

PEASANT CULTURAL HERITAGE. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS AND TRANSMISSION METHODS

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Abstract: *The communist regime (1944 - 1989) meant a period of radical transformation for the Romanian village. However, peasant culture has been passed on in various forms, and if we consider that in 1948, 77% of Romania's population lived in rural areas, we assume that peasant culture has been passed on to more than half of the country's present-day population, to those descendants of the peasants who have remained or left the village. This article theoretically deals with the issue of the transmission of peasant culture by pointing out the following: it is difficult to understand this culture apart from its moral function (to produce social solidarity), it largely covers the moral-religious order (being an expression of a perfect reality for the peasants), it tends to become tradition (actualizing itself through customs), and its communitarian character is also observed in the way it is transmitted to new generations (through a diffuse communitarian mechanism in the sense that participation in village activities is essential).*

Keywords: *Romanian peasantry; culture; tradition; cultural transmission; Sociological School of Bucharest.*

The peasant was at the center of scientific and political concerns in inter-war Romania because (1) the peasantry represented the largest part of the Romanian society of that period and (2) the village was the space with the most pressing problems to solve (Rostás, 2023). Even shortly after the establishment of the communist regime in Romania (1944), more precisely in the 1948 census, the vast majority of Romanian citizens (76.6%) lived in the country's 13,400 villages (Golopenția, 1948: 11).

The extent of the changes brought about by the communist authorities in the life of peasants was significant, given that 77% of Romania's inhabitants lived in villages before the regime was established (Mănuilă, 1943: XXIV). The first stage in the transformation of villages and peasants was collectivization (1949-1962), followed by the mechanization and industrialization of agriculture (after 1962) (Stavarache, 2011: 76). Collectivization meant the confiscation of peasants' land, and peasants became part of the C.A.P.s—the Agricultural Production Households. The peasants became day laborers on their own land controlled by the C.A.P.s, having the right to buy products from them according to the number of norms (days of work) (Stavarache, 2011: 76). After 1962, the communist regime mechanized agriculture, thus reducing the need for manual labor and creating conditions for the exodus of peasants to cities. The indicator of this exodus was commuting (Stavarache, 2011: 76). After the fall of the communist regime in Romania (1989), agricultural cooperatives were disbanded, and peasants or their descendants took possession of the confiscated properties (Socol, 2003: 22).

This article deals at a theoretical level with the transmission of peasant culture, a phenomenon that occurred despite the transformations that the Romanian village underwent during the communist period. The topic is even more important because more than half of Romania's population is, to a greater or lesser extent, the descendants of the peasant population, which in 1948 accounted for 77% of Romania's population.

1. Conceptual clarifications

1.1. Culture

1.1.1. Definition and social function

We start our analysis from the following definitions of culture: “culture represents (...) the set of social definitions that structure society, more or less consciously” (Baltasiu, 2007: 190), “by culture we mean the set of patterns of thought, attitude and action that characterize a population or a society, including the materialization of these patterns in things” (Mihăilescu, 2000: 55), and “culture is the totality of learned and socially transmitted behaviors” (Schaefer and Lamm, 1986: 28).

From the above definitions, we can understand that a culture has an intellectual aspect (definitions, or patterns), a behavioral aspect (the orientation of actions according to them), it serves a moral society (it structures society, i.e. it produces social solidarity), and it is something passed from one generation to the next.

In the following section, we will discuss the ideational and moral aspects of culture, leaving the chapters “Cultural heritage – tradition” and “Means of passing on peasant culture” to develop its transferability.

Durkheim adopts a “functional” approach to culture in terms of its function in society: “it is moral (...) everything that is the source of solidarity” (Durkheim, 1992: 393-394). The function of culture is to organize a group through its structure and the patterns it accords to all members. Human creation is part of the culture of a community if it serves as a behavioral guide for that community.

In the Durkheimian paradigm, norms, which are constituent parts of culture, is responsible for morality. By being a pattern, by structuring society, culture has a normative =character on human groups. In other words, culture increases the dynamic density of a group: “the issue of morality becomes so important that Durkheim launches a special sociological concept for determining the internal cohesion of society, called dynamic density. Dynamic density is an expression of the intensity of social contacts in accordance with the social norm, the social norm being ‘inscribed in the collective consciousness’ and formally expressed in law” (Baltasiu, 2007: 56).

