's terms, the "Romanian dimension of existence" (Tănăsoiu 2005: 125). This passivity and calm acceptance of one's fate stem from a belief in the eternity of spiritual life and is reflected into the political arena as submissiveness and obedience to leadership. More than that, all rebellious actions and form of revolt against those in power are perceived as pointless.

It is interesting to point out that Tănăsoiu's analysis reveals a religious strand running through a number of myths. As such, the Saviour became a fixture in political mythology, irrespective of the regimes in power. Marshal Antonescu, King Michael and Ceauşescu, are regarded as all-powerful figures, assigned an almost divine mission and expected to extricate their people from a life of hardships. Needless to say, the communist propaganda machine attributed such qualities to the Party Leader, "the Father of the Nation, the genius of the Carpathians, the most beloved son of the nation" (Tănăsoiu 2005: 126).

2. Let's Rock the Regime: Communism and Music

2.1. National Mythology and Rock Music

As previously shown, mythology served as a source of inspiration for the communist political discourse. However, it was also used as a vehicle for communist ideology in a cultural and artistic setting. Numerous scholars have been primarily concerned with the way in which rock groups expressed dissent, insubordination and revolt at the regime while integrating national myths in their repertoire.

S. Romano (1999) argues that music was politicized in the communist countries to comply with the cultural policy set forth by the party. In other words, the party and the state used culture as an instrument for manipulating the nation. According to Romano, this politicization of culture could have a more damaging effect than censorship itself. Consequently, the party sought to regulate all aspects of artistic manifestation, pre-eminently the "cultural thesaurus of the past, the contemporary creation itself, and the […] influence coming from the free Western World" (Romano1999: 27).

To exemplify, in Romania artists were forced to join a union, received payment from the state and had to work or produce work under the banner of Socialist Realism (Romano 1999: 27; Roman 2007: 64). Advancing this argument in his insightful article *Promoting Romanian Music Abroad: The Rumanian*

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Review (1946–1956), Crotty (2009) claims that folk music was unobtrusively employed by the regime in its quest for legitimacy. By advocating folk music, the Party aimed to show that it naturally associated itself with the people and by promoting its musical repository it developed a better rapport with them.

To continue, Neumann (2000), Curta (2005), Roman (2007) and Pop (2016) bring into the foreground the relation between communism and rock music. With hardly a dissenting voice, they emphasise the power of this distinctive and idiosyncratic artistic form to stand up to the communist powerhouse. If Denise Roman (2007) and Victor Neumann (2000) build their argument around the indissoluble link between youth rebellion and rock, Curta and Pop look at rock music through a historical lens. Their views that in the communist era rock music expressed its reaction to political transformations and forms of control dovetails with those formulated in the article *A Brief History of Romanian Rock* (published by Radio Romania International on 01/02 2010).

In addition, a sort of activist participation transpired from all rock songs which led Vaclav Havel to exclaim that "long before 1989 the East European revolution had begun on the rock scene" (Curta 2005: 3). His statement is also corroborated by the results of Pop's survey which indicate that Romanian intellectuals saw rock music as an outlet for a different social behaviour or a form to galvanise a subculture of protest (Pop 2016: 53).

Interestingly, Western rock music drew on medieval themes (Camelot being the most prevalent) that came to signify "a new form of Western escapism" (Curta 2005: 3) portraying a purer world, not tainted by historical errors like the Vietnam War or social and sexual discrimination. In the closing days of the 1960s, the song 'Guinevere' was released by Crosby, Stills & Nash. Arthurian legends, with the overarching figure of Merlin, were used by artists such as Uriah Heep and Rick Wakeman. The latter's album was expressly named 'The Myths and Legends of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table'. It is not then ill-advised to draw a parallel between medieval troubadours and rock singers (Curta 2005: 3).