From an ethical and dogmatic perspective, for example, in Nichifor Crainic’s view, man creates culture to achieve ideal goals and civilization for his practical needs (Crainic, 1942: 27). The perspective offered by Nichifor Crainic is close to the sociological one. The ideal represents a disinterested value, “a supreme value” for the community, one in which there is an unshakeable belief in its superiority (Baltasiu, 2007: 197). Vasile Băncilă analyzes the problem from a Platonic and religious perspective. He defines the cultural act as an expression of a deep reality, recognized by the community as perfect. It is through culture that man gives form to this reality that he considers as being “higher than himself”.

Romanian philosophers and theologians observe three forms of “deep reality” in society”: philosophy, morality, and religion. Through morality, man expresses the “perfect world” in an intelligible form (using symbols, another sociological element of culture, which are the “values illustrated” by a community, i.e., the symbolism of that community (Baltasiu, 2007: 198). Religion represents the cult of the “perfect world”, and philosophy is the enactment of a proper understanding of this world (Băncilă, 1935: 371). Concretely, the deep reality takes the form of a moral and religious order in society (Băncilă, 1935: 375).

Returning to Emile Durkheim, we claim that culture is moral because it produces solidarity between the members of society by conferring a model, a benchmark of action considered by that community as the expression of an ideal and desirable reality.

The connection between culture and the moral-religious order of the group becomes even more clear if we introduce into the discussion Dimitrie Gusti’s typology of culture. The Romanian sociologist distinguished between an objective culture – “the system of cultural goods” (poems, songs, scientific discoveries etc.), an institutional one – rules governing a group, and a personal one – “the relation between the person to be cultivated and the value of culture” (Gusti, 1931: 474). Symbols, expressions of human understanding of a perfect reality (which he values and idealizes) are protected by social norms. A person begins to be part of the group culture if, governed by norms, he or she acts in accordance with those values and ideals.

The underlying reality is a mystery to humans. This is why Lucian Blaga argues that cultural creation is made in mystery and its revelation (Blaga, 1985: 402). Finally, Nichifor Crainic described the cultural act as the act of man’s nostalgia for paradise, i.e. the awareness that there is a perfect, ideal reality: “the nostalgia of paradise is the feeling that we are of this world and yet do not belong to it; that the world of our spirit is not identical with the world that surrounds us; that we are in its midst as outsiders of a high order of existence denied us; that, for this reason, we cannot entirely adhere to the condition of earthly desolation, in which we feel exiled; and that, finally, everything in our being which is in some secret way connected with eternity impels us to overcome the present mode of existence and to conquer a higher and perfect mode, conceived in antinomy with the present and here” (Crainic, 1994: 242).

In one group, the expression of longing for paradise is called values, the highest of which are ideals. Values refer to the ideational content of culture; they are “the mental elements that guide behavior” (Baltasiu, 2007: 196) toward something desirable. Therefore, sociologists have defined culture in terms of the concept of value. For them, culture is “the totality of spiritual, religious, moral, esthetic, political and economic values of ethnic, social, national communities and societies” (Verdinaș, 2004: 130). For Băncilă, culture is “a complex of supreme values” (Băncilă, 1936: 174).

Civilization is the opposite of culture, even though they have one element in common: both are transformations of natural elements (e.g. the popular doina is the harmonization of natural sounds) (Crainic, 1942: 27). Human transformations have a civilizational character if they are carried out for “vital

interests, security and comfort” (Blaga, 1985: 401 – 402). On the one hand, we have a culture concerned with disinterested aims (moral, producing social solidarity), on the other hand, civilization with material ones. The creation of culture or civilization bears a technical aspect in that it presupposes elements from nature. Thus, following in the footsteps of Nichifor Crainic, we can call culture the technique of the life of the soul, and civilization the technique of material life.

The characteristic of the peasant world is the predominance of culture (the moral-religious order) over civilization. Vasile Băncilă shows that the technique, the objects, the way houses were built and the clothing were “filled with a religious and moral atmosphere” (Băncilă, 1935: 382). In this respect, Richard Schaefer defines civilization as a material culture and culture itself as non-material culture, the latter being the models according to which material objects are managed (Schaefer and Lamm, 1986: 29).

1.1.2. Components of the culture

Culture comprises a variety of elements that Ioan Mihăilescu and Radu Baltasiu have synthesized as: values, symbols, norms, rituals, rites, myths and stylistic space.

Values refer to the ideational content of culture, which are the “mental elements that guide behavior” (Baltasiu, 2007: 196). Because values are quite abstract, they become intelligible through symbols. Symbols are “illustrated values” (Baltasiu, 2007: 198). Several symbols structure a community through what we define as symbolism. They serve to group people around them (Baltasiu, 2007: 198).