What is more, the 1970s spawned countless rock groups both in Western and Eastern Europe. Polish, Hungarian or Bulgarian bands sang in their own native languages using ethnic music as an important source of inspiration. A successful Romanian rock group that can be placed in this category is Phoenix. Any treatment of the relation between communism and rock music would unarguably be incomplete without the role of this particular group on Romanian society at large, that I will discuss in the next subsection.

However, the historical context that effected change in the repertoire of the band needs to be briefly discussed. Thus, Pop postulates that rock music represented the "'triumph of democracy' over totalitarian thinking" (Pop 2016: 53). Moreover, his views concur with those of Romano (1999), as both scholars make reference to the Sovietization Period in Romania defined by an intensive

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promotion of the norms and principles of the working class as well as an incorporation of Marxist-Leninist theories in daily life. Vehement opposition was shown against the decadence of the West, the Anglo-American imperialism and its culture. As the two scholars point out, Western music was seen as having a corrosive influence compared to Soviet arts and music which were the only ones deserving praise.

Nonetheless, the repressive Stalinization period was toned down during the final part of Gheorghe-Gheorghiu Dej's rule, the so-called 'Thaw' (Pop 2016: 54). According to Radio Romania International[4] and Pop (2016), at the beginning of the 1960s and 1970s the communist leadership adopted a new approach towards Western music conducive to more openness and less restricted cultural relations. Romania embarked thus on a de-Sovietization period, marked by a certain permissiveness and willingness to embrace new ideas and attitudes.

As expected, this turnaround provided a fertile ground for the emergence of numerous rock bands and the constitution of a rock culture. Initially, the majority of the rock bands had few original songs as they adopted Western compositions or drew their inspiration from artists such as Cliff Richards, the Rolling Stones, the Shadows, the Beatles, Pink Floyd, Led Zepellin, The Doors, etc. The most famous rock groups, some of them created even prior to Ceauşescu's advent to power, were Uranus, Pioneers, Phoenix, Cometele, Sincron, Cromatic Group and Sfinx (Neumann 2000, Curta 2005, Roman 2007, Radio Romania International 2010, Pop 2016). According to Neumann and Radio Romania International, most of the rock groups were formed in Timişoara and Bucharest by students and high-schoolers. Neumann stresses the importance of the rallying cry sounded by Phoenix in Timişoara. In addition to being a vehicle for revolt against communist indoctrination and benighted policy-makers, Phoenix also enacted a sense of social unity that reverberated not only across the multicultural society of that city but throughout the entire country (Neumann 2000: 52).

A sudden reversal of policy occurred in 1971 with Ceauşescu's neo-Stalinist approach that plunged the country back into dark oppression. Following his return from North Korea and China, the communist leader was keen to set the stage for a new cultural revolution in order to develop both his cult of personality and a "nationalist version of communism" (Pop 2016: 58-59). Therefore, the new regulations imposed on artistic and cultural Romanian workers were laid down in the 'July Theses'. They were meant to further reinforce Marxist-Leninist tenets and curb any borrowings from the capitalist West. Not surprisingly, rock musicians, probably the most outspoken critics of

[4] For further reference see the article *A Brief history of Romanian rock* by Radio Romania International 01/02/2010 available at http://old.rri.ro/arh-art.shtml?lang=1&sec=170&art=28248

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the regime, bore the brunt of these measures. Citing Doru Ionescu (interviewed by Chivu 2011), music specialist and journalist, Pop claims that more than half of the rock groups of the 1960s had fled Romania before 1989 (Pop 2016: 59). The defection of the Phoenix members to Germany in 1977 is a famous example.

In the second half of the 1970s the Communist Party had already increased its hold on all forms of cultural manifestations and had severed its links with the Marxist teachings. Its aim was to advance "'national politics', based on 'historical, social and national specificity'" (Pop 2016: 59). As a result, the purpose of all literary and artistic creations, as well as the media, was to enable people to actively contribute to the development of national culture (*ibid*.: 60). In what follows, I will attempt to explain how Romanian rock music existed in a symbiotic relationship with the national mythology dictated by the communist regime.

2.2. Communists Calling the Tune: Phoenix Band and National Myths

One of the most famous Romanian rock bands of the 20th century was undoubtedly Phoenix, formed in 1962 in Timişoara (Western Romania). Its original name was 'Sfinţii' ('The Saints') but it had to be dismissed due to communists' hostility to religion. Drawing inspiration from the hippy movement and the British band 'The Shadows', its members Nicu Covaci, Mircea Baniciu, Ovidiu Lipan Ţăndărică, Nani Neumann and Josef Kappl dabbled with beat music, psychedelic rock, hard rock and progressive rock. The following statement by Nicu Covaci clearly articulates the standpoint of the band and accounts for their chosen musical trajectory:

> "We were convinced that that was the way; any young man who desired to free himself from the false morality and narrow mindedness of the leaders, had to follow it. Some radio stations were forbidden, some art and music magazines or even journals from the West were considered decadent and were forbidden as well. The censorship was even more obvious and more powerful in the whole of cultural and social life. All this was trying to turn aside the dynamic flow of change which had become evident. But those who were struck by the virus of liberty were able to cross the barriers and find the information they wanted" (Covaci 1994: 115).

In much the same vein, the insightful articles written by Stoenescu (2004) and Lupaşcu (2016) are predicated on the antagonism between the band and the communist authorities. In somewhat scathing terms, Lupaşcu explains how the band was given only the second prize at the schools' national festival simply because their modern style and Western-impregnated music did not sit well with the communist jury[5].

[5] For further reference see http://www.artasunetelor.ro/Phoenix.html

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According to the same writers, for a better understanding of the empowering and transformative potential of the band, one must go back to the very first days of its existence. Their memorable performances at students' and workers' clubs in Timişoara cultivated a certain "Fronde image"[6] and posed a threat to the communist-engineered order. As Nicu Covaci explains in his book *Phoenix...but me* (Covaci 1994: 236), the group was banned due to the adopted Western pattern discernible both in their music and (physical) appearance (clothes and long hair). However, the band reinvents itself, drops its initial name of 'Sfinţii' (as previously mentioned) and rises like a *Phoenix* from its own ashes. Alerted to the growing success of the group, the communist authorities employ a new strategy, making it possible for the band to rehearse in certain venues and go on national tours. The rock musicians record their first EP and appear on Romanian television, even though with their long hair tied at the back and filmed only in close-up (*ibid.*). More than that, in the gripping and vivid account of his artistic career, Covaci writes at length about the stage adaptation of the first Romanian rock opera, 'Omul 36/80' ('Man 36/80'; Covaci 1994:155) and the subsequent discussions about its meanings with the communists.

Curta (2000), Neumann (2000), Molloy (2016) and Pop (2016) provide an engaging outline of the way in which Phoenix resorted to folklore and national mythology in an attempt to meet the requirements of the regime. As Neumann sharply notes, "the option was also an ideological one, a compromise willy-nilly with the communist system which became again reflected by nationalist ideals" (Neumann 2000: 54). What is more, in a study dedicated to the Phoenix rock group, Caius Dobrescu (2011) stipulates that Ceauşescu's constraining policy acted as a catalyst for the emergence of a "mixture of folklore and counterculture". To give a telling example, in 1978 the rock group Sfinx released their album 'Zalmoxe' (the name of a god in Dacian mythology). Consequently, on the one hand with an instrumental sound akin to that of Western groups and on the other hand with national mythology, folklore, pagan and mystical rituals, Romanian rock groups, especially Phoenix, created a unique hybrid genre that left an indelible mark on Romanian society.