People generally act within the value systems that structure their manifestations. Value systems are based on norms as they “contain prescribers of how social interaction is desirable” (Baltasiu, 2007: 199). They are rules of behavior that make social relations possible. Breaking the rules brings with it a sanction that, according to Emile Durkheim, takes a repressive form in archaic societies and a restitutive form in modern ones (Baltasiu, 2007: 200). Norms also have a formal side (when a political body upholds them) and an informal side (protected by custom and tradition) (Baltasiu, 2007: 200).

Elements of culture in which the main components of social aggregation are “encoded” (Baltasiu, 2007: 201) are called rituals. These are archaic norms whose original function was to control and channel human aggression in the sense of sociobiologist Konrad Lorenz (1966: 76). Human action can therefore be structured by a ritual framework, even if it seems non-rational (Baltasiu, 2007: 201).

Norms and values imply the existence of a desirable behavioral model for the community and the sanctioning of deviation from it. For peasants in particular, myths were the source of exemplary behavior because they originated in the sacred, which for the religious man is the only reality that matters (Baltasiu, 2007: 203).

1.2. The peasant

In this chapter we will clarify our perspective on the peasant and in the next one we will emphasize the associated cultural specificity. „From a social-economic point of view, the peasantry is a stratum of society characterized by family management of the means of production. The peasantry are landowners without being rentiers (although in some cases they may rent out their property) and without seeking to make a profit from their land, i.e. they are not a capitalist social group” (Baltasiu, 2004: 611-612).

We recognize in the definition that the proper term to describe the peasantry is “social stratum” rather than social class. Mircea Vulcănescu, a member of the Sociological School concerned with the economic life of the peasantry, draws this distinction very clearly. The peasantry is not a social class because it owns its own means of production (like the bourgeoisie), i.e., inventory and land, which it exploits through the labor of its own family (it does not “rent” its labor arms like the proletarian class). The class struggle is thus external to the peasant economy (Vulcănescu, 1996: 109).

The second aspect of the definition - the family management of the means of production - refers to the “place” where the peasant economy takes place, namely the household. The peasant household is therefore at the heart of the peasant economy, which is a unit of production and consumption “based on the labor of a group seeking to satisfy its consumption need” (Vulcănescu, 1996: 111). In other words, the means of production are managed by the peasant family (Baltasiu, 2004: 311). Regardless of the economic activity, peasant work is family work (Bernea, 2006: 154).

While the capitalist enterprise serves only a productive function, in the peasant household, production is consumed by family members (Vulcănescu, 2005: 635). The family group is the one that both works and consumes the fruits of labor (subsistence economy). In addition to the family group, the peasant household includes the land and the inventory used (Vulcănescu, 2005: 636-637). By inventory or household inventory we mean “1) household goods: cots, sheds, stables, stables; 2) tools: plows, sowing machine, reapers, carts, threshing machines, threshing harrows, etc., and 3) livestock: horses, oxen, donkeys, buffalo, and for cash: sheep, cows, goats, poultry, etc.” (Vulcănescu, 2005: 653).

Thus, on the economic level, the peasantry is characterized by family management of their own household inventory (means of production, i.e., their household goods, tools and work cattle) in order to provide for their own needs by working the land.

On a cultural level: “the peasantry is critical to the nation’s identity, being the keeper of traditions and customs, being the source of the natural and moral in society. More specifically, the peasantry preserves the fundamental meanings about time and space that guide the community and, above all, the set of meanings that describe the pattern of primal, natural communion in accord with God and the Virgin Mary. The countryside is the wellspring of the essences from which our social and national identity is drawn” (Baltasiu, 2004: 611-612).

We note from the above definition the following features of the peasantry from a cultural point of view: it is the keeper of traditions, of a Christian morality, thus preserving the stock of identity of a nation.

The peasant is called “homo religious” being the keeper of traditions with a deep moral-religious emphasis. The religious man expresses in his way of being “religious existence of an archaic and traditional type” (Eliade, 2005: 6).

Mircea Eliade’s distinction between the sacred and the profane clarifies the peasant’s religious way of life. Any peasant’s behavior can to some extent have a religious mark, since for pre-modern societies the sacred is the reality par excellence (Eliade, 2005: 14). It is no surprise that “the main distinction operating in the space of traditional thinking” (Șișeștean, 2003: 127) between the sacred and the profane.