Therefore, the Romanian rock stage blared out music about the religion of the Dacians and the glorious Dacians with their magnificent ruler Burebista identified by Ceauşescu as his ancestor. In much the same line, Phoenix released an EP containing a song called 'Meşterul Manole' (the myths has been previously discussed). However, in his illuminating biography, Covaci offers some thoughts on how 'Meşterul Manole' was first imagined. Seeking to create a true rock opera with a choir, actors and dancers, the musicians handed in their detailed project to the communist authorities for analysis. Yet, the project was

[6] For further reference see http://www.observatorul.com/articles_main.asp?action=articleviewdetail&ID=1648

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never returned by the communists and vanished without a trace. As the band's leader explains, only a small part of the centrepiece 'Meşterul Manole' could be selected and turned into a song (Covaci 1994: 237).

In her concise and perceptive article *Phoenix Band - Romanian Music*, Andreea Andrei (2015) classifies the new genre employed by the band as 'ethno-rock' drawing on genuine Romanian folklore. Her argument correlates strongly with that of Lupaşcu (2016), who, in addition to the songs 'Bun îi vinul ghiurghiuliu' and 'Pădure, Pădure' (both fiddler songs originally) included in this category, also mentions 'Dunăre, Dunăre'. For further clarification, he contends that "Phoenix achieved for the first time an organic a vivid symbiosis between our ancient pre-Christian ritual music and groove and rock instrumentation"[7](my translation from Romanian). Nevertheless, this aesthetic manoeuvre was disapproved of by the regime, which tirelessly censured and expunged the artistic production of the band in the first half of the 1970s.

Even though the Phoenix music was reminiscent of the Middle Ages, it bore its own hallmarks. Andreea Andrei (2015), Lupaşcu (2016) and Curta (2005) zoom in on the LP 'Muguri de Fluier' ('Whistle Buds' 1974), a symbolically potent title, that evinced the band's leaning towards ethnic and Balkan folk music. An illustrative example is offered by the song 'Pavel Chinezul'. This composition centres on the figure of Pavel Chinezul, count of Timişoara in the 15th century (under the reign of King Matthias Corvinus 1458-1490) and his victory against the Ottomans at Câmpul Pâinii (the Bread Field, 1479). Apparently, following the battle, Stephen Bathory, the voivode of Transylvania and Pavel Chinezul celebrated their triumph on a field littered with corpses. During the celebration, the soldiers started singing songs in praise of their hero, Pavel Chinezul. The count, a well-built, strapping man reacted to their gesture by grabbing "the corpse of a Turk between his teeth, and [...] dancing wildly to the great admiration of his audience and followers" (Curta 2005: 6). The veracity of this particular scene has to be checked, yet, what actually matters is the importance acquired by the Phoenix song. As the collection of folk songs compiled by János Erdély bears testimony, the story of Pavel Chinezul (Pál Kinizsi, in Hungarian) was remembered less in Romanian than in Hungarian folklore. Hence, despite his merits in fighting the Ottomans that were the nemesis of medieval Romanian principalities, Pavel Chinezul has yet to be given his due. By comparison, in Hungary he was morphed into a hero of popular imagination (*ibid.*). What is more, Curta suggests that the choice to sing about a hero more familiar with Hungarians than Romanians might have been influenced by the covert desire to depict a different society than that projected by Ceauşescu's increasingly nationalist society.

[7] For further reference see http://www.artasunetelor.ro/Phoenix.html

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Interestingly, this song is the only one on *Mugur de fluier* providing topographical and chronological clues. As a result, the song makes reference not only to the Bread Field but also to the river Cerna (Western Romania). The idea of a relation between Pavel Chinezul and this river is not corroborated by historical evidence, nor is the connection between the fighter and the mountains in Southern Banat (as formulated in the song). The visual image of the hero descending from the mountains stands as a symbol of deliverance and his victory is musically marked by Covaci's guitar solo.

Two other songs included on this album and worthy of note are 'Andrii Popa' and 'Strunga', both of them folk poems collected by the Romanian poet Vasile Alecsandri (1821-1890).