The great historian of religions also synthesized the religiosity of the Romanian peasants through the concept of cosmic Christianity. They managed to assimilate the pre-Christian heritage into the Christian message. By “cosmic Christianity” we mean “the ‘universalization’ of the Christian message through mythological imagery and a continuous process of assimilation of the pre-Christian religious heritage” (Eliade, 2000: 463-464). We must emphasize that the approach was one of assimilation and not of erasure of the pre-Christian heritage, the peasants and not only, managing to “Christianize” pagan religious traditions, ensuring their survival within the Christian imagination (Eliade, 2000: 464).

1.3. Peasant culture - forms of peasant culture

In the light of the above, we will operate with the following definition of peasant culture, which considers both ideas, attitudes, behaviors and the peasant’s vision of life as part of his moral-religious order: “therefore, it is necessary to formulate the term peasant culture which implies, in addition to the folkloric genres: ballad, doina, hora, etc. and rural people’s conception of the heavens, the world of plants (ethnoastronomy and ethnobotany), the practice of rites of passage: baptism, wedding, burial, beliefs and faiths, from the archaic calendar, a philosophy in proverbs and sayings, finally a peasant Weltanschauung subsumed by oral culture – different from the written – culture that determines a behavior, a mentality and finally a way of existence, in a coherent spirituality, with archetypal structure in consciousness and inheritance” (Șișeștean, 2003: 127).

On an ideational level, we note that peasant values are contained in a multitude of symbols and myths: the ballad, the doina, the hora, a particular “view (...) of the sky, of the plant world”, “a philosophy in proverbs and sayings” and “a peasant Weltanschauung subsumed by oral culture”.

Also in the above definition, we find the rites, reduced by the author to baptism, wedding and burial. With the help of Ernest Bernea, we enlarged the typology of rites, which together make up a calendar of thresholds (part of the archaic calendar mentioned in the above definition). The stages in the peasant’s life that bring changes in his social position are marked by rites of passage, which the Romanian ethnographer summarizes as those related to pregnancy, birth, childhood, adolescence (initiation rites into adulthood), engagement and marriage, death and burial (Bernea, 2006: 44). The rites with their associated rites and customs make up the threshold calendar (Cucu-Oancea, 2003: 136).

In discussing datina and custom, we have turned our attention to the question of the traditional. According to Ernest Bernea, custom and datina are what we call tradition. Custom is the actualization of the datina, or cultural heritage (what is handed down from ancestors to descendants). Thus, the Romanian peasant’s tradition was not in a state of inertia; it changed within the framework established by the datina: “but while the datina is a social form, an image of the collective being continuously present in this being, the custom is a social act that somehow actualizes the datina and gives life to the community today” (Bernea, 2006: 34).

Ernest Bernea has reduced the variety of peasants’ customs and datinas to those concerning the calendar (or commemorative) cycle, the life (or family - pregnancy and birth, baptism, puberty and

initiation, engagement and marriage, burial) cycle and the work (or magic, related to the arts of life and the arts of matter, which concern crafts, construction and domestic industry) cycle (see Bernea, 2006).

1.4. Cultural heritage – tradition

The concept of cultural heritage is another expression for what is known as tradition, “this memory of the social group that preserves and transmits individual experiences advantageous to the collective, socializing them” (Vulcănescu, 1996: 152).

Tradition is, in short, the inherited culture of a social system. Any culture is also traditional because it tends to perpetuate itself (Pouillon, 1999: 674). Anthropologist Gheorghită Geană called tradition “the sine qua non-condition for the existence of a culture” (Geană, 2011: 649).

Yet there is a fine distinction between culture and tradition. The demarcation is given only by the character of tradition as something handed down from one generation to the next. Even the term tradition originally means ‘to pass on’, coming from the Latin *tradere*, *traditus*, *traditum*. Traian Herseni calls the tradition a “handing-down from one generation to the next” (Herseni, 1982: 528).

Tradition is something other than fashion. If a group does not transmit its culture to at least three generations, it cannot be called a tradition. Then that culture is reduced to something passing and we call it fashion (Gheorghe, 1998: 648). It should be noted that for the Romanian peasant and the Romanian village, traditions have an immemorial character in the sense that it is no longer known when they appeared (Baltasiu, 2007: 251).

There is no tradition without society and no society without tradition. The function of tradition is to perpetuate society, which is based on a social mechanism of “stability of material and spiritual social structures” (Stahl, 1983: 251). Max Weber has pointed out that tradition is the source of the legitimacy of authority, making the social order possible. Legitimacy is based on a belief in the sanctity of tradition (Filipescu, 2003: 117).