In what follows, I would like to reinforce the connection between mountains and medieval figures, by bringing into the limelight the song 'Negru Vodă' included on the LP *Cei ce ne-au dat nume* (1973). A folk ballad at its origins, the song focuses on an almost mythical man of Transylvania who, accompanied by his "men, crossed the mountains, defeated an unnamed enemy, and established the medieval state of Wallachia" (Curta 2005: 7). References to Negru Vodă's (or Radu Negru) legend started to be made by 17th century chroniclers who talked about his 'descălecat' (from the verb *a descăleca*, 'to dismount') defined in historical terms as migration combined with state formation (*ibid.*).

Nevertheless, starting with the 19th century, the significance of the story was minimised, deemed a historical myth fabricated by previous chroniclers with the purpose of pandering to their princes. It should be noted that the myth was attached new layers of meaning in the 18th century monk's work dedicated to St. Nicodim, the founder and abbot of Tismana Monastery (the oldest in Wallachia). This work mistakenly referred to Negru Vodă as Radu I (1377-1383). The latter was victorious in many battles against the Golden Horde and was hailed by Tismana monks as the liberator of Wallachia from Mongol oppression. As a result of his success in fight, in a joint effort with the local population, he formed medieval Wallachia. The folk ballad that provided the lyrics for the rock song draws therefore on this 18th century version of the legend (Curta 2005: 7).

The image of Negru Vodă on top of the mountains and pointing the Wallachian fertile land to his soldiers assumes biblical connotations. Similarly to 'Pavel Chinezul', the major instrumental part of the song appears at a point where listeners have to imagine the coming down the mountains of the hero and his men to the Dâmboviţa Valley and their subsequent pummelling of the Mongols. As Curta perceptively notices, it is József Kappl's bass guitar that takes centre stage at this particular moment of the story in what became a landmark solo in the history of Romanian rock music.

Before giving a snapshot of yet another Phoenix composition, a few words need to be said about the album *Cei ce ne-au dat nume* (*Those who gave*

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us names) on which 'Negru Vodă' was included. What figures prominently here is the idea of ancestral customs and traditions related to the changing of seasons. In Octavian Ursulescu's view, expressed in the presentation text of the album, the musicians tried to combine "the melodic phrase of traditional folk music with the Romanian archaic rhythm in order to restore and promote the wisdom of folklore verse"[8] (my translation). As such, there were songs about funeral traditions symbolizing the end of a cycle, about spring, summer or autumn rituals and Christmas carols. The climax in the life of any generation, namely the wedding, was also present, the cycle continuing then to the next level illustrated by funeral rites (Covaci 1994: 218).

In light of all this, the band's live concerts were enlivened with traditional masks, goats, bells and bugles. Their imaginative performances are met with enthusiasm both at home and abroad, at Festivals like Bratislawska Lyra in Cehoslovacia and Sopot International Festivalul in Poland[9]. As Lupaşcu (2016) keenly remarks, the album's great success expressed the way in which the band's form of dissent was collectively sanctioned.

The immense value of the Phoenix repertoire lies in the treatment of medieval themes in a determinate historical context. Relying on Benedict Anderson's concept of nations as 'imagined communities' (2005: 8), Curta suggests that medievalism does not simply embody the concept of nation, but it actively creates it and ensures its perpetuation. The nation, perceived as a theoretical entity needs forms of representation that invariably find their expression in literature, language, arts or history.

Finally, with the rock opera *Cantofabule* (recorded in 1973), the immersion in the medieval world assumes different dimensions. Both Curta, medievalist historian, and Andreea Andrei, lyricist, state that *Cantofabule* conjures up fantastic worlds inhabited by the mythical creatures of fables and legends. Neither foundation myths, nor historical legends found their place in this highly complex musical work that employed abstruse languages hardly accessible to laymen.

Andrei Ujica, one of the band's lyricists, came up with the idea of the album after discovering a bestiary from the 14th century. Among the songs included in *Cantofabule* were 'Norocul Inorogului' ('The luck of the unicorn'), 'Uciderea Balaurului' ('The killing of the dragon'), or 'Filip şi Cerbul' ('Philip and the stag'). Interestingly, Curta (2005: 5) points at Western medieval bestiaries as a probable source of inspiration for the group's song 'The luck of the Unicorn', composed by Şerban Foarţă, a distinguished literary critic. The theme of the unicorn enmeshed by a maiden is prevalent in Anglo-Norman Bestiaries. For example, it appeared in the 12th century in Philippe De Thaon's Bestiary, an adaptation in Old French of *Physiologus*, a didactic Christian text

[8] For further reference see https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cei_ce_ne-au_dat_nume.
[9] For further reference see http://www.artasunetelor.ro/Phoenix.html

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written in Greek in the 2nd century AD. At a closer examination of this work, the symbolic image of the phoenix rising from its ashes is potently displayed, hence its enduring influence on the collective imaginary (Curley 1979: 13). Curta (2005: 5) conclusively states that Phoenix was the only East European band that drew on the resources of medieval languages and themes in such a special manner; they championed a new genre in Romanian rock music and could hardly find any epigones or imitators.

Concerning the dynamics of the album, Şerban Foarţă who also wrote lyrics for the band, explained that the main objective was to pluck numerous animals from obscurity and thus "revive, in a more or less superficial mindset, archaic or pre-existing meanings" (Covaci 1994: 298). What is more, according to Andrei Ujica, the starting point was constituted by "magical formulas for the incantation of the spirits. A sort of invocation. The spirits of these symbolic animals are conjured up and begin to appear one by one, at first the smallest and most vulnerable, like the Scarab and the Unicorn, then the rest, the Dolphin and the dangerous ones. After a while they come into a sort conflict with one other, called Zoomahia, and everything ends suggesting the beginning of a new cycle of existence, at a superior level, by a hymn dedicated to Phoenix, symbol of rebirth and eternal life" (Covaci 1994: 295).

A large-scale concert took place in 1972 at Sarmisegetuza Regia and shortly afterwards the band faced proscription by the authorities. Interviewed by Peter Molloy for his compelling work *The Lost World of Communism: An Oral History of Daily Life Behind the Iron Curtain* (2016), the band's leader, Nicu Covaci retraces the story of his departure for Germany in 1976 (following his arrest and interrogation by the police) and his illegal return the following year when he managed to smuggle his colleagues out of the country in a kit of loudspeakers (Molloy 2016: 133).

Covaci remains highly prolific as a musician in Western Europe, forming the band Transylvania Phoenix. In the revolutionary year of 1989, he gives a concert dedicated to the Romanians' fight for freedom[10]. During the 1990s the Phoenix albums were edited again, the last one being *În umbra marelui urs* (*In the Shadow of the Great Bear*), an allusion to the communist era and the Soviet domination.

3. Conclusion

Communism attempted to develop a new mythological construct that could buttress the regime in its quest for legitimacy. As has been shown in this

[10] For further reference see http://www.artasunetelor.ro/Phoenix.html

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paper, communist myths became intertwined with the concept of Romanian nationalism and national identity.

The joint analysis of cultural (or foundational) and political (or eschatological) myths has foregrounded their points of convergence that further defended the validity of the latter. Political myths build their discourse around previously used structures and a pre-determined arrangement. As demonstrated in the article, they reconfigure old stories in order to rally the nation around their cause and offer people a coherent sense of national identity. The use of historical myths and legends by a regime oriented towards the promised 'radiant future' reflected the need of communism to develop its own vocabulary and language – yet, both had to be evocative of already-established constructions in collective memory. Thus, adding new layers of meaning to past myths and symbols, communists managed to drum up the support necessary for the implementation of their ideology.

Last but not least, in view of the constrictive measures applying to the cultural arena, rock musicians were particularly harassed and put under surveillance due to their refusal to conform. However, strangely as it may seem, the rock group Phoenix found a middle ground, and by blending national folklore and mythology with a Western beat, created a unique sound and genre that continue to resonate in contemporary Romania.

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