The reproduction of tradition is not faithful, and with each generation it undergoes changes. However, it is the “hard core” of the tradition that guarantees that the changes it undergoes do not substantially alter it. This consists of the “relatively constant, stable elements” of tradition (Gheorghe, 1998: 649).

Tradition is preserved in the collective memory (Baltasiu, 2007: 193), or in the “collective component of the individual psyche” (Baltasiu, 2007: 252), from where it becomes a latent part of the community, a potential that becomes a reality when it is realized by the members of that community.

2. Means of passing on the peasant culture

In this chapter, we deal with the question of how to actualize peasant culture and how to pass it on to new generations.

The problem of the transmission of culture will be approached through the point of view of the gustian theory of social circuit and actualization. By placing the social will of those who make it up at the basis of society, Dimitrie Gusti shows that social reality takes the form of a circuit: the social will is, in turn, a “ready-made deed” and a “doer power”: “the whole conception [of Dimitrie Gusti] is centered on the idea of will and on the bent way of its existence as a phenomenon and as a process, as a ready-made deed and as a doer power” (Vulcănescu, 1998: 46).

The process that occurs in the social circuit is that of actualization, whereby frames (potential) become reality in collective manifestations (Baltasiu, 2007). Ernest Bernea adapted the actualization model (frameworks - manifestations) to the problem of tradition when he decomposed the concept between dates (framework) and customs (actualization): “but while the *datina* is a social form, an image of the collective being continuously present in this being, the custom is a social act that somehow actualizes the *datina* and gives life to the community today” (Bernea, 2006: 34).

We are not talking about an update that changes the date so much that it is unrecognizable. The custom must retain something of the hard core of the datum to be called part of that tradition. Remember that by hard core we mean those “relatively constant, stable elements” of tradition (Gheorghe, 1998: 649).

How is tradition passed on?

Tradition does not exist outside the social structures that disseminate it. One generation picks up and updates the cultural content of tradition from another generation and passes it on. Henri H. Stahl described the social mechanism of transmission as “diffuse tradition-based community”: each member of society passes on to others what he or she has received when participating in the same common activities. Transmission happens by itself: “What is essential in all this cultural life (baptisms, weddings, funerals, etc.), which grows and lasts through this social mechanism to which we have given the name of a diffuse tradition-based community, is that all the participants in it, each holding only a fragment of the global,

anomic, collective and permanent culture, are aware that it lives through them, so that they take their role seriously, truly believing in the effectiveness of their gestures and words" (Stahl, 1983: 271).

However, there are certain "places" where tradition is passed on more than in others. The first such place is the peasant's family as it is the nucleus of the village. This brings us to the question of socialization. By socialization we mean: "the process (...) by which the individual integrates into a society by appropriating its values and norms (habits, rules of life, conduct, ideals, etc.) and manifests his own measure of sociality, his sociability" (Ungureanu, 2002: 62). How does socialization occur within the peasant family? Mircea Vulcănescu pointed out that the process is realized through playing and helping with household tasks (Vulcănescu, 1997: 35).

Socialization does not stop within the family; the village has mechanisms outside its own core. This includes the hora, the claca, participation in religious services and the customs associated with the celebrations of the peasant's cosmic calendar.

3. Conclusion

This article posed the problem of a definition of culture appropriate to the phenomenon of the rural peasantry in Romania. We emphasized that the Romanian peasantry culture has an ideational and behavioral character, and it is not possible to understand it without its moral function through which it solidifies the community. This function is all the more important as in the archaic village civilization was subordinated to culture understood as a moral-religious order synthesized by Mircea Eliade through the concept of "cosmic Christianity".

If the concept of the great historian of religion synthesizes the cultural aspect of the peasantry, we have also highlighted the economic particularities of the Romanian peasants. Following in the footsteps of Mircea Vulcănescu, I pointed out that the idea of social class is external to the peasants, who own the means of production and work their own land with family members to meet their family needs.

In the other part of the article, we focused on the transmissible character of the peasant culture. Any culture tends to become a tradition, i.e., to perpetuate itself through a handing down from one generation to the next, as Traian Herseni emphasized. In the case of Romania's peasant population, handing down takes place through a diffuse, communitarian mechanism (Henri Stahl), with the emphasis on the primary socialization of the family (the village nucleus). By working in the household, playing with other children and then taking part in community life in various groups (youth clubs, the "șezătoarea", wedding, baptism, funeral, etc.), peasant tradition is passed on, updating its "hard core" continuously, as Ernest Bernea has pointed out.

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